­Haverson, Aster and Germain dismounted in the forest, the tall northern mounts seemed agitated despite the lack of underbrush. The snorted and paced at the ground, and looked around nervously.

“Ha, well that’s not a good start to things is it?” Germain said with a slight smile, his hand going to the massive sword strapped to his back.

Haverson waved Germain's comment away and bade him not draw his weapon. “Don't fret. That’s actually a good sign. We haven't gotten lost.”

Aster nodded, but still glanced wearily around the clearing. A wind blew cost and damp from the south west. She looked at the trees, the muted gray greens above them letting in the pale light of morning. It was still cold, and the frost hung on the bark and the few bushes around them.

They walked and lead their horses towards a clearing some ways off, where they presumed the entrance was.

Aster ran a hand over one of the trees as they passed, melting off the layer of frozen dew. “This place is… sad.” She said suddenly and quietly, a frown threatening to crease her face.

“Ah, you feel it too? We are in the old forest, and not just the old forest, the heart of it. The elves left their mark on this place. Something of that bond still shares their sorrow.” Haverson said, glancing at Aster.

The blond young woman looked back at him. He smiled at her, but the return lacked heart. The sadness of the place was pervasive. Magic and emotion and old power. Things to stay away from, or control at least. This place was anathema to his life of attempted balance, for the elves were true in all things, from their love to their hatred; richer and deeper and always without restraint. Yes they were going to have to keep on their toes here…

He turned to spy a look at Germain. The younger man seemed content enough. He was oblivious to the magic of the place, and strode confidently through the woods, his symbol etched leather armor swishing softly with his steps. Yes, there was a part of Haverson that envied the younger man. Against Germain, it was clear what the years had done to Haverson, and the young man's assuredness was something Haverson could only remember as if in a dream of a time long ago.

Yet, brashness aside, the man was a formidable adventurer by himself, and his god's aegis and magical abilities were bound to be a boon in the coming days. They had really gotten luck finding him.

After only a few more steps they burst into comparably brighter sunlight. Despite the sun not even having completely risen, the contrast between the pale gloom of the forest and the open clearing left them all blinking. The wind from the south west started up again, somehow navigating the trees in front of them.

“Errrgh” Germain said loudly, drawing Haverson's attention. But the younger man was just stretching. “So my friends, where is this library we are supposed to be looking for?” Germain said, touching his toes.

“Oh!” Aster said, suddenly.

“Heh, you finally see it as well? Lets give Germain some time.”

Haverson said grinning. Aster peered forward at the runeblade with an amused expression.

“What are you all talking about?” Germain said with a fake pout, whirling around, surveying the clearing. “There’s nothing here!” He said, exasperated.

“Oh yeah?” Aster teased. “Well, I guess we'll just have to go back to Dor's Crag, tell the merchant that we just couldn't find the library or his team.”

“Now hold on.” Germain said, now seriously studying the clearing. The grass was soft and still covered with frost, the trees echoed in all directions, as far as the eye could see. Somewhere to the north the hills lay and then the mountains. One or two birds chirped in the distance. The wind continued its steady and weak but unrelenting assault.

“There's nothing here but that boulder.” He said, pointing to a massive stone, easily larger than all of them combined, and the horses as well.

“Look at the boulder carefully. Remember, this is elven worksmanship we're dealing with, and the library was made at a time when they very much did not want to be found.”

“Oh.” Germain said simply, the boulder somehow shifting before his eyes. The shape didn't change. He could have sworn that nothing moved, it was as if the entrance had always been there, yet just a second ago…

“Great, now we all see it. Took you long enough.” Aster teased again. “I guess that god of yours didn't give you eyes to go with those muscles.”

“Hey now. I worked hard for these.” He said, flexing, winking at Aster before pouting defensively again. Then back to seriousness: “Besides, I would rather the sharp clash of iron and the vibrant shine of steel to these muted, lifeless colors. I'm just not used to this part of the world.” He admitted.

The entrance gaped before them, the damp wind drawing them in, somehow warmer now, not that it made it feel better. It was nearly a story and a half tall, a simple triangle of greened stone, jutting from the earth. As they drew closer, they saw that it was covered with intricate designs, pictures, words, symbols.

Germain and Aster both abruptly stopped, independently of one another. Germain, reached around and stroked the head of his black horse, who apparently refused to step closer to the entrance.

“Wait, are those Elven symbols?” Germain asked, casing Haverson to stop and swing around.

“Of course.” He replied. “They're certainly not dwarven.” He scoffed. “What did you expect in an elven library?”

“I don't know, its just… are you sure its safe to go in there? This whole thing looks like it could be magically trapped. All those symbols… They could be anything!” Germain said, eyes intent, pointing at the symbols on the entrance and then pointing at his own on his armor.

“Look guys.” Haverson said. “This is an elven ruin. I will be honest. Its not a friendly place. They are usually worn, trapped, magicked, and gods know what else, cursed too, I imagine.” He said, waving his hands imitating some ancient witch casting a spell.

“But the merchant sent his team in, and they clear most of the top of the place. They have a former battle mage from the Capital with them, a good one, or so I've been told. We just have to group up with them, keep our eyes sharp, grab that damn tome and get the hell out of here. No one is asking you to live here. At least, not for long anyways.” He said, crossing his arms.

“Satisfied?” Haverson asked.

Aster and Germain looked at each other and then back at Haverson. “Not a bit.” Aster said, emoting with her hand holding Haverson's grey horse's reins. “I can feel this place. I don't want to stay here a second longer than I have to.”

“Oh, I forgot. We will definitely have to figure out someway to look after the horses up here. I can tell there’s no way they're going to let us bring them down there.” Haverson added, starting again towards the stone structure.

“Indeed.” Aster agreed, staking both her and Germain's horse. “Wasn't the merchant's team supposed to leave a signal fire out for us?” She asked, quickly finishing.

Germain shrugged, “It probably went out in this damp wind. I suppose its been blowing all night.”

Haverson grimaced somewhat without them seeing as he stumbled over the remains of a burned out fire, somehow already half overgrown in pale green grass. He pointed it out to the rest of them. “I hope you're ready for more things like that. Elven magic was worked deep here, and even now, centuries since the last elven foot trod this entrance, I can assure you it remains. Nothing is a coincidence here. Please stay very alert.”

“Okay. As you say. In and out.” Germain said, motioning Aster to go in front of him.

The group move into the stone entrance, the solid quiet rock swallowing them up like the mouth of some mythical giant. The wind, like its breath, sucking them gently inward. Aster shot one last look backward at the horses, and continued onward.

And so they took their first steps into the silent library.

The passage twisted downwards, Aster couldn't remember whether there had been steps or a ramp, the whole place was hard to keep in her mind, the very thought of it threatening to disappear even as she walked the descent, following Haverson. She felt light headed, the damp air suddenly became stifling and cloyingly warm, whipping around her, a putrid smell of something burning reached her nose, and the ground and walls seemed to shift before her gaze.

“Woah there!” Germain said, his lightening reflexes shooting out a hand to catch Aster as she fell.

“Are you ok?” He asked, still holding her up with one hand.

Haverson turned around and cursed, although not at her directly. “This place is disorienting. It was designed to be.” He said, reaching into his cloak. “Drink this.”

He procured a vial of some sort and held it out to her.

“What is it?” She asked as she pressed the container to her lips.

A cool liquid emptied from the bottle into her mouth, and for a short moment, she felt like she was standing in the rain, cool rivulets running down her cheeks. She steadied herself against the wall.

“It just water.” Haverson said. “But I've found that it helps anyway for some reason. Also try this, repeat after me: On a cold listless plain, the wanderer finds a heart of comfort.”

She looked at him sceptically, but repeated the nonsense, feeling a bit embarrassed, with the other members staring down at her.

However, sure enough, as she said the word 'cold', the air returned to its original timbre and temperature, and as she said the end of the phrase, a warmth came to her from within, or at least she thought it did. She looked quizzically at Haverson, but he merely smiled and helped her to her feet.

“This isn't my first dungeon. And its not my first elven ruin. But little tricks like these will only go so far. The elven magic works against your concentration, seeking to fill your head with visual half truths if you will, illusions. They can even be quite deadly. Just remember where you are. Second guess everything. Hell, that advice goes for anywhere, not just here.”

“All good?” He inquired, as Aster regained composure.

“Yes.” She said, still embarrassed. It was one thing to travel with Haverson. The two had been together for years, and they had roamed the North doing odd jobs ever since she had ran away. But Germain she knew less well. Merely some earnest man they had found in a tavern, looking for gold, like the rest of them.

She stole a look backwards at the spellsword. He noticed and smiled back. What a goofy grin. She could hardly be concerned about his veracity, plus Haverson had somewhat vouched for him; he had heard of him from other adventurers, but never met.

Still, it was different traveling with others. She felt like she couldn't quite express herself as she normally did. She sighed.

Haverson lead the party deeper, the finely carved passageway sometimes turning and spiraling as they went. “There are actually several ways down. Not sure if you two noticed. The elves were paranoid when they built this place. It was several years before the end, but they saw what was coming. Two of the alternative ways down dead end, one actually loops back on itself.”

“What about that one?” Aster said, finally noticing one of the alternate passageways. They stopped for a moment and Haverson bid them come over to the second corridor. There the tunnel they had been following split in two, fine symbols adorned the portals left and right, and both trailed off downwards in the darkness, or at least would have if the team before them hadn't lit the way to their right.

“Perhaps you two should see this.” Haverson said, a grim expression on his face. He snatched a stone from the floor nearby.

“Looks like a regular passage?” He said, motioning to the way to the left.

“Watch.”

Aster and Germain watched as Haverson lightly tossed the rock forward. Where it would have reached the floor, there was no impact.

Aster's brain reeled as it struggled to comprehend what she was seeing. The rock continued moving downward, and it wasn't until it vanished from her sight, obscured by the floor that she realized that the whole left passageway was actually a cleverly designed pit.

The “floor” was just a painting on the sides of the chasm, mimicking the lighting and blocks of a floor.

Germain drew in a breath. “Well. That's a nasty bit of work.” He said, edging away a bit from what he realized was the lip of a very, very deep pit.

“Indeed. Lets not tarry here though. We should meet up with the merchant's team as soon as possible. They have set up a camp further down.”

The other two nodded in agreement and they took the safe right passage.

The dark pit seemed to set the tone for the whole expedition though, and as Aster followed Haverson downward, she was somehow uneasily sure that worse things waited for them in the deep.

After what seemed like hours, but in retrospect had probably only been minutes, the group exited out of the small tunnel downward and emerged into a massive chamber.

“Woah!” Aster exclaimed. “I didn't expect that!” She stared up in wonder.

The ceiling exploded upwards almost ten stories overhead, the square room with its high ceiling supported by arches cut out of the stone which traveled upward, then converged in the center. At the point of convergence there was a pale light, somehow not to dissimilar in feeling from the damp breeze earlier.

Aster had an absurd idea that if that breeze were a gem, it would resemble the one emerging from the ceiling. Its subdued teal blue radiance lit the area around them, but definitely left many shadows for unpleasant things as well.

“Magic, I assume?” Germain said, pointing to the massive crystal structure.

“Hell if I know. Might be. Might not be. I don't know everything about this place, just what I could scrape up in the merchant's library. I bet the poor fool hasn't read a hundredth of what he has collected. Its all a status symbol game between him and the other high merchants...”

“Yes, I realize Henderson. If you recall, I once counted myself among those 'poor fools'.” Aster said, arms crossed.

“Sorry, right. Point is, you can receive payment in things beyond gold. Knowledge is worth its weight, even more since you don't have to worry about loosing it quite as much. Ah, second point, always investigate a dungeon. There's almost always a reason they're abandoned. People find places. The poor, bandits. Spies. Travelers. If there's no sign of people, best stay clear until you know what you're dealing with.”

Germain nodded in agreement, but Aster had the feeling that he'd rushed into his share of dungeons judging by the many scars over the jolly man's face and hands.

“Fine then. What are we dealing with?” Aster asked. “What are these buildings and how deep does this place go?” She said, gesturing to the center of the chamber, where, underneath the gem, there was a collection of finely constructed stone block buildings.

None of them seemed to have any doors or shutters on the window, presumably useless when you were already in a cave. But it meant she could see right through them, and again through the next, each one displace from the others, causing a whirling infinitude of right angles slowly smothering in dark blue light.

“Somewhere in that mess, there should be our merchant team's camp. With them and their mage, we will find the rest of the answers about this place I hope.”

They nodded, and started towards the buildings. The champer was much wider than it was tall, and it was already rather tall. She looked across the ground and she could just barely see the other side, hundreds upon hundreds of feet away. Although, remembering Haverson's comments earlier, that could have been a trick of the eyes.

The ground was pale gray, and something told Aster that if she reached down and felt it that it would be cool to the touch. Leading from the entrance to the houses, the elves had carved the appearance of a road, even though no stones were needed.

“Did they make this out of solid rock?” She asked, astonished. She had grown up familiar with mines, even ventured into a few when her parents and brothers weren't looking, but they never had looked anything like this.

“I'm not sure. From what I read, some authors claim that the dwarves helped them build it. Others say that it was the dwarves to begin with, and the elves either found it or took it by force.”

“Stuff of myth and fairy tale.” Aster said dismissively. Dwarves were never seen in human lands, and seldom seen even in others.

“Perhaps.” Haverson said. Aster could hear him smiling even though she couldn't see his face.

They passed by the houses, Germain warily checking each one as they passed. There was no sign of the merchant's team. But there was no sign of anything else either.

The hairs on Aster's neck started to stand on end, and she got the sudden feeling of being watched. She spun around, and stared grimly through one of the buildings, but nothing moved.

Empty buildings. In empty stone. Carved from silence in earth's own bone. The poetic words popped into her mind and she consciously tried to ignore them. Silence and bones were the last things she wanted to think about right now.

They reached the center of the cavern. In the middle of the collection of buildings lay a small square and at the middle of that was a fountain, or statue, it was honestly hard to tell. It was simply a tall cylinder of stone, a story high atop a smaller, squat one probably only knee height. It had panels on it; art of some sort, figures doing battle with others, symbols and writing splayed around its length.

“Sooo. Where is this team again?” Aster asked. Sitting on the cylinder, legs dangling over the side. She kicked her feet. “Weren't they supposed to be here?”

Haverson didn't drop his guard, she noticed his had was still on his sword. Should she be more worried as well? The place seemed pretty inert, if creepy. She looked at her own short sword at her side.

The cylinder vibrated beneath her.

“Ah!” She exclaimed, jumping to her feet.

Germain's great sword slid effortlessly forward, a faint red glow teasing its edges and running along its symbols. Haverson didn't spook, but his sword was half out of its sheath.

She spun and faced the cylinder, wondering if she should draw her own weapon.

It was quiet.

“I guess it was just...” She started.

“Shhh.” Haverson admonished, sharply, leaning an ear toward the cylinder.

Aster craned to hear and could have sworn she heard voices. Another vibration.

“Everyone back.” Haverson said, jumping backwards himself. They needed no second warning.

The cylinder started to spin in its mount, generating less noise than Aster would have thought possible, merely a quiet hiss of rock against rock. Slowly, inch by inch, the stone ran its way up the cylinder in the middle, as if following some invisible track.

They all could hear voices now.

“Damn this thing.” One said.

“Hold on. Hold on. It takes effort to move this.” Another replied.

“You sure you heard something? It doesn't have to be them. This place makes enough strange noises for fifty people.”

“I know what I heard. Even if Samuel didn't give his signal like he was supposed to.”

With a groan it came to a halt revealing a staircase downward into the floor of the massive chamber. From this staircase appeared a small group of men, somewhat bedraggled looking, but alert nonetheless.

Haverson regarded them and sheathed his weapon.

“Thompson Black?” He inquired to the men.

“Ah, yes. That is I.” One of them said, moving forward. He wore a thick cloth robe, made more curious by its hundreds of pockets and at least as many buckles. The odd individual completed his outlandish garb with a headband of sorts of purple cloth, decorated with a strange pink asymmetric gem in the shape of… a potato. Or at least that is what Aster thought it was at first. Closer inspection revealed that it was in fact a human heart, complete with inclusions of deep purple as the veins.

Thompson caught her staring at him. “Not used to seeing a battlemage are you? You Northerners and your mage engineers always choose the most dull uniforms. Silly fools. I doesn't matter what you look like when you're casting, only the power!” He said, winking and pointing to the headband.

“Oh right.” He said, gesturing to the assembly. “Introductions are in order.”

“Greyson Ohare, Elban Highfort, Josep Barr, who likes just to be known as 'Spiker' and finally...” The mage looked at the last man and let out a bemused sigh. “Ok. I'll give it a go… Alexander Pluzman...no...Pluskan...no…Damns what a name...Remind me again?”

“Pluzinerrorick” Its Gnomian, he said crossing his arms. The towering, muscular man certainly didn't look like the two or three gnomes Aster had seen in the port towns.

“Greyson and Elban are miners both. Greyson from the North, Elban from the South. Spiker is also from the South, apparently a military misfit like myself, only he focused on close quarters fighting.”

“And of course, myself. One time battlemage in the Southern army, now freelance battlemage doing whatever the hells I feel like.”

Haverson nodded at the introductions with a bemused expression at the menagerie of people the merchant had put together.

“Alright.” Haverson said, clapping his hand together. “Myself, Enton Haverson, all around strategist swordsman and my lovely compatriots, Germain Lemarr the indomitable spellblade, and Aster LaRouche of the great house.”

He grinned. It was clear that Thompson's bombastic attitude had struck a chord with Haverson. There was certainly a part of him that was like that. But in the past, Aster had seen a more… weathered side of him.

That being said, she hated being introduced as part of a great house. Either the expectations were high, resentment simmered, or the daggers were drawn. It never ended up in her favor.

“Lovely lovely.” Thompson said, clapping his hands together, imitating Haverson.

“Oh. I almost forgot. Our scout Samuel Vernier, wherever he is. As his name suggests he is somewhat of a mixed bag. He apparently has mixed lineage from both the North and the South, being from West Field and all. He is around somewhere and was supposed to have met you on the way in. Hopefully he hasn't gotten too lost.”

“Come this way. The staircase locks back in place and takes some effort to reopen, but I suppose it protects us from behind.” Thompson said.

They followed the group downwards into the library antechambers.

“Ok” Thompson said, gesturing to the table where they had drawn a crude map. They had slept the night in the biovac that the team had set up right beneath the houses. The floor was large but open, with only one intact building next to a pillar, one of its walls missing. The rest were just piles of rubble.

In that one house, they had set up camp. Packs of supplies, food, rope, even some mining equipment lay. In the center of the house was a charred table, the only piece of furniture. They had carved a map of the place on it.

“Here we are.” He said, pointing to a small dot next to a horizontal line. He traced his finger downward towards a bewildering array of twisted lines and shapes. “And these are the ante chambers. There's not much there, mostly open flooring. We disabled the few traps we found there. That section continues for just five floors.”

“Just five?” Aster asked. “How big is this place?”

The battlemage held up a hand. “One second. I just want everyone to know whats relatively safe and whats not.”

He returned to the map. “After that things get a bit dicey. As you can see, there is a veritable nest of rooms and hallways, crossing one another, drifting apart. Thankfully, they stay to one floor mostly. The staircases are good frames of reference, they're almost always in the same place floor to floor but unfortunately, they're almost always trapped.”

Haverson raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

“Obviously, we're looking for The Book. From what I've heard, its possible this whole place was built to house it. Hide it away so that their enemies couldn't find it. And I suppose it worked. As far as we know its still there.”

“As far as you know? So where is it exactly?” Haverson asked, looking over the crude map.

“Hmm. We think its here.” The battlemage said, tracing a finger towards open space, off to the left a good inch away from explored region. We, um, haven't quite been able to get to it, but Samuel swears he saw signs indicative of its presence; I felt great magical energy from that direction, and the god damn traps get more and more sinister the closer we try to get to this place.” He said, again swirling his finger around the unknown.

“Well. That obviously complicates things. Although I suppose, if you had found it, there would have been no need for us. Right?” Haverson smiled.

But the battlemage pursed his lips merely nodded as if remembering something unpleasant. Aster noticed the mood in the room had plummeted. Something spooked them. Something they had seen?

He looked up from the table at his team and met eyes with them. Something passing in secret very quickly between them.

“What?” Haverson said, suddenly suspicious.

“We don't want to frighten you. But… its pretty bad down there. There's a reason we've only been able to go down twenty floors or so. Its the kind of place that just feel like a death trap. I mean, besides and in addition to the actual death traps. Something about...” He looked, helplessly at the other men who just shook their heads.

“...Its ok. I understand. I've been in elven ruins before.” Haverson said. “The emotions are seared into the place. No wonder no one has touched it.”

The battlemage nodded. “I've only been in one once other than now.” He admitted, walking away from the table and standing near the fire they had set up against one of the massive pillars that ran upwards. His silhouette followed the pillar and put a hand on it.

“...it was in the old forest as we are now, but much closer to Dor's Crag, on a forgotten merchants road. I will always remember the sadness. It was dark in there, and that one merely a fort.” He turned around, “This is something different.” He warned them. “There is sadness but...the elves didn't idly dig in the ground. In fact, I believe this is the only known site that is like this. Unless you count the Fell itself away in the desert.”

He stopped and looked at the grim faces lit only by firelight

“But I'm scaring you all. Ha!” He said, a grin reappearing. The miners and the rest of the other team chuckled, realized that they had been drawn into the other man's descriptions.

Aster didn't fall for it. Behind the grin, there was a true emotion which frightened her to the core. In fact for a moment, she suddenly had a sudden and almost irresistible urge to run from the place, from the battlemage. She looked around, the light from the fire, seeping, trickling into the darkness. It hung around them like a curtain, like the veil of life itself, offering its eternal mystery to those curious or foolhardy to try to pierce its unknown.

She instead clenched her hands and looked to Germain and Haverson. Germain had a neutral expression on his face, but fingered something attached to one of his gloves idly. Haverson had reverted to his same tired face. The one he wore when he saw someone die. Or when he killed.

“Well then.” He said. “There's no waiting for day is there? Lets get started.”

The other team shrugged and readied their things.

When Haverson inquired about the map, Spiker had simply cut the surface of the table from the rest of it and strapped it to his back.

Thompson looked behind. “All ready?” he said, gesturing towards two large parallel staircases barely lit by the torches they carried, hundreds of feet away in the darkness.

“All ready here.” Haverson said, jogging to join the battlemage.

“By the way,” he asked as they set out, stepping around the ruins of hundreds of buildings, ground to rock and dust, “you never did say how big this place was. You thought the book was about, what, eighty stories down?”

The battlemage nodded. “I didn't say actually. But we found a place where the staircases line up and you can see to what should be the bottom. I dropped a stone and counted the seconds. Assuming the floors are all the same height, I estimated it is at least five hundred floors.”

Under tourchlight, the team moved quietly in single file from the first floor. The staircase was easily large enough to allow two carts to pass if they could find magical oxen strong enough to carry the load up steps.

Aster looked around her as they circled downwards. Behind them, the first level of the antechambers collapsed into darkness, the embers of the fire they had set hinting at where the building and the way up had been, but as they descended, even these were quieted, as if the darkness itself wanted not even the tiniest light to encroach on its eternal domain.

Aster shivered as the light went out, feeling the damp breeze from above. She continued with the group.

She ran her hand along a wall, feeling the coldness of the hewn stone seep into her fingers. The elves worked in straight lines while underground it seemed, far from the twisting organized chaos she had seen pictures of in her story books. Here, the floor was level and unadorned. The walls rose at perfect square. The only decoration was a thin carved 'v' in the wall that ran its way downward with them on the walls, at about arm height.

The staircase itself was worked out of the same pale stone, the steps just long enough to make going a conscious effort. Off to both sides, there were solid handrails, over which one could peer into the next level.

The group moved along without talking, their flickering touches illuminating the ancient path. Steps were muted, as if each person dreaded breaking the silence of the place.

It was all superstition, Aster told herself. There couldn't be anything down here. After all, there was nothing to eat. No water to drink. Many of the passages were apparently sealed. No, they and the traps were the only things that could move down here.

They landed on the second level and looked around. More rubble emerged from the darkness, this time more completely destroyed. They moved on, having to cross the floor completely to get to the next staircase.

As they came down the second floor staircase though, some precognition gave Aster pause, and in the darkness she could have sworn she saw something move.

She grabbed Haverson's arm and pointed at where she saw the movement. “There’s something over there.” She said simply, actively trying to not let the fear show in her voice. As the only woman, and as young as she was, she would have to show herself extremely capable in order to gain any respect from the other team members. Jumping at shadows was not the way to do that.

Haverson raised his touch high, and shouted into the darkness.

“Ho! Is there anyone there?”

A hunched figure made itself clear as they walked further, and for a moment, Aster's head filled itself with thoughts of nasty creatures, with too-long appendages, creeping spider like towards her.

However, Thompson's call, shook the thoughts from her head. “Samuel! There you are! How did you get down here? You were supposed to wait upstairs!”

The hunched man collected himself, and ran to them. He looked skittish, but obviously didn't want to portray it. He threw back a dark cloak revealing sandy colored hair, and was clearly the youngest of the bunch. Only about Haverson's height, he must have been only a couple of years older than Aster herself.

“S-sorry Sir. I-I must have gotten lost. I found myself down on the tenth floor somehow, or at least I think it was the tenth floor. Gods it was bad when my last torch went out, let me tell you… But I was able to make it back here, before I got turned around again. I just couldn't seem to find the staircases somehow, I wasn't in the right mind, so I decided to wait for you.”

Thompson took a quick look at the concerned gazes of the miners and regarded the scout. “Its ok son. We're headed down and broke camp. You'd best come with us.” He stopped for a moment and turned to the rest of the group.

“I suppose this is as best a time as any seeing as we have everyone in our little expedition here… Alright. So here's how its going to go. We move as a team from now on. We've seen what this place does to lone men. We have nine men with us and that’s how its going to be at all times. No one wanders off. No one stays behind to look at something. We stay as one group. If a trap separates us somehow, Haverson here is my second, Alexander my third.”

Haverson nodded. It seems that they worked out an arrangement ahead of time by message. Alexander had donned a helmet in addition to a fearsome set of red chain mail, so his reaction was imperceptible.

“If due to a trap or other unforeseen circumstance only a portion of the team gets the book to the surface, they're not to go back for the rest. I don't think you'll hold that against me, and neither I against you.”

“But” He began, a hint of fire reaching out from somewhere in his eyes, “If any of you purposely try to cut anyone else out of the picture, I will lay a curse upon you so black, it will make this place to be a field of sunshine and happiness. We all signed the same deal.”

“Good. Last piece of procedural shit. When we make it to the eightieth floor, where the book is, we're going to have to make camp for a bit. I suspect that breaking the seal and traps around it might take awhile. Sounds good?”

Everyone nodded or grunted in agreement. And they moved onward.

The emptiness of the antechambers was certainly causing Aster uneasiness, so it was with some happiness when, having descended through the first levels, they came to a stop by a massive set of wooden doors.

They curved upwards, flat on the bottom, and like a half moon at the top. Great rings of bronze lay connected to the door at arm level: the opening mechanism. Unlike the rest of the area before them, they had some decoration. About halfway up there was an enormous inscription carved into the wood.

Aster looked up at it wordlessly. She knew no elven, but something about how the shadows played in and around the edges of the runes told her that there was something sinister about it.

Thompson stopped the party and looked up as well.

“Knowledge is eternal” He said, shaking his head. “...If only they knew. Nothing can be eternal in this world. No realm of man or elf. Only destruction we bring to one another...” He said, quoting from some scholar, a particularly depressing one.

“Well. Nothing to it. We've cleared the entrance already.” Thompson said, laying his hands on the bronze rings. “Welcome, then, to the silent library.” He said with a smile, leaning backward pulling the rings to him.

Nothing happened.

“Uh… One second.” The battlemage said, clearly embarrassed. Haverson suddenly looked on guard.

“Damn it. I could have sworn we left this unlocked.” He said, heaving against the massive portal.

Samuel ran up with a set of tools in one hand. “Don't worry Mr. Thompson. I can have them open again quicklike!” He said. Kneeling down and fiddling with an apparent lock somewhere.

“Well. The library's not going anywhere.” Thompson said to Haverson. Haverson nodded but without a smile to accompany it.

A short time passed until Samuel finally moved away from the lock. “Well. Its unlocked again. WE should prbably prop it open this time. That damn breeze must have closed it.”

Aster looked up sharply. So she wasn't the only one to notice the breeze. It was still there, damp and unforgiving, somehow making its way under the door without them.

Thompson shooed Samuel away and lay his hands again on the rings and pulled.

Aster held her breath.

The door did not move.

“Damn it to hell! What is this?” Thompson said, cursing at Samuel. “Did you open the bloody thing or not?” Samuel made apologetic sounds, but Thompson waved them away. “Just open it for real this time!”

Samuel ran to the door and looked at it again.

“Err. It is open. Or at least unlocked.” He looked back at Thompson bewildered. Before attempting a halfhearted tug on the doors. They held fast.

“This is bullshit.” Spiker said. “Sam you child, you're making us all look bad. Stand aside. We got in here once, we can very well do it again.” He said, adding a few curses under his breath.

Samuel made more apologetic noises, and dodged to the side as Spiker and Greyson stepped forward.

Haverson and the rest watched, not wanting to get involved with the other team, even is they somewhat felt towards Samuel; it probably wasn't his fault.

Spike and Greyson each grabbed a circlet and strained against the door.

Aster felt the breeze that had been circling against her body increase the smallest bit. The door let out an unearthly moan.

“Its fucking jammed. Must be warped somehow. Alex, Elban, a hand!”

The other two ran up, and soon the four men were straining against the door and whatever forces kept it closed. A low rumble started, increasing in pitch. Aster saw the doors shutter.

“Pull harder you fools. We've got dozens of fucking floors to go!” Thompson said, “Can't let a goddam door stop us!”

“I don't see you pulling!” Elban said, grunting in exertion.

“You wouldn't want me to use the strength I have! The fucking doors would be gone, and everything behind them, and so would everyone else here!” Thompson countered. The doors shuttered again, the groan growing louder and higher pitched.

Finally Aster saw the massive wooden things give just the tiniest bit. But that was all it took to overcome whatever friction held them in place. With one final massive groan, they separated and swung open.

The breeze turned into a wind suddenly, debris appearing suddenly as a gust rushed its way into the library.

Aster covered her eyes as the gust grew in power. Their torches flickered wildly in the onslaught.

“Gods what is it now?” Thompson howled, looking around wildly as small rocks flung themselves into the air.

“Its...I-Its cursed!” Samuel squeaked, from somewhere to one side.

“Shut your mouth. Trapped maybe, but not cursed. People lived here at one point!” Thomson said over the gushing wind.

Haverson's torch went out, and he struggled to relight it. Then Germain's did as well. One by one, all of them were snuffed out by the wind, even as it settled down.

There was a bit of panic as the party found itself in complete darkness.

A voice rang out.

“Everyone. Stay still. Do not move a muscle.” The voice was firm yet cold as steel. It was Thompson.

“We cleared the traps in the main hallways, but if you run, I can't guarantee your safety. Besides. Its just a bit of darkness. What are you all, children? Afraid of the dark?” He said.

“But have it your way. The elves left us something constructive besides traps. One second while I activate it.”

Out of the darkness Thompson's face suddenly appeared as the gem on his forehead suddenly pulsed with light. Aster could vaguely make out his hands moving in some sort of pattern. He mouthed words under his breath, the wind whipping them around as it streamed past her face, freeing her hair from its tether and cascading it in front of her face. Whispering all around now, as his voice flowed into the structure itself.

“Thompson. What are you doing?” Haverson asked sternly, from somewhere slightly in front of her.

“One second. Almost there. They damn thing hasn't been used in centuries. Give me one second.”

“There” He said, his gem dipping back into darkness. Aster felt something like static build around her body. As strange and frightening a situation as it was, there in the darkness, she realized she really had to trust the others, and Thompson for now. She wasn't running this show, and neither, she realized, was Haverson.

A pale dim light appeared in the distance. It sat against some far off column, casting deep shadows all around it. Then another appeared, and a third. Soon the whole area before them was lit subtly by impossible to locate, diffuse light. Being the same color as the pale bluish walls, it was sometimes hard to tell where it was actually coming from, except for where the shadows were sharpest, and at other times it was like the walls themselves were glowing.

The way lit. Thompson stepped ahead again and addressed the group. “Second times the charm. Welcome again, to the silent library, the penultimate stronghold of the elves.”

The wind subsided somewhat, retreating to is firm, almost ignorable state. Aster soon forgot it as she looked out at the library. In front of them stretched, hundreds upon hundreds of book shelves, all seemingly carved from the floor itself. There was one material in the room and it was stone, the same stone that now dully glowed. The ceilings were vaulted high with columns rising from the floor, then branching in a triangular manner to meet the ceiling. Down the middle of the room was a walkway, intersecting with a smaller one at the middle and continuing on until it met the dark, shadow cast stairs at the end.

In front of them, the rows marched forward, each one hiding hundreds if not thousands of books. Or did they? Aster couldn't actually make out any from where she was, and she was too cautious to check. Thompson was still running the show. They had many floors to go.

“So we're cleared five more floors down. Theoretically. I'm concerned that some of these traps may be self resetting. Everyone stay close.” He commanded.

The group set forward, peering at the endless bookshelves as they went.

Aster struggled to see if there were any books. It was surprisingly hard to tell, each bookshelf had four shelves and came up to neck height, an uncomfortable height, neither short enough to see over, yet not tall enough to block anything coming at you.

As soon as one deviated from the main path, the amount of light dropped considerably, as if the library, forced to give up some of its secrets, still clung selfishly to some, swaddling them its its last remaining shadows. But even still, after her eyes accustomed to the light some, she could just barely make out the spines of the books, of every size and shape, pressed together as far as the eye could see.

Such knowledge. Infinitely more than the paltry study her family had owned. It had been more of a social necessity than a true homage to the spirit of learning. Her father had made his money in the mines, and had retained some of their harsh rigor, even though he himself never had to wield a pick axe.

Still the books brought her back. To playing with her brothers in the study when they were still small, making worlds out of nothingness and setting them to life with their own imaginations. Running around the room and acting out events both heroic and villainous. A better time? Certainly a more naive one.

They came to the next staircase. Thompson stopped them. “Samuel. I trust this staircase about as far as I can throw it. Wasn't this the blade trap?” He asked, pointing at the perfectly mundane, seemingly harmless staircase in front of them.

“You're right sir.” Samuel said. “The traps seem to have reset.”

“Gods that’s annoying.” Thompson said, scowling. “At least we know what we're facing for a bit.”

“True sir. Let me just disable this one again.” He said, creeping forward in an odd manner to a hitherto unnoticed panel set directly beneath one of the banisters. Aster heard a clicking sound as Samuel manually activated the trap.

A fine blade shot from the wall from its invisible housing, slicing through the air so cleanly it actually wistled. Thompson looked at the blade with a mixture of recognition and disgust. The blade hit its stops, and Samuel jammed it in place.

Thompson reached out with one hand and ran his finger slightly across the blade. “Ach.” He said, drawing back suddenly. “Although that confirms it.” He said, raising his finger to show the others.

“Look, straight through. After its been sitting here for centuries! What craftmanship. Or perhaps magically reinforced.” He nodded to Samuel.

“Let us continue.”

The next handful of floors were intriguing, yet uneventful. Haverson walked purposefully after Thompson, once and a while peering outwards into the half lit shelves they walked through. For some reason the books seemed enticing with their perfect stacking, running down the length of the bookshelves. What a trove of knowledge! Even if he didn't know elven, if he wasn't assured by now that they were cursed in some way, he would have taken one or two. To let such knowledge go to waste was a true tragedy.

He spied Aster looking after the books as well, so she must have felt the same.

He had been hesitant about bringing her with him on this journey; it was certainly more dangerous than almost anything they had attempted together, and only slightly less dangerous than the foolhardy runs he had done in his youth.

He had seen the razor blade that had come from the wall, far sharper and better designed than any trap he had come upon before. He usually had a sixth sense about such things, probably going by small signs around the trap site, panels, disturbed ground and the like, but these were truly nasty. He hoped that they were mostly mechanical, but his intuition told him that magical traps were almost certain to be around here somewhere.

So it was with a feeling of uneasiness that he stopped at the edge of the last set of previously explored stairs and Thompson bade him careful.

“So here is where things start getting a bit trickier.” Thompson said. “Me and Samuel will lead the way. We must slow as well. Keep your eyes open and report anything that looks out of place, regardless of how innocuous.”

“You can almost make out some sort of vault if you peer over the edge here...” Samuel said, leaning over one of the bannisters and staring down the long, long drop to the bottom.

Aster followed him and peered over as well, quickly backing up when she realized that only a few inches of stone were keeping her from a chasm several hundred feet deep.

“Don't slip, lass” Greyson said as they passed. She frowned, but said nothing, slipping back into line with the others.

Alexander, Spiker and Elban waited around, bored as Samuel and Thompson carefully inspected the staircase. Germain, Aster and Haverson watched, Haverson occasionally suggesting places to check.

Thompson, assuaged after a few moments of careful peering and muttering while touching his gem, signaled for Samuel to hurry it up.

To Samuel's credit, he ignored Thompson for once, and concentrated on a particular stone step. Haverson watched him test its weight.

A look of shock came over his face and he sprung back up the steps into Thompson.

“Damn it. Watch yourself!” Thompson said, regaining his balance.

“Look out!” Samuel said as he took a pole from his bag and prodded the step in a particular place.

The library was silent for a moment as the group looked on with horror.

A wrenching metal on metal screech erupted from the step and in one sudden violent motion, a five foot spike burst from the thin veneer it had been hiding under. Splinters of rock flew into the air, showering the unsuspecting group with debris.

Samuel put down his hand which had been covering his eyes and whistled. “Well. That was a close one.” He said, inspecting the spike.

The others gazed on, still shaken by the violence of the trap.

“With that amount of force...” Aster said, trailing off.

“Like a chicken on a skewer.” Greyson said, mimicking the motion with his hand and making a squelching noise at the end. Germain grimaced.

“I suppose it pays to be careful. Sorry I tried to rush you Samuel.” Thompson said, the edge which had accumulated from the setbacks now gone. He shook his head, and perhaps against better thinking, ran his hand across the spike.

“Its silvered somehow. Some sort of alloy. Even in death the elves make art.” Thompson stated.

“Maybe if they had stuck to that, they'd still be around.” Spiker said, grinning grossly as they continued down the now considerably safer staircase.

The next floor layout wise was similar to the last two, and the ones before that. Undeterred, the group cautiously moved through, glancing suspiciously at every shadow and every piece of debris.

Another floor.

Identical as the last one. The same shadows, the same books, the same quiet. Silent except for the subtle breeze that was ever present in the place, the breeze itself, odorless, itself ghostly in the spectral place.

Another floor.

Shadows winked as they walked somberly down the middle of yet another floor. The rectangular shelves lending no visual interest to the massive room. All straight lines except for the staircase, yet still hiding shadows.

Another floor.

Another floor. And one after that one. And one after that.

Samuel nervously inspected yet another staircase. Sweat ran over his brow, what seemed like hours of intense concentration had imprinted themselves on his face. The others were similarly stressed, Haverson noted. There was something to be said about a lack of a challenge, or at least a visible one. The last ten… or was it twenty… floors had passed without incident, even on the stairs, but he knew that ignorance and complacency had killed many more adventurers than any heroic duel to the death.

Still. First that trap, then nothing? Was this some sort of cruel trick? His eye sight swam as he wiped a bead of sweat from his own forehead. One slip… one missed step…

Another floor.

He was walking down the center of the hallway, following the others. They seemed to be moving slower, almost sluggishly. He saw them nervously glancing from side to side, as if the lack of challenge had somehow been inverted, and they expected sudden death at any point.

Was that shadow a shadow? Was that rock a trigger? Could the books themselves be looking at them? Watching them as they traveled? He could imagine the system, each floor relaying the information downward, using silent magics. It would need some sort of focus…

He started to look around the same as the others. There had to be a sign of it. There needed to be something different that stood out, some discrepancy…

Another floor.

Perhaps they had built the signal into the walls? He saw no sign of it, but the elves had shown themselves masters at illusion and misdirection. Such a thing would have been child's play to them. He just needed to make sure the system saw him, saw that he knew the secret.

Another floor.

Yes it would be in the walls, traveling through the columns. He draw a knife. He just needed to dig a bit, it was almost certainly close to the surface…

A breeze swept by, and he wiped another bead of sweat from his eyes, cursing as his hair stuck to his face. It was a hot breeze.

He remembered Lord Gerrant's war. When the fire of the southerner mages melted the flesh of his comrades like butter, and the enemy was everywhere. In that paranoid hell of an instant, shared across time, he remembered a bit of the empty balance he once had, when all movements had become clear and perfectly focused.

He felt the nothingness of the detachment again, now in the library, and his eyes slipped into inky black pools.

Greyson and Elban bickered loudly, accusing one another of stealing their gold, and it looked like it was about to come to blows.

Germain was crumpled on the ground, his eyes wide with horror as he stared at his rune encrusted sword like it was some hideous monster. He saw Germain's hand shake with disgust as he tried to drop the sword, but it simply stuck to his palm like glue, its strange symbols blazing as if in contempt.

Alexander was slumped against a pillar staring straight ahead, not saying anything but constantly running his hands over his throat, as if afraid he had just swallowed poison.

Samuel and Thompson we searching a very ordinary floor, pointing out features Haverson couldn't see and rushing to them, shaking their heads with worry.

Spiker was against the same pillar as Alexander running his hands along his arms, making muscles, and then shaking his head distraught before repeating the process.

Aster was running from member to member, trying to get them to hear her, shaking them, yelling at them, but it was as if they were in their own world.

She looked up and saw Haverson.

“Oh thank gods, you fought it? I can't seem to get the other to snap out of it!”

But her words passed by him ineffectually. She was nothing. There was the mission. There was the balance. And that was it. From the void the answer came, a clear course. The library lived in silence. Their loudness intruding on it. But so it must be: the silence and the sound. The quiet and the voice.

And so he spoke to restore the balance. “Stop!” He said.

And although he didn't even yell, his voice boomed across the library, reverberated against the book s and the walls, bouncing down into the depths, passed through the ears of his companions. Pure balance in audible form. More than a mere utterance of his own mouth, but a raw and powerful command.

Thompson and Samuel looked around as if struck. Alexander stayed on the ground, scowling. Elban and Greyson scratched their heads, forgetting what they had been fighting over. Germain, quickly looked around and silently rose to his feet, shealthing his sword, but looked somewhat ashamed.

Spiker blushed for a moment before drawing his namesake spikes.

“What the hell is going on here?” He yelled.

And just like that, the void was broken as well. Haverson returned, conflicted about the state of mind he had sworn to abandon. He said nothing, but he felt the sadness return, and the joy, and the fear. And he vowed to himself to never part from them again.

Aster's face brightened.

“Oh thank gods, you've gone back to normal.”

“What are ye talking about girl?” Spiker said, still clutching his weapons.

“There was some sort of magical trap. For a second I was worried that we were all going to die, but it actually didn't seem like it did anything. But as we walked deeper, you guys started acting very strange.”

“Yes.” Thompson admitted. “Mind altering spells. Devious, yet not surprising. I'm surprised none of us did anything stupid. Good job staying together as well team.” He said. He didn't sound very leader like, as if still somewhat worried about invisible traps.

“Do you have any idea why you weren't affected?” Thomson asked, running a hand to his circlet, still composing himself.

“No idea.” Aster admitted. “And Haverson, how did you get them to stop? There was something with your eyes...”

“Oh? I don't know either. One second I was sure there was some sort of magical surveillance system in this place, and the next I just saw everyone messing around.” He said, almost too friendly.

Something about his tone, made Aster pause, and the next question died in her throat as she realized. He didn't want her to talk about it. Perhaps not in front of the others. She would ask him later.

They agreed to wait for a moment on that floor to regain composure. No one was talking, but Aster figured that they all were embarrassed that they had fallen into the trap. She was about to point out how ridiculous they had all been acting. A look from Haverson reminded her that the event wasn't as humorous as she first thought: a few more moments of panic or paranoia induced hallucinations could have lead them right into a much more deadly trap.

How the hell did he know what she was thinking?

She scowled. One moment he was checking the wall for invisible magical items, the next he was non-verbally scolding her!

She got up from the main group and wandered over to Alexander. The bulky mercenary still sat against the wall, staring off into the library, a completely unreadable expression on his face.

She sat down in front of him.

“Not one to talk much, huh?” She asked, waiving to him.

His eyes focused on her slowly, as if coming out of a trance.

“No, not really.” He said, in a voice surprisingly higher than she expected.

She realized that that was only the second time she had heard the man say anything on the mission.

“So. A Gnomian last name. Is there a story in that?”

He stared at her, staying silent for such a long time that she began to think that he either hadn't heard her, was ignoring her or was simple.

“You're just talking with me to get away from that Haverson guy.” he said, quietly enough that the others wouldn't hear.

She pursed her lips. “Err. Fine. Thats true. But I'm curious as well. I've never seen the ocean, let alone traveled on it.” She said honestly.

He paused a bit, taking a long sip from his waterskin.

“Thats a shame. The ocean is a sight to behold.” He said, but then drawing quiet again.

She raised an eyebrow. “Really a man of few words? Come on, no one can hear you even if you do speak. Whats your deal?”

She paused, letting him speak. But he stayed silent.

A sudden thought occurred to her. “Are you… embarrassed?” She asked, “When the spell… You were running your hands over your throat. Your voice?” She said, guessing piece by piece.

His eyes bulged, and for a moment, Aster realized that antagonizing a man probably three times her size was probably not a good idea, regardless of what anyone had signed. Before she could react, his hand shot out faster than lightening on a clear day. His meat hand grappled her shoulder and wrenched her close.

She started to call out, but he merely applied pressure to the shoulder he had grabbed. Pain shot through her arm, and he shot a murderous look at her.

“Do you know who I am? Are you doing this just to torture me?” he asked, his fearsome actions at total contrast with his high effeminate voice.

She shook her head wildly. “No. I have no idea!” She whispered.

The pain suddenly vanished as he released her. Drawing his arm back in. His hatred softened to a mere scowl. “Then perhaps you should learn.” He said.

“Uh… Actually I think I heard Haverson asking me something.” She said starting to rise.

“No.” The man said. “I… I apologize for my earlier actions. Its just… They used to taunt me so.” He admitted.

“Umm.” She said, nervously looking over her shoulder at the other group. No one was looking her way.

“Fine.” She said. No one earned respect if they couldn't deal with problems they had created themselves. Like it or not, she had few friends in the world of adventurers. It was a small tight community of veterans, gruff mercenaries, and former state mages: not a place for someone others would have written off as a girl. Perhaps this strange Gnomish affiliated man was a test of sorts?

“Whats your story Pluzinerrorick?” She asked.

He looked at her, surprised. “You actually got the name right.” He said, the tiniest bit of a smile appearing on his face.

“Well sure. Growing up in a great house ingrains certain skills onto you from an early age. Names are important.”

“A upbringing very different from mine own, I imagine. I was born to deckhands among the Gnomes, but not of them. My parents were from some small fishing village along the coast somewhere. I don't even know North or South.”

“Any way, when I was younger, I gained promonince as a singer of all things. I used to have a deep baratone voice, that the Shan loved. They said it reminded them of Melro himself. I used to perform in the temples on every island. I got quite good.” He said, as if trying to convince Aster what he was saying was real.

She trusted what he was saying, but it was a bit strange.

“Unfortunately, as I got older, I began to chase after girls a bit too much. A talented foreigner got a lot of attention, and I drank in every minute of it. I began drinking heavily as well, buying expensive wines imported from far off islands. I thought I was living the life.”

“And I suppose I was, until one day, I broke one to many hearts. We had spent the night together and I suppose she was motivated by romatic notions of us running away together. When I informed her I intended no such thing she didn't take it to kindly. I had neglected to realize that she was a windress, a mage aspected of the wind and waves, but also of drowned souls. She cursed me heavily, both magically and non, and fled in tears.”

Aster sat listening at this point. A story was a story.

“I didn't think anything of it; just another scorned lover, until I met for practice with the musical group I was set to perform with. I was humiliated. My deep voice, rich and full had grown peircingly high, and no breath behind it. I couldn't even sing falcetto. I couldn't sing at all.”

“The group laughed me off the stage, thinking I was an imposter. How could I be who I said I was with a voice like that?”

He sighed, again, too high for it to sound normal.

“Well. It wasn't just my livelihood it turned out. The people who I considered friends, when confronted with the reality of what had happened to me offered no solace. In fact, exacerbated with this damnable voice, they laughed as well, shutting the door again and again.”

“And so I found myself on the street with nothing to my name. I spoke less and less, and when someone laughed, I usually lashed out. A ship captian eventually tossed me on the mainland and the rest is history.”

“And now here we are. A usually silent blade for hire inside the Silent Library! Fitting no?”

Aster rose as the rest of the group prepared to leave.

“I… I apologize for my manner when I talked to you at the beginning. Thank you for telling me your story.” She said, actually feeling somewhat sorry for the man, quieting the pragmatic voice in her head that reminded her that he most likely had killed many times in cold blood. He almost smiled, before rising slowly to his feet and motioning for her to rejoin the group.

It was one thing to leave everything you knew under your own volition. She knew how hard that was. But she considered that being thrown from everything you knew, ripped from it cruelly, was perhaps far worse a fate. The fact that he had brought it on himself didn't seem to matter in that sentiment.

And in that sentiment, she couldn't help being a bit selfish, and reflecting more on her own history. As they started down the next staircase, she remembered with an unsettling feeling that her exodus from the safety of her home and family was a privilege in and of itself. She had survived, and barely that, off the kindness of others, the induced guilt of seeing a homeless girl and nothing more.

Here were people who had faced similar life changing events, with much less help, and who had over come them. By definition, these were the ones who had survived war, and sickness and ostracism; the ones who didn't were dead. There was much to learn from here.

Haverson saw Aster rejoin the group, idly wondering what she and the mercenary could possibly have been talking about.

Alexander's face betrayed no emotion that could have hinted at the topic, and Aster he was pretty sure was actively trying to distance herself from him. She had an independent streak a mile long, and sometimes it manifested itself in immature acts like this one.

He wasn't really even sure what he had said or done to annoy her. How typical.

Their relationship was a strange one to be sure, he reflected, as the descended yet another staircase, Thompson blasting several nearly invisible wards off the wall. The age difference was enough to raise eyebrows, and raise eyebrows it had, but nothing improper existed between the two.

He had found her in a small northern village, far away from the capital, in the midst of a miserable row of rainy days. He remembered the water pooling in his shoes as he had entered the town under low spirits. The last couple of contracts hadn't gone too well, and his gold was running out again.

He had even considered rejoining the military, but his promises and his memories forbid him. So he had walked into the town, knowing full well that he still had plety of miles to go to reach the next contract. And his feet were tired. And his food was almost rotten.

He had seen her pickpocket a merchant trying to get out of the rain and considered saying something. He thought better of it, and decided to confront her directly. Little did he know that she had seen him seeing her taking the gold and a chase had ensued.

They had found themselves trapped in a back alley, rain pelting down, turning the ground to mud, which Haverson was sure also held its fair amount of excrement, both human and animal. It was there in that rain soaked hellhole, surrounded by rotting wood and soaking wet that the two had drawn their blades.

He never forgot the mixture of emotions that had gone through him at that moment. Shock, that a child actually owned a blade such as that. Admiration, that she would actually draw it, and then finally humor.

What a joke, that these two half dead people would find themselves in such a situation. He had laughed hard into the sky, until the girl had surely been convinced that she was dealing with a mad man. But finally he realized the humor in the situation as well, with some explanation, and they had sat in the mud, sharing the meager food that they both had.

They agreed to leave that shitty town and never look back.

Haverson looked up as Samuel asked him something.

“Sorry, what was that?” He asked.

“I asked if you've ever seen anything like this in an elven ruin. I'm pretty sure its a trap, but Thompson says that its not magical. It looks like it might be activated by pressure plate.”

Haverson willed his tired mind to focus on the object in question.

It was a spike trap like the one they had faced earlier, but a different variant. He told Samuel, and poked around the step with his sword.

Three spikes erupted from the wall, but Haverson had anticipated them, and was standing far enough away so that he was only hit with the shower of plaster caused by their ejection.

He shot a hand out and grabbed the cold spike in his hand.

“This one resets.” He warned. “I encountered it in the last ruin I was in. I almost spiked me good, and it did hit one of my companions. You just gotta…” He grunted, straining his muscles as they both turned the spike within its holder in the wall and prevented the whole contraption from sliding back into place.

He exerted a final twist, and something delicate broke in the machinery in the wall, He grabbed the limp spike and roughly shook it back and forth until its holding mechanism broke for good and he wrenched the piece of metal clear from the wall.

Half thinking, he threw the device at Spiker's feet.

“There. Grab another and replace the ones you have, there's a reason these are still here.” He said, still thinking about Aster.

Gods, she like the child I never had.

It wasn't quite true. They were close in some ways, but not in others. They respected each other as individuals, Aster taking the semi-fatherly advice that the old man dished out when she wanted.

He had to admit though. He cared for her more than he might admit to her in person. He stared down the darkened staircase, and felt that same damnable damp breeze float insultingly past him. This was not a place for her. Hells, this wasn't a place for him either. He would bring them out of it safety though, he promised himself, following Thompson, missing the impressed expression that Samuel had on his face.

“Hrmm. What do you think?” Samuel said, pointing at the object in the center of the room.

“I think no one should move a god damn muscle toward the thing until I'm done studying it.” Thompson said.

Haverson stared at the fountain. It was nearly two men tall and took up the bulk of the room. Made of solid stone, it was distinguished by two features. Firstly, it was a hideous statue of a small man being crushed slowly and agonizingly by a giant, the man's feeble arms pressingly meaningless against its foot in vain. The giant was a monstrous amalgamation of shifting shapes, barely resembling a humanoid form. Somehow the artist had captured an amorphousness character to it, as if were it real, it could shift suddenly into whatever form it deemed most horrible. Secondly, it was the only thing in the entire library they had encountered besides the books themselves that wasn't made out of the same bluish stone. Instead, it was jet black.

And not only black. The blackness dripped from it, as if applied with paint, oozing itself across the ground where it lay, poisoning the rest of the center of the room. The stood far away, observing it.

“I'm no mage, but that thing looks evil as sin.” Greyson said. “We should just avoid it and move on.”

“Great idea. Now, see any staircases here?” Spiker said, sarcastically.

Greyson looked around, reproached. “Uh, no.” He said. Spiker smirked. “Well there you go. It must be under the fountain.”

“Bullshit.” Elban said, dismissing the thought with a wave of his hands. “I know its hard to believe, but people lived here once. Do you think they just messed around with this thing every time they needed to go downstairs?” he asked, exasperated.

“Who knows what the elves did! They had that one stone block thing at the entrance. Why not another here?”

“This is different.” Thompson said. “I...I think its some kind of barrier.” He added, still pacing back and forth, signing different half spells, and murmuring to himself.

“I agree with Greyson.” Germain said. “We should look for another way down. I don't like how that thing looks either, its like something… wrong has leaked from it. And it doesn't look elven at all.” He pointed out.

Aster looked closer, careful not to actually get physically nearer to the horrible object.

Germain was right. It looked like it was carved from some sort of black soapstone. The chisel marks were still visible as if the carver had stopped in half motion when the elves had left. It was crude. It depicted a certainly barbaric scene. There was no way it was elven.

He imagined running his had over it and feeling the rough cuts. But something told him that would be a very, very bad idea.

“Hey” Aster said, “something doesn't add up here.”

Some of the group turned to look at her. Thompson did not, still pondering the statue and its drippings.

“Samuel, when you looked down from the upper levels, you thought you could see a vault right?” Aster asked.

The scout nodded. “Yeah, you're right.”

“And does this look anything like what you saw?” She added, waving her hand at the fountain.

“Err. No. Definitely not. I saw a light, reflecting off something metal, golden color if not gold itself. A fire, or touch. There was light. It didn't look like this at all.” He said finally.

“So we must have somehow gone the wrong way.” Aster said. “Maybe after that trap...”

“Great.” Spiker said. “I have an idea. How about we stay down here, and you go back up to where we first looked down, and you can yell down if you see us. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like you've got nothing to contribute to this conversation.” Haverson said, coldly.

Spiker turned to him. “Lay off old man. I'm just talking with your girl here. Don't get your nipples in a twist.”

“Knickers.” Aster said. “The phrase is...”

“Girl, does it look like I wear knickers?”

“All of you shut your pathetic mouths!” Thompson ordered. “I think I know how to undo the spell around the thing. Then we should be able to study it more closely.”

Haverson and Germain perked up.

“Wait are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“I advise against it.”

Thompson turned to them. “Say what you want. I'm curious. And it it blocks our path, I can always turn it to slag. Nothing to worry about.”

“That doesn't sound like you at the beginning of the trip. Weren't you concerned about us asking to risky?” Germain said.

Thompson just scowled. “Well. I don't see you doing anything. As Greyson said, there aren't any stairs. There is a fountain: a truly hideous one. Its the only damn thing in the room. There aren't even any books. What else are we going to do?” he asked in an exhausted manner.

“Umm. Be cautious? Perhaps we need to backtrack. We could have missed another set of stairs in one of the higher levels.”

“Ugh. Spiker summed it up I think. You want to go back up? That doesn't seem very suiting to me. Then again, I am the one who had to disable all those damn traps on the way down. Perhaps you want to swing your sword around a bit to contribute? You're awful cautious for a spell sword aspected with the God of Strength.”

“And you're awfully hasty for a battlemage who was supposed to have been one of the high strategists of Lord Gerrant's war.” Germain, who usually was cool to such aggravations, said without skipping a beat.

Thompson looked like the comment had infuriated him, and he turned towards the spellsword with a mighty scowl, accented by the ridiculous headband he was wearing.

“Why don't you shove your…”

Haverson stepped between the two and held out his hands. “Stop it. This place feeds on strong emotions. Need I remind you? Do you all want to end up dead?”

“Step away Northerner. I burned plenty of your kind in the war. Its over now, but I still might have the skill left in me somewhere.” Thompson said darkly.

Aster saw a slight change come over him, his face more pronounced and sharper, the hate shining clearly in his eyes. But it faded almost instantly.

Thompson suddenly laughed. “Forget you all. I realized what spell this is. We will have our answers very soon.”

He concentrated harder on the fountain.

Aster stepped back.

Germain, perhaps sensing something the others didn't, tried again to get Thompson to stop whatever he was doing.

But it was too late.

The spell ruptured under Thompson's sharp scrutiny with an audible breeze, like the last air of a foul balloon seeping out its final sigh, a stale wind that smelled of long rotting corpses and burnt hair.

“Oh gods” Elban said, his voice a whisper. “What did you do?”

Thompson didn't reply, apparently shocked by the reaction.

The smell didn't fade, although the exhalation had stopped.

It was at that moment that Aster noticed that the breeze that had been following them this whole time had stopped. Or perhaps they had deviated from its course. Something about that fact troubled Aster as much as the foulness Thompson had just played with. Not caring what others thought, she took another step back, trying to get the stench from her nostrils.

“Uh, guys...” Samuel said, also slowly backing away from the fountain, “You might want to look at the fountain.”

They turned back from their inter party squabble to look at the disgusting art piece.

It had somehow gotten even worse. All the lines that were roughly hewn before were somehow melting as if wax under a flame. The edges collapsed into the body of the piece, the giant and his quarry becoming even uglier, and somehow more unnatural.

The blackness from the statuettes oozed down to the floor visibly now, spreading slowly, puddling in the crease between the pedestal on which the objects sat and the floor, and the seeping its tendrils outward, staining everything black as it went.

“This is not good.” Germain said. “Everyone get back.” He drew his massive sword and got ready.

Thompson still stood, somewhat surprised by the course things were taking.

Spiker smiled and drew his long signature weapons in each hand. “Forget all that crap above. This is what I was waiting for. A chance to kill something!”

Samuel looked on in horror as the foot of the giant, loosened from whatever melting force was effecting it, slowly came down, oozing its way over the helpless man, smothering it it think, indubitably caustic blackness.

The party looked grimly at the collapsing mess. The man being crushed meant nothing, but damn if it didn't make them all a bit superstitious.

“Oh, on this side something is moving...” Samuel said. The other besides the ones who had drawn their weapons directed their gaze at what he was pointing to.

Indeed, the whole side of the sludge pile was bubbling, as if heated over some furnace.

“There's something…” His eyes shot wide open and his mouth dropped for a moment before he sprung away from the thing as quick as he could, fleeing towards the far wall. As he ran, he held his hand to his mouth. The whole party drew its weapons as the whole thing started to roil and bubble.

Behind them, Samuel threw up in the corner.

Some part of it in the center started to rise, throwing off huge amount of the think black ooze in every direction.

Thompson snapped out of his daze.

“What an ugly piece of work. I don't think anyone will mind if I take care of this.”

His headpiece shone intensely, fire sprouting from his hands and running along his arms.

Haverson jerked uncontrollably at the sound.

“Yeah, burn it good!” Spiker said, cheering Thompson on.

“Honestly, I have no idea what that damn thing is, and I have no desire to find out. Fire away.” Greyson said. Alexander, as always, said nothing, but held his great sword ready, same as Germain.

“Foul thing! Be purged!” Thompson cried, liquid flames erupting from his hands, arcing across the room and impacting with the center of the boiling black mass.

Where it hit, the flames were churned into the shifting black ooze, a hideous stench of boiling flesh exuded from the site. Then the thing became dangerous.

Sucking in the flames while at the same time, spastically shifting and constantly changing shape. Thompson shouted, and increased the barrage, white hot plumes of incineration spewing into the shapless blob.

It sucked them all in and steadily grew in size. “Thats not working!” Germain said, running to Thompson and putting himself between him and the mass.

“What are you… Get out of my way!” Thompson ordered, but stopped the flames.

Germain concentrated for a moment, and the runes that rand along his body and the sword that he carried, burned in their own light, red as well, but somehow more clear and purposeful than Thompson's flames.

“Get back, I think...”

A piece of the ooze shifted suddenly and flung itself at the two.

“Oh shit!” Elban said, jumping back, even though he wasn't even close to the attack.

“Yeah, they can handle this.” Greyson said, backing up to the wall, glancing down at Samuel who was still clenching his stomach and trying not to be sick again.

The pseudopod of ooze moved surprisingly quick for its viscosity, and Aster was sure that contact with it would be particularly nasty, if merely looking at the thing the wrong way had made Samuel sick. Still, she wasn't particularly worried. Germain and Thompson were powerful magic users. Aberration like this one were their element and standing out of the way was probably the best thing any of them could do right now, especially as none of them had ranged weapons.

The black mass hissed and steamed as it washed over a Germain, but both he and Thompson remained untouched. Aster could see some presence, distorting the air in front of Germain, throwing the attack off to both sides. Like a ship bow first into a wave, Germain's invisible shield parted the arm in two as it fell on him.

Deflected, the rest of the black stuff either burned off of the energy shield or fell to the ground, where it boiled and hissed menacingly.

“Ha!” Germain said, clenching his sword in both hands. “Take that, foul thing!”

“Ah, don't celebrate yet...” Thompson, for some reason sounding a bit distant, said, and pointed at the thing. It rose higher, twisting and churning within itself in all directions.

Germain cried out and dashed forward to plunge his sword into the object.

Aster could clearly see the power behind the attack, and imagined the being splattering. However, as soon as he struck, when the blade made contact with the being's substance, the force of the impact rippled through its whole, absorbing the shock and stopping the attack in its tracks.

Germain's battle cry turned into a subdued curse and he attempted to dislodge the sword from the thing. But the thick black goo had wrapped itself around the weapon and its seemed to be stuck fast. Even worse, the symbols on Germain started to dim.

The creature seemed to grow in stature again.

“Ah, gods! Its sucking the power right from my sword!” Germain said. “Someone help me!” He yelled, pulling wildly on his beloved weapon, trying hard to not let the object sink any deeper into the abomination.

As if raised from a trance, Haverson rushed forward to help. To Aster's surprise, so did Spiker, Elban and Greyson, their assorted weapons drawn.

She, Samuel, Alexander and Thompson stayed back, she still unsure as to whether conventional attacks were prudent against whatever the thing was; Samuel still bent over; Alexander, impassive as ever weapon drawn but no emotion on his face; Thompson, still shocked and a bit horrified from the first attack.

“Its the magic!” Thompson cried. “Grab your sword and let the other deal with it. Somehow it feeds on magic!”

“I know. I can feel it same as you.” Germain said, “And easier said than done!” He yelled, still tugging on the embedded weapon.

The mass of blackness shift again in front of him, oozing up the hilt of the sword. Germain looked down at the pseudopod, disgusted, before something in the mass caught his eye. He jerked away impulsively, horror stained on his face, but his hand refused to leave his sword.

“I need help! Spiker, stab this accused thing!” He said, in a bellowing voice. Aster could tell that he was trying to hide his fear.

She drew her own sword, still unsure whether she could actually accomplish anything with it. Looking around, she thought it more prudent to tend to Samuel.

As she ran to him, the party attacked. On one side, Spiker, Greyson and Elban responded to Germain's request for help, dashing past Thompson. Thompson glanced around, seemed to weigh his options, and drew a short sword, looking somewhat pathetic as he charged in behind them.

About ninety degrees separated from that group, Alexander had drawn his sword and was creeping closer to the thing from what he must have assumed was its backside. Haverson stood ready but waited to see how he was needed.

Their attack was haphazard and uncoordinated, this being the first time the group had actually found themselves against something more threatening than a hundred year old mechanism.

Spiker got to it first and, yelling in triumph, stabbed the oozing mound near where Germain was stuck.

He was rewarded with a violent hissing sound, and he had to jump back quickly to avoid being hit with a spray of whatever the black stuff was. It bubbled and sizzled on the stone floor, Spiker deciding very quickly that he had to be careful in the future.

Luckily for them, Aster noted, the creature, if in fact it was intelligent, seemed to be affected by their weapons, and reacted violently to Spiker's attack.

As the other came in to attack, nearly half of it swirled around its midsection and expanded rapidly. Germain found himself wrenched clear of the thing, luckily maintaining his sword and even more luckily not touching any of the ooze. However, the force of the rotation actually broke his balance and he was thrown away from the monster against the ground.

Spiker was not as lucky, half engulfed in blackness, struggling to get out even as it swirled him at a dizzying speed, it threw him with a much greater force, departing an additional amount of ooze, either purposeful or accidental with it.

He screamed in pain as he was flung through the air. He hit the ground hard, rolled, and then spasmed as he attempted to rid himself from the apparently burning black substance coating his body.

Greyson stopped in his tracks as he saw the attack coming and ungracefully jumped backward. Elban, apparently more combat trained or more lucky dropped to his feet and ducked the blow. Waiting until the mass finished swirling above him, he sprang upward and stabbed the creature.

At the same time, Alexander had finished his surprise attack and he leaped forward with a devastating blow, slicing through a section of the thing, which burst like a blister, showering him with acid.

“Ah god!” He yelled, dropping his guard and stumbling backward in pain as, unlike Spiker who was covered in at least leather, the ooze touched Alexander's skin. “Son of a bitch!” He cried out, running his hands up and down his arms trying to frantically wipe the substance off of him.

Aster had helped Samuel to his feet and given him water. He still looked frightened, the dark former statue apparently scaring him as the traps before did not. He didn't look like he wanted to fight.

Convinced that he was fine for now, Aster ran to Spiker only to see that Haverson was approaching him as well. The man still writhed on the ground, even though he was less touch by the substance than Alexander had seemed.

A thought came to Aster's mind as she looked at the water still in her hands. She knelt by the man and doused him with what water she had. The ooze dissipated very quickly. Haverson looked impressed and quickly ran to help Alexander in a similar way.

If the viscous mass had any feelings, Aster could only assume it was furious, it bubbled all over and sent a jet of caustic liquid directly at Greyson who just managed not get hit.

At the same time Elban found a veritable wave of the substance waiting for him. Undaunted he slashed at it as well, dodging the resulting spray of acid. He was less lucky however when the thing truly attacked him next.

Quivering, the whole mass moved at an astonishing speed, crossing the few feet between it and Elban almost instantly. Another pseudopod appear from its midst and it hammered into the miner, knocking him clear off his feet and sliding down the floor. He lay still for a moment and then groaned.

It then turned its attention to Alexander, threatening to engulf him, it moved forward, the whole object moving as one now. Alexander, battle trained and expecting something like this, rolled backwards and as he did so, swung weakly at the thing approaching him even from the ground. A further section burst from the mass.

Infuriated, Elban, Thompson and Germain attacked, slicing off sections of the thing as well, Germain having sheathed his spellsword, and drawing a regular one.

Aster finished helping Spiker, who grunted, and rose to his feet. He said nothing to her before running back to attack the thing.

What a contentious idiot.

She pushed the thought from her mind before going to help Greyson, who still lay on the ground, groaning.

Haverson got to Alexander and doused him with water before pulling him to his feet. Just in time, the pair jumped back as an arm of ooze smacked into the floor where they once were.

The rest of the party was getting revenge. Elban, Thompson and Germain continuing to cut piece after piece from the thing. Pretty soon, and appreciable amount of the black hissing not quite liquid had spilled from the being and evaporated on the cold floor.

The thing roiled in protest, and thrashed out at it attackers. However, the group now understood its attacks, and scattered before every attack, only to regroup and continue their attacks from all sides when it reformed.

Aster once again considered joining the fray, realizing that her lack of participation could be construed as weakness by some of the party. Therefore, after a particularly overreaching attack by the mass of blackness, she sprung forward before the rest of them could recover, and slashed her sword deep into the ooze.

Hand firmly keeping control of the hilt as it cut deep into syrupy mass, she felt the tip of her sword connect with something solid.

“There's something in here!” She cried out, suddenly remembering what Samuel had said earlier.

She turned her head as the ooze ripped open, revealing something horrible presumably at its core.

“AH!” Thompson yelled from behind her.

She heard a sword drop and from another position, she heard retching.

Quickly, before the thing had time to reposition itself, she withdrew her sword in a sweeping movement, glancing up only the shortest amount of time necessary to avoid the outpour of acidic mucous from the creature.

Heedless of the horror that was probably in the center of the thing, she figured that the core of the ooze was probably a weak spot, and shoved her sword deep into the hole she had cut earlier.

The thing screamed. A blood chilling wail pierced her ears. The cries of women and children, the screams of death and pain. Not really registering what she was hearing, she continued to slash at the solid object at the center.

A sudden force impacted with her, and she found herself on the floor, Haverson crashing into her as the ooze shook the stone with an attack that landed where she had been standing.

He didn't say anything as he leaped to his feet. He looked around very quickly. The others were paralyzed in fear or horror and the center of the thing or by its cries.

He turned to face the creature, not knowing what horrors faced him, but understanding that they must be witnessed, if his speculations were correct.

They were not far off. The center of the ooze was a thrashing conglomeration of pale fragments of what looked like small stones. As Haverson stared though, he realized that the truth was much, much worse. The fragments were bone, a whirling of half rotting muscle and impossibly, where the core made contact with the black ooze, faces emerged, flesh appearing, screaming at the top of their lungs, horrible, horrible shrieks before being drawn back into the writhing mass.

He felt pile rise in his throat, and a desire to flee the emotions back, far far back into his mind where he knew the void still waited. He rejected into siren call, and, forcing a foot forward, tried to swallow the taste in his mouth.

The creature, the blob of death and decay seemed stunned as well by its sudden reveal, as if its horrible creation was abhorrent even to itself. The cries continued. He allowed them into his ears as he thrust one last time with his sword, slicing into elven faces, thrashing limbs and disconnected flesh.

The ooze shuttered horribly, the stench of burning flesh and hair filling his nostrils. His teeth gritted, he twisted his blade in the wound he had opened and pulled it back, releasing a torrent of what he realized was actually corrupted blood.

Cursing the magics that must have made the thing, he summoned all of his strength and tore through the core of the thing.

It shuttered one last time and then splayed apart, ooze running with the consistency of melted animal fat, seeping into the stones themselves, the limbs sinking slowly, finally at rest, the flesh rotting instantly before his eyes, revealing parched bones which in turn cracked into a thousand pieces, the dust fading from view even as he watched it.

Soon the black bloodlike stain of the ooze on the floor was the only sign the monster had ever been there.

Haverson breathed heavily and collapsed to his knees, as much out of mental trauma as physical.

Aster saw him fall even as he heard the rest of the group recomposing themselves.

Greyson was still vomiting, but Spiker came close examining the mess.

“Burn the gods above. What was that thing?” He asked, poking the stained stones with his long stabbing swords.

“Ergh. Nothing you want to touch, or see again.” Thompson said, as if trying to get a foul taste out of his mouth. Alexander joined them, eying the ruined floor, but contributing nothing.

“I don't blame you Samuel” Elban said, murmering to the younger man as the two approached. “That thing was pure horror. I have never seen or even heard of its like. And when it… opened...” He said, struggling to describe what he had seen.

“Don't talk about it.” Samuel said, in a wavering voice. “I don't want to think about it any more than I have to.”

Haverson had recovered, and joined Aster and the rest of the group.

“Do you think that was some kind of trap?” Aster asked the older man.

He paused for a moment, taking one last look at the place where the fountain once had been.

“No. Not on purpose at least. Probably corrupted magics, tainted by something I don't even know. My knowledge of these things is again only surface deep. Thompson, can you say what it was?”

But Thompson merely shook his head. “Horror. Pure and concentrated, forced somehow into physical form, yet trapped by the spell. They weren't trapped there on purpose, the spell wasn't necromancy by any means or I never would have touched the thing. It was a persistence spell for art. Nothing even related.”

“But you said so yourself, this place and their magic feeds off emotion, and it seems like that once magical fountain concentrated it.”

“Haverson, good job destroying it. Such a thing should not exist.” He said, but Haverson didn't respond. Something about the whole ordeal he found upsetting for even more than its surface horror.

But Germain came up behind him and clapped a massive hand on his shoulder.

“Thompson's right. Good job. And not a bad job either Aster. You two found its core. I suppose there's a reason the merchant specifically hired you two.” He said, congratulating them.

“Now if we could only find the way down...” Germain said, looking around the now empty room.

They eventually found the way down. The staircase had lain, unhidden on the previous level, off to one side. In fact the staircase they had found that had lead to the fountain had been the more secretive of the two, disguised with a medium level illusion. However, they had been so fixated on finding traps, they had actually found the hidden staircase before the normal one. There was some irony there, Haverson thought.

Another floor.

Books lay strewn across the floor, bookcases smashed into tiny pieces, ripped pages swirling in the damp wind.

Aster looked upon the scene with a foreboding feeling. There was something wrong here, besides the obvious destruction, but she couldn't put a finger on it. Everything was blurry, the pale light barely making out the edges of the room.

“Don't touch the books” Thompson warned. “Hells, I wouldn't even look at them.” He said, gingerly stepping over a pile of smashed tomes. “If there was something I would magically trap in this place it would be the books.”

Almost all of the party nodded. Greyson carefully put down the book he had picked up and looked around, making sure no one had noticed.

“Psst.” Aster said, appearing next to him. “What did it say?”

“What did what say?” He said suspiciously, folding his arms as they maneuvered around the desecrated room. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Come on. I won't tell any one.” She said.

He squinted at her and then relented.

“Honestly, the one I grabbed was in Elvish I think. I couldn't even make out a single word. I think it was a poetry book though, by the text decoration.”

“Ah, too bad. I would have loved to read elven poetry.” Aster said, somewhat wistfully. The library in her father's study had been her favorite part of their mansion, but a place she was seldom allowed to go to. She savored every trip.

The reached the next stairs down. Thompson stopping them. The stairs lead down into darkness, the magical lighting system, however it worked, seemed to be broken on this level. Aster noticed that the stairs were cracked in places, as if some massive weight had fallen on them from above.

“Here,” Samuel said, stepping forward, “I'll light a torch and...”

A flash of light erupted from the wall showering the party with masonry dust. In the confusion, Aster heard Samuel cry out in pain. When Thompson picked up the still lit dropped torch and waived the dust away, they saw that Samuel had been speared by a trap.

Luckily for him, the trigger had either been mistimed, or had failed somewhat over the long years, because what might have been a quick and sudden murder had been mitigated to a flesh wound. He clutched his arm, blood seeping through his fingers as he tried not to cry out.

Germain stepped up and hew the trap spear from its socket in one swipe of his blade. He scowled feircely at the object as it fell to the floor. Now that the trap was definitely deactiveated, Thompson came forward and inspected the wound.

“Ah, you're a lucky one. It missed the bone. Still, better stop that bleeding...” He said, rummaging through his bag until he found a piece of cloth to use as a compress.

“Here, use this as well.” Haverson said, holding out a small jar. “It will stop the bleeding faster.”

While the others looked around somewhat helplessly, Thompson applied the salve and the compress.

“Well, it doesn't look life threatening, but he probably shouldn't be moving around. As much as I hate to say it, we should probably wait for a day until it clots up.” Haverson said, eying the wound.

“Gods, how many days are we going to lose? This was supposed to be a two day mission, three at most!” Greyson said. “Apologies, Samuel, but I think we should keep on moving.” He looked into the shadows suddenly. “I really don't want to stay down here longer than absolutely necessary.”

“You're not seriously considering leaving him here?” Germain said. “That's practically murder!”

Samuel moaned from behind them, Thompson letting Haverson take over the treatment.

“I agree with both of you.” Thompson said. “We can't leave him here. That would be tantamount to a death sentence. But at the same time, we have limited food and water, five days at most for all of us. If we wait, it might be a death sentence for us all. You remember the way in, all those passages? I want a solid two days of food for the way out, even though it should only need one.”

“So what do you suggest?” Elban asked, blocking out Samuel's whimpers.

“Alexander takes Samuel back up one level to where it was more...normal. We can give them their share of the food and water in case they have to leave. Even in his state, I'm sure Samuel can remember the way out. He'll have to. We only have one map.”

“And what then?” Germain asked, “We're still in the middle of nowhere.” He pointed out.

“Look, out of here, he's fine. He'll lose a little blood, probably more from exertion, but he's not about to die, not unless it gets infected.” Thompson said. “There's little more we could do, even if we got all the way back to wildermark, its not like there's a healer there.”

“Well, that raises a question I've had for a bit. All these traps and nasty stuff, why no healer? We could have used one badly.” Spiker said, massaging a bruised shoulder from being thrown earlier.

“Have you seen a healer recently?” Thompson asked, “the temples won't let them leave anymore, everyone has to come to them. I've heard it said that Geremon's lot have disappeared as well.”

“Hmm. The temple in Dor's Crag has been closed for months.” Haverson remarked. “In the south lands as well?”

Thompson and Elban nodded. “The healers that are left are either hidden in their temples or scooped up by the damn lords for their armies” Thompson said. “Hiring just one would have been as expensive as you three.” He said, pointing at Haverson, Aster and Germain. Spellswords and veterans did not come cheap.

“Alexander. Are you ok with this?” Haverson asked. The large man nodded and looked at Samuel.

“I'll do it.” he said, Aster noticing that he was doing his best impression of gravely deep voice. It hardly worked, but no one else seemed to care.

“Then its settled. We will come back for you on our return with the book. If we don't show at an appreciable time, head back up without us. If we come back up and you are gone, we're not looking around for you. Got it?” Thompson said.

Alexander nodded.

After a moment to allow the division of supplies, they split, heading down the staircase.

Aster took a last look at the two.

Alexander waved goodbye. Samuel to his side, lay against a pillar. She hurried down the staircase after the party.

Whatever force had inflicted itself against the library seemed to become more terrible the deeper they descended. Where they had left Samuel, the shelves had merely been smashed. Here, four floors deeper, there wasn't even anything left of them. Terrible cracks rent the floor, some large enough to even see through, if there had been light beneath them. The magical lighting system it seemed had completely failed this far down.

Aster stared at the destruction with growing apprehension. The party drew close by the torches and stayed very close together, as if even going close to the darkness would spell doom.

Elban and Greyson whispered to one another, Thompson paranoid as always, looked for glyphs or symbols only he could see, followed closely by Germain, who had his sword constantly drawn. Haverson, guarding the back, kept one hand on his sword and one on his torch and was the only one to try to peer into the darkness. Spiker and Aster in the middle had also drawn their weapons.

“Do you feel that?” She asked, the breeze now uncomfortably warm. “Its changed and definitely stronger.”

“The breeze is the least of our concerns, the floor is ruined here, watch your step.” Thompson said, dismissively. “Its these damn staircases. I must admit, it was easier with Samuel. I have the mind for the magical ones, but he had the more mundane ones down. I think I might need help come the next staircase.” He admitted.

“We can't afford to send two more people up, and no one is traveling alone down here. Haverson or Aster, you seem to have the best eyes. Come help me. I think I can make out another of those damn spike triggers on this next stair. Perhaps the elves have become too predictable… Oh shit!”

His monologue was cut short as Aster felt a tiny jolt of static on her skin.

“Everyone down!” Thompson yelled.

The party dropped just in time. Something nasty, amorphous and magical arced across where they just had been, impacting with the floor and ate it away voraciously bubbling as it went, not unlike the monster they had faced earlier.

“What they hell was that?” Spiker demanded.

Thompson was silent.

“Is it safe to stand up?” Germain asked, as they all knelt on the cracked floor.

“Yes.” Thompson said, curtly. “I admit. I missed that one. My own damn fault for running my mouth. But there definitely is a spike trap on the next stair.” He said, trying to redeem himself, pointing towards the next steps down.

The darkness hung in the air, shimmering somehow. It was as if the air starting with the steps down was some completely different medium, like sky meeting water.

She pulled Haverson's arm and pointed. “Can you see that?” She whispered.

“Yeah...” He said cautiously. “Hold up Thompson. Whats with that next stair. Why is the air...shimmering on it? Another trap?”

Thompson, to his credit, stopped walking instantly, holding back Germain as well.

“Whats that? Shimmering? Thats funny. You're right, but I don't feel anything magical… Germain, do you?”

“No.” Germain admitted, “But that sort of thing really isn't my strong suit. I trust your judgement if you say there's nothing there.”

“Well wait,” Thompson countered, stopping the whole group. Spike muttered under his breath, clearly annoyed at stopping so frequently.

“I said it wasn't magical. I didn't say there was nothing there. Haverson, your torch?”

He and Thompson lifted their lights above them, casting what light they had into the stairwell.

“Gods. Its something like that blob thing isn't it?” Elban said, clutching his weapon.

“No,” Thompson said, “its just… like the air is distorted. Blackness, definitely, but no substance. Like smog but clear.” He said, drawing closer to the stairs.

Frowning suddenly, he drew his hand and his headband gem shone.

Aster, Spiker and Germain jumped back.

A beam of force shot from his hands, impacting with the steps. “I'm tired of all this bullshit!” He yelled suddenly, snarling.

The steps exploded. Pieces of carefully constructed and hidden trap flew through the air. “The whole god damn thing is trapped!” He yelled, more beams flying from his fingertips, blowing the steps into tiny mechanisms.

Breathing heavily, he stopped to admire his handiwork.

The wavering darkness still lay below, but the traps had definitely been disabled permanently, their twisted fragments lay broken on the scorched steps.

“That was a powerful spell.” Haverson whispered to Aster.

“And that god damn darkness!” Thompson apparently wasn't done with his little fit. Plumes of flame erupted from his hands, washing over the steps and cascading into the darkness.

“Burn your darkness!” He yelled as the tongues of flame descended the stairs.

But whatever the darkness was, the flames did nothing to it. As the magic ended, the whole miasma rolled back, like the aftermath of a child dropping a rock into a pond. After a few moments, it was as if nothing had ever happened.

“Ah. Sorry about that.” Thompson said, again breathing heavily, but made no further attempt to apologize.

Elban and Greyson looked each other, concerned, but said nothing. Germain shook his head. “No use standing around. Its not magical, so it might just be some sort of fog? I have the best chance of surviving something poisonous, I will go first.”

Thompson move to the side and allowed the big man to go around him, taking his torch as he passed. He tentitively approached the steps. Kicking aside some of the sharper pieces of the trap remains, he took one step down.

He held his torch out in front of him and slowly took another step, peering downward as he did so.

He walked down step by step until Aster was sure he was in the darkness, the air shimmering slightly around him.

“Anything?” Greyson asked.

Germain looked around, and shrugged. “Its not poison whatever it is. Probably not good for us, but it doesn't seem to be harmful. It gets warmer down there.” He added, coming back up to meet them.

He looked fine, so the party decided to begin the descent.

The next floor was stifling. The breeze blew still, even stronger, but it was now cloyingly warm. Rubble was all around them, covering the entire floor and forced them to scramble unceremoniously over pile of rock. The carefully carved pillars were missing whole chunks, the floor pocked marked with splotches of darkness where the rock had given way.

“Gods, its warm to the touch!” Greyson said, holding up a palm sized stone, feeling it.

But for some reason, that fact didn't lend any satisfaction, the warmth seemed empty somehow to Aster, more like recently cooled flesh than bath coals…

“ehhh” She said, involuntarily, dropping the stone Greyson had passed to her.

They clambered over the rubble, only to see that the next staircase was almost completely destroyed. Carpeted with debris, they couldn't even check for traps thoroughly, although Thompson was sure that any would have been destroyed by whatever had caused the damage.

He proved thankfully to be correct as they half descended, half slid down the stair ramp.

“The vault!” Greyson shouted!

Everyone spun to look at him.

Excited, he tore the torch from Haverson's hands and held it near the edge of a gaping hole in the next floor.

“Right there!” Careful not to get too close to the edge, he pointed down through almost four stories of emptiness.

At the edge of their vision, they saw a faint glow. The shape of a the vault, a massive door was unmistakable once you knew what you were looking at, but it took more concentration than it should have. The air warped and spun, distorting whatever light came from below, causing the world beneath them to elongate and scrunch sporadically.

“I really don't feel good about this.” Haverson said. “Something is wrong about this whole thing: the shimmering business, the vault. Why is it lit? Why is this whole place destroyed? It just feels terribly wrong!”

Aster exhaled, realizing she had been holding her breath for some time. Haverson had hit the nail on the head, saying what she had felt ever since they had left Samuel and Alexander, ever since the library had started crumbling around them.

“Well, theres nothing to it.” Thompson said. “We were hired to get into this vault. There it is. There's some weird stuff around it, I agree, but we don't really have a choice. What else would we do?”

“Stop and think! We're missing something about this place; about this mission. I have no idea what will happen if you go down into that stuff, but I assure you, it won't be good.”

The others watched the two argue but it was hard to tell who agreed with whom.

“Perhaps you Northerners are scared?” Thompson said dismissively. “Elban you have your tools? Spiker, Come down there with me. We'll get that door open.”

Thompson watched, as the half group walked down the last staircase.

“I don't know what's come over Thompson, but I'm not about to let Elban and him go down there alone, regardless of what that stuff is.” Greyson said.

“Can we just think about this one second? A vault, Silent library, there’s signs of damage...this dark haze...” Haverson paced back and forth.

“Something bad is about to happen.” Germain said.

Everyone who was left looked at him.

“Oh, no magic or anything, I can't actual feel anything magically, just a… regular feeling. And if something bad is about to happen, its best we face it as a team.” Germain pointed out.

“Look, I agree, but there's nothing forcing any of our hands except food and water. We're doing ok; there’s no reason to rush things!” Haverson cried, trying to voice insubstantial notions of danger.

“We're having our decision taken from us.” Aster said, pointing down the staircase.

“They're almost at the bottom.”

Haverson cursed loudly and motioned for the rest of the team to follow him.

“You're right, I guess Germain. Better it be all together.”

The cathedral like room towered above them, far bigger and cavernous than anything Aster had ever seen before in her life. In fact, it was bigger than any room she had ever seen period, even the strongholds of the capitol and the mansion fortresses of the grand merchants paled in comparison.

Massive columns arced their way up the vaulted ceiling, but unlike the previous floors, there were none in the middle, the center of the room was unobstructed, creating a breathtakingly large space. Instead, the columns on the sides of the chamber were of cyclopean proportions. Easily the size of small houses, they ribbed the space from floor to ceiling, basically supporting the whole weight the entire library.

The ceiling was blackened, but Aster could make out reliefs carved into its length, some depicting people, others seemed to be passages from texts. The attention to detail was stunning, even after heavy abuse, without any paint coloring, using only texturing of the stone itself, the elves had managed to create pictures of immense beauty.

Aster found herself staring at a particular image of a warrior princess, wielding a clearly magical spear against some massive beast. However, just as soon as she stared at the ceiling, her eyes were wrenched downward in curiosity and horror at the murky blurred floor beneath them.

The staircase descended the whole height of the room, snaking downward until it disappeared into the torch lit half darkness of the floor. Even though it was as wide as any road she had ever seen, the lack of any remaining handholds near the edge terrified her.

She saw the first group reach the bottom, then stop, as if not sure of what to do next. She saw them looking at the group following them. Thompson gestured towards the vault and they started out again.

The air became thicker and hotter as they descended, becoming almost like a liquid. Moving through it seemed almost difficult. Aster reminded herself that it was almost definitely an illusion of some sort, but she had never come across an illusion that hadn't vanished when interacted with.

They silently came to the bottom. The floor was scorched black, the gray blue stone immolated as if the fires of the earth god themselves had poured onto their surface. Such was the damage, that at times, the rock once had melted like wax, before freezing in its current form.

“Haverson, what kind of force could do such a thing?” She asked, breaking the silence.

Not wanting to be caught listening, the rest of the group pretended not to be interested in the answer.

But Haverson didn't have any good response.

“Nothing we want to run across. It must have been magic of some sort. I know of no natural force capable of such things.” He said, crouching, running his hand over the melted stone of the floor. Suddenly though, he pulled his hand back and straightened, a frown crossing his face.

“Whats wrong?” Greyson asked, concern in his voice, clearly imagining the worst.

“Nothing, its just… Its still warm to the touch.”

“What does that mean?” The miner asked. “Is it possible we're near an earth opening of some sort? I've heard horror stories, ones miners make up, of rivers of melted rock bursting from walls, but I never thought I would actually see such fantasies...” He clenched the straps of his tool bag close.

“Its probably nothing. If this place can trick the eye and the mind, why not the hand as well?” Haverson said, brushing off the peculiarity.

It was clear that this answer satiated no one however, and although the group walked after Thompson and the rest in silence, the concern was just as palpable as the thick hot air that blanketed them.

If the room had appeared large from their vantage point from above, it was unbelievably large now that they were having to walk across it. Had Aster not seen the edge of the room earlier, and had the dim torch light of the vault not illuminated some of the room, Aster would have been sure they had all fallen into some primordial blackness, some sort of shapeless other world.

As they closed on the vault Aster could make out mounds of debris. The floor's massive blocks have been wrenched from their place on the ground and slit asunder by some force, and in the middle of these impacts lay the remains of boulders the size several oxen put together.

It took Aster a moment to connect things in her mind before looking up. Far above them, and almost invisible, the next floor up was hardly visible. She thought back to the wretched holes in the last floor and suddenly she understood.

However, as her eyes accustomed themselves to the light, she began to see larger and strange piles lying on the ground. Definitely not stone, the strange geometries of the piles and the thin plate like nature of the twisted, melted pieces, spoke more to metal than stone, but clearly no metal she had ever seen. Perhaps by destruction or perhaps by intent, it was black as the night sky, and only cruel gashes in some of the larger pieces betrayed its metal nature, reflecting light as metal does when it is scratched.

Aster knew better than to ask Haverson about the piles. They had truly journeyed beyond the comprehension of man at this point. Clearly uninformed, her questions, and the accompanying hollow answers would only scare the others. So she said nothing.

The piles got larger and larger, debris clustered the ground, but so large was the space to begin with that, unlike the previous floor, vast areas of uncovered space were left for the party to weave their way through, still following the other group.

Haverson half heatedly checked for traps to begin with, but it soon became clear that the destruction wrought on the area had long ago destroyed anything left in the dark for them.

They caught up with the other group only after they had reached the vault door.

The door itself was just as large as the room that it lay it. Nearly three stories tall, it took out drastically from the rest of the room, not only because it was lit by torches but also because the stone involved in its construction was completely different from anything they had seen so far. Solid stone, the seam between the two leaves of the door was almost imperceptible. There was no indication of how to open it.

Unlike the rigid and cold feeling rough pale blue stone that the rest of the library had been made out of, the vault was constructed out of smooth white stone, obsessively polished until it reflected the light shone on it.

Into this surface was etched the symbol of a great oak tree, no doubt representing the elves former nature. Around the tree were other symbols of elven culture: stars, an open book, flowers of various varieties. These smaller symbols twisted their way among the branches of the stree, yet were highlighted in what looked like actual silver, poured or ingeniously set into the stone.

Yet, although it was a work of art, it was also not without purpose. The elves had clearly prided themselves on achieving both: as Aster looked closer, some of the branches betrayed themselves as runes of some sort, yet were disturbingly hard to actually focus on. The branches seemed to ungulate in the flickering torchlight, giving motion to what should have been static embellishments.

Clearly there was magic at work in the vault door. This was unfortunate, seeing as they needed to gain access to the vault, and the only was seemed to be through the door.

“Ah, so you decided to come after all?” Thompson gloated. “Perhaps you Northerners aren't so cravenly after all! Just think what would have happened if the defenders had displayed half as much courage during the war? Why West Field might still be Northern!” He said, goading them.

Greyson scowled, but Haverson refused to be provoked.

“Well, we're here now.” Haverson said, waving his arm back and forth through the shimmering air around them. “And I suppose this stuff is harmless, whatever it is, although the heat is concerning.”

“Well, you know what they say, too hot in the kitchen...” Thompson said with an evil grin on his face, fingering his headband.

“Enough banter.” Greyson said. “Its time I was of some use. Elban too eh?” He nodded to his Southern counterpart who agreed, walking over to the other miner to talk strategy.

“Fine, fine. Tools for the toolmen.” Thompson said, strangely. “What do you think? Days right? There's no way you can make it though that door.” He said blatantly.

“Hey! What...What's that supposed to mean?” Elban stammered, pride hurt. “I didn't come all this way to just give up!”

Thompson drew closer. Germain answered his movement subtly, hand on his weapon. None of this was lost on Aster, who watched it happen from the back of the group. And neither was it lost on Thompson. His eyes flashed up to the spellsword for an instant before backing down somewhat.

“What I mean is, one hard look at that door will tell you that its magically reinforced. Symbols, sigils, marks and power: etched into the stone like knives into flesh. The library's destruction was spared upon this vault it seems. Or perhaps defeated? Even the best common tools have no chance.” He said dismissively.

The mage's increasinly erratic nature and peculiar way of talking set them on edge, but the rest of the group was glad when he stepped back.

“Still. The merchant hired you for something, might as well let you try.” He said. “I'm going to look around the rest of the room.”

The others waited until he was out of earshot before talking again.

“I apologize for that.” Elban said. “I haven't known him long, but Thompson was always a strange man. His moods change rapidly, too rapidly sometimes. But I think he is a good person at his core, just give him some time.”

Spiker said something under his breath that neither of the others heard. “Look. I got nothing against you people personally. Whatever Thompson want's to drag up from years past is his own problem. There's no reason we can't just get this damn job done with and come out fo it will all our pockets lined with gold, Northern or Southern. Right?”

Haverson nodded.

“Fair enough. Let us take a look.” Greyson said.

The two miners lay out their tools and went to work, running their hands along the massive length of the doorway, sometimes tapping small hammers against the rock of the door.

Germain, out of his element, sat on the floor despite the heat and stared at the vault. Haverson and Aster joined him, watching the other two as they worked.

Spiker got bored almost instantly with the affair and decided to root among the rubble piles they had seen earlier, no doubt looking for gold or other treasure.

“They look like tey know what they're doing.” Aster remarked, a bit surprised.

She had just asumed that the mienrs had been brought along to simply smash through the door. Although, now seeing it in its whole, she realized the folly of that approach.

“Yes.” Haverson said, quietly, so that the two miners couldn't hear him. “When mining gets too repetitive, there are some who learn the skills of extracting much more… complicated materials.”

“So they're thieves.” Aster said, calling him on his weasel words.

“They prefer to think of themselves as artists.” Germain said, jokingly, perhaps a bit too loud.

He drew the attention of Elban who looked back at him sceptically for a moment before winking and returning to work.

The three of them talked at bit, but not about anything too important. The melodic tapping of the hammers and the accompanying murmuring of the miners soon became commonplace, and the warmth of the shifting wavering air around them soon started to have its effect on Aster. She realized that, without any hint of sun to set the time, she had no idea how long they had been in the library. What was clear was that she was dead tired, and there was no pressing reason to be awake. Haverson agreed to take the first watch.

Aster lay on a small circle of stone, cracked and abused from centuries, between the rents in the surface, she could just make out the dull glow of fire. Curious, she peered over the side. The vision below her was almost indescribable. An ocean of liquid rock blazed and churned violently from partially unseen currents, breaking small crusts of solid rock and pulling them into the fray before growing still and repeating the process.

She couldn't look away. The heat was unbearable, searing his face, her hands, her entire body was on fire. The rock beneath her burst impossibly into flames, which ran along her arms and legs until she too was engulfed.

But still she stared on, unable to stop herself. Before long, patterns in the currents began to make themselves clear. A set of common vorticies, feeding one another, linked together in mind bogglingly complex patterns. The shape of the thing started to rise from the liquid, a proposition which somehow scared and amazed her. That something so terrifying yet beautiful could exist!

The bulk of the prescense rose, forcing the frothing bubbling lava from it, coating it, lifting still into the air towards her. A sucking noise came from the liquid around it as it freed itself from its slumber.

It rose, gaining speed, tearing through the void towards her, a star, a nova of eye searing heat and brightness, at once both formless and impossibly complex.

But from its resting place, Aster could see holes in the liquid fire, sharp edges torn from the surface curving inward into blackness darker than blackness. Burned and shattered bones. Hundreds of thousands of them.

And still the thing came towards her. It engulfed her, incinerating her, her flesh melting form her body, soft tissue rupturing under the inexorable assault of heat and searing pain. She felt herself disintigrate, and realized with horror that she was just a skeleton now, burnt and shattered like the rest of them. She felt herself falling into the hole.

She awoke with a start, sweat running down her body.

Glancing to either side, she slowly remembered where she was.

The miners still were working with the door, and had seemed to have made some progress, a small foot wide stone section having been somehow freed from the whole. However, it was clear that they were tired, or at their wits end on how to continue, or both. They worked, but slowly, repeating themselves.

Germain was awake, but barely. The large man rested against his sword, which he had driven into a rubble pile, his whole weight resting on the hilt. His eyes opened and closed, swaying, half trying to sleep, half needing to stay awake.

Haverson was seated on the floor, staring at the doorway.

Aster tugged on his shoulder.

“Enton.” She said, “Something is wrong.”

He didn't respond, continuing to stare at the tree on the vault door. The lines on his face were pronouced in the torchlight. He looked sad.

“Enton.” She said again, this time louder. Germain's eyes opened and stayed open this time.

“Enton!” She said, shaking him as well. “There's something coming! Where are the others?”

“Something coming?” Germain asked, rising slowly to his feet, sword in hand.

“Something big!” She said, shaking him.

His eyes finally shot open. He sprang up causing her to jump back in surprise as he drew his sword.

“What? What? What do you mean?”

The floor shuttered.

“There's something underneath here.” She said, pointing hastily to the floor. “Did you see where Spiker went to?”

“I'm here, I'm here.” Spiker said groggily, his voice comging from around one of the large scrap piles behind them. “What do you want? Is the vault open yet?”

The floor shuttered again, vibrating them in their bones. Aster noticed the heat had grown. It was no longer even suffocating, it now was almost uncomfortable. Her mouth was cracked and dry.

“What in the gods names was that?” Spiker swore, his voice coming from closer, and sounding more alert. “Did Thompson come back?”

“No.” Germain said.

“Oh gods. This is bad.” Aster said.

“Quick! Greyson, Elban. Everyone, come with me.” Haverson ordered. Spiker emerged from behind a pile, eyes bloodshot from sleep, but now very much alert. His weapons were by his side.

“What about the vault?” Elban asked, setting down the chisel he had been holding and grabbing his sword. Greyson did the same.

“Forget it for now. We need to find Thompson.”

Whatever differences they had earlier, the group followed him.

They sprinted through the maze of rubble, dashing amid fallen monoliths and that same strange black metal Aster had seen earlier. Something about it seemed familiar but they didn't have time to stop and check.

The tremors came again, shaking the whole room. Smaller debris fell from the ceiling, landing among them, but luckily, none of it hit them. This time, even the air seemed to vibrate, as if signaling urgency.

They finally found Thompson, who wasn't actually that far from the vault door.

He was sitting near some sort of crude etching in the ground, but when they approached, he sprang to his feet.

“I didn't touch the damn seal, I swear. Whatever it is, it came by itself. Say what you want, but I'm no madman.”

“Thompson,” Haverson said, with a voice as clear and deadly as a steel blade, “what is it?” It was an order.

“I said. A seal. But, notice the crudeness of it? Whoever did this did it quick. Looks like they smashed a whole in the floor, put something there and just filled it up.”

“So whats going on? The tremors?”

The group stood by, nervous and on edge but unsure of how to proceed.

“Don't you feel it?” Thompson said, throwing a hand towards the seal. “Its shattering! Gods, a hundred years too long. Its already fraying at the edges!” He said, voice full of fear for the first time in the whole expedition.

His head twitched around, staring with horror at the seal which was now spurting flame around its circumference.

“Its too late.” he gasped. “Run!” he yelled. I'll try to hold it off.

Greyson and Elban were petrified with fear. “Run where?” He squeaked.

“Come. Up the stairs. Quickly.” Haverson said, taking off at a run.

But Germain stayed still. Haverson looked back.

“You're not taking this on alone.” He said, sword blazing with energy.

“You pathetic fool. Do you understand how strong this thing is? Run with the rest of them!”

But Germain and Haverson stayed.

Germain looked surprised when Haverson put a hand on his shoulder.

“Tales. I have a suspicion of what this is. I may be of some help. Aster, the rest, you get upstairs as quickly as you can and keep running! Find Alexander and Samuel. At least someone will be able to tell that brainless merchant what he stirred up.”

Spiker, Greyson and Elban needed no second coaxing.

“Lets get the hell out of here!” Spiker yelled, soon taking the lead.

The edges of the seal were already peeling away, the symbols etched into the stone itself somehow lifting into the air and incinerating before their eyes.

Thompson's headband shone, and he adopted a fighting stance. Haverson drew his sword. Germain's was already drawn, but he ran his hand down the edge, blood dripping down it as he did.

“I'm casting a shield. If this heat is any indication, we will need it to protect ourselves from the flames.” he cried, as the ground shook once more. This time though it didn't stop.

A pale light ran itself over the four people.

Aster looked down at her hands, clenching them, feeling the strange tingling of the shield.

She was hesitant, but one look at Haverson's face showed her how determined he was. Her eyes fell on her sword as well.

“Don't even think about it.” He roared, looking backwards at her, weapon trained on the seal.

A decision was made.

Aster ran.

The floor trembled once again, a terrible and foreboding heave, forcing Haverson, Thompson and Germain to catch their balance. From underneath them, the whole slab under the seal deformed, the rock starting to glow as if the sun itself shone from behind it.

They three backed slowly, wareily eyeing the rupturing floor in front of them.

With a roaring splintering of stone and magic, the last defences of the seal failed, igniting under the power of the trapped entity. A massive object broke the surface of the stone, sending pieces of super heated rock flying at them.

Haverson jumped backward, avoiding the fragments; Thompson incinerated them with magic of his own; Germain laughed and bravely stood his ground. The melted chunks hit him, causing Haverson a second of concern. However, they smeared off a now invisible shield surrounding him, sliding slowly off it to the ground.

As the object clawed at the floor, Haverson realized that, despite the fact that it was the size of a fully grown man, it was in fact a hand. Soon a second one followed. The other two didn't wait for whatever it was to make its full appearance.

Thompson, forasking his usual fire, raised his hands toawrds one of the hands, cascades of pure magic ripping from his gesture, the pale blue of some spell Haverson had seen many times before. One, then two, then tends of singular seeking bolts arced from Thompson and impacted thunderously against the hand, throwing up a cloud of dust as the sheer force of the attack pulzerized the rock near it.

Germain, not to be outdone, ran forward, and swung his mighty sword against the other hand, the power of the swing burning the air as he attacked. The impact reverberated up Germain's arm, and Haverson saw him wince in pain. With a curse, the spellsword lept backwards. There was a small mark where he had attacked, not a dent but a discoloration in the black metal. Haverson had a chilling feeling that whatever effect Germain's attack had, was only surface deep.

“Whatever this is, its tough!” Germain said, grinning, running more power through his sword.

“You idiots. We're all going to die.” Thompson spat, turning to the other two. “Its a warmachine! You ever wonder why there are so many Elven ruins but not so many elves? We have no chance.” Thompson said, depressingly.

“I don't care what it is, or how powerful.” Germain boasted. “Im going to destroy it, and you're going to help. After all that god damn talk, I'm not going to let you run from this, not in your miserable little life.”

“Oh, I never said I was going anywhere. Just watch and see. We have stirred the proverbial wasps nest, but get ready for tigers instead.”

Haverson slunk slowly back even more, readying himself, old and now little used phrases going through his head. His reflexes were slow, his body was old. Could he ever hope to accomplish what he had when he was younger? He would have to see. His thin blade appeared in his hand, and in a split second, he almost regretted destroying his old one. But it was only a passing second.

The two hands braced themselves against the sides of the floor and a wrenching metal on metal noise was heard.

A head emerged from the pit, and then shoulders, connecting with the arms and hands. Finally, the body forced itself upwards rising to its full height.

While not quite as massive as its surroundings, the warmachine was easily a story tall, dwarfing even Germain. If it were a human, which it certiannly wasn't, its bodily proportions would have made it especially stocky, with impossibly think arms and legs.

Its body was made up of several solid pieces of strange black metal, but a good foot was unprotected where each of the pieces joined one another. In side these gaps, Haverson could see the molten flow of liquid fire: an almost primordial energy seemingly half contained within the humanlike vessel.

Strangely, he could also make out the distinct movement of mechanisms within the warmachine: gears, pulls, and torsion columns spun and whirred, bathed within the caustic glow. Even stranger, the mechainisms didn't even seem to intermesh in any way Haverson could see, spinning one way and then another as the automoton drew itself out of the pit.

Where its face should have been, there was a massive single peiced helmet, at the center of which was a T. Like the joints of the dread construct, it blazed fire, but unlike them, no machinery spoiled the simmering flames. An impossibly hot, blindingly bright fire lay within, blurring the line between fire and magic. It had no eyes or ears or nose, and Haverson guessed that it must receive information magically.

Such a thing had not been seen in centuries, the elfbane machines had disappeared after the war, perhaps humanity having been to ashamed of their use to keep them.

Thompson didn't intend to guess at its intensions. He wanted it gone. Another volly of magical force emerged from his hands and hammered into the warmachine's torso. Although the magical attack didn't seem to harm the thing very much, the force of it was undeniable: the automoton's great metal feet screamed along the floor as it was pushed back.

Thompson allowed half a grin before the thing counter attacked.

It raised its hands in unison in much the same manner that Thompson had, and from its core, searing power burst forth.

Like a spray of pure sun, the twin arcs burned their way into Haverson's eyes, leaving after images dancing even following the attack.

Thompson, clearly not ready for such a quick response, was engulphed in the flames. When they subsided, he lay on the floor, panting, his eyes wide and his headband burning, but otherwise unharmed.

He shot a quick look at Germain, who grinned and slammed a gauntleted hand into his chest, reverberating off the shield that surrounded him.

Thompson quickly got to his feet as the thing looked at him and unleashed a cry. Haverson had no way to describe it, only as the screech of metal on metal combined with the deepest stentorian singer he had ever heard, screaming.

Germain swung his sword at it, a purple blaze of energy leaving the edge of it as he did so. The automoton raised an arm in self defense and the crescent of energy broke around it. Undaunted, Germain dashed forward, to try another physical attack.

Thompson heald his forehead as if trying to remember something that he had forgotten, and a sliver of dark ice colelesced in his hand. Grasping the javalin, he cast it at the warmachine with must have been magic augmented force.

The elfbane machine reached out impossibly quick and grabbed the sliver of ice from mid air, turn at it breifly as if to stare at how pathetic it was, and then quickly metled it in its hand, grushing it into steam in one solid motion.

With the other hand, it swung at Germain, who was forced to block the blow with his sword. Germain's muscles bulged as the massive attack connected with his sword, not only suddenly arresting his movment but also throwing him back.

Undaunted, Germain used his sudden backwards momentum to his advantage, rolling backwards and rising to his feet, all somehow without catching on his sword.

“What a foe!” Germain said in awe, his grin growing wider.

“You going to do something old man?” Thompson asked Haverson.

Haverson, who indeed had taken no action against the metal behemoth, simply shook his head. “I will strike when it is time.”

“Whatever.” Thomspon said, motioning to Germain. “You and me spellblade. Lets see if we can make this thing bleed.”

“With pleasure.” Germain said, running again towards the construct. Clearly not very improvising in its defense responses, it reacted in the same way, counter attacking mid dash, threatening to take Germain off guard.

This time however, Germain was clearly ready. He spun asire and he ran, the blow passing effortlessly past him, opening up the metal golem to direct attack. He stoped in a second, right before the thing, and, slashing upward, his blade smashed into the bottom of its face.

The purple shine along its edge came into being as the attack made contact, as the two magically reinforced substances slammed into one another. This time, a small nick appeared in the bottom of the thing's helmet face, where its chin would have been.

Like before, although it wasn't massively affected by the attack, it had no recourse against its momentum, and the whole warmachine staggered backward, head snapping back at the force of the attack.

At the same time, Thompson had finished a quick verbal enchantment, which Haverson recognized as a power enhancement. Violet beams of moonlight sprung into life aimed purposefully at the elfbane's feet. Even without doing much damage, the force of the magic swept the thing's feet out from under it. Combined by coincidence with Germain's similarly directed attack, the combined torques wrenched the machine from its stance and twisted it into the air, causing it to come down hard on the stone.

The pavers cracked when it fell, spider veins runnig from the impact. Germain sprang up onto its torso and smashed hit after hit into its face. Thompson tried some kind of binding spell to keep it on the ground.

However, he had only gotten a few words into it, when the metal giant stirred, bursting through his magical tethers. It grabbed Germain in one of its massive hands and came to its knees, leaning forward slightly, clearly putting all its mechanical power towards crushing the spellblade to death.

Thompson attacked with a flashy and violent, but ultimately useless series of attacks.

“Ughhhh!” Germain grunted, his shield cracking under the onslaught.

Haverson saw the searing core of the warmachine redirect energy through its arm, clearly to enhance its deadly attack.

Suddenly Haverson found himself running towards the thing's arm, where Germain was being crushed.

Thompson cried out in anger at the inneffictiveness of his attacks, and a torrent of fire poured from his hands, engulfing one side of the warmachine.

Haverson knew that Thompson's attack wouldn't even distract the monster. He had to act, but was still surprised at his ouwn courage.

Germain saw haverson spring forward, the old man readying his weapon. With shocking speed for one so old Haverson put all his force into the blow and stabbed into the machine.

The peircing attack went straight through the golem's arm's joint and speared a gear lying there. Ripping it from its rightful place, its severed the magical connections which guided the machine.

The warmachine bellowed but refused to let Germain go, even as Thompson bathed its entirity in another shower of molten fire.

Germain, seeing the success of Haverson's attack, cried out.

“Infinite will. Infinite strength!” His muscles bulgin as he forcably pushed, inch by inch, the automoton's hand apart. Sweat poured down Germain's body as Haverson dodged back, out of attack range.

The mechanism controlling the arm and hand momentarily disturbed, Germain tore free and jumped backwards.

Thompson had regained his composure, and had reverted back to more effectual, non fire based attacks. More speficially an empowered version of the ice spear he had launched earlier. Tens of them rained down on its side, lightly denting it and extinguishing some of the flames that ran along its body.

The automonon rose to its feet again and stared down at it arm. Supposedly unable to get it fully working again, it started spinning it at the end of its shoulder like a flail. Gaining a frightening amount of momentum, it tried to smash Thompson into bits.

Not expecting the attack to come against him, Thompson was not quite quick enough to dodge the attack. The bulk of metal hammering into his side sending him sprawling. His sheild looked damaged, though in not as bad of a shape as Germain's.

As it hammered Thompson, it also attemped to step on Germain, raising its foot and driving it down with sudden and horrible force.

Germain slid past the attack and, seeing how effective Haverson's own efforts had been, delivered a definitive attack on the joint of the disabled arm.

The spellblade sliced through the enchantments holding the arm segments together to the shoulder in one sudden swing, causing them to rupture with a sound like cracking firewood. But Germain followed through with the attack, carrying it far through the arm itself.

Through a combination of pure strength, magic and skill Germain cut the arm straight off. It hung in the air in a parabolic moment, before crashing to the floor.

Whether or not the thing could actually feel pain was still up in the air, but it definitely reacted. The massive follow through required by the swing had put Germain in a exposed stance, and a second attack by the warmachine's other fist smashed into him. He was knocked off his feet and into the ground.

Not satisfied with this brutal attack, the warmachine stood up fully in one wrenching motion and directed its T shaped helmet at Germain. The searing light within roiled and shone even brighter.

“Get up you fool!” Thompson said, increasing the strength of his magical attacks in an attempt to divert the automaton’s attention.

Haverson was too far away to do anything, and could only stand and watch.

A bar of pericing light connected the warmachine's head and Germain's body as he saught to ran. The light engulfed him covering him from head to toe in power so concerntrated, Haverson couldn't even stand to look at the attack.

Out of the corner of his eye as he looked away, he could make out the onslaught washing over Germain, burning its way clear through the floor.

When Haverson looked back again, Germain had fallen face first to the floor.

Aster, Greyson and Elban chased after Spiker up the massive stairs. Below them the could feel the earth rumble as whatever had been trapped in the seal released itself. With no rail separating them from the drop beside them, they narrowly clung to the wall, even as they rushed up the stairs.

“Watch out! The next stair is loose!” Aster said, pointing at a section trembling from the events below.

Greyson and Elban dashed across it, but after they did so, the section, weakened by hundreds of years of neglect, fell away down the great distance to the bottom, where in smashed into the floor.

Aster had just enough time to change her course of action, and she lept over the gap. All around them, the rock shook and quaked. She just made out Spiker at the top, dashing away from the stairs.

When the other three got there, though, he was already gone.

“What?” Elban asked, looking around the ruined library floor. There was no sign of the man who had been there just several seconds earlier.

It was then that they noticed several passages that they had missed on the way down, being cleverly hidden so as to be hard to spot when descending.

“You don't think he would go off alone do you?” Aster asked, breathing heavily from the sprint up the stairs.

Greyson swept his hand around the room. “Well, he sure isn't here anymore. Maybe he though he was just going up to the next foor? All these passages look pretty simmilar.”

“We haven't cleared any of them!” Elban pointed out. “What should we do?”

His inquiry was cut off by the sounds of battle from downstairs.

“He knew not to run off alone.” Greyson said coldly. “We should not go after him. Thompson had the map, and both our magic users are gone. We have no way of clearing or even detecting magical traps anymore. The way we came in is our only safe route from now on.”

The sounds of the battle downstairs grew louder: the crack of magic, and the clang of steel caught their attention. Despite the situation, they stole closer to one of the gaping holes in the floor to observe.

On her stomach, careful not to fall down the edge, Aster peered over. Thompson and Germain were battering the warmachine. She could not see Haverson. She gasped and rolled back from the edge.

“What is that thing?” She asked the others, who had also joined her in watching the fight.

“I have no idea.” Elban admitted. “I've never seen or heard about anything like it.”

Greyson was silent, listening to the unearthly bellowing of the machine.

“I have. Just tales and smudges of pictures. Once when I served with the military corp of engineers, I had orders to retreive an very old tome from their library. I was just a errand boy then, and I was fascinated by the books, more than I had ever seen in my life. Most of them obviously were about geology, but some were about the great Elven wars.”

“We Northerners say we like to remember our mistakes as much as our victories, but I imagine there is scarse history about that time. Its as if we all tried to forget aobut it.”

“This is one of the tools we created to bring about the Elves' destruction. The one I read about was an account by someone who had found the remains of one buried under Mellont. He had drawn a crude figure of something like that.” He said pointing down at the elfbane.

“So its ours?” Aster asked, confused. “Whats it doing here? And why would it attack us?”

“I can't claim to know for sure, but I imagine its been here the whole time, hundreds of years. Who knows why it would attack us, someone obviously seal it away, but its been so long. Perhaps its orders have been corrupted somehow, or if it is alive, perhaps it has gone insane. Its creators are also long since dead, perhaps their control over it vanished with them. I can't claim to know how it works.”

The idea of a deranged automaton disturbed Aster.

“You mean it could have been alive down there, trapped for all these hundreds of years?” She asked.

Greyson just shook his head.

They were alerted back to the fighting as Germain and Thompson worked together to flip the machine.

“Yeah!” Elban cheered.

Aster looked around. “Teamwork… Surely there must be something we can do to help as well.”

Greyson looked at her. “That there is a battle of titans. I don't know what Haverson is playing at, but he probably should have come up here with us. We would have no chance against something like that.”

Aster ignored the comment and continued to think, speaking out loud. “Well obviously we can't personally do any damage to it. But perhaps some of these traps could. No… its not following us and we have no way to move them. Her eyes scanned the room, resting on the hole in the floor.”

“Wait, that’s perfect!” She cried, grabbing both of the other's attentions.

“We can't hit it hard enough, but I bet if we pushed one of these stones over the edge, we could let the fall do it for us!”

She pointed to a human sive pile of debris, among which there was a very large piece of masonry, presumably from the ceiling above this one.

“I think we're better off running.” Elban said, dejectedly. “We would have to rely on luck to get it under us. And we would just as likely hit Germain or Thompson.”

“No, I like the idea.” Greyson said. “It sounds like something the corps would have done. Fantastic machines, daring infeasible sounding plans! We may have left our tools downstairs, but I still have a bit of rope.” He said, surveying the area.

“We can use those bits of the smaller columns to roll the piece to the edge. Come on, you call yourself a miner?” He taunted Elban.

Elban looked around warily at the materials Greyson had referred to. “Yeah, a miner. Maybe a thief. But not a sapper. You Northern engineers are crazy!”

Greyson strode up to him, Elban released a squeek, trying to jump back, but Greyson caught him by the shirt. “Listen here. If we have a chance to help we're going to take it. None of that sniveling. You want to bring nations into this? Fine, you Southerners are a bunch of spineless cowards, and your miners seem to be even worse. Where did you work? A tiny little hill? Were you moving dirt around all day for the farmers?”

“You shut your mouth.” Elban said, a dark look coming over him. Aster caught sight of a dagger on his belt, and made sure to be ready to act if his hand slipped any closer to it than it already was.

But he had been effectively goaded. “Fine. Stupid crazy plan. If we crush any of them, the mage's curse is on you!” He said. He was silent after that comment as if trying to let the weight of what he said sink in. But Greyson just grinned. “You Southerners are a superstitious lot. Thompson can't cast any curses. He's not that kind of mage.”

Then, directed at Aster, “Grab those column pieces.”

They went to work, even as the fight thundered on below them. They were also fabulously lucky, both that there were cylindrical objects to use as rollers and also that their target monolith was already lifted from the floor, supported by smaller pieces of debris. They would have had no chance of lifting it: it would have taken a whole team or two to lift, even with proper equipment.

Aster carried the column segments over one at a time, sometimes having to drag the larger pieces. Meanwhile, the two miners cleared the smaller debris from the boulder of choice, freeing it.

In a surprisingly quick amount of time, they had most of their plan executed.

However, the hardest part lay before them. They had to knock out the pieces of stone trapped under the boulder and replace them with the column segments.

Greyson targeted the first one. “We need to push it together. Come on. Otherside we'll never get these rollers under there!”

With all their might they rammed the column segment uder the boulder, displacing the debris. The boulder rocked dangerously, threatening to tip the wrong way, and even worse, come down on them.

“Ah crap.” Greyson cursed, throwing himself against the massive rock. Aster and Elban joined him a moment later, stabilizing it.

The other two proved to be easier. Apparently the weight had mostly been on the first.

“No comes the next challenge. If the column was damaged enough, these rollers just might fall apart rather than roll. Lets try giving it a push.” He said to Elban.

“Aster, get ready with that roller.”

They push forward on the boulder, straining against the friction. Finally it budged a bit, crazking two of the rollers as it did so.

Greyson cursed and inspected the damage. One had cracked on the side, but the other had been crushed in the middle.

“Hopefully we can still roll it with two.” Greyson said, signalling to Elban to help him again.

They push and strained, tryinging different configurations of the two bracing against the boulder. Finally it came loose again, and Aster successfully was able to slip another column under it as it progressed.

They repeated the process two more times until the boulder lay just within tipping distance of the hole.

“Aster, is it clear? Will we even hit the thing?”

Aster peered downward.

Thompson stood his ground against the warmachine alone, while off to the side, Haverson ran to Germain and started helping him to his feet.

“The gods must be looking at us even all the way down here. Its perfect. Push it!” She cried, running back to help them.

With one final heave, the wagon sized boulder tipped over the ledge, and along with the column segments and a bit of the floor, disappeared over the edge.

Haverson rushed to Germain's side, letting Thompson take the brunt of the attack for a moment.

The spellsword lay beaten and seared into the ground. He was not moving. Around him, the floor itself lay mangled still smouldering. Haverson looked down at the damage, which burst clear through into some black sub basement and shuddered.

Despite the force of the attack, Germain looked like he might still be alive. Physical shards of his sheild, broken and half melted by the ray, evaporated into the air, even that hadn't been enough though. Germain's form was burnt badly, despite layer upon layer of enchantment. Even worse, the sigils on his body had been burned clear off: something that Haverson didn't even think possible.

His sword lay half melted next to him, the arm holding it clearly broken at a naseuous angle.

Haverson didn't even know what to do. So he simply grabbed his waterskin poured some through Germain's lips.

Amazingly, the spellsword stirred. He groaned in agony, consciousness slowly returning.

“Easy. You took quite a blast there.” Haverson wanted to let the other man recover, but a glance over his shoulder told him that Thompson wasn't doing too well against the behemoth.

He lifted the other man off the ground with some effort and started moving as fast as Germain could hobble away from the fight.

Meanwhile, Thompson was doing all he could to keep the warmachine off of him. He had taken another blow in the process, and he had the intuition that hhis sheild wouldn't take much more abuse. Even worse, his fire magic seemed useless against the machine, merely slowing it, and his other magics were rudimentary: he had focused all his life on fire.

Forced back step after step, he realized that although he was still a bit from being drained, that he wasn't going to be able to kill the thing or even incapacitate it. He begrudgingly accepted the fact that Haverson had probably done more damage, when he had exposed its joint weaknesses to Germain.

But the spellsword was out now, and Haverson alone and focused on would probably die in seconds.

These thoughts spun through Thompson's head as he continued his defensive wash of magics.

Suddenly, up above the fight, a movement caught his eye. It took him a moment to realize that he was watching a stone be moved somehow to the edge of a hole in the ceiling.

It was the girl. He knew there must have been something about her, something she hadn't let on. There was no other reason that she would be traveling with two high level adventurers like Haverson and Germain. He would have to be more careful with her in the future. It was possible she was a genius like himself.

Ah, but perhaps not as smart as he. The warmachine was still a foot or two off. He could tell instantly that it would just be a glancing hit. Well then. This was a matter he could correct.

Reaching deep, he summoned one of the two most powerful spells he knew, leaving the other one if things got too close for comfort.

Saying the words of the incantation under his breath, as the warmachine moved on him, he reached into the center of his power. The gem on his forehead lazed out of control, catching on fire. He no longer cared, he was one with the flames and they ran across his skin, smouldering at his clothes.

He turned and unleashed his power onto the automaton.

A bar of light identical to the one the machine had used earlier sprung into existance, but unlike the machine's attack, this one was sustained, the molten fire washing over the chest of the elfbane, finally getting through its horrible resistance. The cursed black metal which had eaten so many of his attacks was melting under his onslaught, bits and pieces of it dripping off etching their way through the floor.

But the spell was done at last, and he got the feeling that he wouldn't get off another. The damaged warmachine clumsily strode towards him, pieces still fading from its body and falling off of it.

The fire trance was gone though, and he had remembered the purpose of the attack in the first place. Was it enough? He looked up. The rock was falling through the air now. Yes. It was enough; he had forced it back in target and hurt it.

He sprang back from the inevitable impact.

The boulder, accelerted through multiple sotries of free fall, impacted with the machine's head, splitting the helm open. The magical bounds that held the construct together resisted for a fraction of a second before giving way to the massive amount of kinetic energy. The helm itself physically couldn't stand either. It crushed under the boulder's descent. But such was the size of the rock, that it continued its way through its neck, ripping through delicate, yet formerly heavily protected internals.

Thompson smiled as he saw the infinitely complex flows of magic snap and give way, floating gears and other mechanisms forced out of place and then crushed.

The rock finally came to a stop near the middle of the machine's torso, having buried all the way through from its head.

The machine stopped and shuddered. Then in one sublime moment, it stopped and fell forward onto the ground. More magical wards shattered with the fall, and mechanics tumbled across the floor catching fire and melting now that their protection was gone.

Thompson gazed at the husk with stisfaction. He could not have said to have killed it, that honor belonged to the girl, a fact that seethed somewhere in the back of his mind, restrained for now, but he had injured it, and without his final attack, it would not have been killed at all.

And killed it was. He and the toher two approached the body slowly. Thompson cautiously held them back examining what he could see without getting too close.

He looked at the boulder, lodged in the things ribcage. Below it was a miniture sun, pulsing dangerously.

“Oh gods, the core. I can feel it.” He yelled to them. “This thing was just energy, barely contained.”

“What? Its dead!” Germain said. “It has to be dead!”

“It is dead!” Thompson yelled. “Thats the problem. Its armor is just metal now, and there's no way it can hold that much energy!”

He felt a part of the magical containment bulge, half recognizing that the skill of the makers dwarfed even his wildest dreams of magical control.

“Then we have to get out of here!” Haverson said, turning to run towards the stairs.

“No, no, there isn't time!” Thompson said, running towards them. “Anything in this room is going to be vaporized!”

“Then what are you doing?” Germain asked, defeated.

Thompson didn't respond, mixing a curse under his breath in with the lengthy incantation for his most powerful spell, one which he had heavily desired to hold in reserve. He had no intention of dying in this place. Some strange compulsion reminded him that he could also bring the other two.

His eyes opened in surprise as he felt the containment of the core bulge again, this time more drastically. Once more and he was sure it would break, and they would all be dead, valient fight or not.

The gem on his forehead this time burned into his flesh, through the insignificant cloth wrappings.

“What are you doing?” Germain cried out again, clearly seeing the side effects of the spell, as Thompson burst into dark hideous flames. Thompson didn't respond, but held the other two close as he finalized a quicker version of the spell.

The containment spell burst. Thompson's eyes shot open, surrounded by burning flesh, he released the spell, or what he had been able to make of it in time, hoping it was enough.

The explosion subsumed them all.

Up above, Greyson, Elban and Aster had just moments to celebrate before Greyson pointed something out.

“Hey, stop for a moment. Thompson is using some very powerful spell. Gods he's all aflame! I've never seen anything like that!”

“Maybe its not dead. Maybe he's finishing it off?” Elban said, from behind them.

Greyson looked downward at the giant metal corpse and sprang backwards. However, he didn't have the time to warn Aster, who stood closer to the hole.

The world exploded into light around them.

Aster was blinded, pure light ripping through the hole in the floor. In a sudden moment of clarity and horror she remembered her dream of being ripped apart, as the floor gave way beneath her. She fell into darkness.

“Ugh…” Germain moaned, collapsed on the floor. Fighting bone crushing surges of pain, he slowly patted out the errant flames still running their way across his already burned body.

“What did you do, mage? Where are we?” Haverson said softly from the dark beside him.

In front of them, Thompson still glowed, the after power of the spell still burning on him, in a much stronger version of what Germain was putting out.

Thompson made no movement to squelch the flames. He stood still, staring straight foreward is if in thought or trance. But he still responded.

“Where else would we be? The only place I knew was safe, with such little warning.”

“And that is where exactly?” Haverson asked, trying to peer into the darkness. But neither Germain's quickly smothered flames nor Thompson's stronger yet somehow darker ones allowed him any visual as to their surroundings.

“The vault of course.” Thompson said, still staring.

“The vault? Inside it? Thompson, I must say, I had no idea you knew spells of such high caliber.” Haverson admitted.

“You have no idea how much power that took.” Thompson said, not showing any signs of fatigue.

“I've encountered three mages who knew how to firewalk, and probably none who could have executed it so rapidly. Thank you for saving us.”

“I have no need for your thanks, to be frank, and to be even more so, something tells me I may even regret my decision.” Thompson said coldly.

Haverson grew silent, looked at Germain, then at Thompson.

“Why so much hate?” Haverson asked. “Surely, I agree that our two nations have their differences, and surely I agree that much innocent blood has been shed on both sides, but don't you think we are quite removed from those events? It has been years after all...”

A small but disquieting noise came from Thompson, which sounded a bit like a growl and a bit like a groan. He settled on words after whatever emotions drove him to such a reaction.

“There are some things you cannot forgive.” he said through clenched teeth. “But the mission calls...” He added, his voice fading. Something of the tone triggered memories in Haverson's own head of a war long ago, and the things he had done in it. All for the mission of course.

Flames burst into existence, illuminating the room.

It was positively small compared to the one they had come from, barely two stories tall, and had an intimate chapel like quality to it. The flames ran across art pieces, sculptures, some clearly magical, others mundane but not lacking in beauty, paintings, and several small bookshelves which housed especially large or important books.

However, what attracted Haverson's attention was the dead body.

It was draped over a lecture at the far end of the room. The years had not been kind to it. Although there was nothing to eat away at the flesh, all moisture had long, long since been taken from it. What was left of its skin was almost burnt black, and skeletal.

Germain groaned and slowly got to his feet. “What the hell is that?” He asked.

Thompson answered. “That, it what we've been looking for. Or rather whats under it.”

“The tome?” Haverson asked.

“Yes. Its still here.” Thompson said. “Somehow, its still here. Along with the rest of this junk.”

“I see.” A sudden thought came to Haverson, as he thought he felt it grow warmer in the room.

“Thompson, your flames. There isn't much air in this room.” He said.

But the mage shook his head.

“I can't put them out. Not now.”

“What?” Haverson said, feeling distinctly disquieted. “Why?”

“Because we are not alone.” The mage said, yet more fire appearing in his hands. It blended with the dark residual of the firewalk in a way that Haverson didn't like very much.

A figure rose from the body. It had no physical form, presenting itself only through a pale of blue flame. The soft tendrils of fire twisted lazily, at complete odds with the harsh black red tongues that undulated across Thompson's body and hands.

The calming light held within it an entity, Haverson knew somehow, and as he watched, he could just make out the outline of a human like being defined through the absence of blue flame.

“Alone.” A detached voice said. The word hung in the air until all traces of it had faded.

The three assembled before it said nothing in response. No one knew what to say.

“I have been alone for a long time. A very long time.” It said. “Far too long for a sentient creature to face alone. I suppose I would have lost my mind if I had not died first.”

They still said nothing.

“My eons have granted me clarity if nothing else. The flames of this place have offered me a new perspective. Split open the mind: the piercing, all revealing conflagration. Nothing here remains hidden from its light. At least, not within this vault. The outside still is wreathed in shadow.”

“You talk of flames and fire. I know both. So shade, will you stand our way? We will take that book.” Thompson said firmly. Haverson and Germain said nothing.

“Ah, do you? Your mind is the most shrouded of all! But you spoke of the book. Yes. It is here. And so, I must have been as well, even as I longed for the warriors death with my comrades. My oath held through the flames, the only thing to make it. I read the book. Not all of it of course, the air slipped from this place within days, only a handful of pages.

“This is irrelevant. I'll ask you again, will you stop us shade?” Thompson ordered.

The dead being didn't answer.

“Well, the air was gone, but I was strong, even as my lungs burned, as much as in any fire. I was fierce then, the emptiness that plagues my kind had still yet to come. I had no food or water though. I had hoped that starvation would end me. It did not. My oath was too strong. And when the thing you just killed put its infernal hands against the vault, blasting it with its unholy flames, and the room cooked, even through the godly barrier, I pleaded to die. I did not. My oath was still too strong.”

“Finally, after all that, I read the book. There was nothing left to do; my oath could not let me go, such was its power. I thought surely, this book of all others would let me slip away. Little did I realize. My oath was too strong.”

“Yes. Your blood oath. I've seen the like. Spare us your story. I grow tired of this.” Thompson said, taking a testing step forward. The ghost did not respond.

Thompson darted forward and grabbed an object from underneath the desiccated corpse of the elf.

For a moment, the flames shuddered. Thompson held the tome, hands quivering. The stench of burning flesh hit Haverson's nose.

“And what tome is this?” Haverson asked, feeling his sword to make sure it was still there even through the firewalk.

The question had been addressed to Thompson, who still held the book, even as it seared his hands through his gloves. However, the spirit responded instead.

“The book you seek, although perhaps not the one you expect. This is no elvish tome. Ours lie with us still, only the human pages hide in the shadows.”

Thompson stood, his whole body trembling, his head fixed on the book.

“Thompson, what does it mean? Is this the book we were sent to get or not?” He asked, around Thompsons shoulder.

“It is.” Thompson responded slowly. “The book is how it was described. But this isn't an elvish book. The black cover, the heavy inlay. Oh gods dare I?” Thompson whispered.

“All secrets are laid bare in those pages. Be sure of your actions.” The ghost said to Thompson. “Haverson,” the ghost said, suddenly addressing the older adventurer, “I do apologize for what happens next. But this seems to be the way the world turns. Down here in the darkness, ironically I found the light. In that blackest book, the clearest truth, piercing the ground and to the skies.”

“What do you mean?” Haverson asked. “This is the book we were sent for but its not elvish, then what is it?”

“Haven't you guessed by now? This library, its stench of death, the warping of its walls. Not even our craft could survive the destruction that your kind brought to this place. We didn't leave here Haverson. There was no retreat. There was no where to go: like rats in a hole. The pale god himself wept; this was the first strike to the heart of Ishira. Its all a fascade, the whole thing. The library, the rock walls, the traps, the books, the rubble… Nothing survived this place but burnt rock and charred bones.”

“Haverson, allow me to reveal the truth.”

The ghost stepped forward.

Haverson took an involuntary step backwards.

“You shall see that in time, this was the right thing to do; the only thing I could have done. The last of my power to clear the sundered vale… The truth through THE TOME OF GEREMON” The ghost thundered, reaching one hand towards the book and reaching the other towards Haverson.

Voices sounded in his head, even as he reacted: Geremon the pale, lord of repose and the infinite silence. Cries of comfort, and sadness, repeated over and over in an endless spiral until there was an end. A meaningless end. The shadow of the ancient elf fed itself into spell, its power growing even as it vanished.

Haverson was sprinting already, dashing low to find some cover, but nothing could block what the spectre did.

Germain let out a cry and collapsed in tears, falling to the ground. His sword fell from his hands and shattered.

The world split open before his eyes, reality ripping into tears of hideous flame. Haverson looked back behind him in horror, the vault melting, its spells and bulwark dissolving like wax in a candle. Through the vault door was a hell.

The floor lay splintered, massive slabs reaching skyward, all blackened to the darkest degree. Pale imprints, the silhouettes of bodies lay burned into the stone itself, twisted into horrible contorted poses. Below the rock, just barely visible in the chasm below lay the bones. Piles upon piles of charred and splintered bodies, heaps of them, draped across themselves so that it was indistinguishable one from another.

He could not close his eyes.

Through it all, the smell of burning flesh and hair assaulted his senses.

The fires. They still burned! Black magic soaked conflagrations, fed by the bones. The walls burnt, the floor burnt, the bodies burnt.

Some tiny part of his mind that was working properly remembered the breeze that had followed them in, the true fuel of this horrible nightmare. But who would have thought that hundreds of years later, the fires still burned!

“Thompson...” Haverson said weakly, backing towards the mage.

But the mage had opened the book. Haverson did not look at it, but whatever was held on those sheets must have been truly terrible.

Thompson's mouth opened in an unearthly cry, wrenched from the core of his very being, it it seemed that he too would split apart like the vault, such was the horror and power of the magic.

Thompson's gem blazed, shone like it never had before, searing into his forehead, burning the wrappings into dust, bursting into flames and then, finally, shattering into nothing.

Thompson was flung against the wall, his body limp. Then he did begin to contort, ripping apart like the vault door! A gaunt and sinister corpse rose from the shattered embers of the enchantment. Like a shadow of the Thompson Haverson had known, the features were unmistakable though.

He emerged in rags, the rest of his clothing burned off of him, the dark fires he had summoned now growing stronger, charring the rest of his body, cruelfully feeding from his energy as a fire does a gust of air.

The sunken holes that were his eyes ripped open through the blood crusted char that was his skin. In the wells of his skull lay only more flame. In an instant, perhaps achieved through intuition, perhaps through his training, Haverson knew this was the real Thompson. He remembered him now, a young and sadistic man on the battlefields, scorching friend and foe alike. The fires had grown strong that day as they fed off Northerner bodies.

Haverson's sword had appeared in his hand.

“So it is you!” Haverson cried. “After all these years!”

The thing that had once been Thompson drew together its composure, the flames coalescing around it.

It spoke with no mouth.

“Oh it has been far too long.” It stopped, holding its head for a moment. “It is me again, not that skin I was forced to wear. Curse that gem, and curse that merchant.”

But then Thompson looked up.

“And it is you! The one they called Voidwalker; Spelldrinker. Were you aspected of Geremon himself? We could never tell. Oh how the others quaked at even the sounding of your name. We did horrible things you and I, did we not?”

“No. I did not. I did what I had to. Your mages were out of control. That much was clear. No one had authorized them, had they? The crown couldn't get involved. They still call it Lord Gerrant's war, as if it hadn't been orchestrated from the very center of power. Who else would the mage corp have listened to? Certainly not the Lord himself. And so they had the run of the place. Atrocities. That is what you committed.”

The burned man brushed away the accusation with a crackling fire laden hand. “Did you recall the look of panic in their eyes when you killed them? When they realized their spells were as nothing to you? My friends and brothers, falling before your horrible blade like leaves in the autumn.” He said, turning the accusation back onto Haverson with a pointing finger.

“Pity, it looks like you lost the instrument of your death.” He added, looking at Haverson's decidedly normal sword.

“I destroyed it long ago.” Haverson said. “That sword, the war, all the power; I buried it all.” Haverson said.

“Oh but don't you see? Your history is like this library. How calm and silent it was before. Now look at its true blackness. The same blackness that lies within you and I. My flames, your emptiness. There was only ever one way this could end. You and I, you and I. And your body will join the others.”

If it was even possible, more flames erupted from the very skin of the being in front of Haverson, the remnants of flesh burning away in the process, revealing yet more dark fire twisted around charring bones.

“Die!” The thing screamed, lashing out with great tongues of fire.

Even if he had been younger; even with the greatest void behind him, it would have taken the fiercest concentration to null those flames. Now, without his youth, and without the ever creeping void he had disavowed, he could not hope to be hit.

He twisted, throwing himself to the ground, the heat and hatred of the attack roaring over him, detonating against the vault wall.

A half thought went to Germain who still lay incapacitated somehow, unleashing quiet sobs off to one side. However, it looked like Thompson's fury was solely directed at him. Which was good; he had no way of stopping any of the mage's attacks.

His mind churned, as he dodged another attack, flinging himself behind a column.

In this enclosed space, the mage was deadly. There was very little maneuvering room, very little place to hide. This was Thompson's element. You never allowed the enemy to dictate the terms of an engagement. His mentor, a man Thompson had tried to bury along with the void, had once said that.

Perhaps if he could not summon that power, he could at least take the advice.

Haverson took one look at Thompson to grab his attention then sprinted out of the vault.

Aster lay on the ground, her heart beating, thumping loudly in her ears. She went to stand up, but he muscles quivered in agony when she tried to do so. Consciousness wavered in and out for a moment. Despite all the pain, she could feel the heat, sizzling around her clothing, threatening to reach through the tough leather and burn her, even as she lay there. It came from below.

As she lay there, the wavering air betraying the heat of the place, she tried to remember where she was.

The library of course. But where in the library? She had fallen...Oh she had fallen.

The memory slammed into her mind with a sudden ferocity, making her cry out in pain. The sudden sound of her voice was somehow comforting, even regarding the circumstances.

She took a slow look to her side as was relieved to discover that by some miracle her neck was undamaged. For all she knew she could have died instantly upon impact.

With her new found ability to look around, she gazed into the darkness. What seemed like far above her was the floor she had fallen through. She must be in some subbasement of the library. Below her was some object, digging into her side.

She tried to shift herself off of it but found that she could not; a sudden jolt of searing pain rewarded her for her efforts.

Wincing she settled for looking around some more.

She was lying atop a smashed coffin of some sort. Below her, lay the shattered rock top of the sarcophagus. From where it lay and the place of where it broke, it looked like she had broken it. Was that possible?

All around the cracks of the top lay little...things. A closer inspection revealed that they were gems of some sort. But as she watched them, they melted into nothingness.

Germain's shield. She had been close enough when he had cast his spell. It must have been on her the entire time without her remembering. He had saved her life.

The room was cloaked in darkness; there were no sources of light other than the hole she had fallen through, and even that was a weak red light, as if from the reflection of a distant bloody moon. Other than that, the sarcophagus was the only thing she could see.

That and the floor. The floor was a broken affair, heaps of rubble indistinguishable from the floor itself. There was something broken about all of it, the pieces having been split into arm length splints of what looked like rock.

Gathering her strength, she rose from the top of the sarcophagus. The same pain lanced through her lower back. Groaning she urged her battered hand backwards. Her hand came away with blood.

“Oh gods.” She said to herself in a voice of defeat.

Fueled by panic she got to a sitting position, dull aching running through every limb in her body. Luckily she seemed to be able to move all her appendages, if with some protest. She suspected that some of her ribs might be broken.

Now sitting up, the red light casting itself on her face, she turned slowly, ignoring the same pain from her back.

As she feared, she had landed on something sharp. With the half light, she had to run her hands beneath her to investigate. She was rewarded with a small cut to her hand. She cursed and looked closer at what she had landed on.

The sarcophagus lid was truly and irrevocably smashed, so much so that she could make out the contents, whether or not she actually wanted to. A sword lay haphazardly shattered across the top, and one of the fragments had been the sharp object in question. She thought she could make out blood amid the silver shards.

Upon closer exploration, she found that the wound was thankfully shallow. She ripped a piece of her sleeve and tried to use it to staunch the bleeding. However, she had no training in such matters, mostly because she had refused her mother's attempts to teach her to be a proper lady. A proper lady would know how to attend to wounds; although Aster knew that the lessons were never supposed to have been intended to be applied to herself. A proper lady wouldn't be within fifty miles of these ruins, let alone beneath them.

Her medical attempts seemed to have little affect, but the wound didn't seem to be loosing over too much blood, probably another save from Germain's shield.

She could ignore the pain, if only she had something else to focus on.

The looked down at the sarcophagus again. She knew there was a body in it. What else would lie in such a thing?

A morbid curiosity overcame her, an urge to learn more, even about topics which revolted her. Perhpas it was why she had ran away in the first place.

She slid to the edge of the coffin and slid gingerly to her feet. She had prepared herself for the pain, and was ready when it came. Still, she grunted through clenched teeth, holding one hand to her wound.

She stood on that uneven floor, and when she had made impact, some of the rock fragments had made a disquieting crunching noise.

She shifted the pieces of smashed lid until she could make out what was underneath.

She saw herself. The pale face, the blue eyes, faded with death, staring upwards in a quiet stare.

With horror she lurched backwards, almost falling down on the uneven floor, only a reactionary grab for the edge of the coffin stabilized her.

Regaining her composure, she realized that that was clearly impossible. Closer inspection indeed revealed that the person in the coffin was indeed, not her. Having been worried about magic, she now regarded the corpse.

The face was similar, the white blond hair, so different from the other children her age, still clung to the other woman's head, if thin in places from rot. Yes, the face had rotted away in places, but what was there was frighteningly similar.

Aster ran a hand over her own face, feeling it in disbelief. A half perfect illusion; a coincidence.

The rest of the body was still hidden under what was left of the lid, covered by pieces of stone too heavy for Aster to move in her current predicament. However, Aster could make out some clothing. Leather, like what she wore. Of course, the sword fragments laying across the corpses neck. But there was something else, a necklace, shining even in the half light of the hole she was in.

It sparkled, blue and deep defeating the red light assaulting it, the chain a similar defiant silver. The gem was small, clearly only decorative, since it was nearly the size of Aster's thumbnail. Such jewels, she had learned before she was old enough to be repulsed by such extravagance, were usually semi-precious at best, colored glass or crystal at worst. A diamond or sea stone this size and color would be impossible.

Grave robbery was not a crime Aster ever saw herself committing, and touching, even being this close to an elven burial was a spectacularly stupid act: an ideal place for traps and curses. However, amid the blurring hot air of the chasm-like room, Aster extended a hand slowly towards the piece of jewelery.

Half of her mind screamed, exploding in fear and self admonishment at what she was doing. Another half calmly rationalizing all the other's arguments. There was no one here; Northern law didn't apply to Elven ruins; she never had been a religious person; if there had been curses or traps, they would have activated already in her fall, for a moment when she was unconscious she must have lay directly on the corpse without realizing it. What a horrid thought.

She brushed the chain, which she could have sword was cold, despite the warmth of the room.

The corpse's hand shot up and grabbed her arm.

Terror coursed through Aster's body; paralyzed, she could only stare at the supernaturally strong grip clenched on her forearm. A terrible shiver wrenched through Aster's body as she stared at the thing, the rotted flesh, falling from its fingers even as it held her, revealing white bone underneath.

Trembling, now completely ignorant of her battered body's condition, she tried to wrench away her limb for its grasp, but to her horror the thing some how brought her closer.

She stared upwards, and in a brief second make eye contact with the corpse. Corpse no longer, the pupils rotted away before her eyes, eaten from the inside out by a growing blue flame. It was cold and empty in those sockets, Aster felt herself drifting, threatening to faint.

She tried to reach for her sword, but it was on the side being held by the skeleton and her other arm was in an awkward position, unable to reach the sword which was on her far side, pinned against the coffin by the rest of her body.

The corpse spoke.

*It is yours. Run now. The others are coming.*

Her eyesight swarm before her as the air grew suffocatingly dense. Was this really happening?

The eyes ran out of their sockets, the blue light spilling over onto the being's body, consuming it and Aster at the same time. As she watched, flesh disappeared, not by burning, as she would have expected, but disappeared slowly, as if it had never been there to begin with. The process continued until there was no trace of the body at all in the coffin.

Aster lay, panting, lying face down, staring into the empty coffin. Well not quite empty, the sword pieces and shattered top were still there. She rose slowly and patted herself. The flames were gone. Had they ever been there? Had she actually seen anything?

…

She hadn't. Of course the coffin had been empty from the beginning. Yet another cruel trick that the place played on her. Yet another illusion.

She rose now for real, to her feet and stared up at the hole. It was far too high to jump. She could have climbed up if someone had dropped a rope, but there wasn't one there now, and something in her didn't want to try to call for help. It was one thing to be trapped down here alone; it would be a completely different thing to call out and get no response, her voice ringing through dead and silent halls…

The others were far above, their fates unknown. Had they been buried when the ceiling fell in?

She ran a reassuring hand over the hilt of her sword. It was nothing special, but perhaps it would help. Another thing to keep her mind off her position.

She drew it and looked at the blade. It was only slightly longer than her arm itself, and made of iron, as far as she knew. It seemed to hold its edge well enough. It was dark grey and broad at the hilt, tapering to a point in one angle. She knew this made it more effective for stabbing; it had probably been designed as some guardsman's secondary weapon. It had a cross guard, but only a small one. A particularly dedicate opponent could take a swipe at her hand if they wanted to.

It had cost her nearly a year of work to buy it. She remembered the ignominy of having to work as a lookout for bandits, of having to run messages for merchants, of having to beat the living daylights out of a half dozen people who tried to rob or do worse to her when she lived on the streets.

But with a sword, especially as a woman, people noticed. She was a peculiarity, one that gained credence once she had met Haverson in the rain drenched alley and the two had decided to set out together. Haverson could play the veteran who had seen it all, better than any one she had met, probably because he probably had.

She tested the weight of the weapon in her hand, feeling its resistance as she swung it.

Peircing scream filled her ears, loud to the point of pain, drilling into her head. All around her the world shimmered and tore, horrible dark flames erupting from the nothingness behind the covering. It spilled down and pooled in the dark recesses between the piles of rock at the bottom of the floor.

But it wasn't rock. It wasn't rock. The air shimmered from heat, now almost burning her flesh. The world was aflame and in its horrid light she could see the truth, hidden for so long.

Bones. Blackened, cracked, ash and char. Pile upon piles of bones, falling over one another, churning in the flames that lept between them, covering them, slathering themselves over them. The pile extended downward, and it was only now that Aster saw that she stood at the top of a large rise in the center of the room, with the remains of the coffin on it, sinking sickeningly below her were feet upon feet of bones. She could not even see the floor.

If it had just been the bones and the dark unearthly flames, perhaps it would have been bearable, but as Aster looked down amid the charred remains, something stirred between the gaps. Something wrought of blackened bone and flame, of tortured magic and hundreds of years of silent, dark, lonely existence. She caught a glimpse of it and screamed.

Her hand shot to her mouth, silencing herself. Nothing seemed to respond to her call. Looking around wildly for an exit in the now dimly lit room, she saw that the rise she was on descended downward only somewhat on one side, buried deep in bones, then ascended on the other side to a distinct doorway. Stairs glimpsed beyond its opening.

She had never been so happy to see what were probably trapped stairs.

Whatever was beneath her was apparently taking its time, and had not been alerted yet to her presence. This was good, because although she wasn't a mage, she could clearly sense the overwhelming power and anguish of the turmoil below her. It wafted up like a foul stench and as she planned her descent, she now understood what the rippling of the air had been here and on the floor above: pure horror and the death of thousands.

A first step onto the brittle cracking bones reminded her both that the journey would be disturbing, and that she was still wounded. The pain from both sides and a sharper one from her lower back greeted her as she started down the rise.

The bones crunched beneath her, and she tried not to look at the skulls she was stepping on. They were elven to be sure, and what looked like children as well. No one had been spared from the carnage that had been inflicted on this place.

A sudden guilty thought reminded her that despite the years, her race was theoretically responsible for all this, even if she could not identify whatsoever with the perpetrators; the hundreds of years between them making their motivations just as unknown as the elves themselves. She knew little of history. Had she stayed with her parents, no doubt she would have learned more. Even women were educated well in the fine households of the north.

Little thoughts, to keep her mind away from what was below her.

The bones shifted from beneath her.

She gasped, wrenching her body, contorting it even as one of her legs slipped out from under her. Her chest hit her still firmly planted knee, and in an unconscious reaction, she drove her sword downward for stability. Unfortunately, the material beneath her was bone and eventually stone, the bone being too unstable to help, the stone being too strong for a simple sword to dig into. She found herself slipping off the side of the walkway.

Down. Down. The flames licking at her feet and threatening to cover her body. The heat squeezed her lungs, threatening to force every last good breath from her.

The thing beneath her shifted again, this time closer to her. The screams of the innocent as they were burned alive sounded from the black mass, tearing at her ears and heart. Panic seized every portion of her body and she flung her sword away, there was no time to sheath it. Desperately she found herself waist deep in a sliding landslide of bones. Half swimming, half climbing she crawled herself back upwards.

She cried softly out of shock and horror as her fingers grasped skull after skull, shattered ribcages and the femurs of children, some breaking apart in her hands as she climbed.

The bones shifted off to her left, a wave of cascading fragments signaled the approach of whatever magic wrought horror was below her. The glimpses she had seen where blazed into her mind, and even just thinking about them caused her to descend into a nauseous panic. Luckily her self preservation instincts, honed after years of attempted stabbings in alleyways and the constant terror of starvation, were stronger than even the fear of the eldritch thing.

Her hands grasped solid rock, the edge of the walkway, at last. Silencing both the accumulated pain from her wounds and the perverse desire to turn around and look at the thing again, she sprinted the best she could over the last several feet of bone to the more stable rock steps.

Upon reaching it, she started straight up, taking two or three at a time.

It was too late that she remembered that the stairs were always trapped. This thought slipped into her head only after she had already committed to her action, and she was already halfway up. Luckily, whatever nasty blades or spell had been prepared for this section has long been destroyed by the mere presence of the conglomeration that lay below, the foul twisted magics eating away at the mechanisms, physical or no. Pieces of the mundane traps lay in melted puddles on the steps, bubbling softly.

Amazed that she had escaped unharmed, the realization of what she had seen hammered into her, slowing her steps. When at long last she found herself at a proper floor, she flung herself into a corner and sobbed uncontrollably, unaware and uncaring of the darkness around her.

“Come out!” Thompson screamed. “You pathetic Northern assassin scum!” A fireball obliterated a small pile of rubble.

Luckily Haverson was two piles over, trying hard not to think about the rock burning beneath him, or the strange warped air, which was getting worse by the minute. He was collecting a series of knives that he had sequestered around his body, but he had to do it quickly.

Much as he might have tried to deny it earlier in life, Haverson was a mage killer. Lord Gerrant's war was only the denouement of his prowess, the singular conflict bringing out the worst in both sides. He had emerged as the most powerful of a select group, whose job was, pretenses aside, to murder the fire mages, whether on the battlefield or before they could even make it there.

Then again, Haverson reflected, that was when he still had embraced the void, whatever it was. It no longer frightened him, or repulsed him; nothing did. However, he admitted that this fight was probably going to be his last without it.

He was prepared to make that sacrifice. He had thought about this in the past.

He readied his knives and waited for the mage to call out again.

The trick to killing mages was understanding that they were just people. Sure, they could spout fire from their hands, and call down lightening, but underneath all that bluster there was a person there. A person with the emotions of a regular person, the dreams and avarice of a person, and the fears of a person.

It was these which he preyed upon.

It was clear how to proceed, even against the most powerful mages. They had grown used to having constant control and of having perfect information. They were sent against on target, a bridge a battalion and they were meant to destroy it.

The fact that they were so often successful certainly lead to certain egos, fed by the innate desire for power and the ability to enact change solely through ones own will. To kill a mage, you simply had to strip all those assumptions away.

The lack of a target meant that uncertainty was planted. Hence him hiding. The next part…

“When I find you, I will burn your body to useless chunks of flesh!” Thompson yelled.

“I will sear...”

Haverson leaped from his hiding place behind the pile of rubble, jumping to the top of it in several powerful bounds. Thompson was not facing him. Just as planned.

The next part was the silent needle. Into the body, into the perception of invincibility. The knife left his hand, and for a brief moment it was just like before… perhaps there was ego here as well.

“Ahhh!” Thompson yelled as the knife buried its way into his shoulder. “You pathetic rat of a person! Your tactics are as foul and dishonorable as the fecal nation you call your home!” he spat, wrenching the knife from his body, opening a serious wound, which instead of bleeding, merely steamed half congealed blood, before erupting into fire.

“The same tactics that you used when you burned women and children alive in West Field?” Haverson shouted quickly, already moving.

The counter attack came quicker than he anticipated, and part of the heat almost caught him. He brushed the flames from his leather armor and retreated deeper into the burning rubble.

“The rebels you instigated? Say what you want voidwalker, I remember burying your friends there, after all resistance had been crushed. You lost that fight!”

Haverson said nothing. He had successfully hidden himself behind another pile.

“Won't show your face? I'll just have to burn it off from here!” Haverson peered out a bit, just in time to see Thompson gathering power for some kind of blast attack.

Haverson slid back behind the rock and crouched low. He was rewarded as a wave of fire tore past the spot he had been looking out. Glancing around the other side, he was reassured that the attack had been made in all directions. His spot was not compromised.

Another knife slid from his hands, followed by a second as he ran for another spot of cover.

The first knife missed Thompson by quite a bit, but the second caught him in the leg. “Damn you! There is no torture comparable to what I will do to you!” He cried, gathering more power, melting the knife straight off his body into a boiling mess of metal. The flesh was melting off his bones, his clothes, now only burnt tatters. Blackened bone and flames wrenched their way, sickeningly, from his body as the mage drew more and more power.

Truth be told, he had never seen a mage this dedicated, nor quite this powerful. He recognized that fact that if any of the attacks hit him, he would most likely die instantly.

He crept up to the edge of the next pile and threw another two knives at Thompson. Perhaps he was slower this time. The first knife missed again, and the second was vaporized by a wave of Thompson's hands. He pinpointed where the attacks had come from and blasted the pile with black flames.

Haverson leapt away, sprinting for more cover. Out of the corner of his eye, and with horror, he saw the horrible flames rage past where he had been, melting the sides of the stones in the pile.

He saw something else as well.

The floor was collapsing.

He leapt towards the nearest rubble pile, and out of the corner of his eye he could see a section of the pavers give way. Something, likely not good, menaced threateningly from below with the red tint of flames. The air boiled around the hole as if whatever was below was burning reality itself.

Haverson wiped his forehead and tried to focus on the…

He caught the sight of the attack out of the corner of his eye and just managed to fling himself out of the way. A second attack followed, and it was all he could do to roll far enough to escape most of the flames. Even still, his skin burnt with the heat, blistering before his eyes and sending lances of pain throughout his body.

He had to end this fight. He eyed his goal, the staircase out. He had been inching towards it, pile by pile. But there was no cover on the flight itself. He could run for it, but he would merely be target practice for the mage below. Plus several sections of the staircase had crumbled, making the way even more difficult.

He rose as quick as his protesting body would let him. He had been decades younger the last time he had done this, and although he had been adventuring since then, it wasn't quite the same. He had been an acrobat of sorts, prone to quick contortions, and sudden jarring, unpredictable movements. All necessary when being attacked with a foe with unlimited ammo.

Haverson sprinted quickly, hearing bolts tear around him. Luckily, he seemed to be in better shape than his opponent. The fight with the elfbane and the use of his most powerful spells had taken a toll on him. Even more tellingly, the elf specter’s spell, its reveal, seemed to have split the mage open somehow. All that power was no longer contained, and now it spilled out, rupturing his body.

He threw several more knives, two of which even managed to hit the now slowed and bleeding mage. Black steam billowed from the mage's body as the dark fire inside him burnt through his organs and fat. His eyes still shone with insane hatred though, and Haverson knew that the thing wouldn't stop until either he or it was destroyed completely.

It screamed in pain and anger. “We were as one, you and I voidwalker! Two engines of destruction, loosed on an uncaring murderous world. Don't you recall the terror we inflicted on our other sides? Do you not even remember me?! How low you've fallen!” He screamed, hate spewing from his lips, as his body slowly collapsed.

The last part to killing a mage was the final blow. It had to be powerful and it had to be sudden. It also had to come well before the enemy thought he was finished. Too often in the beginning they had ran, or used magics to flee in terror. Sometimes, when he had been feeling particularly vindictive, he let them think they were winning the confrontation.

And suddenly he remembered Thompson.

That was not his name then. He thought he recalled him at two times. The first was when he had killed the first high mage at what would be remembered as the bloody and Pyrrhic turning point of the war. The high mage's entourage consisted of several very interesting individuals, one of which was a young Thompson.

The second had been the last time he saw the revenge driven man, in the burning ruins of West Field.

He spied a hole opening up behind Thompson's shattered body, and he knew how he would finish him. The problem was, that it would hurt; perhaps he would die. His body might not be able to take it without the void.

“I remember you.” Haverson said, emerging from the rubble, and throwing the last of his knives before dodging towards a nearer spot.

“HOW COULD YOU NOT?” Thompson screamed, spraying tongues of flame.

“How could you not remember me? As I screamed and cried in my own pathetic tears?” He yelled. His fire was out of control. No human that Haverson had ever encountered had ever commanded such flames. And yet Haverson ran towards the man aflame. That was how to kill mages. At the peak of their power.

“I was barely a child. How could I understand what had just happened to my father? That was when I learned my first great lesson. That you can never have enough flames!” He cast his hand towards Haverson.

Luckily, the old adventurer was ready for such a thing, and had already dived out of the way, turning the sprawl into a controlled roll which propelled him sideways to the safety of yet another rubble pile.

But something felt wrong this time.

The blast was unholy. Air vaporized in an instant, the smell of ozone exploded around Haverson. The world exploded. He felt himself lifted from the ground and thrown effortlessly against it again. His flesh seared with pain, every inch of his exposed body flash burned instantly.

He couldn't move for a second. Was he dying? What had happened?

He opened his eyes, somehow mercilessly spared the inferno. He was lying on the ground, back against it. His clothes were aflame. He was aflame. In front of him, the rubble had been destroyed. Not just destroyed, annihilated. Wiped from existence. Their very trace burned into a fine black mist which settled over Haverson as he lay in shock.

Was this fire any more? He had never encountered such magic. He wished for the void.

It was a momentary weakness, and in an instant he realized his error. It was there. He felt it. It was coming.

“No...” he muttered. Drawing his upper body up slowly. He could feel the draining, sucking sensation as his feeling left him. The detachment started, his burnt and aged body simply a tool to his mind, and even that sectioned. Some part of him could even feel his emotion slipping.

Why not call the void? With it he could wipe this mage from existence, fire magic or no. He could carve his way from this place single handedly. He could find the man who had sent Thompson with them on this mission, the supposed Merchant. He could do anything. Limitless power. All it took was the mind.

It spoke to him in seductive words that only he understood. It pleaded, reasoned, negotiated, cajoled. Anything. Anything to be called. Anything to take hold.

And he denied it.

In his mind he confined the void to the sword that it had given him in life. With a hammer he smashed that hollow sword that was the void. To pieces. And scattered the pieces to every corner that he could imagine. As he had in the physical world.

It was a close thing. It always was. But his oath held.

He exhaled slowly. Time was moving clearly again. The fear and pain were returning. He cried out as it slammed into him.

Good.

He rose slowly. Somehow, he found the strength to stand.

“Oh? You survived that?!” Thompson said, faltering for a moment.

There is was. The doubt. He just had to fan it. Like a flame of his own. Eating out the core of the mage's will to fight. And with that will, the magic.

“You remember.” Haverson said, walking towards the other man. The hole had opened behind him. Everything was aligned.

The mage took a step backwards.

“No… you said… he said… The power you had, its supposed to be gone!”

“Is it though?” Haverson said, starting to run towards the man.

“No one could have survived that!” The mage yelled, drawing flames around him again. But it was too late, the doubt had taken hold. They were yellow flames. Weak flames. Flames of doubt.

“Or have I returned just like you? You said we were alike. Both great murderers?” Haverson yelled.

He mentally braced himself. There would most likely be one more attack. He thought he could take it, if only because it would come so weakly. But it would be close.

“No! Too many years. Too many have I waited for this!” The flames were growing.

Oh gods, if he mis-gambled this one he was dead for sure. He ran faster, pain searing his legs and his chest.

“I… I can't lose now. I can't… I won't!” The mage declared. The last of his flesh tore from his skin, steaming as it was consumed inward. Only his face remained, like some horrible bloody mask. His body was a skeletal construct of bones and flames, drawing bright again as he summoned his power.

Oh gods, he had mis-gambled this. It was too late to stop. There were now more piles. The only thing he could do was run faster.

He sprinted. His heart beating in his head. The thump of his blood in his ears. Every foot step a slicing agony. Faster and faster.

“Yes. One final spell for you.” The mage said, growing dangerously soft. His hand reached within his rib cage and clenched around something there. Black and torturous, he removed it slowly. In the mages hand Haverson saw his death.

“I remember!” Haverson screamed as he sprinted, almost upon the mage.

“I remember your father! I remember the circle of mages! I remember their blood against my coat, my blade running through their heart!” He yelled as he ran.

It was too late, Haverson realized. The spell wasn't ready. He was too close. He could still push Thompson off! Just a few more feet!

“I remember you! When you returned those years later at West Field, so full of rage!”

“NO! DIE!” Thompson yelled, realizing that he was too slow as well, and releasing a spell he had in his other hand.

His other hand. Haverson had forgotten about his other hand.

The two collided for an instant. Flames washed over Haverson, but his momentum carried him through. A person or merely a sack of blood and flesh, his momentum carried him through.

“I remember killing you.” He said to Thompson as he knocked him into the hole.

For an instant the two fell together, and for that instant, Haverson could make out a smile on that face. On the little part of the mage that was still human.

But then a force caught Haverson in mid fall. Thompson was torn from his grasp and continued downward. The smile turned to horror.

But the horror had just begun. For what lay below the vault chamber was much worse than any realization.

Churning bones, thrashing, chared and broken, piles upon piles upon piles, stretching downward. And in them, the flames, black horrible. But among these was something even worse. A shifting conglomeration of tortured souls, leeched from the bones. And it remembered too.

It remembered the fall of its empire, and the slaughter of its people. But mostly it remembered the flames. It remembered them so well that it had brought them with it, when it was revealed. In flames they had died: horrible terrible flames. And now flames they were; it was. And to it, the mage was just another burned soul. In need of its embrace.

“NOOOOO!” Thompson screamed, realizing his error. It was much too late.

His body impacted with the eldritch shifting mass, scattering bones. For a second he tried to lurch away from it, but arms grew out of that ball of bones and fire, and they grabbed Thompson, and tore his body away piece by piece until only his face remained, the flesh burning off slowly.

And then they took that too. And he was gone.

Haverson hung by his sword, which had lodged between two shattered pavers near the edge of the hole. With no strength, he hung there for a time, unable to free himself, staring into the abomination below him.

Magic and fire, terror and the souls of the innocent. What ingredients are these? Where are the gods? How could they have let a thing like this happen?

But he thought he knew the answer, and he didn't like it.

Gods and monsters, the manipulation of men good and evil. Were we all just puppets, dancing on strings?

The whole adventure, it had somehow all been about him: Thompson's return, Germain's sudden decision to come back from retirement, the sudden quest from a mysterious Merchant. Someone had targeted him, was targeting him. And he would figure out who. He clenched his fists, realizing that this was the only movement he had made in a long while.

But a better half of his mind revolted at that train of thinking. The fierce desire for individuality had burned in him when he was younger. It was too selfish, too like the old him. He must find the balance between self and selflessness again. His life had been threading that balance. And luckily in his travels he had found the tools for finding that balance.

He had used them then to obtain the void, but a better use existed.

Fine. A better time for reflection there hadn't existed. Even if the void was gone, or at least held back for now, he could still meditate. He could still try to see the world as it was, to walk the balance once more.

He let his limbs go limp and he closed his eyes and simply hung. Drifting in the air between life and death.

He remained like that for a long while.

He opened his eyes at last.

He looked into the writhing mass of bones that were once people, and the foul magics suddenly lost their effect. The nausea disappeared. The headache vanished. And he hung staring at it.

He had been thinking about this whole thing wrong. He was surrounded by the past, literally surrounded by it. Germain, Thompson, this library, even his body the acts it was forced to commit: once more the killing of mages.

Someone *had* done this on purpose.

The elf specter had foreseen it. He blessed the departed being. Even if Geremon was silent, it couldn't hurt to respect the dead. The unknown ghost had poured literally everything he had left into that spell; that masterful reveal, stripping away it all.

But if he were surrounded by the past, and it was expected of him to simmer and hate like in his youth, or collapse inward into that dark place, as during the war, they would have neither. He would continue to walk the balance. The truth was clear.

But what truth was that? Who was he if not a soldier? Who was he if not an adventurer? What was his purpose? There were no foes before him. There was no war looming over his every move. There was no vain glory to achieve for himself.

He stared down at the mass below him.

Something gleamed out of the fires below. A sword. Aster's sword, on top of some stone outcropping. Oh gods, Aster.

The world crashed into him. His eyes widened, and he reached up with one burned arm and grabbed the stone above him. Swinging his feet back and forth he was able, just barely to bring himself up to the floor.

Again. How could he had forgotten about her? The girl was almost done with her teenage years. At times brash, at times, timid. She too had yet to achieve the balance that he had sought so long for. Was this his purpose? Their meeting couldn't have been a coincidence. He knew string when he saw them; but Aster shouldn't pay for others machinations.

Where was she? She was probably scared. Beneath that determined exterior lay a thoughtful woman, but one not quite as calloused by the truths of life as he. This place was as sand paper agianst the flesh. He had been on guard at the beginning, when they had entered, but things had gotten so out of control.

He had neglected the ones around him.

He got to his feet.

He inspected his sword, which had saved him.

His eyes widened again. His mouth opened but no words came from it. Before him was the hollow sword. The one he had destroyed long ago, whose pieces he had spent a year throwing to the far corners of the realm. And here it was again.

Was such a thing possible? It was. He had not used his sword after the elf had torn away the lies. So it was hollow all along. No wonder the void hungered so.

He chuckled. He knew strings when he saw them. And this attempt was nothing short of despicable; quite unlike the other subtle traps for him. Perhaps multiple players?

He picked it up and threw it into the pit without a second glance.

“Germain?” Haverson asked.