­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 seperated 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.