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. He 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.”