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 the 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 intrecate 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 te 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, mimiking 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.