The boat glided silently on the swollen river. Around them, it swirled and spun, engorged on the rain of the previous week.

Quentin looked at the waters with some foreboding. Thoroughly concerned, he settled back into the boat. Thella, her mask still on and safely distanced from the guide, leaned over to see things herself. Quentin started and placed a thin arm across her, pushing her gently back into the boat.

“You'd best be careful Thella. The waters look dangerous today.”

As the words escaped him, he awaited the acerbic reply from the child, but she merely slumped back into the boat and stared at the sky. It was very much unlike the strong willed young girl he once knew. The disease had progressed.

“I should check the wrappings.” He said, rummaging through rough sack, looking for the medicine.

“Not yet. Its such a bother.” Thella managed, although her tune was more of despondence than defiance.

The guide turned the other way, adjusted his hood, and shied away from them as far as he could in the small vessel.

Quentin tried to hold back his fear as he checked the soles of her feet and hands. Thella kept still as he applied the ointment. But the small jar of medicine felt significantly lighter after he was done. He suspected the cursed priest of Geremon had gypped him. He even doubted that the medicine even had any deific properties. He could just barely make out the scent of a familiar plant, but couldn't quite place it. Frauds, the lot of them.

A scowl ran across his face, and tightened to a full on grimace.

Why was it that the most horrible things happened to the most innocent? The least deserving? An uncontrollable surge of fear, nausea and hatred ran trough him. He gritted his teeth, and threw the container back into the pack. He glanced at Thella but had to look away.

The mask, that damn thing they had made her wear in Mellont. It was inhuman. That was the purpose of it, so that the person behind could be made less real, further from the present and reality, so that when it came time for their heartless lips to say 'No' they could feel better about themselves. After all, they had said no to a mask, not a girl of twelve.

“Uncle, how much longer will it take to get there?” Thella asked. Her voice was thin from behind the mask and bandages and was almost swallowed by the rush of the river.

“A day perhaps?” He asked, deferring to the guide. It was almost exactly a day by the map.

“I can get you to the stream by the end of today, but there's no town there. You'd have to find your way in the dark.”

Quentin shook his head. “Still. By tonight then, and if not, tomorrow.” He assured.

It was his fault that they were in this state, he reflected bitterly. All his life he had been a mapmaker, blessed with a skill set always in demand. He had declined offers, even good ones, for pride. And the community of Mellont hadn't let him forget it. He now regretted not spending his time helping the farmers plan their fields and the other small tasks he had always tried to avoid. Because just as he had rejected them. They in turn rejected him when he was in need.

The disease was not endemic. Quentin didn't know how long it had gone unnoticed in the child. It was a wasting disease in the first stages. But he knew it could turn deadly fast, especially if the will was conquered. It was a disease of depression and sadness. It was an elven disease. But he had not told her that yet. He could not. The oath he had sworn in the old language still compelled his silence. So now he bit his tongue and stared at the swirling waters.

They drifted a while further. Up ahead, the river seemed to widen. He knew that they called this place The Spires, presumably because of the small islands. But in his current mental state he couldn't remember any other facts about the place. The times he'd traveled through here in the past didn't seem to leave much of an impression on him.

Or perhaps it was the cruel advancement of time. He'd noticed that it was taking him longer to recall facts that used to come so quick. They lingered in the shadows, dancing just on the edge between recall and forgetfulness. He would have to find a way to tell her the truth about things, if she already didn't suspect. When they got to the library.

“Are those birds?” Thella asked the guide, pointing out at thin storks perched at the edges of the shore. They stared unmoving at them as they went past. There was something cold about their gaze.

“Those are icebeaks. They're fishers. But beware not to get close to them. They're very territorial.”

The guide paused, surveying the river.

“And they congregate here at times like these. They're usually a bad sign.” He admitted.

That quieted things a bit, and the boat moved in silence for a time.

The next time someone spoke, a line of islands had appeared in front of them, and beyond them, they couldn't make out the river, for a heavy fog lay over the water.

“This is not good. This is the wrong time to make this passage. This fog is not natural.” The guide said, frowning. He pulled his oar from the water and ran a hand through his brown greasy hair.

“Can I help? I can paddle a bit if I can rest.” Quentin offered, trying to mollify the guide.

But the riverman shook his head violently.

“No, now is the most important part of the journey. We don't want speed here, but sureness. We must go down the left most passage!” He crouched and peered down the river, adjusting the tiller carefully, but forcefully aiming them towards the left.

There was a sound, almost like a sigh, and in an instant, they were surrounded by the mist.

The riverman cursed loudly.

“Keep an eye out on the left side. The shore is rocky, but it widens again a bit after the first islands. We just don't want to hit the side in the mist.”

Quentin and Thella peered into the fog.

Billows of cloud formed shapeless things that hinted at the line of a shore, but disappeared one after another as they moved.

A spit of rock appeared, slicing straight up through the water, at least ten feet into the air. The monstrous thing gurgled as the river rush to its sides.

“Damn!” The guide said, throwing the boat quickly to the side, dodging to the left. They passed far from the monolith, but even so, they could feel the monstrous power of the water as it coursed past its length.

An island followed it, at first a jumble of rocks, with water washing turbulently over them, then rising up above them, the gravel and then dirt and trees of a proper island. Quentin thought he felt them start to move faster. The guide was clearly nervous.

“Well… We made it? We got to the left.” The guide asked, clearly trying to reassure himself.

“Of course.” Quentin said.

“Its no light thing! The rocks and island here, hells, the whole damn river is cursed here. They say Dor himself split this place with his axe. Thundered a mighty serpent into the ground, deep to the core and threw the waters over its body. I don't know about that, but keep to the left. Thats what I know. Keep to the left and nothing will go wrong most of the time, but on certain days… This mist…” The guide muttered to himself, feeling the air.

The mist was getting denser and denser. Before, it was just an annoyance, but now as it came in stronger, Quentin was finding it hard to even make out the shore that he knew was right next to them.

The guide knew this too and tried to slow them, but the river coursed faster beneath them as if to counter his efforts.

“Oh! Shore on the left!” Thella called out, pointing at the tree lined bank that suddenly loomed next to them.

“On the left?” The guide jumped, pushing them in the opposite direction. “And trees? The left bank has no pine trees. Its farmland!”

The mist suddenly and violently turned chillingly cold.

“Oh gods. We didn't get far enough left! Why did I ever agree to take you? Gods I knew better!”

Quentin could now just barely make out the two sides of the islands surrounding them. Yet bizarrely, the water was flowing without turbulence but with frightening speed.

“Its deep here. And no one who gets thrown into it has ever been seen again. Mapmaker, gods, its must be easy to draw a line on a paper, but there’s actual things there. And some of them are wrong. I warn you two. Gods I warned you. No gold is worth this.”

“Quiet!” Quentin thundered. “Thella. Get down into the boat! Grab onto our supplies!”

The mist swirled around them, and he could not tell whether it was a wind, or from their terrifying speed, but the damp iciness cut right through their heavy cloaks. They shivered and braced for the inevitable trials.

And they did not have to wait long. Without warning, the mist somehow got denser, past a lingering cloud. For the first time, Quentin also felt fear for something other than his own journey and Thella's fate. “There's some power here!” he cried.

The mist grabbed them with crushing force and hurled them down the river, which was now impossibly narrow, the sides sucking as the dark waters frothed and spun, all drawing towards some horrible fate. And a roaring sound could be heard.

“Rapids!” The guide yelled. “Get down!”

But Quentin had already seen the first of the rocks, an ugly flat thing, jutting out into the air, and around it sprayed a torrent as the whole river flowed over its bulk in a white chaos.

Thella screamed.

“Get down! I can't see!” The riverman yelled, his voice filled with panic.

But Quentin stood in the boat and produced a leather tome whose pages now fluttered in the freezing mist.

He outstretched a hand and cried out a word in a beautiful forgotten language.

The rock exploded into fragments which tumbled into the water and instantly vanished, as if greedily sucked under. He then threw himself down as they ran over the remains.

The boat heaved. And this time Quentin let out a cry. He clutched Thella with one hand and the structure of the boat with the other.

A terrible impact shook the boat as they shot over the remains of the rock. Spray washed over them and blinded Quentin. His old arms clung with as much strength as they still possessed, clutching the only two things that mattered to him. Thella cried out, but he did not weaken his grasp as he felt the cruel force of the impact attempted to throw them.

The guide was not as lucky. Although he undoubtedly had countless months of experience on the river, this was a place one simply avoided. Rapids were not familiar to him. So when the boat struck, he was crouched, both hands dutifully on the tiller, trying to avoid the rock. Only too late did he realize the danger, and Quentin for a brief second, frozen in time, saw a look of terror overcome the other man.

The spray enveloped them, blinding them for good. There was nothing that Quentin could do but cling on and hope. The boat shook beneath them, shuddered again, then dropped, soaking them completely as waves washed over the bow.

“Oh heavenly star, moon which fills the...” Quentin started, plaintively calling to the patron. But no sooner had he opened his mouth, spray washed over the boat and filled his mouth. He sputtered and continued to hang on.

The water subsided enough to see that they were going over a series of wild rapids, each no taller than a foot, but interspersed with vertical slicing rocks, like the one he had destroyed earlier. Impacting fully with any of these would surely cut the boat in two.

“To the right!” He cried out. “There's space on the right!” But when he swung around, the guide was gone. The boat was rudderless. They were at the mercy of the river.

Quentin cried out for the guide and heard a yell from beside them. The guide was up to his chin, trying desperately to keep his head above the water.

“Its cold!” The guide screamed, his eyes filled with wild panic locked with Quentin's pleading with him to do something, anything. Quentin froze in shock and the man suddenly disappeared as if dragged down by some massive grasping hand.

Quentin let out a moan and clutched Thella close to him, closing his eyes. He heard her cry out, “Uncle! Another rock!” But it was too late. There was a gut wrenching impact and the boat obliterated into splinters and he felt himself being forced into the air. The next few seconds were a confusing mess of shattered wood, water all thrown together. Then something struck his head and the world went blank.

“Uncle! Uncle! Uncle Quentin! Oh gods. Please!”

Quentin could hear a distant voice, coming to him from miles away.

He reached up towards the voice, but he was so far below, and all around him was darkness. It was empty and fathomless. In fear he looked down, but there was nothing beneath him. And perhaps that scared him more than anything. There was nothing. And he had always known it.

“Thella!” He yelled. But although his mouth formed the words, his voice could not come forth. Not from where he was.

A stubborn determination filled him and he rose, reaching again for that light in the distance, reaching further and further. He knew that if only he could reach that light he could make things right again. The emptiness would be banished, everything would be right if he could just…

But the distance was so great. And he was so tired. His body shuttered and beneath him he felt a great vast expanse welcome him, a magnificent stillness. Perhaps there was another way. The light was so far. Perhaps he could stay here in the silence. Yes. It had been so long. And he was so tired.

The light above shifted, and it was no longer the hazy flicker of a distant star. Now it was immediate and shot down in cool waves. He stared mesmerized at the perfect orb as it rose above the horizon and into prominence. The surface of the heavenly body shifted and although he was hundreds of thousands of miles, impossibly far from its being, he could make out the changes clearly.

Mouths formed, faces that he had not seen in years, decades. Tears sprung to his eyes, and his hand hesitated. Folmar and Akela turned from their inward gaze at the moon and beamed down at him. Their features, like the moon were impossibly delicate and yet had an unnerving stillness to them, a grace that was beyond the ability of men.

But Quentin gritted his teeth. His hand, no longer outreached, now clenched into a fist which he threatened at the orb.

“What gives you the right?! How could you do this? How could you leave?” He yelled, his voice giving out, and he covered his mouth as a hacking cough erupted from his chest, a severe pain even in the anti space of the emptiness.

Their mouth and face exuded sadness. Their eyes creased with sorrow. Their brows deepened in concern.

But this only enraged Quentin further.

“How could you leave?!” He shouted again. “You had no right! Neither of you! It wasn't fair. Gods be forgotten, it wasn't fair of you.”

He clutched his arms to his chest, and hugged himself, spotlighted in the moonlight of the two figures.

“I just want… I just want...” Quentin started, rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet.

And as he did, his fingers brushed thin strands, invisible strands of seamless moonlight. He gritted his teeth and tried to brush them off him. “You had no right!” He shouted once more, his fingers starting to ensnare in the suddenly thousands upon thousands of invisible silver strands. They ran along his body, taught and loose, insistent and still, invisible and blazing with silver moonlight.

A cold fire caught his body and he felt himself being pulled slowly towards the moonlight.

He collapsed, sobbing as the threads pulled him upwards. “I was wrong…” he admitted. He reached out once more, this time with love, and tried so hard to embrace the two figures in the moon, but his arms could never reach the vast distance. They were always much to far from him.

The figures smiled their cold pitiful smile once more.

“I was wrong. Can… Can you forgive me?” He sobbed. And he looked to the figures once more, this time plaintively.

The figures made as if to speak.

He was elevating very quickly now, rushing forwards, upwards, rocketing at inhuman speeds towards the moon, it was approaching, growing larger and larger with each second. His heart beat wildly as it became clear he would hit it. And faster it beat. And faster, until it was as if it threatened to rip right from his chest.

The figures opened their mouths.

The sound of water filled his ears. He heard the sound of Thella in some alternate distance. But yet he was fixated on the figures.

“Do you forgive me?” He cried as he sped upwards.

The figures started to speak.

He exploded through the moon which shattered into a thousand silver mirrors, each one reflecting the silvery perfection of the emptiness and stars, which swam, morphing into dizzying blurred grays of interconnected webbing, and each of the threads formed a shape until the world focused into reality.

Pine trees loomed, appearing from the darkness. There was water beside him which he could hear, crashing against rocks. The cold earth was below him. He felt the cool, damp and unyielding air around him, devoid of any scent. And a pair of small hands impacted with his chest once more.

He coughed and the burning sensation rose through his throat and he coughed, spitting out water mixed with blood, dark against the silver light of the now ascendant moon.

“Thella?” He asked weakly. The child in front of him solidified into view.

“Oh gods. Oh gods, yes! Uncle. Its me Uncle. Are you ok? I'm so glad!” She said, tears forming in her eyes.

“I'm here child.” Quentin said, gritting his teeth as horrifying pain started to appear apparent in his chest. “I'm here.” He said, coughing again violently. It was not his time yet. His hand moved from his chest onto the rock, and the muscles, bidden by force, tightened and he willed himself upwards. Staggering, he got to his feet. “I'm here for you.” He said.

Past the rapids and the rocks and the drop was a small beach, an irregular collection of misshaped stones, each one carved into round form by the power of the water. The section of the river that ran between the two islands widened just slightly, reducing the crushing force into merely a powerful flow. And beside this, it trickled through the stones of the landing.

The focus of the landing was another rock turned skyward, sticking up like a blade almost as tall as a man. The remains of their boat had impacted with this obstacle, and the landing was now littered with black, water soaked wood. There was barely a back third left to the vessel.

Quentin was laying around the stone, having been hurled there, water gurgled around his head and feet.

Thella had found herself against him when her brain had time to understand what had happened, only to find him unconscious.

Thella moved to embrace the older man, but stopped in mid stride, her voice breaking, “Uncle, I was so worried. The boat broke up. I don't know where the other man went. And… Are you sure you're ok?” She asked, reaching out a hand.

His thin hands met hers, but when he went to straighten, his entire body shuddered and he let out a moan and clutched his chest. “Oh...” He pulled away his hands and checked underneath his waterlogged shirt. “Thats not good.”

Thella ran to his side. “Is there anything I can do?” She asked.

But he planted a foot on the rock in front of him, and with an inelegant grunt, forced himself to his feet, even without her help. Thella could tell he was hurting. But he got to his feet despite the pain.

“Are… Are you sure you're ok? You could use the ointment?”

Quentin shook his head and a sad smile ran across his face.

“No. That’s yours dear.” He surveyed the wreck. “Actually, did any of our equipment make it?” He asked, the smile turning to a slight frown.

Thella, lugged the heavy pack in front of him. “I found our pack. The things inside are wet but looked ok. The ointment is in there too.”

“And my book?”

“Its there too.” She said, pushing to pack closer to him.

He winced and bent over, pulling out the leather bound book.

“Oh, the pages are wet. Ah...” He said, turning the book upside down, and let the leaves hang, running a finger through them. “Not a total loss. Maybe I'll have to recopy some things.”

“That’s good!” Thella said, trying to be positive. “But, what are we going to do now? The guide…”

“He's probably on another island, or another part of this one.” Quentin said, lying. He walked over to Thella. She stared up at him and tried to smile.

“Are you hurt?” He asked.

“I don't feel so well. I’m really cold.” She said.

“I'll have to check the bandages after we find a safe place to sit for a moment.”

Thella shook her head. “I don't want to. I'm ok. I don't feel hurt.” She said, pulling away.

But he caught her hand and pulled her closer into a hug. “I'm glad you’re safe Thella. But we still have to make sure everything is ok. And we have to keep on going. Alright?”

“Ok...” She mumbled.

They walked falteringly away from the wreckage towards the looming pine trees and into the island.

Thella held Quentin's hand, but her mind was far away. This was just another horrible thing that had happened because of her; the whole trip had been one disaster after another.

As they walked through the pine trees, and the sound of the water receded behind her, she tried not to cry. Uncle had done such a good job of handling her problems up until now. Even when all the other villagers had been so mean to her.

She didn't quite understand what all the worry was. It was true that her disease was not good. It made the villagers angry for some reason. But it wasn't like the plague. She didn't think others could catch it. And unlike the plague, it didn't hurt. It just made her a bit uncoordinated.

She remembered the first day that she had learned about it. She had been cooking something for Uncle because he always got so caught up in his work. She had brought out the food, but when he went to eat it, he burned his hand on the pan. It had still been hot. But she had been holding it with her bare hands.

They had been badly burned but she hadn't felt anything. That’s when the bandages began, followed by the ointment. Then, when the villagers heard about it, the mask.

She hated the uncomfortable bandages. She hated Uncle having to put them on her. And she hated feeling helpless toward the whole thing. But at the same time there was something frightening and deeper to the disease.

At some point after the pan incident she had started to notice herself drifting off more and more. The things that she usually got excited about no longer made her interested. She found herself staring out the window into the distance or up at the stars more and more often.

And it was that which truly scared her, and why she had agreed to go on the trip in the first place, insomuch as Uncle would listen to her anyway.

Above all, she wanted so much to be back in their house, with all the antiques around them. The scroll maps and the smell of ink and paper running through the place, Quentin yelling at her to find something or another he had misplaced amid the many piles in the house. She wanted that so badly. When they were back, all of this journey and the disease and all the horrible things that had happened since then could just be a bad dream… They just needed to get there and back and everything would be fine.

Or so she desperately wished.

The forest swallowed them. Each tree was alike, with dark, almost blackened, bark. Fog gathered in depressions and spread through the trunks. The place was an unstructured maze of trunks and emptiness. Beneath their feet as they walked were untold years of pine needles, almost a foot deep in some places, and the softness and chaotic nature of this blanket lent the place a disquieting impermanence, multiplied by the lack of distinguishing features.

Footsteps were muffled. There was no sign of animals nor any sound what so ever. If they turned around would the river still be there? If they were separated surely they would never see one another again. If they closed their eyes would they themselves be lost? The place teetered on the edge of nonexistence and threatened to take them with it.

Thella gripped tightly to Quentin's arm as he limped slowly forwards.

“You can feel it too? This place… I had only meant to find a sheltered spot to rest.” He glanced around them nervously. His voice was a thing out of place amid the silent stillness of the fog pines, and it felt as if the place snatched his word out of his mouth and quieted them even as they left his lips.

“It is very important that you not leave my side. Thella. We should continue to hold hands. I'm afraid of what might happen if we didn't...”

Thella grasped his hand tighter and they slipped further into this featureless world.

How far had they walked? Which direction had they gone? Was it confusion that beset them or was it simply the stillness which overcame them? The pine needles whispered beneath their feet, sticking to each footfall. Their stride slowed. They no longer talked. Their direction lost purpose. The fog filtered light grew darker but they did not notice. Were they beings or had they become some kind of spirit, doomed to drift upon the world insubstantially?

They stopped in unison. They feet and mind had lost purpose. They stood, transfixed by nothingness for what seemed like an eternity. Their eyes ceased to focus. There were no features to look at: all trees were alike, with fog between. And the fog grew deeper and the world around them grew smaller and smaller.

Quentin fell backwards into a sitting position. His feet had lost the will to stand. Thella still held his hand, but more out of dulled habit than conscious effort. She fell down too. She realized she could not feel her feet, or her arms, which lay limp at her sides. A sudden desire to call for help emerged from within her, but was quieted by the stillness of the place, as if it and her disease were working together to forbid her effort. She could not longer feel anything on her body. Her vision showed her lying on her side now, sinking slightly into the pine needles. She closed her eyes.

A hooded man emerged from the mist with a face full of a mixture of both anger and perhaps fear. When he saw the unconscious bodies of both Thella and Quentin though, he froze, for a moment. He had not expected anyone else to be here, let alone an old man and what appeared to be a child. They did not look hostile, especially as they were asleep and because neither were fighting age men. Finally, there was a look to both of them, something that he could not process at a conscious level that told him that they were trustworthy.

When he drew closer however, he saw that the old man was injured. Blood seeped through the front of his shirt.

Eyes drew up in alarm and his previous goal was swiftly set aside. His pack, which tottered above his own head, and whose substantial frame held a vast number of drawers, was planted firmly into the needles and his fingers ran across the many tiny compartments as he searched for the correct one.

Finally finding it, he tore it open and grabbed a handful of the broad leaves. From another place he procured a mortar and pestle and swiftly, and through obvious expertise, the leaves were reduced to a powder.

Into this, he added two different sets of oil from small bottles in his jacket. Once he was satisfied with the creation, he peeled back the shirt and applied the spread to the wounds.

Quentin stirred as he did so, and initially was confused and angry.

“Who are you? What are you doing?” he asked loudly. But the hooded man shook his head, and pointed at the wounds.

“I've applied a paste to your chest, but it'll just reduce the bleeding. I will need much more time to make something to actually help.” He said, gesturing to the mortar and pestle and his belongings.

“I…” Quentin struggled to get up, and his movements worsened the wound. He cried out and lay back down. His face turned somber and he lay still. “I am in your debt I suppose. I can't stop you, whoever you are.”

“Hmm. Interesting man. Most would thank me.” The man gestured to the child. “Are they injured as well? Can I look at them?”

“Thella!” Quentin gasped. “This place is infernal. We were walking and then...” Even from his prone position, he struggled to see if she was ok.

“She… She has a disease. A wasting disease. There is ointment in my bag here, but the bandages must be changed as well. I never got a chance to see if she was ok after the boat.”

The man's brows raised again. “Came from the river? And you're alive? Luckier than most I suppose.”

Quentin struggled to raise himself. Seeing after Thella was his responsibility. He couldn't believe he had fallen asleep in such a situation. But his wound sent a gasping shock through his body when he had barely sat fully up. He collapsed to the ground, his teeth clenched in pain.

“I told you to sit still. My work won't be any good if you reopen the wounds. Perhaps you are used to magical healing? Medicinal healing is accessible to more men, yet requires time. I'm no medic, but it seems like perhaps you have broken a rib, perhaps more than one.” The hooded man loomed over him, observing the wounds.

Quentin leaned his head to the side and half reached out to the girl. “Don't bother with me. If you can, if you will, look to her instead. Its getting worse. Every day we spend traveling it gets worse.” He admitted.

“Hmm. A wasting disease you say? Of the body or the mind? How come the bandages?” The hooded man approached Thella and looked her over. “A mask as well!” He said, clearly taken aback.

“Sir. I know its only natural to be afraid of such things, but I assure you that the disease is not transmissible.”

But the hooded man looked back at Quentin and shook his head.

“I know it isn't. That isn't the problem. Has she started to loose feeling?”

“Yes.” Quentin admitted. Was it the sudden helplessness of his situation or something else? Quentin had no one to share his concerns with in a long while and they suddenly burst forth.

“I noticed it when she moved a pan hot from the fire. She didn't even notice although she held it with bare hands.”

The man seemed to retreat a bit back into his hood and was silent for a moment. So Quentin continued.

“That is the whole purpose of this journey, why we hired the guide and risked the river travel, even when they all said it was the wrong time of year. We have to get to the...” He trailed off.

The man held his hands together and seemed to be in deep thought.

“I am familiar with this disease, but I cannot cure it. Was she walking with you, or did you carry her? I would wake her.”

“No, she walked with me. Although I do not know the extent of any injuries she might have.”

“Yes, swallowed by the disease.” He frowned. “I'll still take no chance. I have something that can wake her.” He searched through his pack and emerged with a thin brown leaf which he crushed under her nose.

Thella's eyes shot open. “Agh! What is that??” She complained, shifting away from the man. “That smells horrible!”

Then she realized there was a stranger before her.

“Ah! Quentin!” She saw him lying on the ground. “S-Stay back! He can use magic you know. Even like that. He'll reduce you to ash if you try anything!” She scrambled backwards.

The hooded man held up his hands.

“Its alright Thella. He helped me, and wants to help you as well. We still don't know if you're hurt from the boat.”

Thella frowned and shook her head. “I feel fine!”

“Thats because you can't feel at all.” The man pointed out. “Can you take off the mask for me? Thella was it?”

“Can I Quentin? I really don't like it.”

“Of course. It was just for the guide. He insisted.”

Thella grabbed the mask off and threw it to the ground with disdain revealing a thin face with short light hair.

“Who are you anyway?” She demanded. “I don't mind if you help. But I want to know who you are. I took off my mask. Now you take off your hood.”

The man raised an eyebrow. “Fine then. Old man, this child has better manners than you. Don't you typically exchange names here in the North? No matter… I'll show you I mean no harm.”

He removed the hood revealing a very sharp featured face, green eyes, very long black hair and unmistakable sharp long ears.

“I am Tzuras, the naturalist.” He said, gesturing to the equipment behind him, as if that explained everything.

Thella and Quentin both were silent in shock for a moment.

Finally, Thella, in her impertinence, said what they both were thinking. “Oh! You're an elf!”

“So there's some power here? I thought I felt it.” Quentin said.

“A sorcerer then?” Tzuras asked.

“Magic, yes but learned. Not born.”

“Uncle worked very hard even though he only knows a handful of spells. He makes very good maps though.” Thella interjected.

Tzuras smiled, “Then you and I are alike. Although I believe my lessons were a bit different from yours. I assume you studied at the University?” he asked.

“I did. Under Vicelin Leuthard.”

Tzuras scratched his chin, where a distinct lack of beard lay. “With the old man himself? Its a wonder we never ran into one another.”

“You studied under Vicelin as well?” Quentin asked, struggling to contain his shock. “I-I thought I knew all of his students.”

Tzuras shot Quentin a wry smile. “I wouldn't call it studying under him. It was more of a correspondence. I was never good with either sitting in lecture nor giving one.”

“Well, you know, you have to be quite accomplished to be able to lecture at the University. I never found the time, but I'm sure I could teach something...”

“Sir, I have been annoying the University for decades.”

Quentin pulled back, or at least he wound have if he hadn't been lying on the ground. “Annoying?” Dismay crossed his face.

“I refused a greater role in their plans I assume. I would much rather run amid the forests than among the bookshelves. A bit immature I suppose, but I've learned some wondrous things no book could have taught me. I think of the relationship as symbiotic. After all, were does the knowledge in the books come from anyway? I go there once and a while and burden them with writing down the things I've discovered.”

“… Thats quite an interesting arrangement.”

“But that brings me to why I am here. A power as you said. I've recently, in the last couple of years been attempting to understand more about spirits.”

“Uzerai?”

“Merely the tip of a much larger structure. Uzerai are the symptom. Spirits are the cause. Or at least I think. Damn things are so elusive.”

“And you think there is some sort of... spirit here?” Quentin asked. He could not quite keep the skepticism from his voice. “Are there really such things?”

“You can call it what you want, but there is something here. And I do not think it is something to be taken lightly.” Tzuras said. The elf naturalist was serious. Very much serious. “I've been on this island for some time… I've set out some carved totems. I had hoped to draw some form to this place.”

Tzuras waved his hand at the fog which, while not as thick as it was before, still lay around them.

“Yes. It seems to defy… specifics.” Quentin wondered. “Then, our meeting was a coincidence?”

Tzuras shook his head and pointed at the two. “No. I do not believe in such things. There's something familiar…” But he shook his head again and pointed to Thella.

“The real reason is that she seems to have sat on one of my totems and broken it.”

Thella let out a surprised yelp and jumped to her feet. She looked down at where she had been lying.

Sure enough, a two foot tall wooden icon lay crushed underneath her.

“Oh! I'm so sorry!” She said, holding out the pieces.

“Sir. I apologize on her behalf. I'm sure I can find some way to make this right.” Quentin said from the ground.

“Its fine. I'll make more after I look over Thella.”

The girl grimaced. “I would say that I'm fine, but I guess I didn't even feel that totem.”

“Which raises the last interesting question… What in gods name are you two doing here?”

“Perhaps you've heard a story of an old elven place called, in human tongue, the Silent Library? Of course, that was its name after it was abandoned.” Quentin asked. “Forgive me if this is all known to you, I'll merely explain our part in things. Our hopes.”

“Long ago humans destroyed the lands of the elves. The great tree burned, the forests burned. The world itself and no small number of elves did as well. And in the midst of this fire, the wisest among the elves gathered their knowledge into this library, said to be deep underground.”

And there it lay, for years, decades, perhaps even centuries. All that information, all that accumulated wisdom in one place. But it lay for too long in dismal cloying darkness that the darkness itself is said to have seeped into the place. Like most other elven ruins, it was irrevocably scarred by their horrible fall. It was inaccessible. To venture inside was said to be certain death. Until recently.

I have only heard stories. A team of adventurers is said to have gotten to the deepest level of the library and through methods I don't quite understand, they destroyed it.

“Destroyed?!” Tzuras interjected, eyes wide, he paused from helping Thella.

“Hold on a minute. I was horrified as well, but there is more.”

“This world is not without its surprises, even now in this age of men and reason. It seems that this library was too great to be destroyed completely. They say its shadow has appeared past Merrin's Ford.”

Quentin lifted his head up to see Thella.

“If there is a place in this world that has the knowledge to rid her of this curse, its there.”

Tzuras was silent.

“What makes you sure? This… shadow of the Silent Library. It seems a shade of a shade. So many times removed. Is it even real? I have no doubt of what you heard, but in lands like this, can you be sure its not more than stories?”

“I can not be sure.” Quentin admitted. His head lowered back to the ground. He raised a hand upwards towards the hidden sun. “But I feel like it is true.”

“Hmm. Well. That seems very atypical with what little I guess from your character. Does a university educated mapmaker chase stories?”

“He does when there are lives at stake. He does when there are no other options. The rest you can surmise. We meant to take the river and this place pulled us in.”

“Yes. It seems to be able to do that.” Tzuras said, finishing Thellas wrappings. She had fallen asleep.

“She has little energy it seems.” Tzuras commented. “Although there is little I can do to fix the cause, perhaps I can arrange some things for the symptoms. Now that I've heard your story, I believe I ought to follow you.”

The elf put away his herbalism tools and procured several chunks of wood and a carving knife. With dexterous and purposeful strokes, he started shaping the wood.

Quentin grunted.

“I trust you elf.”

“I know you would. Despite your reclusive tone earlier, I understand you're just concerned about Thella.”

Quentin sighed.

“Its not just her. I've been a map maker for all my life, but lately I've found it hard to focus on my craft. Too often now it is the military type coming to my door. Perhaps I missed out on opportunities before. I've found the heart in it has seemed to have left me.”

“I think this library is a last opportunity to immerse myself in that world once again. Perhaps I can put my thoughts in order.”

Tzuras nodded and continued his carving.

“And how are you feeling right now?”

Quentin raised himself slightly. “I know now better than to try to get up. But whatever concoction you used earlier seems to have done the trick. I might have to ask you for one additional favor.”

He had Tzuras set out a small bed roll and blanket from their bag and place Thella on it near him.

“I fear I will fall asleep soon.” Quentin said. “I must thank you Tzuras. You are truly a good companion. I am very glad we ran across you. I'm not sure what we would have done otherwise.”

“Think nothing of it.” Tzuras replied, putting the finishing touches on the totem. It had the form of a woman kneeling, deep in prayer. Her head was down, but her arms reached towards the sky.

“But I am very thankful I ran across you two, for I have a feeling you will be able to help me as well.”

Quentin had slipped into unconsciousness.

Tzuras looked over the dressings to make sure none of them were still bleeding through. They were not, thanks to his earlier work.

“And its especially lucky I found you before night fell. Exceptionally lucky in fact, that I was so nearby and could get to you without much time…”

He reached his hand out with the totem and walked several paces away from their makeshift camp, but not so far that they were outside of sight range, and he kept an eye always behind him. Feeling out the correct location, he drove the bottom of the totem into the ground. It vibrated a bit under his fingers as he did so, and he felt a comforting feeling emerge within him.

“Not a moment too soon. Hmm. This place does not like to be disturbed...” Tzuras noted as a rush of fog slipped its way towards them, and slowly parted against the totem, satisfying itself with swirling slowly outside it.

With his keen elf eyes he cast one narrowed last glance at the darkness beyond the fog and grimaced. Was there a shape there or was it his imagination?

He shook his head and slipped back to camp, leaning up against his great frame pack.

“You poor two are in fact blessed by the Mother. Had I not gotten to you by nightfall you would have been lost for sure.”

The light of the day exhausted itself finally, and the dark fog held sway.

“So how are we getting off this island Uncle? Our boat is gone.”

They had just woken up. Next steps were unclear. The fog had not abated and Quentin wasn't sure that it ever would.

“Can you stand?” He asked Quentin.

Thella seemed to be feeling a bit better for she stood by him and even offered her hand to help him up. He groaned and with her help was able to climb to his feet.

He ran a hand over his chest. “The bleeding has gone down, but I believe there still might be broken bone underneath. I should be able to walk, provided we go slowly.”

“But as to you previous question, we must find another boat. Tzuras, did you come here by boat?”

“I did. However, it has since been swept away. And I do not think that to be a coincidence. This island is hostile to whoever sets foot on it. Had I a boat, or perhaps better magics, I would certainly help you.”

Quentin frowned. “Where did you set your boat when you came? Perhaps it got caught further downstream? In addition, the far side of this river is shallower, correct? Perhaps we can put something together...” He ran his hands together. “Regardless, I believe our next order of business is to make it to the other side of the island.”

He turned to Tzuras. “What will you do? Will you come with us?”

The elf nodded. “I will. I consider it to be my duty since I theoretically know this land the best. In addition, it would not feel right abandoning an old man and a child to fate. We were...brought together for a reason. I will not go against it.”

“Hmm. I am not so defenseless as I look!” Quentin retorted.

“Uncle. Don't be unappreciative.” Thella said with a frown, tugging on his robe.

Quentin relented. “So to the other side…?”

Tzuras nodded.

A silence fell over the group, and Thella could see just a brief hint of a smile start to form on Tzuras's mouth.

Quentin looked out into the featureless fog, then back behind him, but said nothing.

Thella, knowing well what was going through the old man's mind voiced the question instead of waiting for the man's pride to relent.

“So, which way is that?” She asked.

Tzuras's wry smile was now clear. “Right this way.” He gestured, shouldering his pack.

Quentin and Thella looked down at their own pack. Neither of them could lift it in their current states.

Tzuras sighed, and in one fluid motion slung their pack onto the top of his and lead the way into the mist.

They walked quietly through the forest. The oppressive nature of the fog and the lack of any other moving things made time hard to measure. Had they been walking for an hour or perhaps only for a handful of minutes?

“Tzuras. You've been very helpful, but how sure are you exactly of the direction?”

Tzuras stopped them and a frown crossed his face.

“I know what you mean. This seems different.”

“Look at the leaves.” Thella said, bending down and picking up a broad leaf in her hands. The brown thing was completely desiccated somehow despite the mist. She crushed it in her hands, and it made a thin crunch. She let the dust fall from her palm.

“When did the trees change?” Quentin asked. “They were pine trees earlier.” Thin and branching deciduous trees arced from the ground. Their branches were all empty, reaching naked for the sky.

Tzuras knelt and looked at the leaves. “These have been here for many seasons. But I see no sign of insects.” He gave the leaves underfoot a kick and dislodged a number of them into the air. He then knelt down again and looked at the dirt now exposed.

“You would normally find worms, fungus and the like under here. The leaves would be black, and close to falling into dirt. These are simply… untouched. Yet dead.” He ran his hands through the piles before shaking his head.

“I will admit this is not quite what I expected. The geography of this place is a bit hard to remember, but there is a series of central hills which break into exposed rock as you get further in. Were the fog not here, you could see it easily from where we are I believe.”

“Hmm” Quentin scratched his chin and looked around. “You would expect a map maker to have a better eye for things, but I must agree. There are no landmarks.”

“I had intended to take the most direct route over the central hills. I must have veered to the right at some point. That would put the river to our north.”

Tzuras looked up above them at the thin suggestion of a sun and frowned again.

“That sure looks right over ahead, does it not?”

“It does.” Admitted Quentin.

“Let us try for north then. We will hit the river and then continue counter cyclical until we reach the far shore.”

Thus agreed, they continued back into the dismal forest. Now every footstep heralded the sharp crunch of dead leaves. A sound that sound more and more unpleasant the more they listened to it.

“Thankfully there seem to be no animals on this island.” Quentin said. “You could hear us coming a long ways away.”

Tzuras shook his head. “Although its hard to believe, I believe the island is in fact full of animals. But for reasons I can't explain, I believe they only come out at night.”

“Oh?”

“Yes. I set a fire most nights, and always slept within my circle. They seemed very hesitant to come close to me, although I did hear them many nights, even last night. I would be wary of them. If any of you do see something moving besides us, let me know.”

At this point, Quentin noticed that Tzuras was in fact armed. A long dagger or short sword was at his side, although the sheath was arranged so that he could not discern its make.

After an unknown length of time, they heard the rush of waters again.

“I wouldn't think I'd be happy to hear that sound again.” Quentin said.

They eagerly made their way to the water. The trees dropped away revealing a stony beach.

“Hey! Whats the meaning of this? I thought we went north?” Quentin exclaimed, waving at the beach.

“This is exactly were our boat smashed! We've walked in a huge circle!”

Tzuras seemed without words. His assuredness had melted away and he threw his hood back, revealing a fierce expression.

“Something is quite wrong here.” he said. “I have wandered all over the North, the South and even the Far North. Studying the land is my calling. I have never gotten so turned around like this.”

“Mr. Tzuras.” Thella said, “Do you see that big rock there?” She pointed to an upturned monolith, sharply reaching into the sky. “That is the one our boat hit.”

Quentin scowled at the elf. “Well. No matter. Perhaps this is a blessing. Perhaps there is enough of the boat left that it can be repaired.”

They walked over to the stone.

“Huh?” Thella said, running her hands over the stone and then looking behind it and down the river. “We hit it pretty hard. I remember there was a mark even, and um, some blood.”

“There is no sign of your boat.” Tzuras said, looking up and down the river. The fog was not quite as close in as it had been during the night, but was still frustratingly present. They could look down the river to a point, but after that, there was white nothingness.

“There's not even any splinters.” Thella agreed, searching among the rocks.

But as Tzuras looked around the area, he turned quite pale.

“This is quite impossible.” He murmured, and crouched on a rock and stared at the far bank.

Quentin and Thella came up to him.

“Do you see that downed tree on the far bank? How it stretches into the water?”

There was indeed such a tree.

“And do you see how it kind of creates a little landing there? The bank, while sheer elsewhere is sloped there.”

“Yes, and?”

Tzuras turned to the other two. “That is where I landed.”

His pronouncement hung in the air as the water rushed by.

“You're right. That is impossible. You must have become turned around.” Quentin said, shaking his head. “We came down the river from upstream. Did you come from the same direction or did you paddle upstream against the current on some side channel.”

And now Tzuras seemed puzzled. “I recall coming to the far side from shore. I had passed the bridge to Merrin's ford and headed south. I bought a boat from a fisherman at a small stream and paddled it out.”

The two scratched their heads.

“Perhaps its possible that you landed at a similar spot, or even us at a similar spot. Then we would have walked across until we reached the other.”

Tzuras tilted his head and rubbed the tips of his ears. “Yet that still makes no sense. How is the place I landed over there? There were no islands between me and where I landed. In fact, isn't there only one island?”

“I don't think that makes sense to me either. There were many branches we kept to the left of. That means there must be islands between us and the far shore.” He kicked aside some stones until the mud underneath showed through and traced out a picture on the ground. He drew many forks, between each fork, many islands, all parallel to one another.

“Ah, but perhaps it is like this...” Tzuras made a cut between the outer island. “It would then be possible for a person to paddle a boat straight through the opening without hitting the outer islands.”

“Do you remember seeing such an opening?”

“I do not. The fog clouded everything.”

“Hmm” Quentin frowned. “I can feel my hands wanting to try to draw this out...”

“Uncle. What are we doing? Does it matter how we go to this place? We want to leave it. Right?”

But now Quentin was worked up. “That’s true Thella, and we must leave this island, and soon. But we must know where we are, to know where we want to go. Which is why we need to get to the far shore.”

“Now hold on. We've been saying far shore. I have been saying it too, under the assumption that we arrived on separate sides. Is it really true that this far shore is the one closest to the north bank of the river? What is the orientation of the island within the river? We will know north by the sun, once it moves from noon, but...” Tzuras continued.

“Lets not over complicate things. Do you agree that the close side, this side, of the river is when the water flows down like this, and the island is inward this way?” he said, arranging his thump representing the water flow, and index finger representing inward into the island.

“Yes. That is the only way it can be. At a large scale, regardless of the wends of the river, your goal must be to the north absolutely if not relatively.”

“Precisely. Therefore we must go to the far side from here. Without deviation from this direction. Without loosing our way.”

“Alright. I believe was should be able to cross the island within a day. Its simply not that large.” Tzuras said. Pointing ahead of them.

Quentin caught his arm. “No. Although what you say makes sense, and is the fastest way, I do not trust this island. Let us go around the island in an upstream manner like we said we were going to do originally, and keep the water in our sights at all time.”

“Agreed.”

They set out once more, resolutely staying from the interior of the island. This made the way difficult at some points, where the shore became low, and marsh replaced dirt and stone as the boundary to the river, but they marched straight through, without deviating inwards, although their boots paid the final price.

The sun grew darker as they trudged. Finally they passed a rock outcropping jutting sharply into the river. On one side, the river flowed to their left. On their other, it flowed to their right.

Quentin smiled wryly. “Ha. Here we are half way. This is the most upstream point. Now all we need to do is go downstream in the direction we didn't come from.” He pointed ahead. Tzuras and Thella were silent but nodded and followed his direction.

They followed the river for a while longer, scrambling across boulders. This side of the island seemed much sharper, and it rose several tens of feet above the river, a drop of stone separating them and it. Although the way was dangerous, they were always careful to keep the raging water in their sight.

“We should rest soon.” Tzuras said worry creeping into his voice. “The sun has not moved from its noon position but it is getting darker.”

Quentin looked up at the very dim ball of light hidden by fog. “Damn. You're right.” He shook his head. “I'm not going to think about that too hard. But we should be getting to the other side soon.”

“Fine. As soon as we get to a landing of any sort.”

The group got to one last obstacle, a series of downed pine trees whose bulk and many branches blocked their path. They went right into the river.

“Damn trees.” Quentin said, eyes them suspiciously. “I'm going to climb through them.”

Thella tugged Quentin's robe and pointed at the trees. “They're pine trees uncle. They've switched back.”

Quentin grimaced but grudgingly agreed. “Just right beyond these trees. I'm sure there will be a place to stop.” He cleared a path through the fallen trees, and the party scrambled through.

“Ha!” Quentin announced as they emerged onto another rock strewn beach. “A perfect landing. Now all we need is a boat. We can stay the night here and then figure out the boat problem tomorrow.”

But Thella and Tzuras were staring at the landing.

“Uncle… This is the same landing.”

“What?!” Quentin wheeled around.

Sure enough, it was slightly strange to be seeing it from a different direction, but it was identical. Quentin walked forwards slowly, staring at the blade like rock their ship had crashed on. It was identical, except that everything, from the rock down to every pebble and the trees behind them was reversed. They were at the far shore. The waters flowed in the opposite direction. They had not gotten turned around. But it was the close shore.

“This… Now this is not possible.” Quentin said softly. He knelt by the damned rock which had destroyed their boat, and which, remained, maddeningly, the only real landmark in the whole island.

“This is not possible!” He yelled, turning on Tzuras.

“This is only explainable through magic. And I am not capable of such illusions. Which leaves only one other person. You elf! You're supposed to know this island. How am I to know that you're not secretly deceiving us?”

“What?” Tzuras flashed anger for the first time that Thella had seen him.

“Uncle, that’s not reasonable.”

“No, it is reasonable. We don't really know anything about this person. We crash our boat here and just out of nowhere this person is here? Where there is no other soul or animal and we just happen to run into him? I don't believe it.”

“If I meant you harm why would I help you? I'm telling you, it is this island! There is some spirit...”

“Spirit? Ha. Figments of imagination. 'As the archer attributes to wind, the sorcerer attributes to spirits.'” He spat. “There is no such thing. I have seen no evidence that they exist, nor heard of any that can be reliable.”

“I know that quote. It came from the lips of a university graduate, holed up in Illithar for his whole life. No wonder he didn't find anything, he wasn't even looking. Listen to me old man. I've seen what they can do, spirits.”

“I think perhaps we should travel alone from now on.” Quentin stated coldly. “I have no desire to associate myself with someone who believes in fairy tales.”

The elf let both his and their pack fall to the ground with a dull thud. “I have never met someone so rude. I can't believe it! I have been carrying your pack for the last day. I made camp for you and healed your wounds. What possible motives could I have?”

“There's something wrong with our meeting, something with you. Perhaps you've been here too long and this twisted place was worn off on you.”

“Thats laughable. I've traveled all over the world. If I wanted to leave this island, I'm sure I could find a way.”

“Then why don't you elf?” He waved at the rushing waters. Quentin's eyes narrowed. “How long have you been on this island any ways?”

Tzuras snorted. “Maybe I will… Like you said, I've been here all this time, with no problems.”

But as he voiced these words, his anger was betrayed by a hint of confusion, and he held a hand to his head.

“I've… I've been setting wards, for weeks. They have to be placed in a particular configuration. There's only one island... Ah...”

“My god. Your mind has gone soft with the magic. How long have you been here elf? I bet you don't know!”

Tzuras started to sweat as sudden realization washed over him. “How long...” He muttered to himself. His calm exterior was now completely shattered. His ran his hands through his long black hair.

A smile of victory emerged on Quentin's mouth. Thella frowned.

Tzuras's despondency, and Quentin's smugness only lasted a minute however. Thella, who had been staring at the river, trying not to hear Quentin's misguided comments, suddenly called out. “There's a person!”

Quentin jerked at the sound of Thella's call. Tzuras was still standing in a daze, holding his head as if he was trying very hard to remember something.

Thella ran to the edge of the river. Sure enough there was a shape of a person bobbing in and out of the river. It turned so that they could see it.

And already Quentin was on edge. Something about the way it moved through the waters and rapids. It seemed too slow for the water around it, and even with its bobbing, seemed too still in some way. The head turned to face them.

The rotted face of the guide called out to Quentin in words he couldn't understand. The eyes were gone, ruptured long ago, bale orbs hung in their place, which stared straight at him with accusation. The skin, which he could somehow make out even from where he was, was rancid and puffing with water. The hair was rotten, and tangled with sticks and the bones of small fish. It opened its drowning mouth and screamed.

Thella's eyes were wide. “There's someone in there! Uncle! We have to help them!”

But Quentin was frozen in fear. He backed up a half step and held his hands out as if to ward away the vision. “I can't… He's dead! Oh gods. I couldn't grab him in time.”

“Uncle! Use your magic!” She said, tugging on his robe. The person drifted downward. If it went any further it would be impossible to grab them. He would be swept well past them.

Thella looked up at Quentin and saw that the older man was pale with fear for some reason.

It was clear he could not help. “Tzuras!” She yelled, grabbing the other man's arm. “Snap out of it! We need to save this man!”

“Oh, but I just realized something very curious...” He mumbled. But after a second, his green eyes flashed to life and he stirred. He brushed the hair out of his eyes and sprang to his feet.

“Oh!” He cried out, and grabbed something from his pack and dashed with Thella to the shore.

“Hang on!” Thella cried out.

“Help!” The drowning man called back. “Current- Strong!” He managed to say, before being dunked under again by a roiling surge of water.

“Maybe if we stood out on the tree trunks we could get him.” Thella said, pointing to the fallen trees at the end of the shore.

But Tzuras shook his head. “No need. We would just fall in ourselves.” he produced the object, a wand of pine wood and held it aloft, speaking a rush of words in a strange yet fluid language that Thella found somehow familiar.

The man's struggles started to come less and less frequently. And Tzuras redoubled his efforts.

Sweat ran from his forehead as he continued chanting, every once and a while signing shapes in the air with the wand.

Thella stood by, realizing that this was likely some form of magic.

Then, slowly and with much effort, the river bent slightly. Instead of carrying him down the next set of rapids, the man suddenly shunted off to the side towards them.

Effort shone itself clear on the elf's face as he struggled to keep the spell. He braced his feet and signed once more, vigorously.

A sudden wind rose, and the fog, which until this point has been mercifully hanging hundreds of feet off, started to roll towards them.

“No! I won't let you have him!” Tzuras shouted in defiance. His knees started to shake, and the muscles on his arms and neck strained.

The river bent further and finally the man came close enough that he could be considered to be in the shallows. Thella ran out on the rocks and tried to grab at him, but there was still a number of feet between her and him. Without thinking, she hurled herself into the shallows and grabbed him. With a huge amount of effort, fueled entirely out of adrenaline, she waded into the water up to her shoulders and half dragged the body back.

Her strength failed her as he came closer. He caught on the rocks and could not be dragged. She maneuvered behind him and then tried to push him ashore. Inelegantly, she tumbled the man to the edge of the beach where he would not be swept off.

She then fell over as if faint, and sat on the rocks near him, her clothing and bandages drenched.

“Yes! Thella, you got him.” Tzuras said, breaking his spell. The river slipped instantly back into its original inclination. The fog stayed close though, as if angry to have lost the man to them.

Quentin had, by this point, snapped out of whatever fear had paralyzed him.

“Thella!” He cried out, rushing over to her, clutching his chest as he did so. He grabbed her, cradling her in his arms and brought her away from the water and the mysterious body.

“Uncle, we have to make sure he's ok...” Thella said, her teeth chattering.

Fortunately, as Quentin laid Thella on the ground to address the body, he saw that Tzuras was already seeing to it.

“I-Is he dead?” Quentin asked.

“Hold on a minute, his vitals are hard to read. I think he's been in the water for a while, he's ice cold.”

Quentin let Tzuras tend to the unknown man, while he had Thella dry herself. He then sat down and began the laborious process of changing out her bandages.

“Thella, that was very brave, what you did.”

The child nodded and lay down on the rocks.

“I feel really tired and cold now.” Thella admitted.

Quentin shook his head. “Its possible that we could have grabbed him, but you took action Thella. I was just standing there. You did a good thing. Unfortunately, perhaps the gods don't assign points like that. It seems the cold water may have put a stress on our body. We need to get you into dry clothes. Go over there and change.”

“I'm having some trouble here.” the elf said. “Ill admit, I'm a naturalist foremost. I know some of the human body, but mostly plants and animals...” Tzuras said, frowning at the man.

He had short black hair and wore a black coat. The coat was fine quality and even with the damage caused by the water, Tzuras instantly knew its significance.

“He's a Northern soldier.” Tzuras related to Quentin. He shook his head. “We should build a fire, not only because we have to warm them up, but because I trust this place even less in the night.”

Quentin nodded, and with some effort, they got a small fire going. The wind tried its best to put it out, and the wood in the immediate area was wet and caught only with a large amount of effort. However, amid clouds of smoke from the moisture laden material, and with a small amount of magic, they managed to get a fire going.

Thella was still feeling tired. Now in dry clothes and with new bandages, the young girl fell asleep in front of the fire.

At some point during this, the man came to. It was late at this point and darkness had already fallen.

He jerked awake and looked around wildly.

“Who are you?” He demanded, arms still wrapped in the bedroll they had covered him in.

“Where is Leger? Where is the boat?”

Quentin and Tzuras looked at each other.

“We just saw you in the river. We didn't see a boat.”

“There has to be a boat. Leger was an accomplished riverman. I must have fallen out.” He explained, struggling free from the blankets.

“I'm Tzuras.” The elf said, helping the man free and to his feet. “This is Quentin.”

“Well met. I'm Corporal Odilon.” The man said, and reached out a hand to Tzuras. The elf was hesitant, but accepted it with his own after a moment.

“I thank you for your help. A member of the North's forces should not find himself in such a situation. You have certainly done your duty as citizens. But I cannot stay. I must find Leger.”

Tzuras started. “Now? In the dark?” He gestured around at the midnight blackness surrounding them. The river continued its crushing flow even while it could not be seen.

“I must! He's under my command. He could be in need as well.” The man said, brushing off his uniform and checking his side for a sword that was not there. He scowled.

“I must council against it.” Going out in the dark like this would be suicide.

Quentin nodded, studying the officer closely.

“I'm not sure if I can take your council…” The man said, scratching his chin. “This island has not proven itself to be dangerous. The island is magical for sure, and perhaps insidious in its efforts to keep us from leaving, but we have encountered no hostile forces nor wild animals. I cannot simply be afraid of the dark.”

“We?” Quentin questioned, an eyebrow raised.

“Hmm? Yes...” He turned to the older man, looked him over and then crossed his arms.

“What exactly are you doing on this island?” He asked, now looking at the two of them carefully.

“Its not like we want to be here.” Quentin said, frowning. “Likely the same as you. On route to another place and got caught. From what you've said, I judge you've experienced some of the island… tricks?”

“… Leger and I attempted to leave three times. The first two times, we successfully left, only to come right back to where we started. The magic of this place is strong. The third time seems to have tried its patience.”

Quentin continued to eye the officer. “Do you by any chance have additional boats?”

“I'm not sure I will answer that.” Odilon said. “Are you northern citizens?” He inquired.

Quentin rolled his eyes and shifted his attention back to Thella and the fire. “Do you doubt him because he is an elf?” he muttered.

Tzuras pursed his lips at Quentin's response but turned back to Odilon. “I am. I believe these two are as well. Although I do not live in one place for long, let alone any city. I have papers but I believe you'll find they're out of date.”

“I don't believe in that kind of thing.” Quentin said at first without looking. Then he shifted his head towards the officer. “That law was questionably by the codex at best. Do you have papers to show us?” he said, a small cruel smile started on the edges of his mouth.

To his credit Odilon simply nodded slowly. “That is certainly one reaction to the law. Yet you seem to know it well.” A thin smile of his own crossed the black haired soldier's face, “My papers are destroyed by the water it seems. I cannot ask you for yours with any legality.” He said, producing a sodden mess of parchment which he then threw to the ground.

“To be fair. That would have been my response whether or not you had your papers. I can't say I care for the direction your generals have taken in the past years. The north was never meant to be ruled by the military.” Quentin said, waving his hand high in the air.

Odilon's eyes narrowed once more. “Well. It is not my place to comment on such things.”

“It seems you are steadfast on me not going out, but I swore an oath to defend my fellow soldiers. I cannot forsake it. Leger must be out there somewhere.”

For once, Quentin's response was not hostile. “Good luck. I do hope you find him. If we run across him, where should we have him go?”

“The southern tip of the island.”

“I cannot go with you and leave these two alone. I will give you this knife. I would not send you out defenseless.

He approached the officer and handed the blade to him. As he did he pulled the man close.

“But I must warn you. This is no place to be alone. And especially no place to be alone at night. I survived through my magics. And it was quite harrowing. I would not wish it upon my enemies. You said earlier that there are no animals on this island. That is not quite true. There are no normal animals on this island. Be very careful, and be very wary of anything that moves here.”

Odilon stopped for a moment and looked down at the knife and the pouches. “You have been here for long? What is out there?”

But Tzuras shook his head. “I simply do not know. Nothing normal.” He admitted.

A moment of hesitation passed over Odilon, but some force grabbed his foot and started him walking away from the camp.

“I should hope to see you again safe.” Tzuras said, waving goodbye to the soldier.

Odilon was swallowed by the darkness.

“He is a fool.” Quentin said.

“Careful. You are safe only by the power of the fire and my magics. I could have gone with him.”

“Hmm. You are free to go elf. I will not hold you here.”

“You would die. Both of you.” Tzuras walked and sat opposite Quentin and stared intently at him.

“The dark here brings many bad things I have trouble describing.”

“Spirits?”

“Oh they're real enough. I just…” The elf tilted his head and ran a hand to clear the hair from his eyes.

“Ah. You meant that as an insult. You are quite an individual Quentin. And not in a good way. If it were between you and that officer I would have gone with him. At least he followed a noble motive.”

“Hmm. And you think I do not?”

“I think you are a very unpleasant person, with several deep flaws which you seem either not aware of, or are consciously not restraining.”

“And those would be?”

“You are rude and arrogant. You over estimate your own abilities and think yourself very clever. No doubt you are. However, the world is not impressed with your cleverness.”

“I'm surprised you would have gone with him after what his kind did to your people.”

Tzuras stared at Quentin.

“What do you know of my people?” He asked, a hint of anger in his voice.

“Oh, much actually. You might be surprised.”

“Surprise me.” Tzuras said, his voice cold.

Quentin hesitated, then with slow, purposeful motions, he unwrapped his forearms and held them up to Tzuras before the fire.

Although the flames danced with red and orange, the serpentine sigils running up and down Quentin's arms flashed silver.

“*My hands are guided by the power of the moon.*” Quentin said in Elvish.

To Tzuras credit, he recovered much quicker than Quentin expected.

“*How can one such as you be an Elf Friend?*” Disbelief was plastered across the elf's face.

And finally the snide smile ran from Quentin's mouth, and exhaustion showed for a moment. He let his arms hang limp as if the memory cost him. The elvish dropped from his mouth and he continued slowly in northern.

“A long time ago, my brother took the hand of an Elvish maid. The sadness took both of them. Her at first, and then him as she dragged him in. But they had the right of mind to provide for their daughter.” Quentin glanced at Thella, still asleep before the fire.

“I vowed to keep her safe in perhaps a peak of emotion, when it became clear there was no stopping them. I do love her. I did love them. But an old bitter man is a poor excuse for a family. They abrogated their responsibility to drown themselves in their own pity… at my expense.”

Tzuras stared at them both.

“So she is half elven… I thought there was something about you two...”

“*The threads entangle.*” Quentin said, sighing.

“They do, do they not?” Tzuras replied. “She does not look elven. But even still, her sickness, it is the sadness?”

Quentin shook his head. “Something like that. Only a shadow, a manifestation of it. Unlike the real thing, I have hope it can be cured, if only I can get the right knowledge. Not even the half blooded are spared. Thankfully she inherited her father's looks.”

“Is there something wrong with being an elf?”

“Yes. For a child among humans, unlearnt, bigoted humans.”

“Hmm. I suppose I cannot argue with that. I was not spared the taunts as I grew up.”

“And does the sadness effect you? Or perhaps it is only those who knew the fall?”

“You realize that is quite a personal question, no?” He said shaking his head. But he continued.

“If only.” Tzuras said, again brushing his hair away from his face. “There is a reason I walk the lands alone among nature. It was Ishira's way. Perhaps that is why it seems to help: a path of peace.”

“There is little of that serenity left in the world.”

“Perhaps it died with her.” Tzuras shrugged.

“I wondered if this island didn't emulate her in its stillness. Perhaps there is a ruin here?” Quentin posited.

But Tzuras shook his head. “This is as far from her as one could end. I will give you that on the surface it appears the same. Perhaps this was once elven. However, this stillness is an emptiness, a deadening of the senses. It is the annihilation of the self rather than a reflection on it.”

“Oh...” Quentin nodded. “I see. Yes.” He stared from the fire to the dark woods.

They stared into the fire for a long while.

A jolt of presence caused Tzuras's head to shoot up. His eyes shone violent green in the embers of the fire.

“Are you awake old man?”

Quentin stared, and shook his head. “In a moment I would not have been. What is it?”

“My totems are warning me of danger.”

“Ah, right, those totems. That’s not any magic I know of.” Yet he did get to his feet. “Should I wake Thella?”

“One moment… I'm not sure its explicitly targeting us.” He admitted, “The magic is not my usual. Its something I picked up from the far south and modified a bit, so I admit it is more of an art than what I prefer.”

Quentin wiped the tiredness from his eyes. “Well, you got me up. I'm up now, and on edge. Might as well do something.” He pulled out his large leather book crouched near the fire and murmured words to himself.

“But tell me. What does their magic supposedly do? These totems?”

“I would be annoyed at your choice of words if I didn't know you better now.” Tzuras said, with a roll of the eyes. “Its not 'supposedly'. Its just inexact magic. Look, you are I practice the same fundamentals. Here is my tome.”

Tzuras produced a small notebook and waved it before Quentin.

“But these things are so… ”

He clenched his hands and opened them again. “Spirit magic. It operates on feeling. You can't force them through words, or cleverly constructed phrases. There are no measured steps, nor strict lessons it seems. Its all emotion.”

Quentin quieted his dismissive attitude for a moment and listened.

“Typically, if you can train your mind, you can feel a spirit deep beneath you. Almost like a humming. If you don't know what you’re looking for you'd miss it. So these totems are a similar presence. Only now they envoke...” The elf waved his hand, “nervousness… A kind of edged awareness. Its not a pleasant thing. And it takes a fair bit of concentration to actually focus on one of them individually and tell which one has been triggered, especially as it seems that I have planted quite a number of them.”

He frowned. “These totems are supposed to be a protective ward of sorts. Its not quite as simple as a circle, but you place them in a pattern and they ward off spirits and other things. Like I said the magic is not exact.”

“Hmm. The lack of control sounds frustrating.” Quentin said, tracing the shapes of the words in his book. “I prefer the rigid yet dependable rules of northern magic.”

“Ha. You do seem the type. Well, what can I say. The University has mastered it. But as I was saying, there… there seem to be totems on the other islands. This is all quite confusing. I don't believe I've left the island since I landed.”

Quentin peered upwards in the soft firelight, his book still open in his hands. “I believe earlier I would have ridiculed you for a statement like that. But after seeing things shift here? How knows if we're on the same island we were on when we started. I'm not sure if that question even makes sense.”

Tzuras nodded. “Whats interesting is that, well, although its all still a bit fuzzy, it seems like the totems far off are in the same configuration… I don't think that is possible. It would have take too long to place them all, and I am the only one in this area who knows the configuration, so it couldn't have been someone else.”

“You talked about northern magic. It is true that it is rigid, but I believe its methods can be helpful. It progresses very slowly, bit by bit, nothing like the battlemages to the south or the shamans of the fartherners. Its main tennant is that acceptance of reality as it is. Observation and formation of pattern are key. 'The less imagined, the less guessed, the more clear the world lies'.”

He stared in to the fire for a moment before snapping the book closed with a snap.

“The simplest thing is often the truest.” He continued. “If there are totems on the other islands, and in the same configuration, there are two reasonable solutions. One, the island's magic is tricking your senses. Or, two, there are no other islands, at least not in any meaningful way.”

“Oh… Yes...That the whole area is under the sway of this magic. That does make sense. It is furthermore clear that the island reacts to people trespassing within its domain. Does this mean there is an intelligence here? Perhaps a mage of some sort?”

Quentin shook his head. “It would have to be a wild mage for sure. I've never encountered spells like this. Illusions, sure, and sometimes even grand ones which bewitch the smell, taste, and the like. This is different. This is more fundamental in some way. More wild than individual spells. More like a force.”

“Hmm. Perhaps like a spirit?” Tzuras grinned.

Quentin avoided eye contact with a cough. “Perhaps. I know little of such things.”

“Spirits are obtuse. This fits. Although I have met people who used spirits for evil, I've never encountered a spirit that was evil itself.”

“Not even the undead?” Quentin asked. “Geremon's ilk have been particularly… useless lately, no? The one I visited in Mellont refused me any spells when I had them look at Thella.”

“Perhaps that are tangently similar, but perhaps its simply an overuse of the word. I meant earth spirits, natural things.”

“Does this island seem natural to you?” Quentin asked, frowning at the gathering fog and shapless trees outside of the protection of the fire.

“I suppose not. Although it does use aspects of nature.” Tzuras said suddenly. “Perhaps something has gone wrong here… I traveled long ago. I tried to venture into the wastes. I thought with my skills I would be able perhaps to make it to Ankhsomar and after that, to the Fell itself.”

Quentin was fully alert now. “Ah. That is a perilous journey. So many maps end at the edge of that place, merely and note explaining more.”

“And for good reason. What happened there destroyed the land utterly and entirely. Destroyed it go completely that once there was nothing left, the destruction pooled and seeped into the ground itself. Its stained with that event. I saw many things there that did not make sense: visions of different times, and of fear and that destruction.”

“So you think a similar thing is here?”

Tzuras gestured around. “Its strange. That is my best analogy, but this land is obviously not blasted. If you were to see it from afar, you might think it normal. And it does not seem quite as overtly hostile.”

And just as those word came from his mouth, a blood chilling scream echoed through the night.

Quentin froze.

Tzuras stiffened, his eyes growing wide. “It wasn't coming for us...”

“Odilon!” Tzuras said, springing to his feet. His wand was in his hand.

“That damn fool. We warned him.” Quentin said shaking his head. Still his countenance was darkened.

“It won't matter soon. Whatever it is. Its following him and he's bringing it right here.”

Quentin spun towards Tzuras. “What about your totems? What about the fire?”

“The fire might work. The totems… Are not placed correctly? Its hard to say… Whatever it is is slipping through the pattern. Or perhaps the pattern is changing around it. I cannot tell. They will be here in a moment.”

“Thella! Wake up!” But once again Thella would not awaken.

“Do you have that leaf?” Quentin asked.

Tzuras shook his head. “No time!” The elf was signing something in the air and a flame suddenly appeared hovering delicately in midair.

“Damn you elf!” Quentin barked. With a protest of his body, he ran his arms beneath the young girl and hoisted her onto his shoulder and shifted her to one side. With his other, he opened his book. The fog ran through their camp site now, low to the ground. With it was a slight breeze, like the slow release of a breath, the only think to yet violate the stillness.

“Where is it?” Quentin yelled.

“I think I see Odilon! Hey! Here!” Tzuras called, waving his other hand.

A dark shape emerged from the forest in a rush.

Quentin flinched and tried to call to his mind the last words of a spell. Sweat ran down his face. He could not remember! His mind was blank!

Odilon dove into the clearing, coming to rest mere feet from the fire. He was clutching his arm while trying to maintain hold of the dagger Tzuras had given him. His eyes were wild with fear.

“Its coming!” He shouted.

The three focused on the darkness. Beyond the fire was what? Something was moving out there. Quentin could feel it. Their world was this tiny space of illumination with its dancing flames, and all the rest was darkness and fog. The only things that existed were them and the fire, everything else was dark oblivion.

They waited for a moment with nervous tension.

And another.

And yet another.

But nothing showed.

The fog swirled around them dangerously, but they could not see any movement.

“What was it Odilon?” Tzuras asked, glancing quickly down at the wounded man.

But the officer shook his head violently. “I-I couldn't see. Merely a force. Something so dangerous. Something with claws.”

“Damn. So you couldn't get sight of it either… Perhaps we can scare it off. It does not like the fire.” Tzuras said signing with his wand. The orb hovering by him burst into life.

He launched the thing into the woods at the point where Odilon came. For a moment the darkness was lifted away, and they could see the point were the stone of the landing gave way to the trees of the forest. The orb smashed against the ground, shadows dancing in all directions. Then, as quickly as it flared into life, it disappeared.

Darkness sucked back into its proper place, and went even a bit further. They unconsciously took a step backwards towards the fire. The darkness claimed the space they just occupied.

And there was silence and stillness amid the darkness.

Moments passed again and again, yet nothing seemed to change.

“Perhaps it was scared off...” Quentin said, moving from his protective stance holding Thella. His old muscles burned and he longed to put her down.

“Do not move!” Tzuras commanded. Without breaking eye contact with the place where his spell had just impacted, he walked backwards, wand still outstretched.

For an instant, he looked at Odilon and reached out a hand to bring him to his feet.

“Thanks...” He said, drawing himself up.

And in that instant, something moved beyond the darkness.

Quentin felt it like a sudden emptiness against him, like all the air had suddenly vanished around them, and his very being was tearing apart. There was no escaping it. He felt his knees start to buckle under him. A dark haze overtook his vision, and even the light from the fire dimmed.

“Oh gods...” he cried out, clutching Thella. The others also seemed similarly afflicted.

Tzuras gritted his teeth, wand still out towards the darkness.

“What are you?” He yelled.

A shape moved near a tree.

Inexorably drawn to the movement, Quentin's eye traced the shape of the tree until it reached the low roots, where, slipped between the gnarled twisted shapes was some shape. He only caught a glimpse of it, and his courage failed him completely.

“Oh gods! Oh gods! What is that? What is that!” Composure left him. Fear ran through his body, obliterating every other thought. His arms shook and his leg started to give away. In that moment though, his body stiffened, and wrenched in place by some force, he shuddered, half collapsed, half standing, while the fear and his oath warred with one another.

He tried to close his eyes, if even for one second, but he could not move them. He tried to turn his head, but only succeeded in small jerks. His body was held fast by his oath. Thella was unconscious still on his shoulders. A guttural cry of horror tore its way through his body. He could not look away!

Tzuras eclipsed his view with his body as he took one purposeful step forward. It was all he managed.

The obliterative emptiness returned, horrible and absolute.

The thing reached an inky black paw towards them as if trying the waters. The fire behind them shuttered.

Quentin thought his heart was going to burst. His arms seared like fire and the emptiness took hold of it. He felt lit aflame, suddenly cast into a hurricane, drawn out and vanished into the darkness. Was he going to be drawn into nothingness?

It tried the fire again, and again the flames shuttered, but did not go out.

He caught sight of black feathers, and some sort of unrecognizable hound like jaw press its way forward towards the light.

Tzuras shook his head violently. He managed to sign the last of a spell and a brilliant light flooded from the end of his wand.

“*Back damn you*!” He cursed in elvish

The thing made no reaction to the sudden light, but did not approach. It stayed in place for the duration of the spell and a moment afterwards as if to signal Tzuras who was in control of the encounter.

Then, with a call between a wolf howl cut off into a falcon cry, it slithered its amorphous body through the tangle of roots back into the darkness.

The feeling of being torn apart left Quentin and he collapsed to his knees, careful to not let Thella fall. He placed her beside the fire once more and then collapsed to the ground. He heard Odilon do the same.

Tzuras staggered over to the fire and pushed more kindling into it.

The darkness was pushed back a bit more.

He let out a choking sound and sat down.

“Gods.” Odilon whispered. “What in the deathlord's name was that?”

But the others were too horrified and exhausted to say anything. They lay there for a long while, the unanswered question slipping into the stillness of the night.

The morning brought daylight of a sort, but no end to the mist. Quentin was just glad the beast hadn't decided to return. The thought of that shifting mass, the unnatural form of dark feathers and flesh still jumping to his mind unbidden.

Thella slept beside him. If there was one good outcome of the whole thing is that the child had slept through it all. In retrospect, there had not been any noise or call from the creature, but something told Quentin that even if it had, Thella might not have woken at all, a chilling thought. It was likely the sickness growing more powerful. Island be damned, they had to get to the Library.

“I think we'll all agree that we must get off this island as soon as possible?” Quentin asked, readying his pack. The last night's events had given him new found if perhaps grudging acceptance for the elf. He did save them from whatever that thing was. Or at least it looked like he had. He was the only one to actively oppose it anyway. The least he could do was carry their own damn pack.

His muscles and even bones still felt empty from the encounter with the thing, as if they would shatter at any moment. It was a strange feeling, and he slung the pack onto his back for no reason other than to feel the exertion of the weight.

Odilon just stared at him. The man may have laid down at the end of the encounter, but he sure didn't appear to have slept any. His face was gaunt and tired. He still clutched his arm.

“Did your group have any additional boats?” Quentin asked.

Something like relief washed over Odilon. “Yes. There were four large boats in total. Two for supplies.” But then some conflict seemed to rise in him. His face turned back into a frown as if considering something, and he pulled his black uniform around him.

“We ought to regroup with my fellow soldiers anyway. I need to warn them and the Sergeant about whats here on this island.”

“That seems prudent. You said they made camp at the southern point?” Tzuras asked.

“Yes. If we get near I should be able to find it. I… Sergeant Cyrus is a smart man. He'll know what to do.”

“I have no doubt. But what we really need to do is leave. I don't know what your orders were exactly, but I need to get Thella to the other side of this river.”

Odilon nodded. “Yes… Um. I think I might be able to convince him to allow you to take one of the boats. He's a fair man too. You'll see.”

Quentin returned the nod, but noticed that the man was much more on edge, and much less sure of himself than before.

“Then we'd best be off.” Quentin said, futilely attempting to wake Thella. “Do you mind if I borrow some of those smelling herbs? It seems...” He glanced at Odilon. “It seems like Thella might be sick from fishing for our soldier here.”

“That was her then! I hardly remember everything, the water was so fierce. What a feat for such a child. I must thank her when she wakes.”

Quentin shrugged and grabbed the small container from Tzuras which he used to awaken Thella. The child came to with a start and slowly got to her feet.

“Thella, we're going to try to borrow a boat from Odilon's friends here.”

“Who is that? Is that the man in the water from earlier? Sorry I didn't say hi earlier. I fell asleep.”

“Well met.” Odilon said and smiled at the girl.

“Are they on the island too?” She asked. “Did they crash on it as well?”

“Something like that. We're going to the southern end of the island. Are you hungry? I know we have food in here somewhere...”

“No. Its ok. I'm not hungry.” She said. “I want to walk. I don't like the water too much. It reminds me of when our boat crashed.”

Quentin nodded. “Lets be going then.”

The group collected their things.

They had scarcely gone a couple of feet before Tzuras stopped them.

“Hold on one second. Before we go any further. I want to see if there is any sign of the beast.”

Odilon turned to Tzuras but did not get closer. “Not sure I want to know more about that thing...”

“We may run across about it again. It would help to know what we're up against.” Tzuras said, stooping over the tangle of roots that the beast had watched them from.

“Oh. Thella, whats wrong?” The girl had gripped his arm tightly and stared at the space Tzuras was in.

“Uncle. There was something bad there last night.”

“Yes. There was some sort of beast. Did you wake up?” Quentin said, worried. The thing had been frightening enough to hill his bones. He had considered it a boon that the thing had approached them when she was asleep.

Thella shook her head. “No, but I dreamt of it. I didn't like it at all. It was very scary.”

“I want to get off this island, Uncle.”

Quentin nodded down to her. “Gods, don't we all… We're going to borrow a bout from Odilon's friends and then well leave, ok?” Thella paused as if not sure whether that promise was good enough but finally agreed.

“Tzuras, find anything?” Quentin peered over at the elf.

“Well, yes. We talked earlier about what caused this… but spirits or no, that horrifying thing we saw last night was real.”

Odilon grimaced and continued to hold his arm. “I could have told you that.”

“Well, more real than I expected. I dont' know the rules that bind those sort of things. Regardless, magic or no, this was an actual beast of flesh and bone. Look, it left fur.”

He held up a tuft of black hair.

“As you say.” Odilon cautioned. “Maybe I was wrong. Learn all you can about it I suppose, perhaps we can avoid its tracks.”

“Hmm. You're missing the important part, soldier.” Quentin said, rummaging though his pack for his book. “A real animal? Regardless of magics ensorcelling it, it can be warded off. I have never met a creature that abides the heat of fire.”

“I'm sure you have some nasty surprises in there Quentin.” Tzuras said, straightening. “Yet I mostly side with Quentin. We must avoid this thing at all cost. Were I alone perhaps I would try my hand. But with the girl? No. She should be our primary goal. This isn't your fight.”

Quentin shut the book and agreed. “You're right. We must be on our way.”

Thella walked with them, holding Quentin's hand. Quentin looked behind them at the camp site and continued into the forest.

The fog was quick to assert its dominance. As soon as the rushing noise of the waters had passed behind them, they were once again transported to a dim featureless world. The sun was only a pale smudge through the branches of pine trees and the obscuring whiteness of clouds. The ground was soft with needles once more. Even the scent of the forest was dulled. Sap oozed from some of the trees, but issued no smell.

“Ah.” Tzuras said, calling them to stop.

The crowded behind him.

“What is it?”

The elf gestured at the trunk closest to them. “Look at the marks there.”

The tree had been mauled. Long gashes cut their way deep into its core, past the bark and into the soft core. Sap leaked from the injury.

“Do you suppose its the same beast?” Thella asked, and reached towards the mark, but hesitated half way, staring at it.

“It must be.” Odilon said. “Nothing we can learn here. We should hurry and get back to the camp. The fact that there are marks here means that the beast must be around.” He eyed the fog.

“There's nothing to say it won't come out during the day.” He said, knife in one hand, the other held close by his side.

“Hmm. That's where you're wrong. Thella, want to learn a bit about animal physiology?” Tzuras asked, now crouched and frowning at the marks. Quentin raised an eyebrow but was curious himself, so he let the elf continue.

“I don't know what you mean.” Thella admitted. “You can learn something from these?” She gestured at the marks.

“Yes. Firstly look at the height. Bears rear up on their hind legs sometimes when they claw at trees. Smaller animals like raccoons will scratch at the bottom or climb and eat insects from higher up.”

“Whats your point? These marks are all over the place.” Quentin interjected.

The elf turned to him. “Been a while since the university. I didn't see you raise your hand.”

“But yes, you're right. These marks are all over.” The elf stood up and pointed at the tallest mark.

“That is over eight feet tall. Thats assuming that it reached up, rather than bent down! But what do you see down there?”

Thella had crouched down herself and was inspecting marks further to the ground.

“Theres ones down here as well. Very low. If you or I tried to make them, we'd have to get down to our knees” She pointed out, still shying away from actually touching the marks.

“Hmm. Good point. And there's also the depth and texture to them. This one is straight and very deep, right into the heart wood. This other one is abruptly stopped; more of a rip.”

Odilon and Quentin puzzled over these new facts.

“Finally, there's the reason. Most beasts will tear off bark either because they have part of them that need the wear, like beavers or elk, or because they are eating either the bark or whats under it.”

“Hmm. And what do you think this beast was doing?” Quentin asked. A damp breeze blew through the forest, and the lot of them shivered.

“Neither of the two. If it were wear, it would be one tree, maybe two, and it would use one part of its body. And if it were eating the bark, it would be more purposeful, targeting whatever it eats.”

Odilon frowned and crossed his hands.

“So whats that all mean then? What kind of behavior does this indicate?”

Tzuras gestured for them to keep on moving and so they did while he revealed his fears.

“It was something darker. Rage, or perhaps pain. Everything about these marks is concerning. They're mindless. And look….”

He gestured to the trees in front of them. Every one of the trunks around them was shredded. The thick sap flowed like dark red blood from the wounds as the trees cried.

“This was completely mindless. Made by a creature of bizarre proportions. Jaw marks too high and too low. Claw marks indicating swings from only one side. And there's some over holes here which look like… woodpecker holes. I don't know what to make of this. They were made by the same creature, or at least very rapid in succession to one another. The sap sets up after a while.”

Odilon stared at the elf.

“Gods forget that.” He said, and suddenly bristled, pushing to the front of the group. “Let us make haste across this wretched island, provided it allows us… I've seen enough. I was scared of the thing before your comments Tzuras. They haven't helped.” He gestured with his good hand, still holding the dagger.

Tzuras nodded.

They quickened their pace and started off once more.

“Do you know the way, Odilon?” Tzuras asked, tentatively bringing up the rear. He swung a quick check behind them to make sure nothing was following them. Thankfully, there was nothing the the obscuring fog.

“I believe so. This feels right for some reason.” He said, pointing towards a small rise. There was nothing to indicate anyone had ever been here.

“Fine. As long as you do. How is your arm? I see you're still holding it.”

The soldier's face darkened. “Its fine. Ill have Edoma look at it when we get to the camp. She's a good medic. It got me good though. I'll give it that.”

“I can take a look at it if you want. I know a couple of poultices that may be able to help.”

“Thank you for your offer but I think its best we simply get to the camp as soon as possible. As you can see, the bleeding has stopped. Its not so bad, and I can move it. I think it was superficial.”

Tzuras agreed and went back to studying their surroundings and keeping a watch on the way they had come.

Once again, the island revealed its puzzling expanse. It could not have been more than a few miles across yet they had yet to reach the camp, the river or any identifying markers whatsoever.

The fog had set in with glee and at points they had to walk in single file very close to one another lest they be spirited off into that blank expanse. Thella clung to Quentin's arm. Odilon clung to his knife and hid his arm in his jacket. Tzuras had his wand out and ran his eyes across every unidentified clump of leaves, searching, almost hoping for something to track amid the featurelessness.

“Uncle. The trees have changed.”

Quentin glanced around nervously. Sure enough, the skeletal reach of deadened gnarled trees had replaced the pillar-like similarity of the pines.

“I don't remember these trees near my camp…” Odilon whispered. The admission elicited silence from the rest of the group. Yet through the strange character of the place, every one of them felt a strong desire to continue walking, if only to mask their dread.

“I'm sorry everyone. I really thought it was this way.”

Quentin moved to say something but Tzuras cut him off, one hand on the soldier's shoulder.

“Its ok. This place is twisted.”

Odilon nodded but did not look assured by the comment.

“So… where do we go now?” Thella asked, “Where are we walking?”

Quentin shook his head. “I-I can't explain, but I really think we should continue walking...” He said, gripping Thella's hand. “I think that if we stop...”

Tzuras waved his hand through the dense fog and a grimmace ran across his face.

“This is an evil place. Something is very wrong here.” He offered. “Its not just the look of the trees. The trees, the fog, the shifting places, its all broken.”

Odilon nodded. “Yet, I have some hope? I can't quite explain it, but I feel like if we keep walking this way, if we just keep going, we'll get to the camp. I'll come right out and say it plain, I don't quite remember this place, yet it still feels familiar. Its as if we're coming to the top of a large hill. I know that despite us climbing higher and higher, eventually we will come to the top and see the other side.”

They all agreed that Odilon's description of his feeling matched the one that they were feeling as well. And with nothing more than intuition and feeling the continued into the island.

But before too long, and seemingly very quickly, the light of the place started to fade above them. They walked now in complete silence. The darkening of the sun above them was a cruel sword over their heads. They all subconsciously knew that whatever power this place held during the day, it would only worsen during the night.

“I feel like we should stop.” Tzuras said, boldly breaking the silence. “Its getting dark, but I think we have enough time for me to set out some wards before we lose the sun. Wherever we are, walking several more miles probably won't help us.”

Odilon shook his head. “I swear we're close. I can't explain why but...”

Thella let out a small groan and clung to Quentin's hand.

“Uncle. I'm tired. We've been waking all day.”

Quentin had been about to council continuing, but his words lodged in his mouth. He hesitated, trying to think of a solution. One came to mind.

“Oh. Thella. Of course you're tired. You haven't eaten a thing today!” He said, slinging his pack to the ground.

But the girl shook her head slowly. “I'm not hungry. Plus, neither have you.”

Quentin stopped for a moment and a puzzled expression took him.

“Neither have I?” He rubbed his head, trying to remember their journey today. Had it only been a day they had been walking? Had they really not eaten? That was impossible. They would have felt hungry.

But Thella's comment had disquieted them all.

“Eaten?” Tzuras said, eyes wide. “My god. We really haven't eaten. I don't remember eating today at all, or even yesterday...” He turned to the soldier.

“Do you remember eating recently?”

The soldier shook his head and looked through his pack. “To be honest, all the stuff before the rapids was just a blur. I don't remember clearly. But here...” He lifted out a wrapped ration from his bag.

“I have several of these. I think there's supposed to be seven of them. And there are seven still here...”

They had stopped by this point and they looked at each other with a mixture of shock and dismay.

“What does this mean?” Odilon asked the other two. “I'm not hungry. I should be hungry if I haven't eaten in two days.”

“Another curiosity of this place I suppose?” Quentin said, with a grumble. “Perhaps its because of the changing of the land. This island is not as large as the amount of land we have covered. Maybe we only feel hungry for the actual distance we've traveled?”

Tzuras scratched his chin. “I suppose I haven't eaten in a very long while.” he said, distantly, rummaging through his large pack. “Do I even have food in here?”

But a sudden and intense feeling slowly took hold of Quentin. The others were talking now, even Thella. They were all trying to figure out how it was possible for them to have spent several days without eating.

Quentin had crouched to look through his bag, but he slowly returned to his feet.

What was causing this feeling?

His eyes slid from one side of the forest to the other. Tzuras had been staring into the mist this whole time. Could there have been something that the woodsman had missed?

A chill started to work down Quentin's neck. It was as if he could feel the icy trickle of snow melt. He could not place it, but something was wrong. Even moreso than usual.

In one solid movement his pack was returned to his back and his hand had caught Thella's.

She looked up at him with surprise but quieted when she saw that his face was white and grave.

“Uncle...”

“Everyone, quiet. I can't explain it, but something is off here. Something *feels* wrong.”

The others looked at him.

“What do you mean, feels?”

“Stop talking and feel.” He gestured towards the forest in front of them.

Tzuras became quiet and seemed lost in concentration.

Odilon looked from the old man to the elf and back again.

“Is there something you're not telling me? Is the beast back?” he stiffened and his hand went for his knife again.

Tzuras inhaled as if to take a deep breath, but after a second it caught in his throat. His hand shot out and caught Quentin's shirt.

“Stay together. Something evil is near.” He said gravely.

There was no talking now. The group subconsciously shrank together, everyone peering in one direction or another. There was no movement that they could tell.

“I feel it too now. Its strong. This way.” Tzuras said quietly.

They walked slowly and quietly in that direction. Thella held on to her uncle's hand with a sudden force. The old man could feel the bandages on his skin, the surprising strength of the small hand.

They moved forward, scanning the forest for any sign of movement. A breeze groaned through the trees: only a short gasp, cold and wet. Tzuras's eyes widened a bit.

“There's blood nearby.” He said, directing them forward.

“Right there. On the other side of that tree.” He pointed.

It was a gnarled oak whose vast bulk at some point had been split by lightning. Its branches were bare, yet still thick with unsettling bulbous growth which twisted this way and that with abandon.

From its lowest part, where the trunk met the ground came a much stronger version of the feeling that Quentin had sensed earlier. They all felt it now. A sick fascination fell over them. The mystery of what could cause such a feeling was overwhelming. Half dread and half morbid curiosity compelled them to edge around the tree, bit by bit.

The bark was blackened with rot. Grey moss ran its length. Torturous hollows were dug into its flesh, from which seeped pitch colored sap.

They edged a bit closer.

Finally they could see what it was they had been sensing.

Quentin was the first to react. He threw his hand over Thella's eyes and mouth. Yet he did not look away from the sight, staring on it with shock. Thella buried her face into the older man's side.

Tzuras's green eyes dimmed, and a sadness appeared in them, spreading to his face.

Odilon let out a small groan and took a staggered half step forward, wounded arm uselessly outstretched.

Against the tree was a body, or at least what was left of one.

It was sprawled outwards, arms twisted at odd angles. Draped over its shoulders was a black uniform, the same as the one Odilon was wearing. To its side, covered in blood and half severed from the arm which held it, was a sword.

However, the body's defining feature was its face, which was completely missing. The skull had been crushed inwards by terrible force, so horribly, and so completely, that no features of any kind were visible. Hair was an afterthought and matted black with dried blood behind where the head should have been.

Sprayed to every side and soaking all surfaces and clothing was blood. The same blows extended downward, ripping the neck open and continuing down to the upper torso, creating one large contiguous hole in the flesh. It yawned inward, seemingly deeper than at first seeming possible, until one realized the whole at times went straight through the body and out the other side, digging into the dark recesses of the rotted tree. It was bordered on its edges by the white remains of the upper ribcage and the fragments of skull still visible.

“Oh god.” Quentin muttered and clenched Thella close to his side.

Tzuras had subsided into a sad disappointed frown. His head tilted slightly. He stared at the body in a disconnected and dispassionate manner.

Odilon face cycled through a number of emotions until it stopped on pained horror. He let out a cry and clutched his hands to his face.

Some feeling started building inside Quentin. At first, he thought it was horror, and that he was going to be sick. But while indeed, as it swept through him, it was disgust, it was not fear which gripped him but a sudden and inexplicable anger at the deformed body.

The twisted sprawling arms, the horrible cavernous hole, which sunk inward, too deep ad dark to be natural or even close to it. The thing in front of them was so viscerally and horrifying wrong to Quentin, that he had to act. But rather than look away, his teeth gritted with hateful disgust. The thing had to be destroyed.

And so, with one hand still holding Thella still, and the other outstretched, his tome open and whirling amid constructed wind he cursed the dead thing which lay before them.

Fire formed in the space in front of the book, and surged forward in a rolling tongue of flame which washed over the body.

“W-What are you doing?” Odilon asked and looked at Quentin, shocked.

Tzuras simply stared, still transfixed by the sight in front of him.

Quentin felt the visceral disgust peak inside him, the yawning open hole of the body groaned as the flames washed over it. And for a moment, it seemed like the flames were captured by the hole, swirled, compressing into its unnatural darkness and vanished. Was that a sound it had made? It mattered not, only that it must be be destroyed now!

The flames built in intensity, his body tensed with effort and he clutched his book until the edges of the metal edged cover dug into his flesh. The fire flared now, blue streaks joining the reds and oranges, flickering in ribbons as the smashed into the body and the tree behind it. Whatever strange effect he had seen, he would overpower it.

“Stop! Stop!” Odilon cried. For what reason, Quentin did not understand. The sudden feeling had taken him, and all he felt was rage against the unnatural thing, slowly burning away in his onslaught.

Odilon reached out and made to stop the older man. “No!” Quentin shouted and closed the book with a snap and brought it swiftly around catching the soldier straight in the face. Such was the force of the blow and the unexpectedness of the action, that Odilon fell completely backwards and landed in the soft leaf covered ground, stunned.

Unhindered, Quentin let out a cry the opened back his book with one hand. “Die thing!” he shouted.

The flames redoubled, white searing streaks joined the red and blue, and the air seared with heat. The tree behind the body groaned again, its weight suddenly held by only part of the trunk as the fire cut through it.

With a creaking protest, it started falling. But because of its rotten state, rather than falling over in one piece, it simply collapsed into pieces. Quentin kept the flames coming until the body and remains of the tree were indistinguishable.

Finally, after he could truly no longer separate the body from the charred flesh of the tree, he stopped. In front of them now were merely a mound of charred black material.

“Why?” Odilon asked, from the ground, tears now running from his eyes.

Quentin shook his head. “Shatter.” He said, signing with one finger outstretched from the book. The sigil seared into the air, and hung for a second before darting forward into the material.

Nothing happened. Quentin took a deep breath, the rage building once more inside of him. How dare such a wretched thing disobey his commands? He searched his mind of a proper spell to use, but none came clearly.

The pile in front of them shifted.

Quentin took a slow step backward, taking Thella with him. “Get behind me.” he said to her, ushering her to move with his hand.

The fog swirled around the blackened fetid chunks of rot.

Quentin held his book out as if warning the thing. No spell could come to mind.

But finally whatever resistance the pile had to Quentin's spells rotted away much like the tree. Slowly and excruciatingly, it bulged and deformed as the magic ripped through it. Slow. Much more slowly than it should have, it expanded like a puss filled bubble.

Finally it could hold back the magic any longer and it burst forth. Yet in its last action it refused to perform as expected. Yes the deformed thing burst, but instead of exploding, it simply let out a final sigh, as if from a long held breath. The form of the pile shuddered and dissipated on the breeze until there was nothing left of it.

Tzuras nodded his head slowly.

But Odilon did not take things nearly that calmly.

“What have you done?” He yelled, taking a threatening step towards Quentin.

“T-That was Edoma!” he shuddered. His body shook, and for a moment it looked like he was close to throwing up. But he regained his posture and draw his dagger. “That was Edoma!” he repeated. “What reason could you have for doing that?” he cried.

“She was already dead.” Quentin stated. He looked down at Thella who was crying into his clothing. In the moment he could not think of what to say to her.

“Still, the flames? Why? She deserved a proper burial.”

Quentin had no good answer. Thoughts swirled in his head as he grasped for a reason for his actions.

“Something about it was wrong.” He said, with a bit of confusion. “Very wrong.”

“So you keep on saying! You and Tzuras with your talk about feelings and wrongness… y-you cremated her.”

“The beast, whatever it was had tore into her. You saw her body right? Even if there had been a high priest of Geremon right here, there would have been nothing they could have done.”

“So you say. I still see no reason why you must have destroyed her body! I- Oh gods!” This time his stomach could not withstand whatever thoughts crossed his mind. He dropped to his knees and dry heaved.

Quentin took a step closer, and thought of laying an arm on the soldier.

But amid his forceful spasms he looked up and jerked his injured arm in a dismissive gesture.

“Get back! Back you gods damned maniac! Gods!”

Quentin was disquieted deeply by the whole series of events. He had acted on impulse, a part of him knew that, and yet he could not simply apologize. He looked at the other two people and anger lit within him. Had he not taken care of the darkness in that corpse?

“Tzuras! You felt that, no?” He pointed at the elf.

Tzuras shook himself aware at the sound of his name.

“Yes.” He said gravely. “Sorry, I- The flames… they reminded me of something.”

Again Quentin felt himself being crushed. Of course the elf would be horrified by the flames he had used. Tzuras had insinuated that he had not been present for the fall, but still, perhaps something linked him with those flames, or reminded him of them.

Quentin gritted his teeth. “Damn...” He hissed. He looked down at Thella and was crushed for a third time. She had not looked at his actions, but surely she had heard them. She would be frightened.

“I...” Quentin said towards Odilon. But he closed his hand and shook his head.

“I care not what you do. I must look after Thella.”

He stepped aside with the child.

Thella looked up at him and a moment of passive horror washed over him. For a second he could not recognize her. He saw only her mask and he stared, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. She had readorned the object to her face. His brain slowly worked at what he was seeing until he came to his senses.

He crouched down and reached a hand out to take the object off her face and wipe away her tears, trying to conceal his shock.

“Thella dear. Its ok. You don't need to wear that here.”

But the young girl clutched to it and didn't let him move it.

“No...” She sobbed. “Don't take it off.”

“But…”

However, at this point, the girls words became incomprehensible and she devolved into tears. He crouched, and held her as best as he could, for a long while.

Finally she spoke.

“Uncle. I could hear everything. I could feel those flames. I don't think I've ever seen you use magic like that. Why did you burn that body?”

And finally he could not stay silent. The truth slipped slowly from his mouth.

“I don't know. It was a feeling.” He said, frowning.

Thella was upset. More than just fear. He couldn't see her face with that damn mask on, but he could tell from the minute change in posture. Perhaps her hand had lessened its grip on his clothing just the tiniest amount.

“Thella, I just...” But the words failed in his mouth. What was he supposed to say? How could he respond in this nightmarish situation which was so surreal, and so horrifying, so removed from anything he had ever experienced. He regarded himself as a learned man. He liked to be known as the smartest person in the room, but here his intellect, his stored wisdom was useless. There was nothing to think about or logic through. It made no sense. Nothing made any sense.

“I don't know what to say Thella. I don't understand what is going on here.” He said, finally. He shook his head, and looked down at her. The mask hid her response. At least to her he could tell the truth. His pride could allow for that. Was she the only one he could confide in? How ironic. He was the one who was supposed to look after her, not the other way around.

“Are you ok?” he knelt and stared face to face wtih the young girl.

The blank emotionless mask stared back at him. He could only just make the sad eyes from behind its featurelessness.

“No.” She said. “I couldn't feel the fire. I couldn't feel it at all. I could hear it, I could even see its light even though I was looking away, but I couldn't feel it. I don't like it Uncle. Its scaring me.”

He pulled her into a hug, and despite some hesitation she relented. He could feel her sobbing as she embraced him back.

“I don't want to waste away.” She sobbed. “I don't want to become like that thing on the tree.”

At the mention of the corpse, he couldn't help but shiver for a moment. And despite his attempt to brush it off, he knew she had sensed that something was wrong.

He gently pulled her back in front of him.

“Thats not going to happen.” He said with a bit more force than he intended. He loosened the grasp on her arm. He struggled not to break into tears himself. He stopped and wiped his eyes.

“It won't happen. I'm not going to let it.” He said.

But he could not tell her reaction.

“… Don't you want to take that off?” he tried again.

She shook her head.

He grabbed her hand. “Lets see if we can find that boat.”

Tzuras and Odilon were talking in hushed tones when the other two came back, sitting facing one another on the ground.

They looked up with haunted faces, which Quentin ignored.

“Thella and I are going to look for the boats, if they're still here.”

Tzuras nodded. Odion frowned at the older man.

“Fine. We're going to see if we can find any of the others.” Tzuras stated. He seemed to have mostly recovered from the experience.

Quentin nodded. “I have a bad feeling about it though.” he added.

But Odilon swung around, his eyes bloodshot. “Did I fucking ask your opinion?”

Quentin shrugged and gestured to Thella. The started off towards where they thought they could hear the water.

Tzuras looked at Odilon.

“You got my back?” He asked the elf, holding his injured arm close. With his good one, he furled his jacket around him and stared at the insignia on the shoulder for a moment.

“Yes.” He said, before getting up. He extended a hand to the soldier, who took it with his good one, and got to his feet.

“Perhaps the Sergeant is still here. He was a strong swordsman. He knew the second form. And a good man.” Tzuras nodded.

They walked into the remains of the camp.

They did not find any of Odilon's unit alive.

Here and there lay bit of bodies. Blood lay dried in and among the leaves, at one point seeping into the cracks to run unhindered into the ground. There were no flies. There was no smell even. However, the sight was not made any better by that fact.

Tzuras had regained his composure, yet still could feel an unimaginable sorrow whenever he found another body.

“T-Thats Kolen. He was the tallest son of a bitch I ever saw. We used to tease him and say his mother was half giant.” The corpse lay slumped against a fallen log. Its torso was upwards, but its head was missing.

“I guess I should bury them...” Odilon said, more to himself than to Tzuras.

The elf and Odilon started dragging them together the best they could.

Odilon had to stop after the first five.

He doubled over against one of the trees and tried to throw up again, but once more nothing came.

He wiped his mouth and stood up, a sudden look of anger crossing his face.

“Did it take them in the night?” He asked Tzuras.

“Some of them, like Edoma had their weapons drawn. I didn't see any sign of the beast though.”

“Yes. I think so. One of them was still in his sleeping clothes. The others must have been keeping watch.”

Odilon looked at Tzuras and traced his eye down to the corpse wrapped in pale linen.

A grimace of horror, revulsion and anger gripped Odilon. He clenched his hand into a fist, the released it and ran his hand through his hand violently through his hair.

“That’s Adrian. This was literally his first deployment outside of the city. Gods what the hell… How could he deserve this? How could this happen?”

Tzuras was looking at the young man Odilon had named. The blood on him was dried.

He turned to Tzuras, shook his head, and helped him pull the smaller corpse to the pile.

“It just doesn't seem possible.” He pleaded to Tzuras, “Cyrus, Edoma, the other Corporal Iwan. They're not like me. They're veterans. I always thought they pulled Iwan to maybe… counter balance my lack of field experience.”

He turned to Tzuras, a sad smile on his lips. “Haha. Its seems so long ago now. Gods… I wanted to show them I was up to it. That’s why Leger and I were the ones to take the boat. I'm a god damn merchant's son. They always knew I was better with numbers than the sword. I know there were some who wondered if I wasn't better use to the Civil Guard.”

He looked down at the body he was dragging. “But no. I had read too many stories of the First. Damn worked into my head. Fuck!” He let the body fall onto the pile.

“How is any of this fair? None of these people deserved this, Tzuras. They were good people.”

The elf laid a hand on the soldier's shoulder.

“The world is a cruel place Odilon. Fair? Unfair? Perhaps the gods think of such things. But if so, it does not show. At least not that I can tell.”

Odilon looked back at Tzuras. “Perhaps it is as you say. Perhaps.”

“Lets see if there is anything that’s left of the camp.”

It seemed that the beast was mostly preoccupied by the soldiers. Their equipment was scattered, but not destroyed.

Odilon was staring down at a body in particular. He seemed to be half horrified and perhaps half confused. Eventually though he moved the body to the pile and turned it over, shaking his head. He turned to see what Tzuras was doing, and when he saw that the elf was looking at the provisions, he came and joined him.

“Some of this food still looks good.” Tzuras said, looking through things.

Odilon shook his head. “There's two more here. Help me move them out.”

They moved the two bodies and placed them on top. Odilon surveyed the grim pile.

“That's eleven. Edoma we… saw. Leger might have gotten away when I fell in. But I don't see Iwan or the Sargent here. So there are them and four more missing. Sorry, I can't remember off the top of my head, who they should be. They're from Iwan's part of the unit, rotation in from some squad from Swan.”

Tzuras nodded and turned to the soldier. “This may not help, but I do not intend to leave this island.”

Odilon stopped and stared back intently. “What do you mean by that?”

Tzuras's green eyes flared. “I've seen enough after this. I said before, I'm here to find this thing. To deal with it.”

Odilon looked at him warily.

“As a naturalist, as a learned spirit medium… in Ishira's name as well... I don't intend to leave. I'm going to kill this thing. I will help Quentin and the girl leave the island, but once they are gone, should you seek revenge, you have a partner.”

Odilon nodded slowly. “I do thank you for the offer. But I have to think about things. I did have orders you know. We soldiers must follow orders. To return and get backup? It does seem wrong. As a corporal, they say you must always be ready to be able to lead. But what do I do when I'm the only one left? I don't know.”

“I suppose you're right. Get the girl and old man off the island. No sense dragging anyone else into this. We go and hunt that fucking thing down.” He stuck out his hand and the elf grabbed it with his own.

“That old bastard is a real piece of work. I don't understand him most of the time. I feel sorry for the girl that she got stuck with a guy like that. But it is the right thing to do. Boats first. Blood second. Lets go get them before this place shifts on us again.” The soldier looked around the gnarled twisted trees. “Heh, if it hasn't shifted already.”

He walked off calling after Quentin and Thella.

Tzuras stood in the clearing alone.

His loud and confident voice still sounded in his ears, even now after the other man had left. Around him was now again the empty forest. And the dead. Like before.

He shook his head, but the flare had seeped out of his eyes and his brow slanted in a furious concern as he turned things over in his mind.

He walked over to the bodies. In their pile, Odilon had lit them afire.

A sickening animalistic revulsion grabbed ahold of him, the unlived memory of bodies aflame amid burning trees.

With conscious effort he forced the unwanted thoughts away and knelt by the fire.

He picked up a stray overjacket and mindlessly let the black and silver fabric run through his hands as he stared into the flames.

His fingers ran into something on the jacket and he looked down.

In his hand was a large blood stain, caked and dried.

Sudden thoughts ran through his head and he inspected the spot. It *was* dried. Very dried in fact. Peering closely at it, he determined that it could have been there for months if not longer.

The frown on his face grew deeper. Had Odilon been subject to the same trap as he, wandering the island for time unknown?

But it disquieted him. Odilon had made it sound like he and his men had just arrived.

On a whim, he found his hands going through the pockets of the jacket. What he was looking for wasn't exactly clear. Maybe something to clarify what exactly was going on here, what had brought these men here.

And to his surprise, he found just that.

Folded in one of the pockets was an unsealed letter. Fortunately they were not coded war orders and he found he could read the text clear enough.

It told the Corporal to take his men along the north bank and meet up across the bridge from Merrin's Ford with Corporal Iwan and the Sergeant. One too many disturbances had been reported from the widening of the river. They were to take their men and determine the cause of the disturbances.

The orders were written to Odilon. He looked down, frowning again at the jacket, and turned it over.

In silver lettering on the inside of the jacket it had Odilon's name.

While he was still trying to understand what he was looking at, a snap of the fire alerted him. The pile of bodies shifted and a hand fell from its perch, knocking the effects from his hands.

Terror seized Tzuras, and he scrambled backwards inelegantly. He stared up at the pile and his eyes widened in horror.

Staring at him, eyes dead and missing, was Odilon. His arm came outstretched, still seeming to clutch at his belongings. And although he could have sword the body did not move, the fire overtook the arm and its contents as he stared, as if asserting ownership, as if dragging the items back to itself.

The dead eyes stared at him, holes in sockets, asking him what he was going to do now.

He sat, prone, staring at the vision, completely in shock, unbidden thoughts of fire and darkness threatening once again to come back to him.

He did not know how long he waited like that, before Quentin's voice shocked him back to his senses.

Now thoroughly disturbed, the elf cast one last glance at the burning pile before stooping to grab his backpack.

If Quentin expected to be able to leave, he was sorely mistaken.

He stared out at the water, before looking down at Thella.

“Uncle. There are no boats here.” She stated.

He said nothing. Pursed lips aimed out over the waters.

“How are we going to leave if there are no boats?” She wondered outloud.

The approach of another person grabbed their attention.

“Oh, its just you.” Quentin said, downcast, to the soldier.

“The boats are gone?” He asked.

“The boats are indeed gone. Perhaps they were never really here to begin with. I'm beginning to understand how this place works.” Quentin said, with a scowl, turning to the soldier.

“As, am I.” Odilon said grimly. “And frankly, I don't believe we will ever be able to find our way out of here.”

Quentin's eyes blazed and he clutched Thella's hand. “How can you say that?”

But the soldier threw up his hands. “Find our way I said. I don't think we can ever find our way. Obviously there is nothing to find. What can you find in emptiness?” He waved cryptically. He returned Quenitn's stern gaze. “But perhaps we can… know our way.”

Quentin did not respond, so the soldier continued.

“I've talked to the elf about this. I have thoughts about this place. It tries to deceive. It tries to trick. It shows images that are impossible and yet presents them as real. Perhaps they are. But at the core of things lie what we know. For instance, I knew this camp would be here, and here we are.”

Quentin looked away from him. “I don't understand what you're getting at. I thought I knew a number of things about this place, for instance, how to get to the other side. It tricked us cruelly.”

“Perhaps 'know' was the wrong word. Maybe, something more like… feel? You used that word earlier.”

“I...feel two things about this island. One, there is something causing this. These effects. Something is to blame for it all. And two, it has killed a great number of my men.” Odilon said, with clenched teeth.

Quentin let the man finish what he was saying but then waved his hands.

“I do understand your feelings. But what I'm trying to do here is get Thella and I to safety, and then to the library. I can't put her in harms way due to revenge. I simply want to leave.”

But the soldier gripped his shoulder, much to Quentin's surprise and anger. Before the older man could say anything though, the soldier confronted him, ignoring Thella by his side.

“And do you think you'll just be able to leave? That this place will ever let you out of its grasp? Don't you understand? The world here is at its twisted control. If you seek here, you will find nothing. No escape, no cure, no hope! The only way forward is to feel!” He said forcefully.

Quentin actually wobbled on his feet from the verbal assault. He had just been coming up with a retort when again, for the second time, his mind went blank. He simply stared at the other man's anger.

“I don't know...”

“The only way forward is to confront this thing!”

But the older man just shook his head over and over.

“Damn!” Odilon said, running a hand through his hair. He backed off, fuming.

Suddenly Thella's movement caught his eye.

“What about you? You have a voice don't you?” He crouched down, near the young girl. “You saved me from the waters. You have a say in this; perhaps the most important one. The rest of us are old and full of mistakes. What do you think we should do?”

Thella initially shied away from the man, but after a moment, something, perhaps the lack of intervention from Quentin, who simply stared downward, changed her mind.

“I listened to what you said. I know its not the same, but I want to feel as well. I don't know about the rest though...” She admitted.

But the soldier took that to be her response.

“Its clear then.” He said straightening. “I know where we need to go, what we need to do.”

At this moment, Tzuras came approaching them as well.

“Oh, Odilon. You're here as well. Do you think I could talk to Quentin?”

But the soldier was in a state of righteous fury.

“This isn't the time for talking.” He whirled around. “Do you see the waters there? Have you been looking at them?”

The three others looked surprised at the shore.

It wasn't like Odilon to be this forceful Quentin thought suddenly. The solider had, until this point, been firm but unwilling to argue. Perhaps seeing his comrades had triggered something in him. He backed up slightly with Thella.

“What are you saying? What about the water?” Tzuras asked suspiciously.

Odilon waved his hand at the shore.

“Can't see much further than a couple of feet into it, right?”

Tzuras and Quentin shared a look. Where was this going?

“No. The fog cover is too thick.”

“Exactly. The fog. Primary inhabitant of this place. Fog is a coverer and an obfuscator. Fog exists to hide the eye from the object. Everything past the fog remains unresolved. Once the fog is lifted, it becomes clarified. But until then, many possibilities are present. They must simply be felt.”

“Where are you going with this? Were you not just talking about action of some sort?” Quentin asked.

“Yes, exactly. A thrust at the very source of this sick magic. And we are going to get to it with its own rules.” He grinned widely at the others. But flagged a bit when they didn't seem to responsive to his plan.

“Don't you see? This can be any water. Anything! Watch: will will alone, I feel that this is not the shore of a river. This is merely an inland pond.” He started wading into the waters.

“Hey, wait! You can't do that!” Tzuras warned. “You'll get swept away, just like when we found you!”

The elf moved to save the man, but Odilon turned around and smiled.

“Do you hear any rush of water?”

The others stopped and looked around.

“No. I don't.” Admitted Quentin. He grew quiet and looked at the mostly fog covered scene around them. “But the damn trees have changed again.”

“Of course. Because we are no longer by the shore. We're next to the pond. You know the one I'm talking about, right Tzuras?” Odilon, started wading with violent action out fo the waters, spraying with each footstep.

“I could feel the unnaturalness from it.” He said without thinking, and then caught himself. What was he talking about? Had he been here before? He turned around this way and that.

They had indeed changed locations, he could feel his wards in different locations than before. And before him was a pond. Although Odilon had just existed it, its waters were already still as glass, and dark in dim light of the forest.

“Uh-” Tzuras exhaled suddenly, backing up, a sudden horror taking him. “Not just a pond. *The* pond!”

“What the hell are you talking about? Damn Elf, stop it with the hysterics.”

Tzuras's eyes were still wide but after looking around and not seeing anything he calmed a bit.

“I must have tried to forget about it.” He said, gesturing to the place before them. “When I wandered this place alone this was the one location I feared to approach. This might actually be the source of things.”

Quentin shook his head. “This is wrong, with Thella here? I'm an old man. You seem have a great deal of revulsion for this place, and Odilon? You… moved us here? This is insane. We're not capable of fighting whatever this is.”

“You think? You two are mages. Together we have a much better chance than my unit ever did.”

Tzuras shook his head. “Odilon. This needs to stop. Whatever is going on here.”

Odilon's eyes narrowed to a glare. “What is that supposed to mean? Whats is the deal? You just agreed to help me fight this thing and now you're backing off?”

“Look. No one is going to fight anything, not when Thella is here.”

“Uncle. I want to help!” Thella protested. But the older man refused to budge.

“I can't let you be in harms way. In fact we had better leave.”

“Leave? Just try. Don't you see? This place really isn't that large.” He gestured behind him. “I'd say a mile at best. There literally is nowhere to go.”

“Hold on just a damn second here. How do you know that?” Quentin said, catching Thella's arm.

“That's the right question, Quentin. I think it would be best if you two got behind me.” And he interposed himself quickly between the two groups.

“You.” He pointed at Odilon. “I'm serious. You can drop the act. I know everything. Who are you actually?” His wand appeared in his hand.

Odilon scowled. “What the hell are you trying to pull here? You know who I am. Who the hell are you?”

“Elf, mind explaining whats you're doing here?” Quentin asked, trying to maneuver himself from behind Tzuras.

“Stop old man. This is not Odilon.”

Quentin backed up and brought Thella behind him. “What do you mean?”

“Just what I say. The blood on the soldiers? That had been there for year. Perhaps longer. This place has no decay, who knows how long they lay there.”

“T-Thats not true!” Odilon protested. “Thats impossible.”

“I saw the real Odilon.” Tzuras continued. “He was dead. In the pile with the others. I suspect none of them made it out alive.”

“Shut your lying mouth elf! What a load of shit.” He said, anger flaring sudden from within him. His eyes ran over the hilt of the dagger Tzuras had given him.

“If you reach for it, I'll cover you in fire before you can take three paces.” Tzuras said, a cold steel having entered his voice.

Odilon looked up at the elf, anger turning to hatred.

“What do I have to do to convince you that I am who I say I am?”

Tzuras thought furiously. “Fine, we can start easy. Who is your commanding officer?”

“What? I literally told you that.”

“Say it anyways.”

“Sergeant Cyrus.”

“Whats his last name?”

“That is his last name. I don't know his first.”

“Isn't that unusual in the northern military?”

“Yes. But he and I haven't been assigned together for long, this was our first.”

“Where were you born?”

“Illithar.”

“What part?”

“Well, not in the city itself, actually in Hinterwall.”

“Hinterwall, hmm.” The elf thought hard for a moment, dredging up some obscure fact.

“Then you should know the name of the only baker in Hinterwall, hmm?”

“Of course I do, her name is Mary Domer.”

“That is not correct. The baker in Hinterwall is a man. I've been there myself.” The elf pointed at Odilon.

“No, it is you who are wrong. You must be thinking of Charles, Mary's wife. Is that it? Charles Green.”

The elf reluctantly nodded.

“Well you haven't been there is a long time I think. Charles took ill not two summers ago and when he passed, Mary took back up the bakery, and her last name.”

The elf looked annoyed and decided to press the man further.

“Where were they originally from?”

Odilon would not be defeated. “The South, or at least south lands.”

“What kind of good are they known for?”

“A spiral sticky bun.”

The elf looked concerned. He ws quite sure that Odilon was a fake, but how would he know all this unless he was real? The elf was drawing heavily on a previous visit, and thought he had Oldion in the bag.

“Fine! What is the secret ingredient they use in their buns?”

Odilon threw his hand aside in disgust.

“What purpose are these questions? You really don't think I am myself? Fool! I have no idea you you came across this knowledge, but I happen to know that they use a type of southern spiced clove in combination with salt.”

“How do you know that!” Tzuras thundered. “I saw you dead in that pile!”

Odilon drew up closer to the elf, equally enraged. “Do you not understand I was a child there? I worked in their bakery for three seasons. They taught me how to make the buns. How dare you imply I am anyone other than I am!”

“Step back dopelganger!” Tzuras threatened with his wand.

“Hey! Don't hurt him!” Thella yelled. Quentin dragged her behind him even more.

Odilon did back up, but remained aggressive in posture.

“Tzuras, I'm sure you saw what you said, but can you be certain it wasn't this place and its tricks?”

Doubt visibly crept into Tzuras's mind.

“I'm sure we can work though this.” Quentin said to both parties.

But Tzuras had other plans.

“Odilon. Take off the bandages on your arm.”

The soldier frowned. “Why the hell would I do that?”

“Do what I ask, and it will exonerate you.” he turned slightly to Quentin and explained, “When I looked after him earlier I thought something was odd with his arm. At the time, I thought I was just out of it, seeing things in the dark. But now I know what I saw. Take the bandages off!”

“Not a chance elf! It will merely open up the wound.”

“I promise you I will mend it.”

“I don't trust you.” Odilon returned.

“I promise *I* will mend it.” Quentin added.

Odilon regarded the old man. “Ah, so you're taking his side?” He pointed at the elf. “Really? Taking the side of an elf over a human?”

But Quentin just laughed morosely. “Oh, its clear you know nothing about me. Take the bandages off. I swear I'll fix whatever is under there, if I can.”

Odilon's anger suddenly turned to fear. He looked wildly from Tzuras to Quentin.

“Screw that! You can't tell me what to do!” The soldier made as if to run.

“Like hell I can't!” Tzuras shouted, swirling patterns with his wand.

From the ground vines conjured into being which quickly wound their way around the soldier's leg as he went to run. He toppled over into the mud beside the pond.

“Turn around!” Tzuras ordered. “Take the damn bandages off.”

“Fuck you!” The soldier cried out, and went to draw his knife with his other hand.

“Enough!” Quentin yelled. “Corporal Odilon, drop your weapon!” And this time, as the words exited his mouth, they came with an inescapable force tied to them.

The soldier only had a brief second to see that the older man had his book open, before he felt compelled to drop his dagger. The weapon landed with a thin splat into the mud.

He let out a dull groan, anticipating what the man was about to ask him.

“Corporal Odilon. Take the bandages off your hand.”

Odilon grimaced and looked at his bandaged hand.

His free hand started to move towards it.

“No!” He cried out with horror, his face pale.

With palpable effort he slowed the advance of his now uncontrollable hand. It trembled with force, bidden from forces both mechanical and magical. Sweat beaded down his face.

“No! Gods. What are you making me do? Quentin! No please!”

Thella tugged at Quentin's shirt. “Uncle, don't hurt him!”

But Quentin's face was cold. “This won't hurt him, Thella. At least not physically.”

He reasserted his stance and the pages of his book fluttered. “I said: 'Corporal Odilon, take the bandages off your hand.'”

The physical gave way to the mental. The soldiers hand removed the bandages.

The elf looked curiously on.

Thella covered her mouth. “Uncle whats wrong with his arm?”

Quentin was grim in triumph, merely shaking his head. He released the magic.

Odilon tried to cover his arm again after the magic lessened but by the looks on their face, it was too late.

The deep gash caused by the monster during the night still lay fresh. The laceration his not healed. In fact, the skin still lay open. However, instead of blood, there lay nothing but an unknown white material behind the skin. It looked nothing like bone, regardless of the lack of muscle or other intervening layers that should have existed. It was distinctly inhuman.

“What is wrong with your arm Odilon?” Quentin asked, perhaps almost menacingly.

Odilon was still shocked and scared himself.

“I-I really don't know. I was as shocked as you were. Why is there not flesh in my arm?” He held the offending appendage out for them to see.

“Ha. I trust you very little. Perhaps you are in league with the forces of this island?” Tzuras said with scorn. “We helped you! Did you kill the others?”

Odilon dropped to his knees and began to weep.

The gesture was so unexpected from the others, that they did not respond. The sudden hostile air was broken. It was clear that Odilon was as confused as the rest of them. Moreso because it was his own body in question.

“You've got to believe me. I did not kill the others. I don't know whats going on, but I was truly horrified when I found out what had happened.”

Tzuras still had questions however.

“And what about the other Odilon I saw. Did you see him too?”

“I-I hoped it was just the island playing tricks on me, like you said. After all, how would any one of you react if you saw your own dead body before you? I don't know what I should say or what I can do to convince you that I am who I say I am. I am Odilon!”

Tzuras was about to say something, but Quentin cut him off.

“It was very interesting that my magic worked on you. I had not thought about it in the moment, but I called you by your name, Odilon, and the spell of command took hold. Were you not Odilon, you would not have been affected.”

Quentin puzzled over this.

“And you did know of Hinterwall. I am at a loss. You seem to be Odilon, yet your body is clearly not human. What is that material anyway?”

“I don't know.” Odilon said, showing his arm again. “I've actually tried not to think about it.” He admitted.

A chill wind reminded them where they were.

“But does this truly change anything? We are here, in the proverbial lion's den. Its clear this island has no intention of releasing its secrets. I still think the best way forward is to force them from it.”

Now it was Tzuras who grew silent.

But Quentin nodded slowly. “Well, your nature is somewhat clearer now, if not fully revealed. Perhaps as you say, this changes little in the immediate term. So, likely-Odilon, what do you suggest? This pond is of some importance?”

Tzuras and Odilon nodded.

“This is the focus point. Here and actually right over there. There is a fissure in the rock behind the pond. I can't believe you haven't felt it already. Its honestly almost overwhelming.”

“Hmm. And what do you feel from it?” Quentin questioned.

“...Nothing” Tzuras responded. “Not just the lack of things, empty space, but the conspicuous lack of any substance at all, like a gaping void. Strangely still and likely hazardous.”

“And you suggest entering it?” Quentin asked, clearly concerned.

“Well, its the only place of importance we've found on this island, and it does seem to be linked to its strange properties. I feel it as well, something right beyond eyesight within that fissure. Yet to me it seems different than what Tzuras described. I am no magic user, this vocabulary is foreign to me.” Odilon apologized. “I propose we enter work from there.”

But Quentin shook his head. “Thats not a plan. Thats the lack of one. We have no idea what capabilities this force has, which has shrouded the island. It is certainly not something pleasant. It seems inactive now, but, to believe your story, it killed your fellow soldiers. We all saw and felt that monster from earlier as well. This is too dangerous for Thella.”

But although he had made the decision, and made to turn around, he had forgotten to keep hold of the child's hand during Odilon's reveal.

She had found a thin lip of rock around the side of the pond and was edging her way around.

“Thella! What are you doing?!” Quentin yelled.

The masked girl turned to face them, the smooth white face hiding her emotions. “It feels like this is right. Sorry Uncle. I want to get off this island!” She started edging the rest of the way around the pond.

“Stop!” He shouted. And made after her.

The other two followed him.

So frantically did the three follow the girl that they never noticed the slow dying of the light, nor the thick swirling, creeping fog which now made its way across the still pond. The air which propelled them was as still as the last breath of a dead man, and made no sound, yet the fog still moved, lifeless and yet moving.

Thella approached the ravine. A part of her still stared at it, terrified. Its broken rock mouth gaped open, the inside a mystery of shadow and fog. The edges of the rock were sharp and shattered, cracks radiated through the once solid stone. Yet it also beckoned. The curiosity of the unknown, and perhaps the fear of the nothingness within combined into a singular emotion. As a man might look into the darkened abyss of a fathomless ocean, and consider both the existential dread of its vast expanse and yet be intrigued by the secrets of its dread depth, so to did Thella stare at the opening.

Before her, conscious of it or not, was the door to a great unknown. The ability and will for her to walk towards it, and then inside it, only spoke to her conviction and her desire to, for one moment in her suddenly and inescapably bleak life, determine her own destiny, free from Quentin, and the clutches of her horrible disease. And so, walk inside she did.

The other three were right behind her and also felt the disturbing power of the place. Yet so driven was Quentin by his love and pact made for Thella's sake, that his old feet never slowed. He disappeared right after her, calling her name.

Odilon and Tzuras stopped, each feeling the grave force upon them. At once, they looked at one another, their differences aside now in this strange and alien domain. Should they stay or should they enter? The outcome was indeterminate. The risk was extraordinary. They shared that glance, and in it was the remnant of the conversation they had earlier in the camp, when they had both agreed to find and destroy whatever power had set itself on the island. Despite being tested by Odilon's strange nature, that feeling remained. They entered the mist as well, and were lost in it.

Tzuras immediately lost Odilon. The interior of the ravine was cold and he soon found himself shivering. The mist was so thick he couldn't even see the sides of the small entrance he had just passed through. When he went to place his hand on where the rock wall of the ravine should have been, it simply passed into thin air. A sense of foreboding washed through him and he wondered if there were in fact any limits to this space.

It was silent inside. But not in a peaceful way. The very air itself seemed to tremble, thin and strained, as if everything had been pulled far too tight and the world itself were in fear of breaking apart. This tension did not exclude him. Instead with every foot forward, it permeated his body. Despite the cold he found himself sweating.

“Odilon?” He yelled into the mist.

Only silence returned, like before when the fog had dampened their desire to talk. However, this time the effect was multiplied a thousand times. His call hung in the air, slithering its way out of his lips. He could feel it leave. And when it did, something dark and unpleasant replaced itself in his lungs.

His hand slowly went to his chest. It was a sudden and gnawing emptiness which hit like a physical blow. He stopped in his tracks. It wasn't pain per se, more like a dawn out breath which held itself outside his body. He stared into the mist, trying to replace that breath, and although he could physically inhale, whatever had left his body refused to return. He felt empty and disconnected. His strength of will slipped away. In such a featureless mist was there meaning to his movement? Perhaps it was better for him to simply stand there. It was so easy. It was like doing nothing at all.

He looked straight ahead, arms by his side, staring into the white nothing and remained like that for an indeterminate amount of time.

Odilon himself also was slowly learning similar things as Tzuras. After wandering through the fog for what seemed like hours he had finally come to a stop.

Unlike Tzuras, he had some precognition what would happen if he attempted to call out. Instead, by a type of sense he didn't quite understand, of which he only had become recently aware, and with a mad determination, he tried to figure out where the center of this magic was coming from.

He could feel it, always right just out of reach. Always in the middle distance, close enough to be reasonable, obtainable, but never close enough to see. It existed in his mind like a beacon, yet one which consumed rather than emitted, a distant hole.

He could feel it drawing on him bit by bit. But, frustratingly, he could not seem to reach it.

Dull anger began to rise within him. At this point all thoughts of the others had gone from his mind. He was solely focused on the goal in front of him. He still didn't understand the ramifications of his strange artificial body, but that didn't change the fact that the island had killed his men, his command officer and possibly even him. He was going to find the center of the magic and destroy it, regardless of what effort it took.

Quentin ran unhindered through the mist. The place had opened up into a vast space. Although he had been running for minutes after minutes he never found an edge or a change in elevation or in fact anything at all. He would have stopped long ago, but part of him was pulled forward by a feeling of dread.

Where was Thella? He had to protect her. If he could not protect her, he must find her. That was clear. And it was that clarity that kept him moving, even after his muscles began to tire, and even after his breath started to come slower and slower.

He called her name and was afflicted by the same breathlessness that had hit Tzuras. Yet instead of dulling his senses, it only enraged him. How dare this place try to stop him? How dare it try to take Thella? He felt his own power and that of his vow burn deep within him, and to some degree replaced that which was lost from the cry.

His actions would not be dictated by outside forces. He was his own person, and no magical entity, no matter how powerful, would change him.

“Curse you! Damn your fog and your lifeless existence.” He shouted to the emptiness. “I won't relent you hear me? Thella! I'm coming for you!” He cried out.

But the magics of the island did not care for his new found passion. To the exact same degree that he had shouted, he felt a strange cold around that fire in his chest, like a fire suddenly exposed to a powerful wind. It flickered but did not go out.

For he too was stubborn, and now conscious of the effect, would not relent.

“Thella! Where are you?” he called. The sudden loss hit him again.

“Damn you!” He screamed at the loss. He would not accept this!

The fire responded again, struggling against the constant attrition of the fog and emptiness around him.

“What are you?!” He yelled, book springing open, flames leaping to his hand. The light from the flames flickered and danced, falling short into the endless mist. The emptiness lapped greedily at the fire.

Quentin saw this and planted his feet, drawing deep within.

“You won't take me!” He yelled again, unleashing a torrent of flame from his hands which spread in red orange tongues, for a moment burning away the fog, revealing nondescript blue grey stone beneath his feet. But the moment was a short one, much shorter than it should have been.

The loss was palpable feeling at this point. Even his magic seemed to be affected!

The pages turned on his book to the very last place where there was still writing. Beyond it, there were only blank pages. His eyes fell on that script with nothing on the very next page. Regardless of the consequences, his mind gripped the structure of the sigils and held them in his mind where they began to take form.

He chuckled now. “Do you want to eat this fire of mine? Are you so sure you can?”

The sigils now glowed, searing with white light. He extended his hand outwards, trembling with both power and exertion.

“Let your sick appetite be sated on this!” The words stretched upwards, out of the page, being drawn out by his skill. The magic instructions combined with the power he had drawn from himself, and with the two together, gave form to blinding fire.

His book now floated before him, his town hands cradling a ball of burning whitness which grew and formed between his fingers.

Victory ran in a toothed grin over his face. “Ill light the whole damn island if I have to!” He yelled. Throwing both his hands high.

The ball of fire streaked upward then detonated with a frightening force.

Suddenly the emptiness was driven back. The fog burned with light and ceased to be. The ground, perfectly level, heaved and scorched, real marks forming as the expanding flames burned their was outwards. In the center of it, perfectly illuminated, was Quentin.

Or so it seemed.

For as the ball of light and flame continued to expand, the smallest edges of it were eaten away. And as it widened even more, it lessened. The further it went, the greater the effect, until finally, the fog stubbornly remained. The fire continued, burning bands through it, though slower, with less energy.

Finally, the white flame dimmed to red and then orange, then in places started to falter.

From the ground at the edges of the fog, silently crept... nothing. It pooled underneath the sheltering mist, and slithered along the ground. Beyond the range of the fast depleting fire, it gathered, floating in pools and clouds and amorphous shapes.

The once solid flame now shuddered as the antithetical force slipped its way around it. It had burned bright, and pushed away the fog, and it doing so, revealed what the fog had been hiding: nothing.

Excruciatingly slow, yet disturbingly fast for the amount of power he had forced into it, the fire swirled into those clouds of nothing and were completely lost.

The fog eagerly refilled the small area which had been burned away.

And now Quentin's victory slipped from his face. The fire which had burnt inside him and flared upon provocation had burnt at the emptiness and had been found lacking. The strength ran from his legs. His book fell from its position hovering in front of him. The pages now turned. They only showed as blank. And there were precious few of them. The enormity of his failure undermined him in an instant, and he sunk downwards and within himself.

Oh gods… If only we knew… It was like a candle falling into the ocean...

What have I done Thella?

The nothingness around him could no longer be contained. The fire within him could no longer keep it away. It rushed to him, through him, every inch of his body until his fingers were numb, until he could no longer see, until he could no longer think or even stand.

The book slipped from his hands.

And at that point, his body began to fall.

Thella entered the mist, but it hadn't been more than a few moments before she hesitated. She could no longer hear Quentin's footsteps behind her.

She had entered with strong conviction, but suddenly, alone for the first time amid the lifeless mist, she shivered in fear. He had been right behind him, right? And what was she planning on doing anyways? She had just wanted someone to do something. They were all stuck, all of them.

“Uncle?” She called out.

Her vision blurred. She lost feeling in her fingers. Pins ran the length of her legs, threatening to fall away as well. She found it hard to breathe. Why had she entered this place, when she had known the danger?

And perhaps it was her current predicament, the illness which dulled the senses and threatened to take away her body from her, but she alone the part realized that this *was* the danger. She felt the weakness grow inside her from just a tiny cry for help.

Tears now began to stream down her cheeks, and she had to stop herself from uttering anything, which she now realized would only make things worse.

She looked around herself and saw that there was only mist in every direction, and realized that she was lost. Not just in a directional sense, but in a deeper sense as well. There would be no one to come and save her. In her moment of action, she had lunged head first into the lions den. And now came the lions.

She felt the despair whelm up within her. Why her? Why this disease? She hadn't always been a perfect child, foster daughter, but certainly there were worse. Was there really to be no more afternoons with Quentin as he searched absentmindedly for maps, or rummaged through his collection? Was there to be no more long walks down through the gates to pick up food? Could she no longer help her Uncle help customers in the shop, nor run through the city with the other children?

These memories surged forward, and with each one came additional tears. She didn't know she had so little time. She would have been better. Done more. Been nicer.

She went to wipe away the tears from her face and found that some force kept her hand from reaching it. Her fingers had very little feeling now, wrapped deep among bandages, but the action reminded her that she wore her mask still, done partly out of rebellion and partly out of fear.

She went to take it off now. Maybe, just maybe she could still feel something, the cool of the mist on her skin if she did.

But through some mechanism she could not explain, the mask refused to move. The tears ran between her skin and the plaster, inaccessible.

A heart wrenching cry came from her, as she realized she could no longer feel her face. The counter action was swift. The life ran out of her as he body betrayed her. Her legs gave way and she fell to the ground.

Odilon stared straight ahead. Again in front of him was that mysterious force which he had felt since he had entered. It was as if he were circling a drain. He could feel the pull, he could feel the subtle but inexorable pull of its power towards him.

And it now no longer fled from him. He could feel that too. Something had changed. The mist was even thicker than he even though possible. Before in the forest it had obscured a person a yard away. Now, he could no longer see his own feet. Where they even there?

But these thoughts were farther off than his goal, which he now felt lay right before him. A final pull of force, the soft ushering of that unseen thread which ran him to it.

And there, before him it lay, materializing out of the mist.

He stood and looked at it, not sure of what move to make.

Before him was a large region. It wasn't quite definite enough to be an object, yet its was also not amorphous enough to be some cloud. Unlike the mist, it had a form.

And yet, it seemed to rebel against this form, for he could not see nor describe any end to its shape. If he were pressed, he would say it most resembled a dark, black crystal about the same height as himself, buried by terrible force into the pulverized bedrock at his feet.

And yet crystal was a strange word to describe it. Its shape could only be described as a crystal in that it had large hard edges and appeared to be black. From his knowledge, maybe only volcanic stone could portray the kind of ink blackness he was looking at. But such a facsimile would completely miss the true nature of the object, for it completely defied *extent*.

The mist which had so blanketed the island, was still around at, and it was impossible to determine where the mist began and the darkness ended. For such a thing to also be described as having sharp edges, it was quite impossible, and his eyes swam trying to understand what they were looking at. It clearly did not move, yet the patterns that his eyes tried to ascribe to the object changed every second, giving it an impermanent feel. It was unnatural.

And it wasn't just its edges which defied clear boundary. Its whole being, its whole surface and depths seemed to be be starkly present and both curiously absent. He got the feeling that if he were to press his hand into the object, that they would simply disappear.

And there it lay. Whatever the thing was. It sat there and did nothing. Oh his eyes slid around it, trying so hard to ascribe it to purpose or form, but it itself refused to be classified and it did so in a strictly passive manner. It did nothing. It was: nothing. A very persistent and dangerous nothing.

Staring at it did not seem to help. He thought that if he observed it for a while he would begin to see some sort of pattern or hint at what he ought to do. At the very least, maybe something would attack him. At that point, it would have been clear what was expected of him. However this did not happen.

He frowned and on a whim his hand reached closer to the thing.

He had used the damaged hand. With it outstretched, he could see the white substance where his bone should have been. He stood and stared at it with curiosity.

Again acting solely on feeling, he reached forward with his other hand and felt the spot where his skin was gone. It did not hurt. It did not feel like something was missing. It simply was not there.

He peered at the transition between skin and whiteness, trying to determine what the true nature of the change was, but there was no boundary, there was no rip or tear or claw mark which revealed damage. On one part of his arm there was skin, on the next there was not.

He shook his head and ran his other arm down the damaged hand. He could feel every inch of it.

And despite himself he chuckled. It lacked explanation. It could only be laughed at.

Whatever force the thing in front of him possessed, it was that mad emptiness which had him now. It was a dry laugh in the darkness. Orders and uniforms and islands were forgotten to him in this moment. It was just him. Whatever he was. Whatever he was supposed to be.

With a grin on his face he walked forward and, testing, pushed his hand into the formless structured void in front of him. True to his predictions, it went right in. He could not see it come out the other side.

He pulled it out.

It came right out. The whole thing, still damaged, with no sign that he had plunged it into anything harmful.

A grin slowly formed across his face. Perhaps he would see what this thing truly was?

He stepped into the void.

Some part of the Tzuras felt the change in the fog. There was some slight tell, some combination of pressure or temperature, or perhaps some change that could only be felt rather than described. The sun had long gone down, yet in some way he could see: light itself seemed trapped in this place, thin and interspersed among the mist.

His mind drifted.

He was no longer on an island. Instead he was in the midst of a large forest, the largest he'd ever seen. He himself was formless, and in his incorporeal state he was able to instantly understand the extent of the trees before him. It was far larger than the Old Elven. Perhaps even large than the great twisted Farthern reaches to the north or the steaming jungles of the south.

He could feel the trees all around him, connected in an intimate way with one another. The trees lived and breathed as one, and in the center was its focus: a tree beyond all the others, towering and massive, reaching far over into dizzying heights, lost in blue and scratching the reaches of the sky.

And so it was for an eternity.

But even an eternity ends.

The wind changed. A disturbing, alarming cry of something from the north. The sky darkened and the shapes of elves running filled the spaces between the trees.

The trees could not run. And instead, they burned.

They burned in the thousands, the ten thousands: fire sprouting, gushing from evil sources onto roots, spreading up trunks, twisting itself in violent red orange flames till it reached the branches which exploded into crackling cinders. Leaves drifted, elves drifted, burning in the wind, a hot and heavy death. Tens of thousands turned to hundreds of thousands and into numbers uncountable. They all screamed in the inexorable blaze.

And he screamed with them, for, lacking a body, he was of them. He felt every leaf and branch, every piece of bark and every earth bound root. And when the trees died, so did he, the pain of the flames running through him, again and again.

He went to cry out, but he had no mouth, no substance with which to give voice. He was nothing.

Odilon was within absolute darkness. The darkness was so true and complete that eyes could not function. No light could ever hope to exist wherever he was.

He looked for an entrance and realized that there was none. And furthermore, he could not see his body: there was only nothingness. Panicking, he instinctually tried to look down at his hands, but not only was there not a down to look towards, but it was quite clear that wherever he was, the concept of looking, and of a physical body was foreign. He could tell he existed, but that was the extent of it. It was just him and the void.

The previous self assurance was draining from him quickly.

Where was he? Was he inside the crystal thing? Why couldn't he see the exit?

He couldn't move! His body didn't exist!

A horrifying claustrophobia gripped him despite the lack of surroundings. He had to get out! To see his body! Anything!

He tried moving, to no avail. Panic now overtook him. He thrashed and contorted and screamed, anything to feel or see or touch. But there was nothing. He simply existed and yet did not exist.

Time meant nothing in this space. How long did his consciousness remain there, alone amid the nothingness? Was it hours, or perhaps days? It could have been years, or eternia. And the time destroyed him. He was mad with the inability to move or control anything. His mind rebelled against it with all his might. And yet, nothing changed, which only lead to more and more panic.

Something rose within him and struggled to break free: a long and terrifying scream, made not with lungs or a throat or a mouth, but with his very being. He screamed with all his might and all the force he could muster within himself into the void.

And continued.

And continued.

But there was no end to it. There was no end to the void and there was no end to himself. Completely lacking stimulae and on the brink of madness, his mind plunged within itself. If there were no things to see, he could still imagine; he could still remember.

His mind could think of his past: and there it was. His mother and father in the city. There they were beaming with joy as he accepted the summons to join the army. And again, there was that ceremony which had meant so much to him when he was formally indoctrinated.

But then why was everything so hard to see precisely? Why were the concepts of his parents and their house the only thing he could summon up? He focused harder and harder on the building, the house which he grew up in, but the edges refused to solidify, they drifted away from him like mist.

He turned to the ceremony. There was a person there, someone who was giving him the certificate. He could feel his happiness and the embarrassment of the crowd's eyes on him. But who was the person giving it to him? Why couldn't he remember?

And his parents… He could see them walking with him as a child through the streets of the city. He could feel the cobblestones under his feet the background sounds of the merchants selling their wares. He asked if they could buy him a sweet of some sort. His mother bent down to talk to him. But he could not make out her image clearly. Every aspect of her made him instantly sure this was his mother, but if that was the case, why could he not ascribe an image to her face? Why was everything adrift?

He raced through his memories one by one. Finally he came upon something he had no desire to recall. His eyes opened on a stony beach. Above him was a small girl with a mask on. He could hear the sounds of the water rushing beside him. He could feel the cold of its flow seeping into his body.

Now that did feel real.

He could hear the girl asking him if he was ok. And then yelling something to her uncle. He could see the old man now, and every wrinkle in his body, the gray hair, traveling cloak, and the book he held by his side. He could recall everything.

What did that mean?

But the answer came to him all too quickly, immediately after the other, unbidden.

He was looking at himself.

He saw it all too clearly.

Tzuras had heaped the bodies into a pile, at his own suggestion. But there was one on the top. He had to stop. The world was not making sense. There it was. It was him. He was lying on the pile. Completely dead.

It was impossible. It had to be a trick. There was obviously no way that could happen. It was obviously just the island fooling him, tricking him. It was evil this island, and it could deceive.

But the face was quite clear. And just as he could instinctually identify the blurred faces in his memory,

He knew without a shadow of a doubt that this one was his.

He threw another body atop of his.

But there was no hiding the truth from himself.

What did that mean? What did that make him?

The implications were also clear: an ugly truth which he could not deny. The memory of him looking down at his arm, the strange substance where bone should have been. He was the false one. He was Odilon, and yet not him. The true Odilon had died, the only memory of Odilon which he could not recall.

He simply remembered setting out to the island and the next waking up on the shore.

His mind shuddered. He was not himself. He was not even human. What was he? Who was he?

And did such questions even make sense in this context? Now, in this world which he had plunged himself into, which solely consisted of himself and nothingness?

The memories which he had gathered around himself seemed cheap and out of focus. He let them slip one by one into the nothingness.

Did it even make sense to think of the two as separate? If he was not Odilon, and just some facsimile, was it not true that there was nothing to him as well? No body, no memories of his own, no hope of escape.

It was not him and the void, it was only one concept, it always had been. Odilon was dead. He was nothing.

Quentin came back to consciousness dangling from an infinitely long silver thread. Below him was nothing in every direction. Above him drew the blazing white line which fastened somewhere imperceptibly onto his body.

And he was in the middle, strung between the two, arrested form the void by but this thin line. He was weary. The magic was gone from him. The flame and indignation that had carried him so far had failed him. Even desperation was gone.

But he was alive for the moment, if in a precarious position. His body felt incredibly fatigued, as if every part of it had been put through the most horrible abuse imaginable.

He groaned weakly, and found himself spinning slowly on the line above him.

Now, at the culmination of this horrible journey, he truly had to admit that he was not only out of his depth, but that his own actions had lead them here.

“Thella!” He cried out into the mist. The crushing depression slammed into him again, leaving him breathless. But more than the eviscerating nothingness which now tore at him, he had to come clean.

And so, spinning, readied his weary body for one last exertion. This time, it was not a flaming attack. He understood now that such a response was worthless. And indeed what he prepared was also perhaps worthless, but he somehow felt he needed to at least say things out loud, to try to set things right.

“Thella! I was wrong! I was too wrapped up in myself. I could never see how my actions were affecting you. All the alienation of the townspeople? It was all my fault. Perhaps too, this disease is my fault, a test of my oath. Would I let my own pride overshadow your well being. Perhaps in the past. Not any more. Not any more!”

So he got his one last cry out, and then the backlash hit him.

Before it was insidious draining sensation, like an extremely acute lethargy. Now, however, he was truly in its domain of mist and nothingness.

He had gritted his teeth, expecting it to hurt. His mouth opened with a confused expression. It didn't hurt after all. Whatever the sensation was, it was the opposite of pain. Not pleasure, but the lack of pain, the lack of feeling, the lack of anything at all, accelerated and invasive, spreading its numbness throughout his body.

Perhaps now he felt what Thella had felt all this time, an inability to sense, only being able to sit in horror, watching it all drift away.

A great pressure enveloped him, and every second he felt the warmth and essence drain from his body. He could feel it crushing him slowly, like a massive hand from the void below. Before it has been happy to take a passive stance. Now it was actively attacking him, tearing life from him, memories being dragged away into the darkness below.

He felt the good times with Thella begin to leave him, and he struggled to bring them back, an arm thrust out into the void, but it was far too late for that, and his strength failed him. His arm went limp, and he spun back and forth on his line.

The times much before that, when he was studying in the university soon left him. They were long gone and the fervor with which he had attacked his studies was now foreign to him.

Next it was his time as a map maker. Had he nursed some hatred for his failure as an academician? If so, he tried to bury it in his work. The memories, though, the good and the bad, left him.

But now came to the most potent memories. It was a clear autumn night. They were still in Mellont, in his father's old house, before he had been forced to sell it. The air was crisp and many folk were still outside. He could hear them far below his balcony as he read. But there was also something foreboding to the night. The wind moved just a bit too strong at times, and brought with it a cruel freezing undercurrent which spoke more to winter than it did to fall.

It was a portentous day, one that would run through his head many, many times.

His brother had been despondent. Akela had been more and more distant, conversing with the scattered brethren who still lived in the city. Word arose that they were preparing some sort of pilgrimage to commemorate The Fall.

Then, a particularly strong breeze blew, and Quentin knew that someone had arrived behind him.

He turned to the man behind him. Once the two brothers had looked quite the same, and some might have even called the handsome in their younger years. However, their years of happiness had been brought short. The man behind him was gaunt and long in the face. Worry clouded his appearance and he stood with a slight stoop. Quentin frowned and put the book aside.

“Folmar? Its a fine night. The harvest is coming to an end and it should be festival time. You should take Thella and Akela to see the parade.”

A troubled smile broke on the younger man's lips.

“I'm afraid I won't be able to do that. See, something has come up.”

Quentin turned, the other man silhouetted by candle light from behind him. Quentin could not make him out completely.

And now the dialog likely departed from what was truly said. The conversation turned into a monologue and Quentin stared at his brother, unable to speak.

“I feel Akela's pain every day. Being together with her is but a slight reprieve. They are talking of a great journey out into the desert, to see what has become of things. And to give respects to Ishira in Ankhsomar.”

Quentin felt himself spiraling around. The floor had come undone and was drifting away from both of them. The candlelight stayed behind his brother as he continued.

“There is no other way in my mind that this can be done. I am going with her… But Thella cannot go with us.”

And had he been carrying the child all this time? For it was in his hands now.

Quentin stared dumbly and with lack of comprehension at the small baby being thrust into his arms.

“We must leave tonight. You remember I talked with you about this possibility: the oath you swore at our wedding and again at her birth? I know you think little of ancient rituals, but you said you could look after her for a few months. We should be back ere the new year.”

Quentin had stared down at the child, now asleep in his arms. Dare he move to disturb it? It was a wild combination of emotions, sadness, and fear and anger at the situation. The baby moved in his arms and another range of emotions rose: love in equal parts with fear.

“Don't do this!” he had said. “I'm not prone to these things, but I have a terrible feeling about this. Do not leave Folmar!”

“And would I forsake my vows to my wife? She asked, me, begged me, pleaded with me to help her people. But she needn't have. I would have done it all the same without. I see what the merchants are doing to those that are left; it is a great glut of coins. And it is not that they are too nearsighted to see its end, it's that they simply do not care. The elves must leave now or be destroyed, crushed slowly, slowly underfoot.”

“How...” Quentin stared, meaning to say “… how could we let this?”, but instead it came out “how could you do this to me?”

And he saw the sadness and hurt in his brothers eyes even as the words left his mouth. And he knew it was wrong, and he hated himself now, looking back from the safety of tens of years, but yet he said them all the same, as he had done that night.

His brother had not replied in words. He had simply raised his head upwards towards the moon, and slipped into the night.

And that was the memory that struggled the longest. That was the one which gripped the most on Quentin's mind, for it was his first true recollection of Thella and the last of his brother. But the force which opposed him was implacable. It was not a question of whether or not the memory would be drawn from him, it was a question of how long it would take.

How much suffering would he be able to endure? For every second now, it played over and over in his head, twisting itself and changing just a bit each time, for it was many years ago and the mind had to fill the gaps the memory left. But regardless of the exact words, the exact movements of the characters, the was always the same striking pain at the end: the fear and sadness and intense self hatred played over and over.

And finally with a sobbing gasp, he *let* it go. The pain was too much. The memory, which had meant to live only in the past, could not be borne in the present. It was simpler to forget. It was less painful to forget. And with that memory, though, the last of Quentin's memories left his body, and he became nothing.

Thella saw herself. She was lying amid the mist on some invisible ground. She could neither rise nor move in any way.

There were figures around her. She was still lying but now she was being carried. There was a woman who held her and ran her fingers through her hair.

Her mother had always been a figure of mythology to Thella. There existed portraits of her father, but not a single one of her mother. Quentin said it was because Elves preferred to let go their earthly connections upon death rather than cling to the nostalgia of memory. And he had declined to ever describe her either. She imagined a face though, something kind and sad.

Words could be heard from beyond the barrier of years. Her mother bent and whispered something to Thella's ear.

Although she heard, she could not comprehend the words. They were in a language she did not understand. She felt like she knew the feel to them though. They were flowing and curved words, silver words which blazed bright even in the darkest of nights.

Her mother had put her down now though and she was talking to another figure, which Thella instinctually recognized as her father. Two myths alive in one memory.

They talked in hushed dark tones. They argued. They went back and forth for a long time. Finally though, silence got the best of both of them. They joined their hands and walked to the window. Outside, the moon carved a circle in the sky, radiating its silver light onto them.

And Thella then understood what day and memory this was.

Her parents were standing over her.

“We have to go now little Thella.”

She wanted to cry out. She wanted to call to them to not leave. Didn't they know how horrible it was to be left alone? Didn't they care how she felt at all? Surely they would understand that? But she could neither move nor speak. She could not argue or even attempt to persuade them. The vision of them was one of memory that could not be changed.

“You will be safe with my brother.”

And they slipped off into the mist.

She lay there alone. The pain she felt in her heart, was the only feeling let at this point. Her limbs lay still and lifeless.

And yet another took their place, this time an old man. Quentin held her for a long while.

Yet he too gazed far off at something in the distance.

“I have to go now Thella. I'm leaving you alone.” He said to her. She looked into his face, and saw nothing there. It was blank. “I'm leaving you.”

And she was alone. The crushing pain she left now could not be described. He had left her. The only one who had been there for her all this time. Even after he had lost his house. Even after the other townsfolk had shunned them. Even after his title as elf friend was challenged. Even after she had become sick. He had stayed by her side. And even into the mists he had went with her. But now he was gone.

It was too much. She curled into a ball and welcomed the growing numbness as it ate the last piece of feeling from her heart. She was alone. She was nothing. Yet the white mask she wore remained. And, despite its featurelessness, and despite its plain design, it was hers.

The ground broke away from her. Thella was falling. She could just barely feel the rush of the cold air around her on the parts of her body that could still feel. Most of her limbs were completely numb now. Could there be anything that could save her now?

The despair was gone though. Perhaps it was simply that she had used up all her tears. Perhaps it was that she realized that her sadness would not change her situation. Or perhaps the numbness had invaded its way so far and so deeply into her body that it had seized and destroyed her very emotions. Regardless, it was gone.

She fell for a long while collecting her thoughts. She tumbled and spun, plummeting ever faster. She knew she should have been terrified. She had never been good with heights, but everything was so removed in this place, she wasn't even sure if there existed a bottom to the depth into which she fell. And perhaps that was the key to things. Was the falling that bad if there was no bottom?

She realized she had tensed up her body earlier, but now she let it free. Her arms ran free, her bandages and dress whipped behind her. She began to tumble and spin violently now, but in the mist covered domain, with no telling direction, did orientation matter? She did not take any action to arrest the tumble.

After a long time of thought, a clarity over took the masked girl.

How did she know she was falling?

Her arms and legs could no longer feel. The bandages fluttered this way and that from her body. But did the bandages matter? What had been the point of them anyways? To stop fleeting physical damage? There was nothing here that could hurt her now. They spun off her, and trailed behind her, fluttering as she fell before vanishing completely into oblivion.

How did she know she was falling?

Looking down it certainly seemed like she fell, but she had previously established that without landmark nor feature, the concept of sight was not defined. So she closed her eyes.

How did she know she was falling?

She could hear the rush of the wind in her ear. But with neither change of pace nor acceleration of any kind, it was perfectly uniform. It was a white noise which faded into nothingness. She heard it no longer.

How did she know she was falling?

She did not know.

And thus, could it not be that in fact she was not falling after all? Perhaps she was merely stationary.

Nothing changed, but she now knew without opening her eyes, nor sensing her surroundings in any way that she had in fact either stopped falling, or the very concept of falling was now meaningless. The distinction did not matter in this place.

So what did matter?

All that was left was the vague feeling of detachment. Of sensing herself as separate from the world. Could that cease to matter? Could she simply cease to acknowledge this distinction? What would happen then? Her instinct was to continue, in the same pattern as the previous obstacles. For this was the final obstacle in front of her.

But she hesitated at this. For there was something there, a feeling that she could not place, in fact both a feeling and a memory. It was the words given to her by her mother, words of caution. Words which made no logical sense, for they were still in a language that Thella never learned, yet were in some way still able to be understood, in the deepest purest emotional form.

Her mother and another female elf stood at the front of a large group of people, including her father, on the top of a hill. Before them was an endless flat plain. Dotting the plain, at irregular intervals were odd jutting forms, sticking just barely above the sand. She could not tell whether they were the remains of trees or skeletons of people.

The small group of elves looked down at the expanse and understood their fate.

Sebisi and her mother looked to the moon and decided on a course of action. They motioned for the group to sit on the sand.

Her mother uttered the words she had said to Thella, and the group collectively removed the barrier separating them from the world, and ceased to exist.

That revelation should have shocked Thella, but she was beyond such things now. The true meaning of the mask became clear. She touched the edge of it, knowing it would not move. But she no longer desired to move it. It was not only a layer between her and the outside, but what she hadn't seen until now, was that that layer was also her. The mask was molded to her face. She had worn it now for almost a year. Longer? She had long understood that time held no sway in this place.

Perhaps then, there was no mask after all? Perhaps it was simply her which existed and the mask simply an aspect of that existence. In that case, similar actions to her mother should lead to interestingly dissimilar conclusions.

She tentatively felt the barrier keeping her from the mist surrounding her, a force she had never felt nor located before which resided somehow deep inside her and yet was until now, unreachable. The attritive forces of the void surrounded her, lapping hungrily. There was a moment of hesitation as she felt the otherness seep its way closer. Yet all concern and fear had left her. Through the mask she could both exist and not exist.

To step through the barrier required both intense concentration and lack of thought. Her mother had explained, all at once, the mind must be devoid of thoughts, and remain so. Not a single one could be generated, or else the whole thing was doomed.

Before, Quentin and Tsuras had talked of feeling and emotion when finding the camp. However, this was the direct opposite. Where they had felt, she must un-feel. She must let not only her thoughts recede into the mist, but also her memories, her ambitions, her feelings, both good and bad. They all must be surrendered to the mist; the surrender was to become it. And in becoming it she would be free of it. It was a feeling she was not quite unfamiliar with. The numbness of her disease had prepared her for such a feeling. Now it was applied to soul rather than body.

She relented and her body dissipated. Yet the mask remained.

Thella awoke lying on the ground. The mask was nowhere to be seen. The mist still lay around her in a suffocating grasp. However, this time it could not hurt her. She was one with the nothing around her. Its effects she now realized were an equalization. If one was empty within, as was empty outside, there was no damage possible. There was a sudden clarity to her actions.

She looked out into the mist. She knew that somewhere in this place were her companions and that she should find them. They likely had been effected by this place same as she, but were unlikely to have fared as well. First she would find Tzuras. He would be near the entrance and likely unconscious. She pictured him in her minds eye.

How would she find him? This place worked its magic by denying expectation. Space and time were at its mercy. However, aspects were less likely to be changed. Her mask for instance. Tzuras had his totems, but they remained outside this place, and were numerous, which made them more susceptible. He also had his wand, which was likely important to him. However, he had not gotten a good look at it.

His ingredient bag on the other hand was both key to him and had been shared with her. She remembered its shape, the wood drawers, the leather bands which held it to ones back. She imagined how it would lay with Tzuras on the ground. She saw it.

And now that she knew, she simply reached down and out towards the ground…

And there it was. She felt the leather straps in her hand. This place was not as large as it appeared.

And attached to the bag would be…

Tzuras. There he was, before her.

She looked over the elf. He was deadly pale, and his breath drew thin and exhausted and slow. Just looking at him she could see that he had fallen victim to the power of this place.

She did not know much medicine. He was the one for that. She did not know any magic either, not that it would have been helpful in this place. So she did the only other thing which made sense and attempted to wake him.

He stirred in his unconsciousness.

She got glimpses of fire and burning. Dark shadows and crazed fearful screams ripping through blood soaked nights. The assault of emotions shuddered the void which she had so carefully formed within her. However, for now it held.

She grabbed him by the face and slapped him forcibly.

His eyes rolled in his head and he struggled violently against her grasp. She held fast through. Her arms maintained surprising strength, almost vice-like despite his thrashing.

“Those are the dreams of the already dead. Don't count yourself among them yet. Ishira still lives if you act in her name.” She said, accompanying it with another purposeful slap to the face. The words were clearly not her own.

He drew a solid gasping breath as life returning slightly to the elf. Before he had looked dead, now he just looked close to it.

“I-is that you Thella? W-where are we?” He chattered.

“We're still in the opening. We have to find the others. And soon. Night has fallen outside I think.

The tone of Thella's voice seemed much more confident than he remembered. Was this really the same girl who had hid behind her uncle's leg? This seemed the voice of a grown woman. Yet he could hardly choose not to follow her words. He was in no state to do anything.

Half conscious he rose to his feet with her help.

She bent to help him with his pack.

“No. Leave it. I don't have the strength.”

The void shuddered within Thella, threatening the balance. “But your items. You must have spent years collecting all those things...”

But he pushed the strap aside, letting it fall to the ground.

He merely shook his head. “No. I can always find them again...”

She let it fall. The contents scattered on the ground. And she then understood. Perhaps it would help to have the others let go of their ties as well.

“Yes. Do you know what happened to Odilon?”

But he shook his head tiredly and staggered before regaining his footing. “I lost him as soon as we entered.”

“Then we must find my uncle first.”

She lead him forwards.

She did not know enough about Odilon. She had thought the soldier would have been Tzuras since they had entered together. Now she had only a very vague idea of where he might be. A vague idea and some deep concerned feeling of conflict to come.

It would, with this additional information, make more sense to find her uncle. She stopped for a moment and thought about hwo she would accomplish that.

“Did you see Quentin enter this place?”

But Tzuras shook his head. “Normally I would attempt a dowsing, but this place seems to dislike magic.”

“No, that would be inadvisable. It would lead us in circles for sure.” Thella said. “We must find our own way.”

The words awoke some memories in Tzuras and a small bit of the haze and exhaustion left him, and he stared at the child in front of him.

“Thella. What exactly is going on here?”

But she merely grabbed his arm and lead him forward. “Don't worry about it too much. Think of this as a brief echo. Our kind can never truly fade. You'll see to that. Or perhaps someone like you.”

He had no words to this response. Did she know her true kin then? Who had told her? He was not quite sure what she meant, but the purpose and action of the girl in front of him was unmistakable. In his past travels he had learned that it was sometimes helpful to simply observe, especially when strange events were occurring.

But after a moment she came to a stop.

“I do not know how to find Quentin.” She admitted. She turned to Tzuras. “Do you have any ideas?”

He paused for a moment. Her eyes were blazing silver, with such ferocity that he was taken aback.

“He was a driven man. He cared very much about you. Perhaps he will find us.” he offered.

She considered this for a long while.

“I do not think that is likely to be the case. While I would agree with you normally, this place is a deadening of the spirit. Many things can be said about my uncle. He is a man quick to anger. However, that will not help him here, and neither will his magical abilities. In fact quite the opposite. So once those two aspects are stripped away, what is left?”

Tzuras thought slowly. “There is a current of sadness beneath his anger. Perhaps he would be wandering?”

“Hmm. Perhaps you are right. But if that is the case, he will not wander at all. If he had fallen into sadness, he will stand still, dead to the world but still alive. And if we were not with him, he would stand there until the spirit passed from his body and be left a lifeless thing.”

The words were given with a simple matter-of-factness. Previously this itself would have caught Tzuras off guard but now he was attempting to right his ship. He had no idea of the storm, but he knew he must only head the bow into the waves.

“So he is still. You seemed to find me with no problem. Simply do whatever you did then.” He suggested.

Thella nodded. “Yes, the form of this place allows for everything to be both near and inaccessible. Perhaps his book? Yes, I can see it. Leather bound. Metal on the corners. Well worn. He did always like that book. Perhaps more than he should have. There was always more to learn in it, but as he studied he avoided the things he could have learned outside it…”

Thella stooped, and ran her hand sifting through the endless fog.

“Yes. I can see it now. Its gone cold...”

And there it was. Her small hand touched the metaled edge of the large tome. She ran her hands around the ornate symbols which adorned its outside. But a frown ran across her face.

“But where is Quentin?” She asked herself.

Tzuras stood by, not sure of what to make of the situation. “He seems to be somewhere else. He is book is not with him I suppose.”

Thella looked back at Tzuras with just the thinnest bit of smile. “You are correct. He is finally separate from it. So we must find him in another manner.”

Tzuras thought for a moment.

“Ah, he did surprise me with one thing. His arms and back are tattooed with elven script.”

Thella stopped and stared at him. Something shook within her, not out of anger, but out of surprise. The confidence wavered. The silver eyes dimmed. She held a hand to her head.

“I-Is that the case?” She regained her footing.

“That… Thats is quite useful. Perhaps the old man is not as cynical as he appears. Perhaps there is some selflessness in him after all.” She pondered the new information.

“You would know would you not? He cares deeply for you. Enough to follow you into this place at a run. He paid no heed to the danger.”

Thella shook her head. “No. Of course. Yes, I know.” The words were unconvincing.

“But if that is the case… He must have taken an oath. Oh Ishira. How I wished for more of your guidance. Perhaps there was a way for us to have taken that course. Perhaps we didn't see it in our anguish...” Thella considered the surroundings.

“Then for this we need the moon.”

Tzuras laughed. And Thella turned to look at him again.

“The moon? In a place like this? Ha! How many nights and days have gone dark and empty?” He threw his hand to the mist. “When it does appear it is a sad lifeless thing. It is a corpse hanging in the sky, too large to fall. There is nothing that will help you up there.”

But Thella would not be daunted.

“I said our kind can never truly fade. And that extends to the moon as well. Is it a corpse you see in the sky?” She turned to him.

“What does it appear to you?”

He shook his head in anger. “Less than a corpse. It hangs day after day. Night after night. Simply there. If there were any justice in the world it should have been gone. How can one forget such a fall when there is a constant reminder of it hanging in the sky? What a cruel fate! How it has taunted me!”

“Then let it taunt you no longer.” She replied. “For it exists still, in whatever form you imagine. Here in this place, it is whatever you see. Whatever purpose you ascribe it, it can be, for this brief while.”

Tzuras shook his head.

“Ah, can you not see it majesty peaking timidly amidst the sky? It is obscured by clouds for the moment, but it is simply waiting for clear moment to present itself.” Thella stated.

Tzuras looked overhead. He did not believe. He could not. Not after so many long dark nights. But indeed, didn't the space above him seem lighter? Could he even dare to hope?

“Yes. Here it comes. Remember it well. There may come a time that you must envision it again in its whole. It will come now, though perhaps it will take all the power left in me to see it so.”

“Here it is! Look to the sky Tzuras!” She cried, thrusting her hand to the sky. And it was very much no longer Thella's voice which cried out the words, “It exists undaunted amid the void, piercing and perfect. Its heavenly sphere is undiminished by time and space. It exists outside of this world: a promise that is to be fulfilled.”

Tzuras shielded his eyes. Could it be?

The mists seared with light and retreated before their enemy. Tzuras's eyes went skyward and tears started to fill with him. He could see it now. It did exist after all, just behind the clouds, its silver light beaming down and filling even this dark crevice.

“Praise Ishira!” he cried out, and fell to his knees.

In the moment of power, suffused with silver glow, Thella grabbed out with her hand and gripped the thread which ran from it to Quentin. The thin silver thread stood out, blazing in the moonlight.

“This is as far as I go, young one. The moon waxes full now, but will just as quickly wane. This place is inimical to all life, all structure; even a memory. You must be the one to lead in the future.”

Before his wild eyes, some essence cohered off of Thella and drifted away into perfect full moon hanging above him.

He blinked once.

The scene was completely gone.

Tzuras looked down at the silver thread he was holding.

The moon was gone. The mists had returned. Thella was before him, but seemed faint.

“We'd best follow it.” She said softly, and held out her hand. Tzuras took it and followed the line.

Before the two of them stood Quentin.

The older man stared blankly forwards, and made no move or an indication of awareness when they approached.

“Uncle?” Thella called, but he did not respond.

Tears stared to well in her eyes, which she tried to fight back. She paused for a second and tried to regain her composure, mimicking the straight forward unemotional perspective it seems she had lost.“It seems that he has been taken by this place.” She said to Tzuras.

“Can you carry him? We have to get him out of here.” She said, gesturing to her uncle.

Tzuras observed Quentin, drawing closer to him and looking at his eyes. They were open but stared ahead. There seemed to be something dark within them, a certain light seemed to be missing from the usual fiery spirited map maker.

Tzuras went to grab the man, but as he did he unbalanced him. In a moment of panic, he thought the man would fall since he seemed so catatonic. However, Quentin merely took a step forward with the foot that had been moved out of place. It seemed like an automatic reaction rather than a conscious movement.

“Perhaps the soul has gone from him for the moment, but I think he can walk.” Tzuras said, attempting to lead the man.

Thella tried to not look at what her uncle had been reduced to. Her voice indicated that she was crying.

“L-lets go. We have to get out of this place. And soon. I think I can find the exit right now. I'm not sure I can make it if we wait around.”

“But what about Odilon?” Tzuras asked, looking doubtfully around into the mist for any sign of the soldier.

Thella shook her head. “I don't know. We'll have to think of something when we get outside.”

Quentin and Tzuras followed Thella as she felt her way through the mist. Despite the feeling that it was infinite, it likely only took minutes until Tzuras made out the edge of the stone fissure that had signaled the entrance into this otherworldly place. He gave a quick prayer to Ishira. And for the first time in as long as he could remember, it wasn't riddled with doubt.

Had he ever thought that he would see the trees again? Inside that dark place of mist and fire, it seemed like the only future was to continue that vision again and again. He could hardly believe that the entrance was in front of him.

“Tzuras, do you have any light on you? It will be dark when we get out.” Thella advised. “Don't use magic either.”

The entrance to the fissure loomed at them from both sides, suddenly springing into existence. Had it always been there? It did not matter. What mattered was that they had found it. They were going to get out.

Beyond its two grasping hands, the sun had descended into murderous red. It glowed softed amid the trees, a hazy and foreboding color. Light was again something to be noticed. Inside it had been a perpetual and indirect lighting in such a way that the mind completely forgot about it. After all, there was nothing to see anyways.

But Thella stopped in her tracks.

Tzuras peered past her and saw why. There was a figure standing in the entrance of the fissure.

There was only one person it could be.

“Odilon?” He called out, half expecting that horrifying draining sensation.

And indeed a version of it did hit him, but it was not an external thing. It was a sinking feel when the figure did not respond to him. Yet perhaps the despair it caused him was similar in a way.

But the outline was unmistakeable in the bloodied darkening light. The coat he wore. It could only be Odilon.

“Odilon… I don't know how you got out, or what you saw… or experienced in there. But in spite of the strange situation, I still consider us friends.”

The Odilon-like person figure moved, but something about the way it walked struck Tzuras as very wrong. It did not walk like a person, it was more like a puppet. Instead of the expected gait, it shuffled slowly towards them, jerking as if it was injured or propelled by some external force which only knew of walking through second hand knowledge.

“Somethings wrong.” Thella said, drawing behind Tzuras. “Do you have a weapon?”

“Yeah.” Tzuras drew a dagger in one hand and his wand in the other, although in this place he knew magic would still be a poor idea.

“Hey...” Tzuras tried again, gesturing towards the solider, but still keeping the weapons in his hands.

Odilon again drew closer and now Tzuras could make out the souless eyes hidden previously by the shadow of the dying blotted sun.

Tzuras backed up, horror filling him.

Odilon staggered forward again. And this time, having gotten close enough, Tzuras could see that the edges of the man were not quite there. Was he a solid figure or was he a solid shadow? Light bent around his body is strange ways, and at time it might have been possible to see straight through him in a murky and indescribable way.

“Tzuras...” Odilon shuddered. Part of his body seemed to blur when he said the name, as if he were struggling to keep himself whole and that the very act of speaking threatened that cohesiveness.

“Tzuras… Did you truly mean it when you said you considered me a friend? Even knowing now what you know? Even if I'm not… If I'm really no one?”

Odilon's eyes were blackened hollows where irises should have been. Beyond them, instead of flesh or bone or in fact anything at all, was instead inscrutable emptiness, a dark expanse which seemed to draw you inwards towards it.

Tzuras struggled to respond. The words were Odilon's, but the appearance was ghastly.

“Odilon. I saw you in the river. Perhaps we can help you again.” Thella interjected from behind Tzuras. “Uncle has also been affected. I-I don't know whats going to happen, but I know that the only way anyone of us is getting out of here is if we all leave together.”

The other two considered her words and found that they too agreed.

“You have to help me then. Some way… I-I stepped into the void. Gods what a fool I was. I thought I understood. I was inside there for so long. For eternities, with nothing between me and the emptiness. Then, just as I was about to let go, I thought I felt a silver light, shining from a distance. And I followed it to you three. Thank you.”

“But its not over yet for me. I think I am of this place in some way… This false flesh, these impossible memories. Am I a shade? Am I a reincarnation? Whatever the form, I believe I was made to waylay you. Just another shift in scenery or impossible occurrence. The power of this place is so removed. The soul of a man means nothing to it. The endless void holds the souls of all those who died on this island. It was nothing to it to recast its form.”

“But now my purpose is fulfilled. The second I passed through that crystal, my life was gone. Or was supposed to be gone. I saw a woman… some elven woman. She lifted me out of that place. But I feel it drawing on me even as we speak.” He shivered, and another part of him seemed to grow dimmer.

He grimaced, and the emotions defeated the obliterative power of the place for an instant. Half formed tears of darkness welled in his empty eyes and slid down his face, before whisking away into the mist.

“I'm coming apart.” He pleaded, shuddering again.

The annihilation of the self. Thella had felt that not a short time ago, although not in such a literal sense. What had saved her?

“Perhaps… Maybe my mask can help? I don't know where it has gone. I think it was used up. Tzuras, can you think of anything?”

Tzuras's thoughts raced rapidly. Odilon staggered again before him. The draw of the place was clearly affecting him, and it was taking all power the soldier had to not disappear.

“How did you use the mask Thella? I don't see it anywhere.” The elf asked.

“I saw death and destruction. I seemed like my life would not be worth living the in face of such things. A person made me see, allowed me to see that the future could be brighter. A future of Ishira, even in the face of death, and that I must fight for that.” Tzuras continued.

Thella considered this.

“Then there is no shared method of escaping the void. My sickness, the mask… I was able to take the path of acceptance. Yet I was not lost. However, I can't say with any certainty that this would work for Odilon. I believe acceptance would destroy him currently. Perhaps there is something we can do in the short term… If the mask worked for me...” Thella thought hard.

“But its gone. You said so yourself. It was used up with whatever you did.”

But a smile formed on Thella's face.

“Uncle can be like this. Are we taking after him? We are thinking about this far too literally. Things change in this place. Is the mask gone?” She asked, and spun so that her face was hidden to the other two.

“Can you recall what it looked like?” She asked rhetorically. “I remember it. Pale white with just slits for eyes, bent down the center. I remember the curve of the bottom, and the material from which it was made. I remember its smell, I remember its feel.”

“Is it lost? Or was I wearing it this whole time?” She said, with humor in her voice, slowly turning back to reveal her face to them.

Tzuras gasped. On Thella's face lay a mask. He could just make out the girls eyes from within and the smile underneath.

“And now all I have to do to take it off is remember who \*I\* am without it.”

She reached her hand towards the mask. Her smile for a moment seemed false, a second where Tzuras could see the clear concern in her eyes, fighting forces trying to equate her with the mask she wore. Her hand trembled, but then stilled. A balance was found somewhere there.

She reached up and took the mask off.

She stared at the thing in her hand and breathed a sigh of relief.

A queeziness rose within Tzuras, and the immediacy of the situation ran through him. The sliver of blood red light was quickly fading. His runes were burning in his mind. Danger was coming. Something wrong and evil.

“Its coming. Something bad. Odilon. I don't know what will happen if you put this on, or if this will even help permanently, but I promise you, I''ll help you figure this out when we get away from here.”

Odilon looked doubtfully at the mask in Thella's hands. “Do you promise? Tzuras, do you promise to help me on that silver light?”

Tzuras thought of the thread affixed to Quentin, and the pain it had caused him and grew grim. But the assurance did not leave him.

“I do promise. I swear on the last light of Ishira's moon. Whatever is left of it.”

A sense of horrible fate wrapped itself around his body. An impossibly heavy weight settled on Tzuras's shoulders. Immense and unfathomable power coalesced, a thread taking shape…

In that moment, when that power, at least mostly uninhibited by the attritive forces of this place was at its peak, Tzuras moved with certainty, towards a path he saw in his mind, through feeling only.

He grabbed the mask from Thella's hand and strode to Odilon, drawing close to him for the first time since they had entered the fissure.

The same sucking draining force of the fissure behind them could be felt coming from Odilon. But Tzuras was undeterred. He placed the mask on Odilon's face. The empty eyes now hidden behind the mask.

“I know who you are Odilon. We all do. And nothing here can change that.”

Thella nodded.

“I think this will help.” He stopped for a moment and the image of a rune came to his mind. He gripped his knife and etched the image into the forhead of the mask. The power blazed silver before fading. The rune remained.

Odilon shivered, and fell to his knees before the elf.

Tzuras looked down in alarm, but the soldier reached a hand upwards.

Tzuras grabbed one hand and he found Thella had grabbed the other.

Together they pulled him to his feet.

He looked more substantial than he had previously. Would that last? They did not have the time to find out.

“I...I don't know if I can repay you. I no longer feel that horrible void.” He shivered again, but this time it was clear it was only from the memory.

“Well, if you really want to repay us, get ready.” Tzuras warned. “There's something coming. Its almost here. Just a few paces off. It feels...” He paused and made a wretched face.

“Its horrible. Its something that needs to be destroyed. Worse than before. Get your weapons ready. Lets get out of here and meet it on the other side of the pond if possible. I don't want to be in this fissure for any longer than I have to.”

They stepped out of the ethereal world into the marginally less strange expanse of the island.

Instantly, Tzuras felt a perceivable difference. For one, it was cold. Inside the fissure, time and feeling were all lost. The place was the definition of stasis. Out here feeling returned. The wind could be felt, the moisture on the air could be felt, he could feel its chill in his lungs. Had he breathed in that place? Likely not.

But there was another aspect to the island which came back to his memory. If the fissure was a place of internal challenge, and it seemed like that was the case, the island was a place of external challenge. He had not forgotten the beast they had encountered earlier and he mentally prepared himself. They had beaten it back with magic last time. But this time they Quentin was unresponsive, his magic was weaker and the fissure seemed to be inimical to magic in general. Who knew if the same strategy would work? They needed light fast.

His hand went for his pack only to remember that he had left it. He cursed under his breath.

“There's nothing here to make light with, lets at least get around the pond.” He said, the worry starting to edge into his words.

Odilon walked with some difficulty and Tzuras could see him fingering the mask on his face, as they walked, and occasionally rubbing his injured arm.

Thella kept her face away from view, presumably on purpose. It seemed the child was very aware of his stare. She had aged during this horrible expedition hadn't she? If only there were a better way to ensure she was somewhere else safe during the conflict that was to come. But he dare not have her stray too far from them. They both knew she might never see them again if they tried that.

So that left Quentin. The older man walked haltingly still unaware of his surroundings. Tzuras gripped his chest with anger and sadness. What a horrifying place to bring someone like that so low…

But the time for contemplation had finished. They were on the other side of the pond now.

“Get ready!” He ordered.

He grabbed as much loose wood as he could manage and set it aflame with magic. The now familiar draining feeling slammed into him, making his vision waver, but he was buoyed by the fact that he knew that they were in danger and that the feeling was not as strong as it was in the fissure.

Odilon breathed heavily and drew his sword. “I don't know what I can do in my state. But I swear I'll fight what ever comes.” He said. The steel in his hands reflecting the red of the dying sun.

Thella positioned Quentin as far back as possible. She approached him and looked into his eyes. There was no intelligence there. She pulled herself close so the others wouldn't hear or see her tears.

“Uncle. Are you there?” She tried, grabbing his hand.

He was unresponsive. His hand was not quite cold, but certainly also lacked the heat of life. It felt like flesh, unconnected to a body. She dropped it with a horrified feeling. What if he never woke up?

But her fears would have to wait. The last light of the sun faded into nothingness in front of them. For all at once, breaking the silence of the clearing there could be heard a sudden rasping.

Thella spun and turned to Odilon. “Is that you?”

The masked soldier shook his hand and held his sword at the ready.

The deep rasping noise could be heard once again, low and labored, like some great creature struggling to breath. Mist appeared unbidden from the surface of the pond, filling the spaces between the trees and threatening to close in on them.

Tzuras had his knife and wand out once again.

“Careful. Its probably...”

Something moved in the distance. Tzuras could see the body of something. Its shape was vaguely that of an animal but not like any that he had ever seen. Its form was curved, but he could see no legs which moved it. Instead, it seemed to be dragging itself towards them.

Despite it not having legs, it heaved itself forward with a disturbing pace. They stared in shock and horror at the mas quickly approaching them.

Suddenly it came into contact with a tree and heaved its weight and momentum through it. The dry tree shuddered and broke from its roots, and was thrown over the things bulk and off to one side.

“Its here!” Cried out.

The creature thrashed its way into the clearing in front of the pond. Its head was that of a deer, but comically and sickeningly distended, drawn out and thrashing without bones. It hung on the end of a sagging and ineffective neck, clearly not controlling what was going on below it. Its mad hollow eyes screamed for death, but its body struggled still for life.

It had seven feet, none of the same animal, and none of them quite reaching the ground properly. Instead they flailed in the air, jerking with each movement. Instead of these feet, the thing shifted forward on its horrible bloated body, contracting its bulk and expelling it again, like some demented worm.

The majority of its mass was made of a repulsive collection of fur, feathers and open sores, which oozed what was either blood or some other dark liquid. The patches of fur seemed almost artificial and they could not even hold back the swelled corpselike pallid flesh which wriggled beneath it. The whole expanse quivered as it heaved, and struggled against the remains of skin, in places oozing out in grey gelatinous form.

The head, thrashing back and forth as the body moved form under it, opened its mouth wide, wider than bones could allow and from the great mass of flesh, a chilling bestial scream emerged.

Tzuras only had a second to register that the cry was one of pain before it seemed to focus on him, and heaving its bulk in fleshlike waves, it swung multijointed talons at him.

He jumped backwards, nearly not dodging in time. The ground burned beneath his feet as the talon sank into the ground and tore off as the creature moved again, the blood sprayed the ground.

“Oh gods. Don't let it touch you!” He cried.

He brought around his short sword and dodged another flailing limb. Sensing an opportunity, he darted forward and stuck the beast with his sword.

It let loose a bone chilling collection of screams, cries and garbled sputters, before shifting towards him. The patchwork collection of flesh and fur rippled where he had struck it, then, tensing for a moment trashed a blob of flesh and puss at him. The sudden movement caught him by surprise. There was still muscle under there for sure. He felt the wind slam out of his chest and he was driven to the ground where he lay, stunned.

“Back to the abyss!” Odilon cried, jumping in front of the creature, placing himself between it and Tzuras.

It emitted a gurbling sulphurous smell and sprayed a caustic mix of blood and acid from its wounds at the soldier.

But Odilon was ready and spun, throwing his great cloak over himself and Tzuras, shielding them from the attack at the cost of most of the cloak. The spray bubbled and oozed at the leather of the jacket, and he tore it from his body.

Now that it was gone, Tzuras could see how pale and thin Odilon had become. The experience in the fissure had not just changed him mentally, but also physically.

The mask wearing man held his sword high though and counter attacked.

In the first couple of movements, Tzuras was reminded that Odilon, after all things were considered appeared to have the blade training of his namesake, regardless of his true condition.

A feathered fanged maw attached to an arm of flesh leaped from the body and swung towards the soldier, who deftly dodged it, and in one movement, closed and pulled his sword clean through the flesh. It severed and dropped to the ground where it twitched on the ground. He slammed his weapon through the middle of it and pushed it deeper until it stopped moving.

But the best would not be so easily stopped. The severed limb's stump oozed blood black as the night for only a moment before the flesh beneath the injury shifted and from its place came a beak smeared with offal. It opened its mouth and sheaked at him.

The whole of the body moved again, much quicker than its size would have let on. The entire thing contracted, stretching the bounds of the fur covering the flesh, tearing in places with the strain, then expanded violently, unleashing a torrent of meat towards Odilon.

He just managed to jump backwards as the thing oozed towards him at worrying speeds. It was trying to crush him!

“Damn you!” He yelled, leaping forward and sticking the side, before jumping backwards once again as the beast tried to thunder towards him.

Tzuras had now gotten to his feet and looking back at Quentin and Thella decided that it was worth the risk to try to use magic.

He extended his wand and a flash of fire shot from it into the monster.

To his surprise, the flesh caught quickly, but showed no signs of stopping it, or even damage beyond what horrible wounds it seemed to have already inflicted upon itself.

The void slammed into him and he clenched his teeth. He had to try something!

Odilon dodged another flailing appendage and stuck it for the second time. On this impact, the sword tore through the skin holding together that section of the monster. The tear widened as the thing moved to turn, ripping open completely, revealing a tangled mess of blood soaked antlers piercing grey pink flesh. Sinew contracted ignoring the injury and the section of the body sloughed off in a mess of sharp pointed bone and steaming blubber.

From its torn hole a hundred snake bodies emerged, each one a different color, some with feathers, some with fur, some with scales of lizards or fish. At the end of each there were ears, fingers, hooves, mouths, and indiscernible other body parts, some of which were not fully formed.

Where there was one appendage there were now tens, thrashing, tangling in one another, but over all, urging and seeking, throwing themselves at Odilon with a fevered mindless pain.

Odilon was now driven backwards. Try as he might to avoid all the attacks of the chaotic flailing, two did find their mark, one gripping his torso, the other slicing into his shoulders with razor sharp claws.

He grimaced in pain, and fought to keep hold of his sword.

Tzuras's eyes widened with anger and his eyes flashed silver. He pulled back his hand, and thrusting it forward once more, a beam of pale white light shot from his wand. Where it touched the side of the creature, the flesh roiled in pain, searing away the exposed flesh, and welting into blood which froze in the exotic light. Crystals of solidified blood shattered as the beast now, for the first time, retreated.

But Tzuras would not let it go so easily. He stepped forward and pushed on his magic as hard as he was able and beyond. His vision dimmed at the edges. His fingers grew numb and a chilling wind swept through him. He blinked past the doom telling him that his efforts were useless, and that Ishira was long dead. At this moment, with his friends behind him, it mattered not.

The beam persisted, driving through the external layer of fur and skin deep into the flesh, where the void laden meat was found to be inimical to the power of the moon. Chunks were now falling off the beast as it roared and cried in its myriad tongues. Desiccated and solidifed hunks hit the ground and broke into pieces as Tzuras pushed harder and harder.

“Get it!” Odilon shouted, leaping to attack the thing, stabbing it again and again in places not directly hit by the beam.

Finally however, the bean went clear into the creature, and in doing so, revealed the true nature of the thing. At its heart, beyond the twisted meat and fur and shattered bones, lay a void. And into this void, the beam poured itself. The yawning maw swallowed the whole spell. Tzuras understood that there existed no spell which could fill it. The chasmous hole did not close however, unlike before, and the flesh moved no longer on the places touched by the moonlight.

The void now tore at Tzuras from the inside out. His mind went blank. He lost control of his legs and arms and collapsed to the ground barely aware of what had just hit him.

Thella ran to him and pulled him upwards, crying out if he was ok, to which he was just barely able to nod.

The aberration was injured. That much was clear. Tzuras's beam had flayed off a good part of its side. But it was equally clear that the thing had no critical parts that Odilon could tell. Most of it was just bulk with no discernible shape. Harming this thing to the point where it retreated might be impossible. It seemed to feel no pain and the damage they had done to it just seemed to make it more angry. It was likely they were going to have to destroy it completely, but without Quentin, it was hard to see how that was going to happen.

Tactics came to a quick stop, as the monster bellowed in a thousand cries. It turned its uninjured body towards Odilon and came rushing at him.

This time he was caught flat footed and could not jump out of the way quick enough.

The body opened revealing a tangled mess of antlers, teeth and broken bones. Like a mouth it tried to close down on him.

With a cry, he lifted his sword and stabbed it straight through the roof of the mouth that had formed.

The beast bellowed once more, but would not be dissuaded. Odilon found himself being driven backwards.

He frantically looked behind him. There was not much room between him and the Thella who was still trying to raise Tzuras. Quentin stood still despite all the violence and screams.

It tried to bit his hand off. He had to let go of his sword, though he knew he would be at a disadvantage without it.

Perhaps there was some sick intellegence left in the beast, for when it knew that he could not strike back at it, it became even more aggressive. It now became clear that its goal was to crush not only him, but all of them. Possibly driving them into the pond.

“Damn you! Void ridden piece of-”

It slammed again at him.

Left with no weapon Odilon grabbed two fistfuls of flesh and braced himself trying futilely to keep it back. The beast pushed harder.

Odilon was pushed back. Thella struggled to get Tzuras to his feet, which he managed, but just barely.

She grabbed Quentin and retreated to the very edge of the pond. The cold water now lapped at their feet. Thella looked backward at the waters. She very much didn't want to find out what would happen if they fell in.

Odilon saw the fear in her eyes and redoubled his effort. Was it possible? The beast was easily the size of a small river craft or ten moose. In fact based on the contents of its flesh, it was probably exactly comprised of ten moose. It was much larger than him. It cared not for pain. It grew fangs and talons. It was mad with pain.

But he could try. He gritted his teeth and planet his boots against the ground. With all his might he pushed against the creature.

And for a moment he was in fact able to hold it back. Even despite its horrible size, he stopped it.

Then it redoubled its efforts, shifting its fell muscle forwards. It moved beyond him on either side and pushed with its terrifying power.

He cried through the mask atop his face, clenching his hands, and straining his body beyond its ability, beyond any conscious effort, where it was just that unknown substance against tendon and bone. His hands burst through into the flesh beyond, where they sliced against fragments.

But he was past pain at this point. He had found an equilibrium. If what he suspected was true, he really didn't have any purpose, or any place in life. If his suspicions were true, he was simply the creation of an unimaginable intelligence, the same one that had created this horrible monster in front of him.

Were he and I similar? Not in the slightly. For although he and it had been created form the same formless void, he had seen these others behind him. They counted on him now in a way that no mindless beast could ever understand. If there was a purpose or a place for him, it was exactly here, right between the hulking mass of flesh and his friends.

And so he took a step forwards.

The beast shuddered. His hands dug deeper into its body, passing by nameless bodyparts, and the detritus of a thousand animals.

He took another step.

He was not human. He knew that. It was not flesh which moved him. There were no bones inside him. There was no brain which controlled his actions nor heart which pumped blood through his body. He was extant. A form of human but not human. And because of that he was not limited by that which was human.

He took his left hand, and seizing whatever flesh lay in it, he struggled with all his might and started bring it out. Muscles ripped, and bones snapped but he would not be denied.

The boneless head, and presumed useless head of the beast shrieked and thrashed. But still he pulled.

And he pulled until there was no substance in that ball of flesh that could stop him. And with a clean motion, he pulled his hand clear out of the body, taking with it a massive chunk of broken bloody flesh, which he threw to the ground in disgust.

The beast roared again, the pain clear in its fathomless wild eyes. It stared at him begging him to end its horrible existence. And then crushed him once more with the entirety of its power. It reared up, its whole bulk rising into the air, bringing him dangling in the air, injured arm still stuck into the core of the beast.

Then it came down with frightening force, this time directly on him.

He heard Thella and Tzuras cry out and then he was surrounded by crushing meat.

The pain was unimaginable. His legs crumpled. His head was slammed to the ground. His injured arm was still caught at its original angle. When the beast brought itself down, he was unable to free it. A searing horrifying pain radiated from his arm. It was so strong it broke straight through the balance he had so recently achieved.

A realization told him that it quite possibly has been torn completely lose. He could not move it.

The beast was crushing him now. He could feel its weight above him. He could not draw breath. It was trying to destroy him. It was trying to rid the difference between him and it. He could feel the void within the beast grow closer to him as it sensed its kin within him.

With his body broken and immovable, he could not hope to free himself. He readied himself for the end.

Thella and Tzuras had cried out when they saw the beast come down on Odilon, but neither were in a good position to do anything. Thella lacked the strength and Tzuras was drained from the counter strike of his magical use.

To his credit, Tzuras was now on his feet with Thella's aid. He readied his wand.

Thella tried to stop him. “You cant'! If you use magic again, it might kill you!”

But the elf simply stared at her. “It doesn't seem like we have any other choice. I think I have one or two big spells left.”

But as he pushed Thella behind him, and gripped his wand, he mentally noted that this was a complete lie. He shouldn't even have cast the last spell. The fissure did not allow for the recovery of magic power. He had been running on fumes this entire time. And combat spells had never been his expertise.

“Back!” He warned the beast.

But it paid him no mind. Instead it poured its horrible form in a pair of pseudopods which flung themselves at him before he could react. They wrapped themselves around him, one on his arm and the other around his waist.

In a panic he reached for his knife, which had dropped to the ground when he fell.

But before he could grab it, the arms lifted him clear off his feet, and, in one motion, hurled him into the air.

“No!” Thella cried.

But that didn't stop Tzuras from arcing over her head into the center of the frigid pond.

Then, the beast came for her.

She stooped down and grabbed the knife Tzuras had dropped. With two hands, she prepared to defend herself and Quentin.

The arms rushed towards her.

But she never had to use the weapon.

Instead, Quentin calmly grabbed both of the arms in his own.

Thella looked up at him in shock. But he did not respond to her in any way. Instead, she saw suddenly the thin silver line she had used to find him earlier. It snaked from the old man off into the distance.

Quentin switched his grasp, and with only his hands, crushed the beasts arms.

It moved back ever so slightly, revealing Odilon's head on the ground. The rest of his body was still covered.

The remaining stumps of the creature flailed wildly, blood and ichor running form their ruined lengths.

Quentin advanced.

“Uncle! Don't use magic. It will just drain you. We can't hope to fight this thing. We should try to run somehow.”

But Quentin shook his head. “We can't run from this thing.” He said simply, “See if you can help Tzuras” he added and readied himself.

The beast charged him, hoping to crush him like it did Odilon. Quentin leaped to one side in a maneuver that was much more agile than his age should have allowed. As he did so, he threw the silver line across the beast, where it instantly tangled around it. He then moved to the beast's side, and attacked it.

He was simply punching the beast and his attacks seemed to make little effect on it. But he had gotten its attention. It focused all its pain filled rage on him and lumbered to turn to face him.

Before it could, he grabbed the silver line once more and wound his way circularly around the beast. There was now a complete loop surrounding its chest.

It was only then that Thella saw that where the line touched the beast's skin, it festered and burned.

The beast opened several maws along its body, each one belching caustic fluid at Quentin. But in his current state, his keen eyes tracked their movement and he avoided each one. He continued his circular motion, dancing around the beast until the line was wrapped several times around the think center of the beast.

Satisfied with its position, he took up the slack nearest him in his hands.

“Ishira. I made a vow I would protect this child. I did so in your name. If there is anything left of your presence, make yourself known!” He challenged, holding the line in his hands.

However, if he was expecting something to happen, some great power to come raining down, or for the moon to appear once more, searing through the fog, he was mistaken. He was left holding the line just as before.

The beast lunged for him and he dodged backwards again. In doing so he ended up quite next to a tree which he regarded for a moment before nodding.

When the beast next attacked, he moved just outside of its reach, retreating further and further in the direction that it had originally came, through the empty grove of skeletal trees.

The beast's skin was burning now, the thread lighting into a new kind of pain. This wasn't the horrible existence it had been moulded into. Instead, this was acute and deadly. It felt this pain and became even more enraged. It lashed out, toppling trees and smashing holes into the ground. It flailed and attacked.

But it could never seem to connect to Quentin. He was always one step away. He was able to read the creature's movements in a way that neither Odilon nor Tzuras had been able to do. Deadly calm, he dodged yet another attempt to crush him, bringing the beast beside yet another tree. Around them lay the tangled remains of several. As it had mindlessly attempted to crush him, Quentin has lead it on a merry chase, particularly tangling it and the silver thread with as many trees as he could find.

Now there was very little slack in the line. It had tangled around a good number of trees, and each pulled against it when the beast struggled. All that remained was the other end.

Quentin finally stopped dodging. His breathing was hard but measured. He grabbed the small amount of silver thread still untangled, leading directly to the beast and gripped it with all his might, moving backwards as he did.

The tension ran through the thread. With the trees holding it fast on one end, and him on the other, the cord started to cut through the beast itself where it had wrapped around its body.

The aberration spasmed in pain. It had once been a true beast or likely several beasts of the forest before the void of the fissure had corrupted it into this horrible parody. In its current situation it was attacked by forces diametrically opposed to it. The moon existed unhindered among the void. Ishira might be gone, but her domain had always been that silver orb and the creatures of the forest. Doubly so then, the thread was anathema to its disgusting existence. It could not abide it touching its body.

It jerked and strained and pulled, snarling and biting in every cry imaginable. But Quentin held firm. He was no longer dodging. Filled with the same resolve that had possessed Odilon, he kept winding the thread around his own hands where it bit down deeper and deeper into his own flesh. And pulled.

The beast was ceasing to function as a single object. The thread had now cut halfway through it, and its dubious cohesiveness was now nearing an end. Its various limbs and protrusions convulsed and thrashed in their death throes. Quentin had set up the situation. Everytime the beast struggled, it merely tightened the thread around it. All that was left was for the old man to hold the line.

The balance within Quentin allowed for one emotion as he pulled one final time.

He pitied it.

The deer head screamed once more and flopped down, finally still.

Quentin was not done. He took the line pulled it from the now dead pile of animal pieces piled before him. The silver line stripped the meat like a metal wire through clay, leaving the core of the animal. Tzuras had seen it earlier. It was a tangled mess of antlers and bone, cruelly wrapped around an emptiness given form.

Quentin knew he likely would be unable to touch it with any part of his body directly, so he kicked it as hard as he could into the pond, which, due to the strange nature of the island's geography, was near him once more.

Tzuras, with Thella's help was dragging himself out of the water. Typically the cold would have been of utmost concern, but the deadening effects of the places came to their advantage for once. He was merely damp after a few moments, once Thella dragged him out.

Still he found it hard to get the strength to rise to his feet.

He shifted over, and looked at Odilon, also lying on the ground.

“I'm fine. You should check on him.”

Thella frowned. “I don't know what I can do. His arm is completely detached from his body, but there is no blood. If I help you get up, can you look at him?”

The elf nodded and the girl lifted him, best as she could to his feet. He groaned but was able to keep standing. He was, after all, the youngest of them save Thella, at least in elven terms.

But when she saw Quentin had returned from his fight, she left the elf and flung her arms around the older man. “Uncle! You're ok!”

The balance within him was hard to remove, and did not allow many emotions. He found it hard to understand the situation, but returned the physical gesture while he tried to find himself.

“I-I guess I am.” He wondered slowly.

She hugged him tighter when he tried to free himself. “I thought you were never going to come back. You scared me so much.” She admitted. This time she couldn't keep back the tears, and cried into his pant leg.

Tzuras let the two alone while he hobbled over to Odilon.

The soldier was pressed into the ground itself, but looked surprisingly ok for a man who was literally crushed to the ground.

Tzuras checked his pulse. There wasn't one. Or perhaps it was weak? It was hard to tell.

Alarmed, he attempted to flip the man over. As he did so, he realized that although the man wasn't bleeding, he did seem to be surprisingly heavy and at the same time, very thin. It was clear that there was not flesh and bone under his clothing.

Perplexed with how to proceed, he checked for a breath, and realized that he had never really seen Odilon breath earlier. The white mask, which Thella had worn earlier was now slightly cracked, but still affixed to the soldier's face, his brown hair disturbed only slightly. Tzuras could make out his eyes within the ceramic, but they were closed. He tried to take it off to check for signs of life, but the mask refused to come off, even though Tzuras couldn't see anything keeping it on. He left it for now.

And Odilon's arm was definitely off. Tzuras scratched his head and looked at what was left of it. Next to the solider was the tattered cloth of his coat's shoulder, and what looked like fragments of bone. But on closer inspection, they were not bone at all, but what might have been stone? He could tell there had been some skin looking layer atop it, but the abuse of the current fight and the earlier encounter with the monster had torn it off.

He had to do something though. He did know of one healing spell which he had teased out of a priest of Geremon during one of his travels. It was not one with which he had proficiency though, and he had to refer to his notes.

He took out the small book which he liked to use just as a field booklet rather than the more obsessive journal of the normal magic user and furiously tried to find the proper inscription.

He found it and carefully prepared a circle around Odilon, checking the runes as he went. But once he recited the words, he felt only a small draining of his power. Has the spell failed to work?

Looking at Odilon it was possible that some of the wounds, and chipped parts of his body had been fixed, but it was quite hard to tell.

He looked up with dismay to see Thella and Quentin approach him slowly.

“How is he?” Quentin asked quietly.

Tzuras shook his head. “I'm just as out of my league as Thella was. I'm not sure I know of anything that can help him. To be honest, I'm not even sure how injured he is. This body is not like anything I've ever seen before… It's certainly not human. I'm not sure its even organic. Its more like...”

“It looks like more a simulacrum.” Quentin interjected.

“Oh. Yes. That too. I was going to say Uzerai.”

“Spirits?” Quentin wondered. But this time there was no mocking in his voice, only a slow introspection. “Possible. This place can twist anything, as we've seen.”

“But maybe I can mend him?” Quentin wondered. “The spell doesn't usually work on people. Its not healing.”

Shaking, Quentin pulled out his tome, but he had to stop. His hand trembled and Thella steadied him with some effort. “I'm sorry. I really don't have a lot of energy left. Thella, can you open this to the third page or so? It should be early in. I guess I never told you much about this book, have I?”

Thella shook her had and flipped through the tome very carefully.

“I wonder if I haven't been forthcoming enough… What a miserable pile of secrets.” He muttered.

“Ah, its that one there.”

Tzuras looked on as Thella held the book for Quentin. The older man, raised his hands and began the proper procedures for bringing forth the magic. He had to try the spell multiple times, his hands shook so much, and once he couldn't hold back a rasping cough during a section which required a verbal incantation.

However, in the end, the spell did perform. And, being a minor one, did not produce quite as much distress as their prior combat oriented efforts had.

And Odilon did stir.

With a deep groan he lurched upwards.

“Careful! We don't know how to heal you. We've done what we could think of. You held that beast off, but it got your arm.” Tzuras said.

Odilon groaned again. This time it was a more conscious effort.

“I feel like I'm about to fall apart.” He rasped. “Its like every bone in my body is about to shatter.”

He said, feeling with his unbroken arm to the stump of the missing one. “Oh gods… It really is gone.”

“I'm sorry Odilon. It doesn't seem like normal healing magic works on you. Quentin had some ideas, but we're really at a loss. I study animals mostly. I don't even study human or elven anatomy. Most of what I know I picked up my accident. But I couldn't even tell if you were alive.” He admitted.

“Ugh. What does that mean anyway?” Odilon asked, sitting up. He pulled what was left of his jacket over himself. And then ran a hand on the mask covering his face.

“I think I'm ok. I don't feel like I'm losing blood. I guess there is no blood to lose. There is pain of course. Crushing pain. But I think its like broken ribs. I think I can walk with it.”

He started to get up, which triggered alarm among the assembled followers. But he would not be dissuaded.

“Night has fallen.” He coughed, and waved a hand around slowly. “I take it someone handled that monster?”

Quentin nodded.

“Good. But I do not think we can afford to be lax.” He said as he got to his feet. He brushed himself off slowly and from his movements, it was clear he was in a large amount of pain.

He coughed again. “We were able to rid ourselves of that fissure. But I think there must be some reevaluation here. I have to apologize to you all. I suppose I tangled you up in my revenge. And it turns out it was not quite mine to have in the first place. Although, this place did kill my original.”

He stared down at his arm and said, this this softer, looking at Tzuras, “We cannot destroy this thing. I don't think we can even seal it away. I believe its beyond our power. We were helpless inside there.”

Tzuras frowned, but nodded. He looked over the other two who also wore grim expressions.

“We were saved. We are not the ones to do the saving. Without help we would not have emerged form that fissure.” Quentin stated.

“I was never for challenging the power of this place.”

Thella began to protest.

Quentin shook his head. “I have seen its depths now. I don't know that I can call it evil, because that would ascribe it too much consciousness and purpose. But it certainly is malignant. It should be destroyed, or removed or sealed. But by those with the ability to do so. Perhaps the university...”

“Then is our goal again to leave this place?” Thella asked.

They looked at one another.

“It feels wrong.” Tzuras said, voicing what they all felt. “By leaving, there will certainly be others who are caught in its power.”

But Odilon disagreed. “You mentioned the university. There are people with the capacity and ability to address this place. It simply was too much for our small band of travelers.”

“Its funny, but in a way, the original Odilon and his party were successful, at a very heavy cost. The knowledge of this place will be brought back.”

Tzuras looked into the mist.

“Is that truly the case?”

Odilon would not be dissuaded. “We know this place now. I know my nature. We are different from those who first arrived on this island. And when I get off of it, I will go to Odilon's commanding officer and inform them of all that went on here.”

“So we are leaving this place?” Thella asked again. She phrased it as a question, but it had a sense of finality to it.

They nodded in agreement.

“That is supposing that we can.” Tzuras said, a hint of darkness to his voice. He looked again to the mist.

“We barely handled one of those things. How many do you think are on this island?” He asked.

The thought of multiple of those monsters spread a ripple of disquiet through the group.

“We should leave at once.” Odilon said.

They gathered themselves and their things.

“Do we know the way?” Tzuras asked.

“No. But I can feel it.” Odilon replied, taking lead. Based on what they had already gone through, this was enough the for the rest for the group. And with some lack of assurance they started away from that horrible place.

They hadn't seemed to go far when Odilon turned to them and tapped the mask he wore.

“I think I can see it.”

Tzuras looked around. There was nothing but featureless trees and yet more mist. “You're going to move us again?”

“Move you? We're already here. The river is just over that rise there.” Odilon said pointing ahead.

Tzuras eyed the soldier, and stared forward into the darkness. Sure enough there was a small hillock in front of them.

“I believe Odilon has a measure of this place now.” Quentin said, motioning for them to continue.

True to his word, as they crested the top of the hill, they emerged from the forest, hopefully for the last time. The familiar stone swept beach greeted them. This time though, there was an addition. There were two boats pulled ashore.

“Those must be the military ones. They look large enough so that we could fit in one, although we might as well take both. It seems like they have oars as well… I imagine those were there this entire time?” Tzuras asked, looking at the craft.

“I'm not sure its relevant. I don't think it makes sense to talk about things with the expectation of permanence.” Quentin said, waving a hand.

“So did you expect these boats to be here?” Tzuras asked Odilon.

“I'm not sure. The river I expected. It makes sense to have boats here. Perhaps that is enough.”

“I thought there might be boats. We had talked about them earlier.” Thella offered.

Odilon shrugged. “Then perhaps Thella expected the boats to be here.”

“Why now though? We wanted off this island for what has felt like weeks. Why would it let us go now?”

“Surely you're not going second guess a gift?” Quentin asked. Before it would have been said with a bit of a sneer, but now it was only meant humorously.

Tzuras shook his head. “Forget I said anything. I'll take any boat at this point. I wouldn't mind leaving this island forever.”

Odilon nodded and they readied the boats by the waters edge. However just as they were about to leave, something caught his mind.

“...leave this island forever, you said…” He said, turning back and looking at the mist covered trees.

The party, now in the boat, stared at the mask covered solider. Something in his voice put them on edge.

“I've been thinking. I said I would track down my commanding officer and tell him about this place. Look, I'm on this boat now, and it seems like we can finally leave. Surely you can, but what about me?”

“Odilon as you would have known him was from outside this place. He had a home, parents, people who cared for him outside this island. What do I have? How can I prove I am anything? If I am simply a creation of this place, what makes you think I can leave it?”

Quentin stared at him. “Do you feel a connection to this island still? Even after all we went through?”

Odilon held a hand up to his head. “There's been nothing but terror in this place, but bad experiences alone cannot divorce a person from their…” He motioned, trying to think of a word, but none came to mind.

“Tzuras, you know what I mean? That… connection?”

Tzuras jerked like he had been shocked. Very faintly the smell of burning wood came to his nose.

“Gods, I do. If I hadn't before, I now do.”

“So you think Odilon will be unable to leave? Say we take this boat and row across the waters, what will happen?” Quentin asked the elf.

“I don't know for sure. This is not a science by any means, very much the opposite. Perhaps he will be fine. Perhaps the spirit will leave his body. Hells, his body itself is magical in nature, or so we thought. He could turn to dust! I have no idea!”

“Thats not fair!” Thella blurted, reminding them of her presence.

“Odilon went through all of this! Just as much as any of us, even more! He deserves to leave the island with us!”

Quentin nodded. “Yes, a thousand times over. But there are no gods of justice. We should think carefully about this.”

Odilon let out a groan and clutched his arm. “Oh gods. After all this I might not even leave… I-I… I can't stay here though.” He looked back at the trees. “No. I can't do it. I'd rather throw myself into the water. I'd rather end everything myself, or have one of you run me through. Anything but that featureless void. Anything but that.” He shivered back and forth. “Just start rowing. For gods sakes. Before this place changes its mind or something.”

Quentin and Tzuras stared at one another but dutifully started rowing.

Thella saw Odilon's fear as soon as they stared out onto the water. She grabbed his hand and held in in hers. She looked right at him.

“Its all going to work out. I know it.” She said. Odilon nodded and to some degree calmed, but was not completely reassured.

They were now in the river proper. The current was strong and attempted to pull them downstream. Although they all fit on the boat, the current gave them some concern, and they mostly went with it rather than fighting it. How far downstream they traveled didn't matter. Slowly and steadily they made their way across.

By the time they had gone halfway across, Odilon groaned and clutched his arm.

Thella looked to him with concern.

“Oh… I don't feel so good guys...” He said, frantically taking off the fabric that Tzuras had bandaged his missing arm with.

“Oh gods. Its dissapearing. Its fading away!” He panicked.

Thella got a look at what was happening.

Odilon was clutching at what was left of his arm, which was, as he phrased it, fading away. As if a clenched hand had extended from the island and was dragging off pieces of Odilon with it as he left, the mist swirled around him.

“Quentin, keep us right.” Tzuras said, turning to the soldier.

“Odilon. Look at me.” The elf said, deadly serious.

Now he grabbed the soldier's hands, and fought off his panicked attempts to free them.

“Look at me!” The elf said, green eyes flashing.

This time the soldier did look at him.

“I swore an oath!” The elf cried.

The waters quieted. The mist slowed. Time hung still.

“I swore it on the moon. I swore in Ishira's name that I would help you. You're not going anywhere!” He said with complete certainty.

“And did you not swear your own oath? Upon joining the military, did you not swear an oath to the North and to your fellow men? Does that mean nothing? The forces of this places have their limit!” He said, pointing at the mask on the man's face.

“The symbol I carved there glows brightly. It remembers my words and knows that they were true. Do you?”

Odilon looked at his arm, which was still vanishing. The effect was now spreading to affect the whole side of his body, swirling away into the mist.

“Don't look at that.” Tzuras ordered. “Answer me. Did our oaths mean nothing?”

“But was it even me?” Odilon cried, looking in terror as his body continued to vanish.

“I feel for those poor men, but it was not me who said that oath. You might have sworn to me, but that matters not if I am no longer here.”

The elf looked wildly back at the island. Was there some force stirring there? Did the mist coalesce on the shore facing them? Did it call for their child to return to that void place?

He looked at the other side of the shore. Its was so close! After so long they were finally going to be free!

Still clutching the solider's hands, he stared again at the masked figure, his voice now rising.

“Then who are you? Are you Odilon? If not, you must prove that you have the desire to live. It matters not if you are human. Your nature matters not. What matters now in this place is your will. The mask cannot protect you alone: The symbol cannot protect you if there is nothing to protect.” He declared, eyes flashing and hair rising with the force of conflicting fates.

A heavy presence settled over them. The boat struggled madly in the water. Quentin yelled out an exclamation and tried to steady the craft. They were caught, stretched between forces unimaginable, and hung in the center, under incredible stress.

The man who was not quite Odilon sputtered and cried, jerking one way then another. His good hand tried to clutch the mask on his face, whose symbol now burned too bright to look at. Tzuras still clutched to his hand though. With horror, the man felt the mask starting to slip from his face.

“Did you hear me? The mask can't save nothing. I can't save nothing. There has to be someone under the mask. Who is it?” He thundered, staring straight into the man's eyes. “Say something! Swear something! Offer your life to a cause! Scream your name! Prove you exist. Otherwise you are nothing but your nature, a figment of this island's power, something which cannot exist beyond the bounds of this place.”

A terrible cry arose from the masked man as he struggled. His sword fell from his side into the water. His black jacket tore from his back, unfastened and now missing an arm. It spiraled into the air, hastened by a sudden gust of air, powered by the tension of the conflict.

“I-”

“I am not Odilon.” He admitted. And with those words, he started to slump downwards, bits of him fleeing into the air. The mask sagged precariously. His whole figure became less and less firm.

Tzuras gripped his forearm. “This may be true, but it is not good enough. It must be affirmative! It can't be a negation!”

The mists tore at him. The false clothes vanished. The flesh tore away. Whatever white material made his body was the only thing that was left. He was a skeleton.

“But I swear I will avenge him!” The figure said with some difficulty. The mask caught. The mists stopped. The bone white hand in Tzuras's own tightened.

With all its might, the figure rose upwards and cried out.

“In the names of all those who died on this island, man and beast. I will find a way to destroy this place!” He cried, one last time.

There was a terrible weight that descended on the boat as if something colossal had just fallen from the heavens. Quentin fought like mad to still the boat. A mist laden wind retreated from it back to the island, disturbing the water.

Tzuras and Thella stared in awe as the skeleton in front of them turned and pointed back at the island. A pale fire burned in its eyes, shooting from the holes of the mask.

“I will find your secrets. I will return to this place. And I will close that fissure, such that it never ruins another life. I was unable to do so this time, but next, I will destroy you completely!” The figure said, accusing the island directly.

With those words said, the boat was finally freed of the titanic forces gripping it.

The announcement seemed to have taken a huge toll on the figure, and stared to fall. Tzuras and Thella grabbed it and lowered it down into the boat.

Tzuras produced a cloak from their supplies and threw it over him.

The figure now seemed to be unconscious from the effort, but the mask held.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Tzuras grabbed the oars, while Thella watched over the figure.

The river still ran with mist hanging over it. Its current was still deep and cold. Rock spires still shot from its depths. But with that final pronouncement, they had escaped the island. With a sigh, it let them from its grasp. And they were at last free.

“So what shall we call you now, if not Odilon?” Quentin asked, some days later. They now lay at the crossroads. The turn to the supposed location of the library was in front of them. The trees were wet with dew, but no longer ran with mist. They had encountered a few people. They were back to normalcy once again.

“I don't quite know. But Odilon is truly not my name. I suppose I will have to find the right one.”

“Then, perhaps you should come with us still. As I said, in what seems to be a different lifetime, we mean to travel up this road and find the library said to be at its end. The caretakers of the place are said to have great knowledge, and that which they do not know lies in the books they care for.”

“Thella says that the disease has progressed slowly since that place, but I cannot be assured of its future growth. I will find a way to rid it completely.”

“Hmm you did mention a library?” The figure said, rubbing the bottom of the mask. Quentin could see straight through the eye holes on it. There was only a faint warm glow behind them.

“Perhaps there is history there of that cursed island. At the very least, perhaps there will be someone there who can provide me with a more normal appearance. I suppose I will travel there with you.”

Tzuras nodded. “Then I will go as well. I intend to keep my promise. I'll see that you find a name for yourself. I'll help you, Odilon or no.”

The figure thanked Tzuras.

Thella smiled. “Looks like we're staying together! I'm glad. According to the map it says it should only take a day or two to arrive there.”

Quentin crossed his arms. “I'm glad. If at the end of such a nightmare, something good can come of it, perhaps it wasn't completely horrible.”

Thella looked up at him. “And Uncle, along the way, you have all the time to tell me about the elves and my mother.”

Quentin choked. “I'm sorry, what was that?”

“Did you think I forgot what went on in that fissure? All this talk about oaths is one thing, but you never told me mother was an elf!”

“Hey, I guess that means I'm sort of one too right?” She asked, looking at Tzuras. Tzuras purposefully shifted stares to Quentin.

“… Perhaps it is ok. If I can speak of it now. Perhaps there are in fact quite a number of things I should talk with you about.”

Thella beamed. “I also want to learn magic! And mapping. Tzuras, you have to tell me stories from your travels as well. And about spirits.”

“Now hold on...” The two men said simultaneously.

But Thella grinned wider. “Hey, I got through all that same as you grown ups. I helped out right? Fair is fair.”

“...I suppose it is.” Quentin conceded, a wry smile playing on his face. Tzuras laughed and put an arm around the masked figure, pointing ahead down the road.

“Adventure awaits.”