

SHADOW OF THE ETERNAL SUN

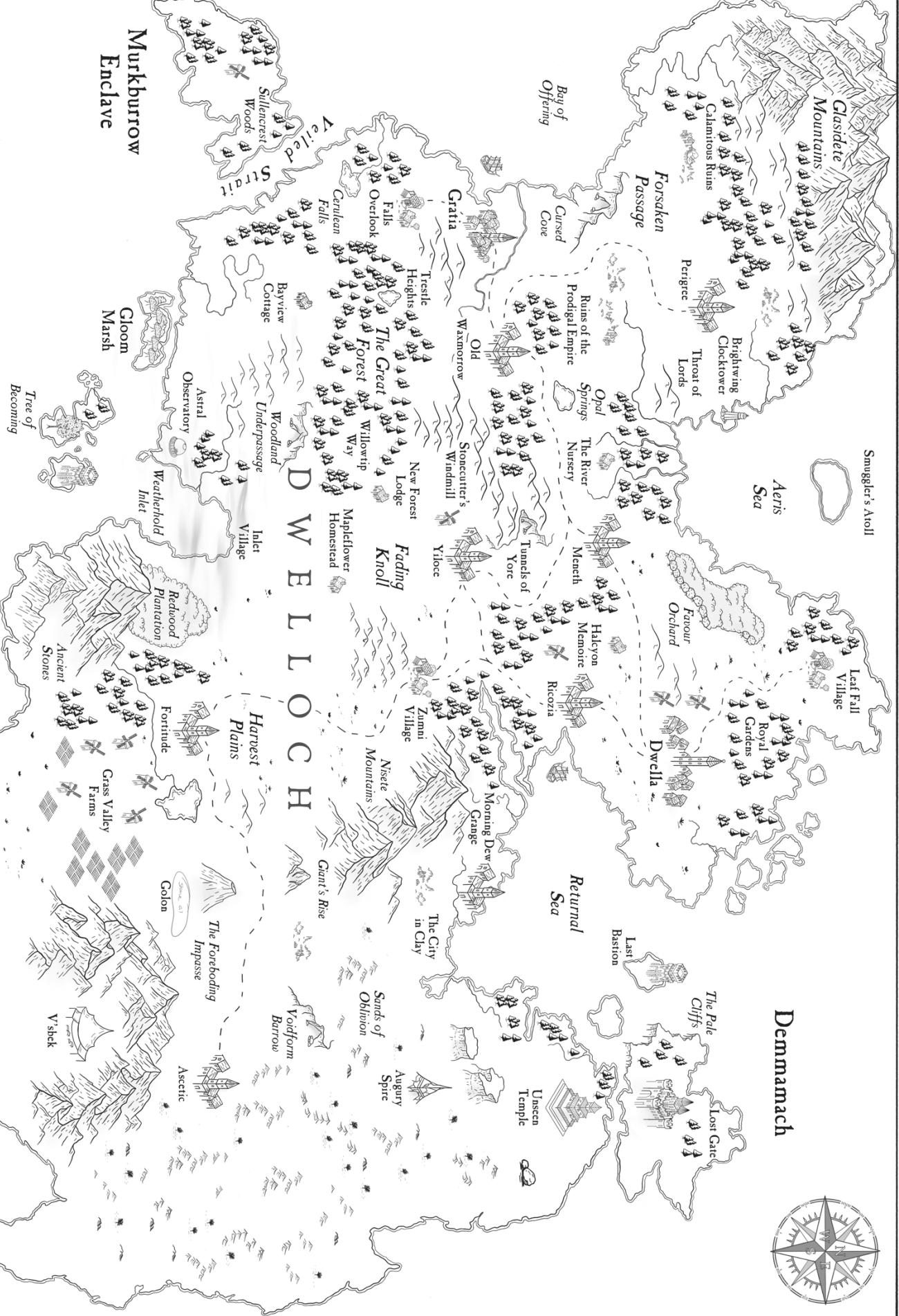
The Choir of the Cosmos: Book One

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ESPISÍR



GELERECHT





ICANTIA



ORILÉVEN



Prologue

Year 4572

Third month of Terminus, Precipice of Solus

Just as sunlight chases cloistral shadows into exile, so too does moonlight betray its own set of profound secrets.

The lapping water gently caressed the ears of the monastic man who stood upon the shore. The timing of his arrival was most fortuitous – any delays in the journey and the swelling seas might well have swallowed him whole. But right now, for all their depth and might, they could only kiss his sandals in cool welcome. The temperature had begun to drop. His timing was impeccable indeed.

Kurtal stepped out of the shallows and into the coarse sand. He paused to feel its rough greeting, savoured the feeling of every grain passing over his weathered skin. It had been many, many years since he had felt anything but pavement, grass, and the moulding timber of his small boat. He wrapped a wrinkled hand around the small carved idol which crested the front of the tiny vessel and pulled it ashore. The trip home – if there was to be one – would be gruelling if not outright impossible. But Kurtal was strong in his faith. He had been chosen. Failure would not colour the sunset of his life.

The shoreline extended out in a wide arc in front of him. The island was massive, and, in the lunar light, difficult to penetrate visually from so far away. Hitching up his long robe, Kurtal strode through the sandy bank. It took him several minutes to reach the grasses at the top of the dunes which marked the threshold of the shore. From his new vantage point, Kurtal could discern the next part of his journey.

A dense forest covered much of what he could now see, its contents largely obscured by the thick foliage. However, the moonlight was occasionally able to peek through the natural gloom, revealing narrow passages between trees older than most cities. The lucent paths also showed Kurtal that he was not alone on this part of the island – nocturnal predators stalked the forest floor, stirring a sense of unease within him. His time at sea – and indeed the arduous journey he took prior – had created a sense of isolation about his endeavours. A false belief that his task existed outside of the swathe of lesser worldly machinations. It was no wonder that he was shaken at the first signs of life in so very long.

Kurtal reached beneath his billowing robe for the pendant hung around his neck. He clutched the sigil tight, felt his resolve return in tides that would match the future shift in climate. His purpose reassured; Kurtal took his first steps into the woods.

Whether it was a divine sign or the fact he had overcome the challenge of simply beginning, Kurtal found his path unimpeded. Creatures steered clear of his ghostly visage and the more capricious flora did not challenge him. He had been chosen, after all. It was a sign. It had to be.

The forest was every bit as massive as it seemed from the edge. Kurtal trudged for an unknown amount of time in as straight of a line as he could manage. But it was difficult to navigate the treacherous woods with any degree of accuracy in the dead of night. It would

probably only be marginally easier in the sunlight anyway; such was its all-encompassing atmosphere. However, much to Kurtal's relief, the foliage did in fact end.

He came to a clearing that spanned the entirety of the rest of the island. Huge walls rose up as colossal silhouettes. Atop them, intermittent lights flickered bravely against the encroaching dark, sending plumes of smoke into the inky sky.

A settlement.

A large one at that.

But, of course, he had known it was here.

Kurtal clung to a nearby tree to mask his form. He scanned the signs of civilisation. There were no visible sentries nor any activity outside the fortifications. He also noticed that the walls extended in a U-shape from the woods – there was no border on this side. A strange decision. But then again, the island was heavily isolated to begin with – there was likely little reason to barricade more than was strictly necessary.

Kurtal waited a few more breaths before leaving the tree-line. He progressed slowly – methodically – just for good measure. He had come too far on a task too important to grow complacent now. He moved in a leftward direction, not for any particular reason, but just because it felt appropriate. After all, he was searching for something, and he had no idea where it might be located. It could be buried fifty feet beneath the dirt he stood upon or on a mantle in the highest quarters of the settlement. He resigned to the fact that he might be on the island, in these accursed woods, for quite some time.

Kurtal continued on for a short while before deciding to make what could pass as a camp for the remainder of the night. He found a small clearing – no more than a few paces across – and constructed a bed of nearby sticks and soft shrub. There would be no fire. Not on the first night. Not this close to those who would see him executed. Blanketed by a ceiling of rustling leaves high above, Kurtal drifted off to a restless sleep.

The morning rays from the World's twin sources of life provided little comfort for Kurtal. Their warmth hardly reached him beneath the canopy, and his demeanour was particularly glacial in any case. His dreams had been tumultuous at best and downright frightening at worst. Visions of death had flooded his unconscious mind – visions of his own, primarily. They were horrific – excruciating in the painstaking detail with which his earthly form would be rent asunder.

But there had been a trade-off of sorts. For he did not look away from the horrors of his dream state. He endured, and was rewarded for it. Although the fruits of his labour did not come with the crystalline clarity he might have hoped for. All he had been left with on this, the strangest of mornings, was a *feeling* – a sensation that pulled at him like some kind of invisible tether. It subtly coaxed him further leftward, towards some unseen place in the woods.

The path of the sensation brought Kurtal dangerously close to the walls. As such, his progress was slow. To make an enemy of the sunlight now would be as foolish as placing value in the heretical art of sorcery. The completion of his task was a crucial step in the extinguishment of such injudicious arcana.

Kurtal did not know if any wielders of the heathen arts were inside. As vile as he thought them, he also knew arcanists were formidable. They had to be, since their power siphoned that of his God.

Kurtal continued to skirt the exterior of the wall for some time, guided by nothing but the inexplicable tether. Gradually, he noticed the feeling grew stronger. He was drawing near. But what would he find?

The guidance grew in strength until Kurtal thought his head might split in two. It was no longer a feeling – a suggestion – that he follow. It was now nothing less than a directive – a *command*. And he had been commanded to enter the earth. But the way was shut.

A thick slab of stone covered the entrance to what seemed like a barrow. It was an odd feature – the only rock formation he had encountered in the woods so far. The clearing around the subterranean passage was small and mostly comprised of compacted grass and dirt. But to Kurtal, strangely, it also seemed that nothing had trodden here in a long time. He did not know what to make of it. All he knew was that the assault on his consciousness was too strong. He had to lie down. As the day's light slowly funnelled into its nocturnal cocoon, Kurtal slept between the trunks of two small trees.

He awoke the moment the hybrid suns had fallen into slumber. A wakefulness driven by mathematical precision. The pounding in his head had subsided, and Kurtal felt revitalised. He slowly rose to peer into the darkness of the clearing. The stone still barred the entrance. Kurtal scratched his rough black beard in confusion. Had he been deceived? Did they know he was here? Was this sorcery? The questions compounded. Then it happened.

The moons high above rotated into position. Lunar light cascaded down into the clearing, bathed the space in cylindrical turquoise. It was beautiful. As the moonlight touched the grass, Kurtal saw blue flowers sprout from the unforgiving earth. He saw a subtle vibrancy take hold of what greenery remained. And the moment it touched the excavated rock, the stone door *dissipated* like mist. Kurtal shook his head in disbelief. He had indeed been chosen.

The sensation returned, but only in the form of a weak feeling – an additional source of encouragement, it seemed. But Kurtal did not find himself lacking. He entered the cave.

The subterranean passage was nothing if not monotonous. But the reason why Kurtal could reach that conclusion took several moments to sink in. He could *see*. In the paralysing darkness, devoid of any light, he – a Human man – could see. Kurtal was astounded.

The aspect of monotony diminished in favour of childlike astonishment. He reached out a hand, touched the wall. It was slightly damp. He marvelled at the craggy design of the rock, savoured the feeling of seeing what his hands could touch. There were so many intricate details to be found at night.

The shadowy nature with which he now viewed the World painted it in a different light compared to the way he usually saw using torchlight. Was this how other people – such as Kûrasti or Leathgrûskh – saw the World at night? Or was this different? Something *more*?

Kurtal continued his sensory study of the surrounding rock while scanning the remainder of the tunnel. But his boyish wonder was replaced with numbing dread as a tiny hand – an *infant's* hand – returned his grasp from the rock. He looked down to find the entirety of the wall now swimming with groping hands frozen in the stone.

Kurtal struggled to pull his hand free, but eventually it was returned to him. He spun out of instinct to face the entrance only to find it shut. The stone doorway had returned. Panic seized him.

Great Herald!

I have been most loyal!

I am here!

For you!

The only reply Kurtal received was the pounding in his skull again. Only this time it was directional, forced him back around to face the unknown depths. His limbs suddenly began to operate not of their own volition. Kurtal had lost all autonomy. He had become a hollow observer. Just as he had thought those outside his faith.

Herald! Please!

Is this sorcery?

The vessel that was Kurtal was marched deep into the underground, taking deliberate and predetermined paths whenever the tunnels forked. He was brought to a wide chamber, beautiful despite the circumstances for the way the moonlight poured in through gaps in the rocky ceiling. At the centre of the room was an altar, illuminated perfectly by the lunar gaze. And in front of it, stood himself.

Kurtal stared back at Kurtal – one drenched in blue light, the other wreathed in inky black on the threshold. The vessel that was Kurtal stepped forward until both figures resembled the other in perfect simulacrum. It was the other Kurtal who spoke.

‘Long have I waited, and long have you travelled, Kurtal.’

It paced careful steps in an arc around him. Something seemed off – it shimmered as it rounded his periphery.

‘For years since you were taken in you have shown nothing but unwavering dedication. Faith.’

Herald?

‘This journey was to be the apex of your devotion, the mantle atop the hearth of fidelity carved only for you. You were right in the last respect. This has been carved only for you. Because I know what has come and what will come. Do you understand, Kurtal?’

He could not shake his head.

‘That’s okay. I know you will.’

A hand seized him by the throat. But Kurtal felt nothing. He had truly been evacuated from the suit of flesh. Then the hand reached *through* what once was his skin and bone, clutched the thing that was his consciousness.

‘It’s a pity that you will not live to see what you and the others have worked so hard to achieve. But before you die, Kurtal, know that your contribution was invaluable. You see, I did not need *you*, Kurtal. Merely what parts of you were tied to this Realm. Those parts being this shell you call a body. The body you were destined to bring to me.’

He—Her—Heralddd! Pleaseee!

‘I’m right here, Kurtal. I have always been here. Just as you would always come.’

Herald...

‘Goodbye, Kurtal. I go now to take my first steps in this World. Infant in their power but we all must start somewhere, mustn’t we? After all, you started from a slum in Ricozia, discarded by parents who brought you into the accursed Design. But no matter. We all end up exactly where we need to be. For you, that was here. Goodbye, Kurtal.’

The remainder of the man – the being – that was once Kurtal watched through encroaching black as the spectre of himself stepped into his own body, took absolute control. He watched his former skin decay and rot at the touch, become skeletal, before it marched towards the entrance. A faint glimmer of brass or bronze flickered momentarily in one of its newly claimed hands.

The last thing Kurtal would ever register was the sickening, sonorous voice, followed by a cacophony of laughter. He did not have the time nor the capacity to register the lifelong betrayal – the sheer crumbling of the foundation upon which he had built the entirety of his existence.

‘Time to send the word... Only two more to go.’

‘I am starved...’

Nibb**Year 4573****Second month of Driftus**

Some forces in the world are the residuum of entities older than time.

The weary voice of the giant boat groaned amidst the oscillating tides. The continual treacherous journeys west from Dwelloch to the labour island Murkburrow Enclave had long begun to erode the foundations of the Gelerechtine vessel. A few moments of relative silence passed before an even louder groan rippled through the brig below deck. Accompanying the shrieking wood was once again a violent splash followed by a wave of deathly cold as the natural might of the ocean broke against mortal ingenuity. In this dim chamber, the only reminder of the vast outside world was the sound of the unending struggle between ship and sea.

Indeed, it had been almost a week since the young Gnome-kin Nibb had left the mouldy brig. Despite still not being exactly certain as to the sequence of chaotic and violent events that led her and the other strangers in the same tavern in Fortitude to be ordered off to the Enclave, Nibb was seemingly unbothered. Her demeanour was a stark contrast to the other twenty or so captives who shared the room. Her posture was upright on the wooden

bench affixed to the left wall, her head lifted, and her wide, eager green eyes still actively surveying the space – even after so much time inside. Her face always wore a persistent smile no matter the circumstances – the mark of someone so deeply in love with the very notion of existing.

One could easily mistake Nibb for a child due to her height and naïve disposition, though in truth she was eighteen years of age – the lower threshold for adulthood amongst Gnome-kin. Nibb's brown shoulder-length hair was still as bushy as ever and filled with twigs and leaves and other remnants of nature that always seemed to find their way into it. Her large ears extended out playfully through the tangles, framing her narrow face and blushed cheeks. While her belongings were confiscated upon entry onto the ship, her clothes were thankfully allowed to remain. She wore an off-white tunic with her beloved forest-green over the top, which was covered with a white flower-shaped collar that traced her slender shoulders generously.

The other prisoners differed greatly in appearance. The majority were dishevelled and bore only rags of servitude – a potential giveaway as to their criminal lives back on Dwelloch. Nibb thought that they most likely came from one of the larger cities that she had heard stories of, but never visited. Unbeknownst to her, the guess would be correct, as it was exactly such cities where criminal enterprise thrived and undoubtedly bought them a one-way trip to Murkburrow Enclave. But this knowledge was not commonplace – if knowledge at all – back in her self-contained community of Willowtip Way.

Also unbeknownst to Nibb was the source of the feverish tides of the Veiled Strait which separated the Enclave from Dwelloch, for they were not always this spiteful. The natural forces across Gelerecht were amplified during a period labelled by the sorcerers of Augury Spire as The Enshrouding – a feared stretch of time which occurred once a generation. Throughout the period, the dual suns that granted Gelerecht life became

recurrently eclipsed by its collection of seven smaller moons. The exact mechanics of the eclipse eluded even the brightest of scholars to this day. But it was nonetheless believed that somehow the boundaries between Realms weakened during the period. The boundaries between places of unfathomable hunger and ruination and the World as mortals knew it. But if one looked deep enough – measured the true extent of mortal behaviour – were they really so different?

For young Nibb, however, none of these existential details were of any concern nor knowledge. For there she sat, against the wall, kicking her legs playfully, almost in anticipation or excitement. The brig itself was rudimentary – it bore no appointments save the long wooden bench that traced the walls. A single sconce was lit near the ladder on the far side that led to the hatch above, though its waning light indicated the initiation of extinguishment. Would one of the guards come to replace it? Nibb was not sure. Throughout the journey so far, she had only seen guards on two occasions when they dumped gruel through the hatch. Both times the hungry prisoners had fought over the dismal sustenance, despite the abhorrent taste.

The boat suddenly lurched again, harder this time, shaking three of the prisoners awake who were sleeping on the floor. The strangest of them was a tall Kereeduine whose dense white feathers were stained with the grime of the unsanitary floor. The Kereeduine noticed her staring. Rather than scowling back as one might expect, they instead strode over, their taloned feet making a scuffling sound.

‘Hi! I’m Nibb!’ she beamed in her high-pitched voice.

As if by surprise or instinct, the stranger took a step back, not having said nor heard a single word in over a week. But realising the softness and genuine nature of Nibb’s tone, he then extended out a feathered arm from which a large taloned hand appeared.

‘I’m Uallaack,’ he replied disarmingly, also in the common language, but with a distinctive emphasis on the ‘ck’ in his name.

Nibb’s own hand shot out as soon as he stopped speaking. This drew the attention of the other prisoners, but they quickly returned to their own brooding, save for the other two who were thrown to their feet earlier with Uallaack. Their gazes lingered.

One was a Dwarven woman of similar height to Nibb – stout, muscular and brown of hair, which was styled into a collection of dreadlocks that were pulled back in places. Her almond skin was marked by a great many scars. Both of her arms were tattooed with strange runic sigils, none of which were familiar to Nibb. She wore dirty brown boots, and her matching leather trousers were covered around the waist by a colourful, though soiled, tribal garb. Above her exposed midriff she wore a red tunic with leather patching around the shoulders. Nibb had met a few Dwarves before, but she thought this one looked reasonably young, but at the same time, extremely well-travelled. It was very confusing.

The other individual was a juxtaposition to the Dwarf. Tall and slender, the young Leathfriel woman stood above most of the prisoners save for Uallaack. Half-Elves were common across Gelerecht, occupying many seats of government in the capital Dwella and other major cities. Nibb had even met some who stayed at New Forest Lodge where her mother had worked.

However, the Mifriel half of their parentage, who were responsible for passing on the elongated ears, radiant skin, and extended lifespans were much more solemnly seen – they preferred to associate only with rulers and keep to their island of Demmamach. Nibb, of course, was not aware of the existence of such a place, nor the politics of Gelerecht.

The Leathfriel was garbed entirely in black, her roguish robes as dark as the night sky, with only her long blonde hair to betray her position in the dimness of the brig. Her very

demeanour seemed to fill the space around her with guile. She looked cockily towards Nibb and Uallaack, whose hands were still locked in greeting.

Her tone was biting. ‘How lovely. Are we doing introductions now?’

The Dwarf snorted, seemingly in agreement at the absurdity of the situation.

Completely unaware of the ill-intent of their remarks, Nibb skipped over, and in the exact same fashion, beamed at her two new unwilling companions.

‘Hi! I’m Nibb!’

A long, awkward pause filled the air. Nibb, unwavering in her positive attitude, waited attentively.

After letting out a very audible groan, the Dwarf finally conceded, grumbled back in a low voice. ‘They call me Bogs.’

‘Oh, it’s so wonderful to meet you Bogs!’

Cautious, though probably not wanting to make any further enemies in the world just yet, the Leathfríel also chimed in. ‘Ari,’ she whispered hastily.

‘It’s so great to meet you all, I really do enjoy mak—’ Nibb’s voice was cut off by the loudest creaking of wood in the journey so far, followed by trails of voices somewhere up on the deck.

The quartet rushed back to their positions. Several tense moments passed with only the sound of foam breaking against wood to colour them. Finally, the giant padlock which secured the hatch was released, and cold air flowed freely into the damp space. The weathered green face and long ivory tusks of a Leathgrûskh poked through.

His voice was low and stern. ‘Alright you lot. Time to go. No funny business, or the work in the fields will be the least of your concerns.’

The prisoners looked about each other – none seemed willing to make the first move. Nibb pushed herself off the bench and walked to the ladder.

‘Oh, I can see the moonlight again! How lovely!’ she said.

The other prisoners followed, with Ari, Bogs, and Uallaack leading the more ragged collection up the rather unstable ladder after her.

Bells tolled.

Not of the kind meant to signify arrival, but of the kind meant to communicate danger.

The ship had docked at a small port meant for one, maybe two boats at a time. The jetty which met the deck was rudimentary – just a simple extension of wooden planks from the sandy coast. Beyond it lay high walls which encircled the island for as far as Nibb could see. A large iron gate set into the wall at the end of the trail leading away from the dock was drawn upwards – most likely the only way in and out. A giant bell sat atop it, and the silhouette of a man thrashed it in alarm. Its desperate call was answered by others further within the island.

Bodies littered the shoreline. Guards, all of them, their rudimentary leather and mail armour proving to be just that – rudimentary. Human, Leathfríel, and Leathgrûskh alike lay dead, limbs severed. Their blood now the crimson artistry upon the sandy canvas of the shore.

Bells tolled.

There were no guards left on the ship. The Leathgrûskh man who summoned them was nowhere to be seen amongst the bodies in the distance. Fires burned inside the walls, their plumes snaking upward as if to touch the eclipse itself. But no matter the number of corpses Nibb could see, she could not determine the reason for their end. The ship was simply too far away for careful observation. But the screams which travelled on nocturnal winds reached her just fine.

Mama, I see bodies! They are not moving. I don't know what to do...

Nibb would often speak to Twiggy, though not always in her head. She would relay exciting things she saw that day or just generally have a conversation – though they were always one-sided. Nibb wanted more than anything to see Twiggy's gentle smile again. She felt a rare pang of an unknown emotion come over her, but it was quickly washed away as she reminded herself that her mother was listening, but just could not respond yet.

Mama, I don't know what to do!

A voice called out to her.

'Nibb! Uallaack!'

It was the stern cry of Bogs.

'Come! We make for cover on the island!'

Bogs took off running. Unsure what to do, Nibb followed with Uallaack in tow. None of the other prisoners dared move from the false safety of the hatch. The three of them caught up to Ari who was already on the jetty fumbling with a padlock on a chest.

In her hands were two makeshift pieces of metal. Ari jammed one curved end and one straight end into the lock and began to dance with the mechanism, slowly rotating her left hand while applying pressure with the right, then shifting the right vertically and releasing with the left. Eventually, a subtle *click* sounded beneath the droning bells before she pressed both hands in simultaneously, prying the lock free.

'I saw them stash our things in here before they took us below deck,' the Leathfríel hissed. 'Quickly!'

Bogs retrieved an elaborate greataxe – a large, two-handed weapon with a thick, rounded handle with rings of iron carved expertly into the hilt. The pommel was emblazoned with a crest in the centre. The blade itself was broad and symmetrical. It was decorated with

golden etching in the shape of linked chains surrounded by arcs which mimicked the curvature of the blade at either end.

Ari collected a pile of smaller items – a set of daggers, a shortsword, a bow, and a quiver. Uallaack reclaimed a set of shiny silver plate mail which Nibb thought looked heavy and uncomfortable. He brandished a sword across his back that was at least twice as big as her. She could see the reflection of her face in the width of the blade.

How could someone wield such a thing?

Nibb lovingly collected her mother's satchel and quickly checked that all the flowers she had collected were accounted for. She also grabbed her whip – a knotted and barbed device which she used mostly for collecting berries from hard-to-reach trees as opposed to combat – and affixed it to her waist.

'Do you see the gate ahead?' asked Bogs. 'We make for the right-hand side of it. At the very least, we should be able to see if the situation inside the walls is any more dire than out here. We are too exposed.'

Ari nodded, followed the Dwarf at a brisk jog. Nibb and Uallaack joined them and set off towards the tolling bells and unknown danger. For the more world-hardened of them knew that remaining idle on the lone vessel was to simply await their demise.

Their arrival on the shore only brought clarity to what they all already knew: this place was cursed.

For years, songkeepers had spun tales about the calamitous nature of Murkburrow Enclave. A prison island built upon lands rumoured to be the site of deific warring. While no historian or acolyte could verify the claims, somehow the populace of Gelerecht came to believe the words sung to them. For how could one deny the beauty – the *tragedy* – encapsulated by music? It was simply too harmonious, too visceral, to not be true. Belief

would then pass into folklore, then into stories told to frighten children. Some even still feared being shipped off to the Enclave to this day. It was a powerful thing indeed when people feared land itself more than a life sentence of hard labour.

Nibb had only ever met one songkeeper when they stayed at New Forest Lodge under the care of her mother. The Kûrasti bard had sung three and only three songs that night: one of the Enclave, one of the Imea, and one of whales whose mouths were portals to the stars. Nibb was fascinated by the finale, though the others at the Lodge found it far too extravagant for their tastes.

She had even gotten the chance to speak to him briefly after the intimate performance. Similar to the show, he granted her three and only three questions. Her first asked about the Imea, since it was a word unfamiliar to her.

‘The Elder Gods,’ the songkeeper answered.

Nibb had no clue as to what a God was, but she did not want to waste a further question. Her second asked about the bard’s heritage, as she found herself interested in the twin horns which crowned their head. She learnt that his father was an unknown Nîlang – another word unfamiliar to her – and their mother a Human woman from Ascetic. The songkeeper seemed sad when recounting their parentage, though the reason for it was lost on her.

Much to her surprise, the bard absently started to hum and mutter parts of songs, as if out of some reflex or need to distract themself. Most of it was lost under their breath, but small snippets came to her. The first was her favourite:

First came forest, concealed and green

Next came desert, pale secrets unseen

Third came tundra, unyielding and white

Which left only ocean

And its ripples at night

The second contained words she did not know at the time, but she remembered it nonetheless:

Seven they numbered in all their glory

Bathed in knowledge of every story

As one they grew, covet unchecked

Until sealed away, forever bereft

Once the strange recitation concluded, Nibb asked her third and final question. It pertained to the whales.

‘*Just a story, little lass,*’ the songkeeper replied. ‘*But it’s a wonder to believe, isn’t it?*’

Nibb still believed.

The tolling was deafening beneath the gate. Again, and again the bell sounded, though the number of responses had dwindled. Only two bells remained – the one above them and some unseen distant partner. Two alarms, locked in a fleeting dance of panic, neither willing to abandon the other. But whatever had come for the Enclave was not in the business of leaving anything behind. They would both be seen silenced.

Nibb could now make out far more details of the corpses than she ever would have wanted. Pained faces lay motionless beneath helmets. Envenomed wounds seeped yellow fluid into the sand. Severed limbs told stories of attempted flight, but ultimate failure. A macabre profligacy. But there was no sign of whatever nightmare was responsible.

Ari and Bogs toed their way up to the threshold. Nibb and Uallaack waited anxiously a few paces behind. Even from here, Nibb could discern more of the island. A feat mostly possible due to her Gnomish eyes. It appeared Ari and Bogs were similarly blessed, while Uallaack had a much more difficult time of it. Massive fields – crops, mostly – extended out in plantation rows for as far as she could see in the bonfire-lit shadows. Deep burrows and trenches were carved between them, and tools for tending to soil and seed were scattered about.

Suddenly, Nibb's attention was drawn back at the glinting of steel. An unseen blade whirled from the darkness on the other side of the wall and stopped a hair's width from the neck of Bogs. Maintaining the scimitar's position in front of Dwarven arteries, a figure stepped out of the shadows.

Their features were cat-like – dark blue-grey fur covered everywhere skin would on Nibb, and two piercing yellow eyes peered warily through the dark. They were a Filas, and not many of their kind remained in the World. A calculating and assertive voice somewhere between that of Nibb's mother and one of the male village elders addressed them.

'Prisoners? With weapons no less. What role did you have to play in this? I'll have your heads! The King himself will see to it!'

'Sheathe your fucking blade before you lose the hand that wields it,' hissed Bogs, unflinching before the face of death. Her tone exhibited none of the vagueness associated with a threat. No, her words were a promise.

'Proud fool! You think you are in a position—'

The reply was cut short by Ari. Her voice was cool, unperturbed by the circumstances. Whether it was a lack of fear or lack of care for Bogs, nobody knew.

‘Stay your tongues, the both of you! We have come from the ship, no more, no less. We collected equipment along the way. Now, who are you and what the fuck has happened here?’

Something in Ari’s tone made the Filas lower their sword. Not entirely, but at least to the navel of the Dwarf.

‘I am Executor Arbis, head of Murkburrow Enclave... or what’s left of it. You would have worked under me, should whatever has befallen the island not occurred.’

A statement intended to procure a sense of loyalty – hierarchy. None was given.

‘Well, *Executor*,’ started Bogs, ‘would you mind telling us just what has befallen the island? *Your* island?’

The yellow eyes dimmed slightly. ‘I do not know. It keeps to the shadows, strikes when we cannot see. What’s left of my people are holed up inside the compound behind me. Many of the workers are dead or unaccounted for. Such an occurrence is completely unprecedented...’

‘It strikes from the shadows, you said?’ asked Ari. ‘What weapons do they wield? How did your people die? What type of injuries did they sustain?’

Nibb knew of nocturnal jungle predators, but none of them killed people – not on a scale like this. She was at a loss as to how to contribute.

‘Yes, shadows. I am blessed – or cursed – to see them better than most, but all answers have eluded even me. But the sounds... The sounds of their deaths... I’ll never forget them for as long as I live.’

The posture of Bogs softened; her head stooped slightly. ‘Aye. I know that feeling.’

The sincerity made the Executor fully lower their sword. Deep, genuine pain existed within the Dwarf. Regret. Heartache. Yearning. Emotions with which Nibb was almost entirely without schema.

‘How can we help?’ asked Bogs. ‘How can we survive?’

‘I cannot promise survival, Daughter of the Mountain, but I can promise you this: you put an end to whatever is killing my people and I will pardon you onto the ship bearing tomorrow’s delivery. I cannot lose any more of my people.’

Her cowl drawn over her head, Ari looked intensely at the Executor as if to read the truth of their words directly from their flesh. She seemed more wraith than person for the few heartbeats it lasted.

‘You mean that? This is not some ploy to get us to do your dirty work?’

The Executor sighed. ‘Aye. What choice do I have? I have no options left. We cannot get word to the mainland, and besides, it would be weeks before they received our summons. What remains of my people are locked away in the guardhouse. I daresay none of them wish to see the outside again until at least the safety of sunlight.’

It was at this time a dread realisation sunk in for all of them. There was a single reason they had been able to have this conversation at all: the bells had ceased tolling.

The group stepped from underneath the portcullis and gazed upward. The giant alarm was motionless, its once tireless attendee nowhere to be seen. A shadow raced through the inky night before it. Nibb blinked and it was gone. But the others save Uallaack had seen it too.

‘Shadows themselves...’ said the Executor sullenly. ‘What can our blades do against such sorcery?’

A pregnant pause.

‘It was not sorcery.’

Everyone turned to Uallaack.

‘I did not see it, but I *felt* it. These... *shadows*, you say... threaten my Goddess. I know this much.’

‘Your Goddess?’ asked Ari with more than a hint of derision. ‘And which one of those forsaken entities might you lay claim to?’

‘Forsaken? You, perhaps. But not me. Through me and my mother before me the will of Mûyor is done.’

‘The Goddess of the Moon,’ said the Executor, ‘a fitting deity for such a night. What information does your Goddess tell you about our enemy?’

‘She does not lend me any further information. But not out of a lack of piety on my behalf or a lack of a willingness of her own. She simply... does not know.’

‘Great!’ exclaimed Ari, making her sarcasm known to even Nibb. ‘A God that doesn’t know something. How useful!’

‘Do not insult the Nocturnal Lady!’ hissed Uallaack, his calm demeanour cracking for the first time. ‘You may wish to live a meaningless life, but I do not. Through her I have seen – *done* – things otherwise I would never have dreamed!’

‘Okay, okay!’ interrupted Bogs. ‘All discussion of Gods and anything not trying to fucking kill us has ceased! Whatever it was, it fled eastward. How much more of the island lies that way?’

‘Almost all of it,’ sighed the Executor.

Three more shadows whirled past the group beneath the gate. One passed *through* the Executor, drew an abysmal laceration across her sword arm. The Executor howled and collapsed clutching the wound. The stench hit Nibb before the sight of blood. Viscous shadowy pus seeped from it at a terrifying rate.

‘Poison,’ said Ari.

Uallaack shook his head. ‘No, something worse. Necrosis. This is not the work of anything natural. Hold still.’

‘Do not fucking tou—touch… me!’ gasped the Executor, their breath already weakening.

‘If I do not help you right now you will die!’ bellowed Uallaack. ‘Do we look like the usual rabble – the thieves and murderers and whatever else – who are sent here? Let me help!'

The Executor swore under their breath before finally offering their arm. Uallaack was right – the wound was getting worse, the darkness deepened with every moment that passed.

Uallaack dropped down. Nibb watched as his eyes glowed blue, just like two moons. Power radiated around him. Invisible, yet palpable all the same. He placed one hand on the arm to steady it while the other hovered in the air above.

‘Ishk ck ung Mû!’ he chanted three times in Keree.

His free hand traced a strange conical shape between their two bodies. It glowed dully before it faded into nothingness.

He chanted again four times.

Five.

Finally, the coalescing shadow-pus and blood started to drain away into some unseen ethereal basin. The wound sealed in its wake. Vitality returned to the Executor almost immediately.

‘That was incredible! How did you do it?’ asked Nibb excitedly.

‘I told you,’ he said, his eyes returning to their usual hue, ‘my Goddess.’

Nibb did not say anything further. She just simply thought to herself as she often did. This was not the first time she had seen healing performed. For the last time she had, it was her who performed it.

A lone deer in the Forest. It lay bleeding on a bed of fallen autumnal leaves, a grievous bite across its abdomen. Nibb could still hear its dying whimpers if she thought about it. She was ten when she came across the poor creature. Tears wetted her cheeks and a tightness gripped her chest. Such a hurtful sight she had never seen. She caressed its cheek, calmed the scared creature with her touch.

As she did, tiny vines materialised out of minuscule spheres on either side of the wound. The ends of each thin tendril found each other, coiled around and around in a faithful embrace. The laceration closed before her teary eyes, sealed by nature itself. Before long, the deer bounded upward and away, back into the dense green foliage. Nibb would never see it again.

Her mind reeled back to the present. Uallaack's ability to heal was distinct from hers. There were no vines, and she had not needed to speak nor trace any symbols in the air. She still had no clue as to what the sigils actually did or how it worked. Maybe a Goddess truly did watch over him.

However, she did not understand the gravity of that assertion. What was it that provided the weight – the reverence – others associated with deities? Belief? Understanding? Nibb did not ponder any of this for it was difficult to consider things for which she had little reference.

‘Thank you,’ said the Executor, their voice still hoarse with the threat of death. ‘Such a kindness can only be repaid one way. But we must rid ourselves of the danger first, else I may never get the chance to repay it. I would rather leave this life knowing I owe no debts in the Beyond.’

Ari cocked her head. ‘But you said the island is far too large to scour in any meaningful way. How do we track a shadow? I’m good. But not that good.’

‘What if they are easier to see from above?’

Everyone turned to face Nibb, who stood with her hands clasped about her waist, awaiting a response.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Bogs.

‘Well, it is hard to see it from here. But maybe in the sky it might be easier?’

‘You’re right!’ exclaimed Uallaack, his Kereeduine wings itching to take flight once more. ‘I’ll take a look.’

‘No!’ barked the Executor. ‘You are far too large. They will see. They will come.’

The Filas was right. Their position had already been betrayed.

‘Maybe something smaller might help?’ offered Nibb.

‘Unless you have a pet crow that can speak, I think we are shit out of luck,’ said Ari.

‘I don’t know about a pet, but I’ve been a raven before.’

‘You? A raven?’ snorted the Executor.

‘Mmmhmm! It was so fun! I flew through the treetops and saw other birds and—’

‘Look, I’m sure your story is lovely,’ interrupted the Executor, ‘but we need a realistic solution.’

Even Nibb could realise that they didn’t believe her. Their faces looked the same as the Council back when she tried to explain the horrific things she had seen in the Forest. When she hopelessly pleaded her case about the poisoned flora and fauna.

Nibb looked to where they had seen the shadow. She closed her eyes and pictured the night time wilderness back home. Her mind’s eye searched the tenebrious landscape, her sweeping gaze rising and rising until it soared free of the monolithic treeline. At the same moment, Nibb’s physical form was pulled into an impossibly small sphere. Within an instant, she burst forth as an emboldened raven and took to the skies. Her call reached out far and wide across the despondent land. There was no answer.

Feathers as black as the void, the raven form of Nibb became one with the charcoal sky. From her new vantage point, Nibb could discern much more about the Enclave. The giant walls curled off far into the distance, where they were partitioned by the furthest reaches of a forest of some kind. Its thick canopy made the existing nocturnal darkness somehow even darker. Moonlight scarcely penetrated it. Regardless, the sight brought memories of home to Nibb. Memories of warmth. Kinship. For this, she was grateful, irrespective of the circumstances.

But as sure as the suns would rise tomorrow, the thrill of a puzzle boiled within her. How she loved to solve things! To complete tasks! And this was a task most important and most fraught with danger. An enticing duo if ever there was one.

She fanned her wings, caught a whistling draught which carried her higher. The details of the island decreased in their sharpness. But she was rewarded with a far better view of what she actually needed. From this height, the shadows which tore across the Enclave were visible. Like misplaced blots of ink on an elaborate canvas they painted nightmares of suffering. Tens of them, each as long as a caravan. Ordinary eyes would miss them, such was their speed. But Nibb did not possess ordinary eyes.

At first, their movements appeared chaotic – random, even. But the longer she watched, patterns began to emerge. There was an organisation to their blackened flurries. A steady convergence towards the eastern side of the island. Ruin rode in their wake. Scores of crops were decimated, structures and outhouses levelled. But worse, people continued to die below her. The fleeing workers were cut down as they ran.

At first, Nibb thought that the poor people died in the same manner that would have claimed the Executor if Uallaack did not intervene. The attack and the reaction were

incredibly similar. Then she noticed them. Pale wisps, as translucent as morning fog yet as nebulous as clouds. They departed each body after the writhing and howling ceased.

Souls.

The very essence of being. Stripped away and consumed by the shadows. Whatever was behind this madness was feeding off each and every one it claimed. It was *growing*.

The idea of a soul was once a source of wonder for Nibb: an invisible part of yourself that persisted beyond your life. How incredible such a thing was! She had pondered throughout her formative years just what hers might look like. Would it be a representation of her? Would it be a flower? Something else? She wondered whether any two would be the same. Nibb hoped to share similarities with her mother's.

But now, staring at the ghostly culmination of so many lives – so many experiences – being unceremoniously consumed, she doubted the beauty with which she once regarded the soul. Nibb shook the doubt, reminded herself that what she witnessed was unnatural – a perversion of how things should be. This was not how whatever came after life worked. It couldn't be. Whatever was doing this must be stopped. Just like whatever was affecting her home.

The last souls assimilated with the final shadow before it pursued the other apparitions eastward. Nibb's keen eyes were unable to find them once they disappeared within the gloom of the distant woodland. But she knew enough of their bearing to inform the others. Nibb flew down, transformed back into her Gnome-kin form gracefully as her feet touched the ground. Her newfound companions were dumbfounded.

The Executor studied her closely with piercing eyes. 'Impressive. It has no doubt been some time since this place has seen such an act, if at all.' The brief wave of kindness receded back to an ocean of scepticism. 'What did you learn?'

‘Terrible things!’ Nibb exclaimed. ‘The shadows they... they took the souls! All of them!’

‘Souls?’ asked Ari, her tone untrusting and scathing. ‘How can you say such a thing? I have seen *many* corpses, and not once have I glimpsed an inkling of this thing fools hold so dear.’

‘I saw them! Grey and like clouds, only... different. The shadows took them into the trees!’

The Executor shifted uncomfortably.

‘What is it?’ asked Bogs.

‘Your companion refers to the Sullencrest Woods. Accursed place, so the workers say. Apparently even more-so than the ground which we stand on. A great number of them outright refuse to go in there for even simple tasks such as fetching lumber or hunting. They would rather work double shifts, even risk starvation, all just to pass the responsibility to someone else.’

‘What makes them cursed?’ pressed Bogs. ‘We have heard the stories and songs of this place, but there is no mention of the Woods specifically.’

‘I don’t know how or when the rumours started. But they have persisted over the years.’

‘I have no time for alleged curses,’ said Ari. ‘Let us make for the Woods and be done with whatever is at work here. Great rulers have been slain by shadows, but then again, many have also died by steel.’

Nibb saw Ari subtly finger the hilt of one of her daggers.

‘Will you come with us? Be our guide?’ asked Bogs.

‘No. I must return to the compound. The safety of my guards is paramount. Follow the main trail east between the fields. You cannot miss the treeline; it spans much of the island.’

The Executor made to leave but turned around at the last moment.

‘I wish you luck. Truly. You may be the one thing that spares us all from this roll of the dice. If you manage to return, find us in the north-western compound. If any of us are left to be found, that is.’

With parting melancholy, the Filas stole into the night, became one with the darkness.

‘Stay close,’ Bogs said, adjusting the greataxe across her back. ‘Tonight, we rewrite our futures. Gûmtûng knows mine certainly needs it.’

They started walking.

‘What’s a Gûmtûng?’ Nibb asked Ari.

She chose the wrong companion for insight. The Leathfríel simply marched away, the strides of her slender legs much too long for Nibb to keep pace with.

Nibb was unsure how long it took them to traverse the Enclave. Everything about her surroundings – the way the moonlight fell, the death and decay, the musty air – was foreign. All she knew was that her legs were tired. But they had arrived at the Sullencrest Woods at last. Despite the Executor’s foreboding words, the sheer proximity to dense trees revitalised her aching muscles.

Mama, it looks like home! Only the trees are a bit shorter. But they are still beautiful!

However, the closeness brought little reprieve from the inability to penetrate the obscurity. The silhouettes of large trees were easy enough to trace, but the more minute details required for a pursuit were entirely absent. Of greater concern was the fact that this

was not the strangest phenomenon which awaited them. It was as if the Woods themselves inexplicably communicated silent intent. A warning: *do not enter.*

Someone or something knew of their position. And that same something wanted nothing more than for them to turn away. The sensation driving the intent was almost like... annoyance. As if their presence was an affront to the course of history or nature.

Do not enter.

'I was never one to listen to advice,' said Ari before stepping inside the threshold of the Woods.

Bogs followed, with Nibb and Uallaack close behind. Uallaack maintained slight contact with Nibb's cloak as he was unable to see in the darkness as well as the others.

Do not enter.

What seemed like hours passed as they carefully traversed the woodland. At first, Nibb had been elated to be surrounded by shrubs and bark and beetles again. But there were no such things to be found. Each time she brushed past a dead leaf or branch it seemed to cling to her far longer than she would have expected. Everything about the Sullencrest seemed a mockery of the sanctity and beauty of nature. Of everything Nibb found wondrous. Every detail communicated a desire to stifle their progression. Maybe it truly was cursed. Maybe it was just their collective unease rising to the fore.

However, it was not the *presence* of danger or evil which troubled Nibb. It was the *absence* of life. Even the trees – the very pillars of the Woods – which at first appeared normal, were revealed to be decrepit and fragile, their bark a husk of former ancient glory. It was as if the souls of the flora had also been consumed. Nibb wondered whether trees had souls as they continued their journey into the murk.

She decided they did, and it pained her to see their absence.

Both Ari and Bogs proved to be highly effective trackers. The former through intellect and training, the latter through experience. The signs were subtle – leaves carved from gnarled branches, small shrubs blown in one direction just a little too far. Subtle, but noticeable to skilled eyes.

The strange gracefulness of it struck them as odd. Where the Enclave proper had been decimated, here the wake of the shadows was merely a whisper despite the apparent decay. Whether the Woods were somehow impervious to their malign intent or if the entities paved a more careful path, none of them knew.

Their measured pursuit led them to a small clearing deep within the foliage. Moonlight beamed down into the clearing, painted a portrait of luminous azure. The centre was marked by a yawning cave mouth – a curious sight given the absence of rock elsewhere in the Woods. Troughs in the dirt marred the ground about the entrance, betraying the first signs of residence of whatever lay in wait.

Ari crouched down on the left side of the cave and looked inside. Bogs stood beside her while Uallaack just gazed up at the moons, apparently lost in thought. Nibb was unsure what to do.

A small patch of grass on her right caught her attention. Skipping over, momentarily detached from the seriousness of the situation, she was pleased to find a unique assortment of weeds and even a few flowers. Realising that the flowers were new to her, she delicately picked them and stowed them carefully inside her satchel.

Her eyes then caught the bright blue leaves of three much larger, more vibrant flowers a few paces away. They almost seemed to *draw in* the moonlight from above, their large petals dancing to some discordant rhythm played by the lucent beams. Nibb picked them excitedly and placed them in another safe spot in her satchel.

‘Hey! You two!’ hissed Bogs, ‘Get over here! And keep your eyes open!’

Ari led them into the dark, narrow tunnel. Even if they had wanted to fan out, only maybe two of them could fit side-by-side. Uallaack leaned forward to listen to Bogs’ movements as a guide. At the rear, Nibb found herself peering closely at the walls – they were covered in a strange black-green moss that was writhing slowly towards the ceiling, singing a quiet but unsettling chorus. The uni-directional movement reminded her of marching ants.

The party came to a chamber where three forking paths snaked into the darkness. Ari inspected the entrance to the left path, Bogs the central, and Nibb the right at the request of the Dwarf, leaving Uallaack to wait behind.

Nibb looked at the walls of her passage and the darkness beyond. At first, she thought her eyes deceived her. What initially looked like jagged rock was revealed to be horrifyingly different. Thousands of hands seemed to be reaching outward from all over the malleable surface – themselves actually forming the rough inconsistencies in the rock. The hands were locked perpetually in a desperate outstretched grasp – almost beckoning for someone or something to save their petrified forms. But they were long lost to the mortal world. Nibb extended out a lone finger and clasped one of the tiny hands. There was no response from the cold dead stone.

She turned back to face the others. They all save Uallaack had stumbled upon the same realisation.

‘Maybe this place truly is cursed after all,’ said Bogs solemnly.

‘What makes you say that?’ asked Uallaack, genuinely unaware of the horror which lurked mere paces from where he stood.

A pause.

‘Just a hunch,’ answered Bogs blankly.

Neither Nibb nor Ari elaborated.

‘My tunnel is a dead end. The air travels only a short distance,’ said Ari.

‘Mine too,’ replied Bogs.

Nibb turned back, noticed a slight draught.

‘I can feel a breeze in mine!’ she exclaimed.

‘Then our path lies down yours, Gnome-kin,’ said Bogs.

‘Before we set off, humour me, will you?’ said Ari slyly. ‘Let me look down one of these others, for... posterity.’

‘Posterity?’ Bogs sighed. ‘One only. Need I remind you the potential danger we are in?’

‘No.’

Bogs waited with Uallaack while Nibb accompanied Ari the short way into the leftmost tunnel. The end was marked by circular rounding, forming almost a stem-and-bulb shape. At first, the tunnel appeared to be empty. But the keen eyes of Ari found a set of loose stones in the floor. She used a dagger to dexterously pry them open and reached inside. Her hands returned with a small birch wood box bearing a crescent-moon shaped lock on the front. Ari placed it on the floor and inspected the exterior.

‘What is it?’ asked Nibb.

‘Some kind of storage box, though I’m not certain for what.’

Ari reached into a hidden pocket on her waist and produced the tools Nibb saw her using earlier. A similar dance with the mechanism took place before the young Leathfríel proved too skilful for the contraption’s designer. Ari popped open the lid to reveal two small vials filled with crimson liquid. A black felt-lined bottom rested softly beneath them. She looked at Nibb and shrugged.

‘I have no clue what these are.’

‘Me either,’ answered Nibb. ‘Who would keep a box beneath stones?’

‘No-one that you would want to meet, I’m sure.’

They returned to their companions, box in hand. Bogs and Uallaack inspected the contents.

‘I’ve seen these before,’ said Uallaack, using a faint luminance from his hands to see. ‘If I am correct, they are Sant Elixirs. A single vial can heal all manner of grievous wounds.’

‘You mean they can heal you? Like if you were cut, it would seal it?’ asked Nibb.

‘Oh, I have never administered one myself. But my mother and father have, and they showed me how they work. My father is a seasoned traveller, and my mother was renowned with both sword and salve.’

Ari gave a sharp gesture to shush the party. She had not finished with the box. She tapped the sides and the base; noticed a hollower sound than expected. She slid the edge of a dagger between the felt lining and the wood and peeled it back, revealing a false bottom. A smirk crept across her face, too proud to finally deny it.

Ari removed the decoy to expose the true base, drawing from it a small handheld device of some kind. It was shaped similarly to a hand crossbow, but instead of having a top-loading mechanism for a bolt, it bore only a round metal tube which extended from the walnut handle. Nibb noticed a series of ornate etchings in a language she did not know carved into the stained wood. Ari reached into the box again and returned with a handful of tiny, bright silver pellets.

‘What is it? Some kind of projectile device?’ asked Bogs.

‘It would appear so, though I have never seen anything like it,’ replied Ari.

‘Stow it away, then. It may prove useful. Come, our journey draws to a close.’

The right path was longer than they had anticipated. It was also marginally wider, though no less uncomfortable for the dread which grew with each footstep. Bogs led, her axe drawn and resting deftly in her powerful hands. Ari followed with a dagger and shortsword. The tunnel began to curve and Uallaack struggled to create space for his large two-handed weapon. Nibb carried her whip, though only so as to not feel out of place.

On and on they stalked into the dismal tunnels. Nibb had lost all sense of how far they had gone. To plumb the earth was to fathom just how little one truly knew of the land upon which they trod. Too easily was the safety of the surface taken for granted – especially for Nibb, whose subterranean experience stopped at small hedges and burrows. Even her cheery demeanour started to become unsettled. What was the sensation purring at the edge of her consciousness? Fear?

Suddenly, luminescent light broke the gloomy monotony. It poured downward from an opening above into a wide chamber. Rather than filling the room, the light was directed so that it fell deliberately onto a stone altar in the centre. As if nature itself sought to conduct a lucent ritual. A lone robed figure sat with their legs crossed in prayer before it.

The shadows which Nibb had seen from the sky swirled around the figure like a nightmarish vortex. At this proximity, she could properly discern their aspect. They were not merely midnight shades. Their substance was shaped from thousands of gaping mouths, each yawning and yearning in anticipation – *hunger* – as they wrapped around the seated figure, cloaked it in maddening black. The mouths seemed to swallow the light around them, as if they were each a void from which worldly matter did not return. From which souls did not return.

The shadows settled behind the seated figure as a macabre cape. The figure had the shape of a tall, thin man, and wore tattered white rags which appeared to have once been an elegant robe. Nibb's heart raced as thoughts of the Prophet came to mind.

Then she noticed the body.

The figure was not a person at all. Not anymore. A desiccated husk sat in its place, skeletal and stripped of life, with only loose reminders of flesh clung to the vague assortment of bones. Eyes of pitch stared out of a dead face as the figure blinked open what facial structure remained.

The voice which addressed them was unlike any other Nibb had ever heard. A cold shiver involuntarily rose up her body – another sensation she had never felt before. The voice was entirely devoid of affect. It was monotonic with only the slightest inflections, as if variability itself was a trifle to be suppressed.

‘It was preordained that we should meet. How long I have waited... Well, long according to the system you label the forward march you endure before you inevitably die.’

Light continued to drain into the shadows behind the entity.

‘Who are you? Why do you destroy this island?’ asked Bogs, her voice stern and calculated, somehow unshaken by the undead creature.

Guttural laughter. The tone was so low, so sonorous, it awoke the very stone beneath Nibb’s feet.

‘Of course, you do not know. It has always been this way. Almost five thousand years, by your counting.’

‘Five thousand years?’ said Ari. ‘Osseous fool. You actually believe you know anything of when life first came to this World? Your fetid deeds have clearly rotted your mind.’

There was no response.

‘Who are you?’ demanded Bogs again.

‘Such desires. Such haste. It’s understandable, in a way. Time is your greatest adversary is it not? It constrains your decisions, acts as the great sieve through which you

attempt to control your path. I have seen these paths one and all. And the inevitability is this: it cannot last.'

Bogs raised her greataxe, took a step closer. The shadow cloak hissed and swirled, the mouths eager to drink the marrow of her soul.

'And you would strike me down? The most probable outcome. I wagered the gathering of souls might stall you a little longer, but it would appear flesh is forever destined to be limited.'

'Stall us?' asked Uallaack, his voice louder, angrier than Nibb had heard so far. 'You killed all of those people to just *stall* us?'

'Not killed. Devoured. They are one with me now. Rest assured; their voices are yet still heard. They are harmonious – unique, in a way – but ultimately altogether the same. They sing a chorus of regret. Pitiful.'

'Foul hierophant of the vile and damned!' shouted Bogs.

'Damned?' screamed the entity. 'You know nothing of damnation! Nothing!'

A rabid desperation pained its voice – a complete departure from the indifference it had displayed thus far. It was a desperation that one could almost take for honesty.

The monotony returned. 'I have seen thousands of worlds like yours burn, wither, and die. Your futile attempts at denial are just that – futile. For how long can you sustain such an act?'

'Act?' asked Ari. 'What act?'

'The same questions. It is always the same questions.'

'And I tire of your lack of answers,' said Ari. 'Let us end this sorry creature and receive our pardon.'

Nibb was conflicted. On one hand, the words and demeanour of the undead priest unsettled her for reasons she did not understand. But on the other, the taking of a life was

something so unbelievably foreign to her. That was until she had seen the work of the shadows. The vision of the departing souls would stay with her forever. She stepped a foot closer to Ari. The Leathfriel drew her blades.

Booming laughter. Cacophonous and terrible – a persistent, violent drone which shook the walls of the cavern.

‘A pardon! You deem a pardon the apex of importance! Words cannot explain the inadequacy of your concerns. Go on! Strike me down! Put an end to this pathetic memory.’

Ari plunged her shortsword into the bones which comprised the creature’s throat. The shadows recoiled, but did not attack. Instead, their malleable form began to harden then chisel away into dust before their eyes.

But the voice continued even in the absence of the required anatomy.

‘Insolent fools! Blight of the Cosmos!’

Ari’s dagger carved ribs off the torso.

‘Hear me!’

The cavern walls shook violently, such was the volume – the *malice* – of the voice.

‘I will not just consume you! I will unmake you! Erase every modicum of your putrid beings! Every! Last! One!’

Bogs stepped forward, swung her greataxe in a wide arc.

‘To never have existed! That is your fate! And I will savour it while your World is scattered to the stars!’

The greataxe swung downward towards the skull.

‘But I will devour them too! Nothing shall remain! Nothing!’

The giant weapon cleaved lunatic crown body. The cavern ceased shaking. The remainder of the shadows crumbled away into meaningless ash. Nibb stood dumbstruck, unable to process everything she had just seen and heard.

Uallaack stepped up to the skeletal remains. ‘We should take no chances.’

His eyes flared as moons once again as radiant light cascaded from his palms and enveloped the unmoving body. When the light dissipated, all that remained was a pile of soot. A pyrrhic reward. Nibb reached into her satchel, drew a flower – dark brown with large orange blotches – and tossed it gently onto the ashes.

‘Farewell, whatever you were. This is for those you took with you,’ she said.

Nibb watched as Bogs collected a fistful of the remains and poured it into a small pouch fastened about her waist.

‘What are you going to do with that?’ she asked.

‘Use it as proof. Somehow.’

Nibb was unsure how anyone could tell that what Bogs collected was not just dust but she decided to trust the Dwarf. She seemed wise, after all.

They exited the subterranean hovel, their minds reeling with venomous and obfuscated words. Thankfully, reprieve awaited them on the surface.

Like the parting of clouds after a storm, the air itself felt clearer. Cleaner. The surroundings were noticeably brighter too – moonlight now penetrated more avenues of the Sullencrest. Nibb smiled, for she also noticed some of the vigour return to the bark of the ancient birch and elm.

Cautiously, they retraced their steps back into the Enclave proper. Uallaack periodically gazed upward, muttering words in a language Nibb did not understand. She thought it fascinating. She had spent so much time looking downwards – whether it be at plants or animals – that she sometimes forgot to look up. His faith would serve as a reminder for her to more actively consider the rest of the World.

They returned to the upper fields near the portcullis. The compound the Executor mentioned lay a few hundred paces to their right. Bogs led them up to the gated entrance – a security measure against the workers, no doubt. It was unmanned. And ajar. With a heave, the Dwarf pushed it open against the grating friction of the cobblestone below.

Nibb could make out a series of what seemed like stalls lining the entryway. Most were ruined – produce and items littered the stone, their splintered wooden constructions scattered to the wind or impaled in neighbouring buildings. A mediocre attempt to provide some semblance of life back on the mainland had clearly been established for the guards. Nibb noticed a set of stables on her right and – unbelievably – the streaming manes of two mares who had somehow survived the slaughter. She wanted nothing more than to go and pat them, but was whisked back onto the path with a firm hand from Bogs.

A little further in, buildings traced either side of the remaining length of the compound, with most of them looking like accommodation. Near the end, Nibb could see make out some kind of communal area, more stalls, and a large clocktower that rose above the walls. She was unsure how she could not see it from the boat earlier.

Bogs and Ari continued their procession through the compound for a short while longer before stopping outside a large rectangular building directly opposite the communal area. A guardhouse. Nibb thought she saw Ari stir for a second.

‘Well,’ said Uallaack with a slight cough, ‘do we knock?’

Bogs slammed her fist into the door twice in quick succession.

For a while, there was no sound except the distant rolling waves behind them and the fading echoes of the Dwarf’s greeting. The four of them wondered whether shadows they had not accounted for had already sealed the fate of the survivors.

Footsteps crept forward from the other side. The door slowly creaked open, complete with the flashing point of a readied blade just below the handle. The door opened further to

reveal a giant serpentine form garbed in bloody ringmail and tattered leathers. Their verdant scales were scratched and scarred, but their twin ruby eyes remained unscathed. They were a Lézarith. Nibb had never met a Serpent-kin before and she could scarcely contain her wonder. It reminded her of the time she met the Kûrasti songkeeper.

‘Survivors?’ they whispered. ‘The Executor mentioned some new arrivals were attempting to aid us.’

Nibb found the Lézarith’s voice confounding. It was somehow melodious yet sharp with the hissing undertones provided by their tortuous anatomy.

‘Yes,’ answered Bogs. ‘Now, *Lézarith*, where is the Executor? We have news to share.’

The Serpent-kin seemed taken aback by her tone.

‘Daughter of the Mountain, I know our kin have long drawn blood deep beneath that hallowed rock, but I abandoned that life long ago. Not all of us are the monsters your people tell stories about.’

Bogs considered. ‘Nor are all of mine. You can call me Bogs.’

‘Korathok.’

‘Is the Executor here, Korathok? Do they live?’

A reply came from deeper within. ‘Yes, I live. Come in. Korathok, re-dress Gritlut’s wounds, why don’t you?’

‘Yes, Executor.’

The Lézarith set off towards a set of beds which encircled a makeshift medical station. The interior was relatively simple, seemingly fit-for-purpose with expeditious access to swords and spears, but also littered with tools and parchment. Despite its simplicity, it was far more densely appointed than any of the huts in Nibb’s village. However, despite its intended function as a place of order and organisation, the space was in complete disarray.

Blood decorated the floorboards and much of the furniture, indicating that the survivors likely bore grievous injuries. The fact that candles and a single oil lantern provided the only source of light somehow made everything even more sombre. There were sets of drawers and cabinets stacked on either side of the doorway where Nibb stood, indicating that it had been barricaded earlier in the night. A useless defence against formless enemies.

Nibb counted no more than twenty people strewn about the guardhouse. She also noted that they all wore armour, whether it was intact or in tatters – a sobering reminder that none of the workers had survived. At least none that made it here.

The Executor was in the far-right corner patting a soft hand on the shoulder of a Kûrasti man. The purple-skinned man was old, his skin weathered and bruised from a lifetime of hardship. One of his horns was shorn off near the tip and the other was unnaturally canted. His peppery hair lay matted with sweat and blood between them. He was crying.

‘They were my charge! Mine! And I failed them,’ he sobbed into the Executor’s embrace.

‘Samus, old friend, there was nothing you could have done. They were shadows! Shadows! Steel and iron cannot pierce such a thing!’

‘I taught them, befriended them! And yet why is it I who lives? Arnathor... Oh, Arnathor... I had him, Executor. I had him! He was in my arms. And they took even that from me. Right outside the gates.’

‘I know you cared for them all, Samus, and it pains me to see you so. But maybe our guests here can bring you at least some comfort that they were avenged.’

The two of them regarded the party. Crystalline despair dressed the aged cheeks of the man called Samus. The Executor’s face was blank, though a trained eye might have been able to perceive warring emotions buried beneath the surface.

‘I assume you being here means one of three things,’ the Executor said solemnly.
‘You succeeded and this horror is at an end. You were let go to deliver a message. Or you are thralls whose candles must be snuffed out.’ Their tone changed from solemn to scathing. ‘I advise you speak quickly and inform me as to which of the circumstances I now find myself in. Whatever shred of patience I had remaining died with Vith’Rhygar over there.’

‘It is over,’ answered Bogs. ‘The creature no longer lives, and with it, so dies whatever hold it had on this place.’

If the Executor was relieved, they did not show it.

‘And what exactly was *it*? What proof do you have?’

Bogs threw the pouch of dust on the ground between them.

‘Some kind of undead. Now it is no more than ash.’

The Executor considered but did not move to inspect the pouch. ‘Very well. I guess I have no choice but to trust you.’

‘There is a larger pile of that within a cave in the Sullencrest,’ Ari added. ‘You are more than welcome to validate our claims.’

The Executor’s face pursed into a grim smile. ‘Thank you for the reassurance, young Leathfríel, but I daresay my people have had enough of those Woods to last them a lifetime.’

Nods came from a few of the guards standing around the room.

Samus looked up. ‘I’ll go, Executor.’

‘Samus, please...’

‘No, I must. I want to bury the friends I lost. Wayward souls as they were, I am proud to have witnessed the citizens they became. I do not care about whatever crimes or decree bound them to my service. I would stake my life that any of them could have lived back on the mainland if given the chance again. No, I will go. I will give each of them a burial on the edge of the Woods. I owe them that much.’

The Executor shifted their palm to his back. ‘You do not owe them anything, old friend. You already gave them what they most desperately needed – purpose and a kind heart. Not all of us are fortunate to be born into such circumstances, but people like you make life worth living for those that are.’

Samus rose. ‘Thank you, Executor. Your words are a great kindness. We can speak later, if you like.’

The Executor nodded. ‘I will come by and offer what reflections I can.’

Samus made for the door but paused at the threshold. ‘Something just occurred to me.’

He ran a damp palm over his broken horn. Nibb noticed that he was missing a finger. ‘I remember each and every face who has ever come into my service. And I have been here for centuries. A knack I have my father to thank, I guess. Somehow, your faces are not entirely new to me.’

Nibb cocked her head.

‘Unless my memory fails, I have seen you before. Many years ago. Actually...’

Samus paused looking puzzled. ‘Now that I think on it, there were some differences. I guess when you have lived as long as I have, you are bound to see some likenesses, are you not? Maybe some relatives of yours were here once.’

‘I doubt it,’ said Ari.

Samus regarded her closely. ‘Fair enough. In any case, if it means anything to you, their names were... hmm, let me think... Kriviel, Lysra, Cerk, and Myza.’ He finished with a sweeping look from Ari to Bogs to Uallaack, and Nibb.

Myza... What a beautiful name!

The four of them shook their heads.

‘Forgive my intrusion, then, it’s been a troublesome night. I hope the dawn brings renewed purpose to your lives,’ said Samus before closing the door behind him.

The Executor rose. ‘Samus speaks true. Although we could certainly use the hands to restore the island, a ship is due to arrive tomorrow with just that. And, if my hopes are not scattered to the wind, there may also be some survivors on the ship which bore you. Regardless, as is rightly deserved, I declare in the name of King Vanelor Sylword, that the four individuals before me be pardoned from their station at Murkburrow Enclave and be given their freedoms on Dwelloch once more.’

Uallaack breathed a sigh of relief.

‘I imagine you must be tired,’ the Executor continued. ‘There is a set of three cabins down the hill past the first four fields from here. Take any bunk you like. Samus will be out all night and there is no-one to occupy them anymore. Help yourselves to any food that remains. Meet me at the gate at sunrise.’

‘Thank you, Executor. I am truly sorry about those you have lost,’ said Uallaack.

‘As am I.’

The trek to the lower cabins was welcomingly light-hearted. Bogs and Nibb chatted idly about the crops in the surrounding fields and the purposes of what garden tools they could see. Both Dwarf and Gnome-kin proved to have extensive knowledge of tillage – much to the surprise of the other. Eventually, the group reached their respective bunks and settled in for what felt like their first real rest since Fortitude.

The morning came almost as fast as sleep had to Nibb’s eyes. The Executor and a collection of guards with less serious injuries were waiting at the main gate. Nibb watched as

prisoners were whisked off the newly arrived ship in lines to their future of reconstruction and toil.

With a cordial nod, the Executor took one last look at the group before addressing the latest arrivals. The sensation finally set in.

Nibb was going back towards home.

Back towards finding the Prophet.

Under the first rays of sunlight peeking through the drawn curtains of the horizon, the four pardon bearers boarded the new vessel and were shown to their rooms. This time, they would travel above deck and with amenities. A marked shift from the gruelling nature of their previous endeavour.

How Nibb longed to gaze out over the water! To feel the true warmth and salt of the aqueous wonder which enrobed the mainland. Her mind raced at the thought of what creatures she might see.

The great boat rocked as it departed from the dock and turned slowly back to face the Veiled Strait in hopes of safer seas.

Gratia, the Captain said they were sailing to.

Bel V'lloch

‘Ever are sorcerers present at the height of folly.’

Each morning Bel V'lloch woke he would consider his late father's words. It was the “ever” that had stuck with him through all these years. The phrase was less of a statement or commentary and more of a warning – a perennial caution against the hubris heralded by sorcerous ambition. But Bel learned to stifle egocentric pursuits a long time ago. What he did he did to better the knowledge of all. Well, that and to at least partially sate his own intellectual curiosity.

For nearly seven hundred years Bel had lived in Gelerecht. As a Mifriel, he was blessed with longevity that stirred envy and yearning, though, in truth, he was at the doorstep of old age. His people were known to live for millennia, not centuries. However, their livelihoods were strangely predicated on proximity to their revered communities. It was a phenomenon that not even the most devout of Míyor's acolytes understood.

As a result, the consequence for his decision all those years ago would reap its inevitable reward. But Bel had made it with full knowledge of what would come to pass, for he had no desire to return to his ancestral home of Demmamach. A fact that his mother Caisys and father Beivalûr were deeply grateful for.

Bel had been young – only thirteen years of age – when he began to fan the flames of arcane and alchemical interest. Although seemingly possessing an innate disposition for understanding sorcerous complexity, Bel had always maintained it was due to a more general ability to discern – to incessantly ask *why*.

He put it down to the frequency with which his parents read to him as a child. Sometimes, if Bel thought hard enough, he could remember gazing up at his father through bantling eyes while he explained the meaning of the words he read. Maybe Bel's ability to question the world around him had truly started there, whether Beivalûr realised it or not. It was only a span of months following his adolescent beginnings of the pursuit for knowledge that the scholars of the Spire of Erudition learned of his nascent work.

The Spire of Erudition.

The largest source of systematic education and arcane knowledge outside of Dwella and Augury Spire. Bel had scarcely been able to contain his excitement when the emissary arrived in Perigree. Both his mother and father begged him to stay – to instead cultivate a place of learning closer to home. They did so primarily out of fear that he would develop a desire to return to Demmamach. Their flight centuries prior had not been made without its risks and dangers. But Bel's hunger for understanding would not be denied. He set off within a week to the eastern port city of Ricozia.

For twenty years the Spire of Erudition would be his home. For twenty years he slaved and toiled beneath the watchful eyes of professors and acolytes, herbalists and graverenders. The education was gruelling, but thorough, and left Bel with an extensive understanding of the mechanics of the world and many of its curious intricacies.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of his time there was the companionship he found. Ever were the strongest bonds forged in the fires of hardship. Many of those would

pass by over the following centuries – some by sword, others by poison, and a fortunate few simply because time only ever marched forward.

And now, after all these years, time finally revealed its hand to himself. Bel stood before his bedroom mirror – a remarkable marriage of the purest platinum and the finest porcelain. He ran a smooth hand over the dark skin of his face and neck. He thought he could see new blemishes forming around his eyes. A sudden itch drove him to rub one of them into frustrating blurriness.

Oh Bel, time does inevitably come for us all doesn't it?

Bel's waist-length silver hair now seemed to him an even paler shade. Or was it just his temporal melancholy? Either way, he needed a distraction. With a sorcerous gesture he filled his tub with warm water. Aromatic soap bubbled to the surface. His morning ritual was still enjoyable, even after so long.

Bel rose after bathing and conjured his robes. With arcane assistance they draped about his body and settled into his great flowing garb of shimmering sapphire. Despite all his research and wizarding might, the robe was one of his proudest creations. It was enchanted to grant a unique viewing to anyone who gazed upon it.

Around his waist he drew a yellow and amber belt made of webbing from the Míus Arachni – an endangered species of spider from the Sands of Oblivion. No-one knew how he had come into possession of such an item. And nor would they, for he swore to the Arachni themselves that he would keep their resting place a secret from perverse hunters with deep pockets and even deeper recesses in their hearts.

Bel had had scores of encounters that were worthy of song. However, throughout it all, there was a diligent constant – order. Without it, there was chaos. And with chaos came a disorganisation of one's very being. A descent into hubris. He never forgot his father's words. And he never forgot his routine.

For most of his first three hundred years, the routine consisted merely of upholding his presentation and stimulating his mind. But for the last four centuries, an additional set of requirements had been added. Bel strode into his study to begin them.

As an independent scholar, the study was more of a personal library and complete arcane workstation than a simple academic retreat. Shelves that rivalled the archives of small towns lined the walls. Glass-paned cabinets were embedded between them, each containing a wealth of magical and historic artifacts. All were tagged, dated, and catalogued.

At the end of the room sat a rosewood desk beside a dormant hearth. Mounted on the wall above the desk was a small nursery. Bel regarded it as he did every morning. Dozens of exceedingly rare *florae* hung from ornate wooden restraints, bathing the workspace below in a beautiful emerald hue. Of all the unique and covetous items in his study, the verdant display was the most valuable – both economically and sentimentally. It was gifted to him by a dear friend centuries ago.

Bel took stock of each plant. Some required urgent trimming to prevent caustic sap from dripping onto the stacks of parchment. He usually did not let a single stem grow so long – indeed he had never missed a morning of maintenance over the years. But it appeared he overlooked a few yesterday. To make matters worse, the culprit flora was especially pernicious if left unchecked.

Bel sighed, but forgave himself, for pressing matters occupied his thoughts the day before. He recounted the events as he took to the longest tendrils of the Viper Spore with secateurs. Archivist Ipapos Spírnél, his oldest friend and head of the Spire of Erudition, had come to him with troubling findings.

‘The Astralis Countenance,’ Ipapos had begun in his thick accent, ‘has been producing readings of utmost peculiarity.’ His wide accompanying gestures drew curious glances from townsfolk who passed them on the steps of the Spire.

He paused for effect.

‘Peculiarity? Now that is not very empirical of you,’ Bel replied factiously. He loved the look of irate sheepishness Ipapos gave whenever Bel teased him. The purity of it suited his pale Mifriel face, even as they aged and the history wrinkled in skin preceded the frown.

‘What was peculiar?’ Bel added with a conciliatory smile, unwilling to let Ipapos drift into the silence that so often foreshadowed a frustrated withholding.

‘As you know, The Enshrouding draws many pains for our instruments, demanding their constant re-calibration. But we observed a series of troublesome readings two days ago not long after the adjustments were made. The spikes were unlike any measurement we have recorded for centuries.’

‘But you *do* have measurements on record which approximate what you observed? Meaning it is not without precedent?’

‘True, but is this not cause for some concern? Our recordings do not go back further than five-hundred years, meaning we cannot observe if a periodicity exists. The Aethereus Conclave possess the only known observations prior. You know this.’

‘Alright, alright. Show me the measurements.’

The old sorcerers climbed the pristine stone steps which marked the entrance to the Spire, as they had both done so often before. No matter how many times he looked upon it, the wonder never truly left Bel’s eyes. The Spire was a magnificent building of sheer dark stone with embedded marble furnishings that spiralled towards the top. It was an impeccable display of masonry that would impress even the Dwarves of Golon.

Two large oaken doors stood in welcome at the top of the stairs, each bearing a golden inscription written in Mifhr – the language of his people. *To learn is to grow* was written on the left and *To grow is to prosper* on the right. Although not all who entered could read the text, the cursive nature of the calligraphy was reportedly somehow reassuring. Bel was still unsure why.

The Spire was divided into ten sections, with the first three levels for general research, the middle four for topics concerning beasts and plants, potions, history, and magic, and the top three for collaborative work. On the upper levels, each School of Sorcery founded by Augury Spire had its own laboratory. The Schools of Invocation, Enchantment, Principal Forces, and Abrogation. All constantly vied to be the most powerful, though, in truth, all were completely dependent on the work of the others. It was a fascinating predicament.

Bel claimed membership to the School of Principal Forces, though it took him longer than most to decide. For why should one limit the bounds of their curiosity? Resisting the allure of the School of Abrogation had proved hardest. Having the power to unravel the world in a storm of fire and lightning was a temptation not many could defy.

Ipapos' violet scarf blew over his right shoulder in a light breeze. Bel quickened his pace and walked beside his old friend into the massive lower floor of the Spire.

Bel returned his mind to the present, clipped the last of the greenery hanging beyond its designated limits. Ipapos' readings had proven true.

What could it mean?

Bel stowed the secateurs in a drawer and turned towards one of the bookcases. Thumbing down the spines – all arranged in order of subject matter and author name – he withdrew the one he sought. *Principia Astralis* by Ryllyn Aleantlar, the famed Mûthrén

scholar of ages past. Bel flipped through the pages to the section he remembered from his youth.

"It is thus determined that the movements and forces exerted by the expanse labelled Astralis can be measured. Though we have not yet the means, the tools shall come to us soon enough. To see the mark of one's curiosity reflected in the instruments of our making – is there no greater satisfaction?"

Bel considered the passage. He knew what the Astralis Countenance measured. But what could drive a spike so many years apart? Was it chance? A random fluctuation? Or was it some hidden mechanism of nature they were not yet privy to? The answer eluded him for now.

Bel mulled over the details as he left his home and walked through the sun-bathed Ricozian marketplace towards the Spire. While he had opted to become an independent researcher to more freely pursue avenues of his own interest, he was frequently asked to speak to eager students with a penchant for adventurous tales.

He passed through the large doors and briskly climbed up the winding staircase to the fourth floor, hitching his robes as he went. Today's lecture was on plants from Gelerecht's mountainous north-west and was to be delivered in a small room close to the main body of bookshelves – no doubt a ploy by the Spire to tempt wandering ears into a life of expensive tuition.

The topic was actually outside Bel's core research expertise – botany was more of a hobby to him. That being said, he certainly possessed deeper knowledge than most. Plants and their seemingly endless multitude of uses had always fascinated him, but his passion for their cultivation did not truly begin until he met someone unique. It was their affinity for nature which stirred something in Bel, and as close friends, right before her departure, she gifted him the seeds which became the display in his study. He decided there and then to

expand his knowledge – a keenness that did not go unnoticed by the academic planners of the Spire.

Bel was greeted upon entering the classroom by a group of fifteen students, all standing to bow according to Spire etiquette. While the adoration meant little to Bel, he appreciated the eagerness. It was his life's work, after all. To learn and to teach. What good is the hoarding of knowledge if it is never used? His ancestors had hidden far too much from the people of Gelerecht. He would not follow in their footsteps.

Bel held up his hands to quieten the calm chatter. All eyes fixed upon him, each pair of them hungry for knowledge, eager for the opportunity to impress. His first words were measured, tranquil, even. They were the only part of the lecture he had planned in advance. Despite his orderliness, Bel did enjoy the challenge of having to think on his feet.

‘Who here can tell me why plants need sunlight?’

A question so deceptively simple that even a first-year member of the Spire could provide an answer.

A bright-eyed Gnome-kin youth raised his hand. Bel gestured for him to speak.

‘Photosynthesis,’ the boy said.

‘Yes,’ nodded Bel.

The youth smiled, pleased with himself.

‘But why?’ Bel pressed.

The smile faded into pursed confusion. Another student – a middle-aged Mûthrïen woman – raised their hand and came to the rescue. Bel motioned for her contribution.

Her voice was melodious and stirring. ‘It allows them to grow.’

Bel nodded. ‘Why do they need to grow?’

The Mûthrïen woman considered. ‘To survive.’

‘Why do they need to survive?’

The Gnome-kin from earlier spoke without raising their hand. ‘When plants survive, our environment survives. This is due to a variety of reasons, be it food, a source of wind, or removal of harmful substances from the air.’

Bel nodded again. ‘Good. And why does our environment need to survive?’

A young Leathgrûskh raised their hand. Bel gestured at them.

‘For us to survive.’

Bel shook his head with a wry smile. ‘The Cosmos is not centred around our survival, though we sure do endeavour to make it appear so.’

The students let out a short burst of laughter.

Bel continued once it died down. ‘Why does our environment need to survive?’

A Dwarven woman from the far-right side of the room spoke. ‘Because then the World survives.’

Bel smiled. They were getting closer.

‘And why does the World need to survive?’

A few looks of recognition emerged across the room. The Mûthríen woman was one of them. It was, in fact, little wonder why she would be one of the first.

‘Because it is the Imea’s Design,’ she said.

Bel clapped. A singular, resonant clap which communicated his pleasure with the exchange. Their minds were primed for learning. He could begin the lecture in earnest.

Over the following hour, Bel told tales of flora with exceedingly valuable properties not seen outside of the Glasidete Mountains. Some were his own findings, some the works of others. The students remained eagerly attentive the entire time.

However, the lecture was drawn to an abrupt pause when a beautiful young Human woman interrupted. Such intrusions were perceived as the height of rudeness by the Spire, but the woman stood steadfast in the doorway regardless. Her auburn hair glistened like the brazier on the wall.

‘Forgive my intrusion, but the Archivist wishes to speak with you. *Urgently*,’ she said softly but with restrained assertiveness.

‘Of course. Lead on,’ answered Bel, apologising to the students on the way out and directing them to relevant sections of essential texts for further reading.

Bel followed her up the twisting staircase to the highest level. He knew the way to the Archivist’s office, of course, but was glad for the company. From their small talk, Bel surmised that Kaylen – as she introduced herself – was of incredibly high intelligence.

They spoke of insignificant things such as his research, recent travels, and what Kaylen’s role was. She described herself as having arrived in Ricozia from afar at a young age. Apparently, Ipapos had taken her under his wing and given her an opportunity to aspire to something greater.

At last, they came to the tenth floor, highest in the Spire. Each side was marked with equidistant doors bearing the insignia of each of the Schools. The Archivist’s office lay in the centre at the end. Beside the closed mahogany door was a small final set of marble steps which lead to the observatory that gazed out eastward over the sea towards Demmamach. Bel had only ever used it twice.

Kaylen rapped on the door thrice, the third a short pause after the first two. The door slowly opened, and Bel saw Ipapos sitting in a leather chair in the centre of the room. The office was dimly lit by a burning hearth which cast small shadows across the statuettes of Archivists of old. Bel expected Kaylen to leave as he entered, but she instead followed him in, closing the door behind.

‘Ah, thank you for coming so quickly, you know I hate to interrupt your talks,’ said Ipapos, choosing to now sit on the edge of the desk with his right leg draped lazily over the left.

In their youth, a previous Archivist had punished Ipapos for sitting the same way. They alleged the lack of posture threatened the tenebrous perception of sorcerous punctiliousness. Bel had healed those wounds personally.

‘Our measurement has been confirmed. A second reading, equivalent to the one of which we spoke yesterday.’

‘That is strange,’ said Bel. ‘Is it a reproducible error or does Astralis actually stir with rumour?’ He threw Ipapos a knowing look. ‘I’m sorry, but given the potential implications, is it right to have a student in our midst?’

Kaylen stifled a laugh. ‘Respected Bel V’lloch, it was I who scoured the historical records to find the precedent.’

Bel tried to mask his surprise, but ultimately failed. He knew better than to underestimate a student. Especially given how tenacious he had been at her age.

‘Impressive,’ he conceded.

‘Despite your status as an independent researcher, I do still govern the efforts of our kind here in Ricozia,’ Ipapos said sternly. ‘I am sending you in search of answers.’

Bel’s heart sunk. Part of him knew this could be a possibility, but he did not think it so soon.

Noticing his inner turmoil, Ipapos continued. ‘I’m sorry, Bel. I know how much your way of life means to you. But I know of no other with your far-reaching knowledge that I trust to pursue this. We must keep it contained, for now, until we are certain of the cause and effect.’

‘I understand. Where are you sending me?’

Ipapos hopped down from his desk and strode over the large vermillion rug. It was emblazoned with a charcoal outline of two giant irregularly shaped bodies – the continents of Gelerecht and Icantia. The existence of each unknown to the inhabitants of the other, save for a select number of high-ranking scholars, mages, and rulers. Bel studied it beneath the Archivist’s position, now understanding the full extent of the matter.

‘You are sending me to Icantia, aren’t you?’

Ipapos grinned. ‘Always the cleverest of us, aren’t you? Now you understand why I cannot ask another to do this in your stead, for precious few know of our sister-land. I’m sending you to an acquaintance of mine, the Principal Scholar of the Library of Aerotross. Oh, cheer up Bel, you’ll not be going alone, after all.’

Bel tilted his head towards Ipapos, asking silently whether he would be accompanying him. Part of him leapt at the thought.

Ipapos laughed. ‘Maybe not the cleverest after all.’

Bel’s surprise fully bloomed as he turned to Kaylen who simply stood there, arms folded with confidence beyond the measure of a student. Maybe his underestimation had been more severe than he initially thought.

Why hadn’t Ipapos introduced her earlier?

‘Safe travels,’ smiled the Archivist.

Ari

Sunlight beamed down onto Ari's grateful face. She stood on the bow of the ship, basking what fair skin she dared leave visible. Prior to the tumultuous events on the Enclave, it had been some time since Ari was last at sea. Even then, she was only on board for a matter of hours. In any case, the young Leathfriel was grateful to have her seafaring adventures drawing to a close.

She watched with eagerness masked as stoicism as the vessel anchored at its designated spot in a large, bustling harbour. Countless others arrived and departed around it. A massive city sprawled out over the horizon just beyond the dock, filling almost the entirety of her view.

Just like home.

Even though Ari had not been to the western port city of Gratia, she had heard a great deal about it.

What secrets do you hold?

Shouting exchanges between the crew and the dockhands interrupted her pensive thought, reminding her to pull the black hood of her cloak over her glistening long blonde

hair. She had always favoured the sophistication of plaits – a trait she assumed came from her father.

The ship lurched to a halt in a final submission to the weight of the anchor. Ari surveyed the deck with calculating eyes. The stout Dwarf whom she had found herself allied with gazed over the side, arms folded, with a furrowed brow. Ari intuited that she had never looked upon Gratia either. The awkward Kereeduine was perched high, sitting atop the doorway that led into the bowels of the ship. His white plumage appeared appreciative of the warming rays. She thought him odd, not in the least because it seemed that he had some strange connection with Mûyor – a curious and rare relationship for a non-Mûthríen. Ari spat into the water below.

The Gods never have time for us.

So why should we give so much and receive so little in return? Reciprocity of faith is an illusion, Kereeduine. You would be wise to realise that.

The other one who travelled with her – the Gnome-kin – was similarly vexing. At first, Ari thought her a child – she even still might be – but she clearly had some gift of the wilds, able to turn into beasts at will.

I don't need them.

‘Alright you lot,’ called a familiar gruff voice from the helm. ‘I thank you for the company, but I really do hope never to see you again,’ laughed Captain Cesildrens.

‘Farewell, Captain,’ replied Bogs with a strange sense of dutifulness.

Maybe she has a military background? A guard, perhaps?

Ari spat again.

The company of four stepped off the boat and onto free land for the first time in two weeks. They awkwardly walked down the long timber dock towards the crowd of merchants

and seafarers. Ari darted her eyes left and right, scanning for hidden enemies. Nothing caught her attention.

‘Be wary my brethren! For all you judge is also judged and may the judge of us all be not judged!’ bellowed a wild herald standing on some nearby fishing crates.

Ari thought it a hilarious juxtaposition – the supposed weight of his words contrasted with the plainness of a stack of mildewy fishing crates. Much to her surprise, Nibb actually seemed interested. The Gnome-kin skipped over, her forest-green cloak trailing in the breeze behind, a mere waist-high blip in the sea of taller folk. Ari watched her listen for a few moments before returning looking disappointed.

Further down the main thoroughfare, the curious group of travellers drew several glances from both fisherman and citizens. A heavily-armed lot, complete with a Kereeduine – a peoples rarely seen outside their communities – was an uncanny sight, even for those who frequent a place as diverse as a port.

A nearby Human merchant’s smile betrayed his interest in their oddity. He hollered at the group with an aggressive sweeping gesture.

‘Fine travellers!’ he cried obnoxiously, ignoring Ari and Bogs who visibly rolled their eyes. ‘My my my, aren’t you a sordid lot! Tell you what, I have just what you need to spruce up your spirits!’

The salesman stepped away from his wooden stall and matched their strides, his well-rehearsed showmanship not showing any signs of faltering. Ari surmised that he had spent some time at Banber’s Phrontistery of Performance – the college for drama, music, and the sometimes not-so-subtle art of mercantile. Uallaack stopped and looked closer at the collection of berries on display in one of the merchant’s cabinets.

‘Ah yes, my feathered friendly forlorn forager! I have the finest assortment you have ever seen!’

Uallaack, seeming to believe in the integrity of the man, considered the prices. Ari had had enough. She stepped in close to the merchant. Hidden beneath the swimming fabrics of their duelling cloaks was the point of a dagger resting precariously on his abdomen. She applied just enough pressure that it drew a single droplet of blood.

‘I suggest you return to your stall, *friend*,’ she hissed.

Terror ran across the man’s face... and down his leg. He retreated hastily.

‘Come, Uallaack,’ said Bogs, unbothered by Ari’s actions, ‘I wager there will be a great deal more and of finer quality in the city.’

Giant gates marked the boundary between the port and Gratia city proper. As the main sea hub for transit in the south and west waters of Gelerecht, it was one of the largest cities on the mainland. Ari could see countless winding cobblestone streets carving pedestrian veins through the metropolis. Many of the roofs of the structures surrounding them were of a reddish brick, which created an odd sense of consistency and an almost sunset appearance across the skyline.

Individual buildings varied in their construction – some opted for various types of brick, while others were seemingly carved from a grey-white stone with which Ari was unfamiliar. Wood was used sparingly, seemingly reserved for market stalls, banners, and other smaller implements. Looking to her left, Ari saw a series of long bridges connecting various parts of the city to one another over a river that ran steadily some twenty paces below the main concourse. The stream snaked around even further to the left-hand side, eventually feeding into the harbour in a gentle aqueous gesture.

In the mid-morning sun, hundreds of townspeople were going about their daily business, some purchased freshly caught fish at the dockside markets, others haggled with preachers who stood on the corners, and some just chased their children who mischievously

ran away. The smell of bustling city life was unforgiving for some, but not for Ari. For the first time in weeks, she felt right at home, slipping effortlessly into the anonymity of yet another young woman just trying to make her way in the world.

Being the trained, watchful person she was, Ari continued to discreetly peer around the large masses of people. Her eyes darted between buildings and individuals, alleys and doorways. As she shifted her gaze back to the front, a set of piercing eyes some eighty or ninety paces away caught her attention slightly off the main thoroughfare. It was impossible to make out any useful or distinguishing features from this distance, but the way the eyes blended in with the surroundings seemed concerningly familiar.

However, it was too hard to form any concrete assumptions from so far away. Ari contemplated getting closer, curiosity finally starting to win the war against safety in her mind, but she blinked and the eyes were gone. They vanished as quickly as light from a blown-out candle.

The party continued down the main street as it curved around a central congregation of buildings. Before long, the huge Gratia marketplace fanned out before them; a giant open pan of bustling commerce and livelihood. Unsure where to go and with a mutual silence providing confirmation that none of them had been here before, the group marched into the centre.

‘I am familiar with cities as large as this,’ Ari said at last, turning to face the other three. ‘Usually there is a board of notices or something of the sort. Perhaps we can learn of where we now find ourselves.’

‘That would be helpful!’ beamed Nibb. ‘This place is so much bigger than my home!’

She twirled around on the spot, struck by a sensation caught somewhere between awe and overstimulation.

Childish.

A large wooden board was visible in the heart of the marketplace. Various bits of weathered parchment were nailed to it. They were all marked by frantic scrawling – feeble attempts by the authors to compete for the limited attention of potentially interested patrons.

"Danger! Merpeople! Save our Lighthouse!" said one.

"Thieves at the Bottomless Mug!" said another.

Uallaack seemed to find them all interesting. He went through them one-by-one, smoothing the parchment with his hands as he read. Nibb and Bogs could only properly read half of the notices due to their height. Ari studied the summons, deciding that each was as mild as the next. None provided an indication of the governance structure of the city nor anything else she deemed important.

‘Aaaahhhh!’ exclaimed Nibb elatedly.

The Gnome-kin jumped and pulled one of the notices down. It ripped it as she pried it from the nail.

‘Look! Look!’ she yelled, pressing her finger hard into the parchment. ‘They sell animals here! Some place called *Friends & Familiars!* Can we go? Please!’

‘Alright, alright. But I really must find some work. My lack of coin is concerning,’ replied Bogs.

‘Agreed,’ said Ari sternly. She tore down the last remaining notice her eyes scanned. ‘How about this one? *"Children taken: Devilry 'neath our city!"*’ She raised a curious eyebrow at Bogs before continuing. It was time for Ari to test her theory about the Dwarf’s background. ‘Seems up our alley given what transpired in that accursed cave. If we tell this *Fireta* who posted it that we have slain worse, they might just grant the contract to us. One-hundred and fifty gold pieces is nothing to snort at. That is, unless you resolve to part. In which case, I will do it alone... And gladly, for I could use the coin.’

An uncomfortable silence took them as they actively considered the question that had ruminated in the back of their minds since sailing to Gratia: should go their own separate ways now they were free? The buzzing marketplace grew distant as the question loomed over their precarious union, drew them into deep consideration.

‘I find you all interesting!’ said Nibb at last with her perpetual smile. ‘Besides, I don’t know where the Prophet is anymore. I have to find him again, and I think you could help me! If you want to, that is...’

Bogs, ignorant of the latter half of Nibb’s sentiment answered in the affirmative.
‘Aye. I shall not be returning home. Not yet, anyway. Besides, we are likely stronger together, if we decide to take on jobs such as these. Each of us excels at something unique. A valuable mix, in my experience.’

‘I quite like the road... And the company,’ said Uallaack. ‘I wish to look upon the capital and the lands and the deserts and the mountains!’

Ari sighed, almost in disappointment at the continuing cooperation, though a long-buried part of her valued the opportunity to pass some responsibility onto others.

‘Fine. We’ll continue on for now. We’ll make a quick pass by this *shop* to appease Nibb, then we get to business and find this Fireta.’

After asking some of the locals for directions, the group found themselves on the eastern side of the marketplace. They walked down wide streets between horses and carts, and beneath stone archways which gave the illusion that the buildings on either side were connected. They came to a small shop with a four-step porch that bore a swinging carved wooden sign depicting a cat and a dog with their tails entwined. A strange odour came from within, alongside the sounds of scurrying and glass shattering.

Ari stepped inside and to her great surprise, a tabby cat darted between her legs. A black-haired puppy followed it, and a mouse after that. All animals for sale were free of any cage, evidently given permissions to roam the store. Uallaack found it hilarious, Nibb was struck with amazement. Bogs even let out a small smirk at the first true sign of relief and humour in weeks. Ari herself found a grin overcoming her instinct for restraint. She pulled her hood up even further.

‘Hello! Hello! Welcome to our humble shop!’ came a voice from amidst the ruckus.

A short, young Human woman – very short by Human standards – poked her head around a stack of animal feed. She had round glasses, and a messy tuft of short cropped blonde hair.

‘Yes, yes! Please, tell us what you seek!’ came the exact same voice, from somewhere else in the shop.

An identical woman materialised behind the counter.

‘I’m Flora,’ said the first.

‘And I’m Fauna,’ echoed the second.

Another cat darted by Ari’s feet.

‘Hi. We are just... looking,’ Ari replied icily, making her disinterest noted.

She tiptoed through the scurrying animals to the other side of the store. A thin mesh door revealed a small courtyard out the back where a handful of children were feeding chickens.

Strays, she thought, referring to the children.

How easily disregarded coins slip through the cracks of avarice.

That could have been me. Now, I am the hammer which cracks the stone, draws its bloody rewards to the surface.

How much we can change...

‘You are incredible! Look at you!’ Nibb’s voice cried out through the store, drawing Ari’s attention.

She turned to see a small white ferret dancing its way across the Gnome-kin’s neck, diving beneath her cloak. Nibb giggled as she stroked its soft fur. Ari laughed internally at the thought of how comical the creature would look against her once fully grown.

‘How can I keep it?’ asked Nibb, her wide eyes gleaming.

‘Three pieces of silver,’ replied Flora, visibly excited at the prospect of a sale.

‘Oh... I do not have any coins,’ answered Nibb sullenly. Then her eyes darted up. ‘But after my friends and I finish this job, I will have some! Lots! Can you please keep him until I get back?’

Fauna laughed. ‘Yes, of course! We do not have too many requests for ferrets. Come back soon!’

Nibb let the ferret down off her gently, whispering an apology and a promise of her return.

The group exited, followed the eastern path to the north-eastern reaches of the city where they learnt Fireta ran an establishment called The Fort. By this time, the suns were cresting high in the sky, marking the middle of the day. Countless cityfolk passed the group, including armed guards bearing the standard of Gratia: a teal banner with a black ship encircled by coins.

Their armour shone – bright plates of steel and mail, draped in striking teal cloaks. Ari appreciated the objective beauty of the uniform, but could spot a great number of vulnerable points between each piece of plate. Every single one of them was the perfect size for her dagger to penetrate.

The wandering quartet came to a cobblestone tavern which matched the paving beneath. It bore large stained-glass windows from which the sounds of raucous behaviour

poured outward in droves. Through the open door, long mead hall-style tables were aplenty, and a bar lined the right wall where a collection of smaller circular tables were located for quick service.

Frothy ale spilled over tables and goblets clanged in too many directions to distinguish any individual one. Leathgrûskh and Nyostath patrons laughed at a tale of outrageous and obviously embellished sexual exploits told by a Human man at their table. A group of Mûthríen sat huddled together in the far-left corner, whispering hushed stories which not even Ari's keen ears could pry open.

A beautiful Kûrasti woman with red skin was behind the bar. The twin horns which extended from the crown of her head were adorned with gold piercings. She had dyed black hair styled in a pixie cut nestled between the protrusions and wore a short scarlet dress with stockings beneath knee-high boots.

The bartender spoke with command and assertion, barking orders to the two assistants beside her. Ari watched dumbstruck as the Kûrasti walked up to an ensuing brawl and through stern words and the threat of no future patronage, snuffed the violence out before even so much as a glass was broken. Everyone seemed to respect her voice, regardless of their drunkenness.

Ari led the others deeper inside, herself clearly the most experienced in navigating the busyness of cities. She stepped in and raised four fingers to the Kûrasti bartender. She pointed to a round table in the corner near the bar. Not long after they sat, the devilish woman came by to take the order.

‘Four of your strongest,’ said Bogs without so much as a greeting.

‘Hi, I’m Nibb! I’ll... I’ll just have a juice thank you. What’s your name?’

The Kûrasti laughed. ‘Fireta. You’re clearly not from around here, are you?’ she replied disarmingly, her accent thick and inviting.

Fireta eyed Ari closely, tried to decipher if nefarious intent lay beneath the hood.

‘Fireta, was it?’ said Ari. It was best to strike before unknowns drove a person to action. ‘We just arrived, none of us having been here before. Tell me, is there a Lord or someone similar in charge of the city?’

‘Newcomers! Welcome to Gratia. You certainly chose the right establishment to whet your appetites. To your question – we operate a little differently to the other major cities. Our leader is the Ruler-Elect and they are usually the Captain of the City Guard. It has been Captain Sylharice Mitara’s role for nigh on three years now.’

Ari fought back a frown – the union of guard operations and city power was unfavourable. She drew the notice and placed it on the table beneath a firm finger. ‘Heard you’re having trouble?’

‘Let me get your drinks, then we can talk business,’ whispered Fireta.

She whirled away upon receipt of a single silver coin which Bogs procured from her boot. The Dwarf simply shrugged when Uallaack shot her a questioning glance.

Rowdy conversation and drunken games continued around the party. The richness and unfiltered purity of it reminded Ari of her local bar Glass & Tale back home. Ari was flushed with memories.

The distinct smell of eastern-brewed liquor. The way the wooden barstools felt. The relief she felt whenever Pablo’s understanding eyes met hers from behind the bar. The way light barely escaped its own stained-glass windows.

Fireta returned before long. She placed the drinks down, grabbed a stool, and sat. Her long, slender legs traced desirable lines to the floor, and she knew it. Her expression turned sour.

‘Not many have wanted to take this job,’ she said with unhidden sadness and worry. ‘It started three weeks ago. Started out as one child. Then another. Then another. Nobody

fucking listened. Now we have seven dead and nothing but a single finger left behind to grieve with. Most were from the slums, true, but that doesn't make them any less important. The finger was how we determined that they were disappearing somewhere near the large drain east of here.' A pained look stretched across her face. 'That fact has also meant my business has plummeted. Sure, it looks busy enough now, but these are my regulars. I lost most of my walk-in business out of fear. I can't sustain operations much longer.'

Everyone took a long drink, considered the information. Ari swore she saw a set of eyes leering across the bar. Fireta's pleading gaze drew her back.

'I'm in. But one sixty,' said Ari without a care for the context, the desperation.

If you are good at something, never do it for free.

Or for too little.

'I can't spare any more than that. But you have a deal, *if* you succeed.'

Fireta rose and sauntered back to the bar. She picked up a large mug from a rack and started drying it. Business had to continue and she had a reputation to maintain.

The group stayed seated for some time while they finished their drinks.

Uallaack wiped the remaining froth from around his beak, his head twinging from the strength of the brew. 'I should like to see the rest of the city. Do we start the job tomorrow when we aren't fresh off a prison transport ship?'

'We have no money to afford lodging,' replied Bogs grimly.

Nibb gazed at Bogs' boot.

'That was my lucky last! Well spent I say,' laughed the Dwarf.

'If we peruse the city, I can find us coin enough for rooms tonight,' said Ari.

The others raised their brows, but none pursued the means of her methods.

With bellies full, the foursome departed The Fort to the darkening afternoon sun.

Having already traversed the eastern path around the city, they decided to head north-west and follow the main thoroughfare towards the docks, stopping anywhere they might find interesting. Shortly into their walk, a beautiful building fashioned out of white wood drew their attention. It was shaped into a giant blooming flower – an artful piece purposefully designed to tempt eyes amidst the drab surroundings. A large sign hung above the entrance which read *The Pure Petal*.

Nibb cried to the group upon seeing the floral design, desperately wanting to go and see the “flowers”. What ensued was a highly awkward explanation from Bogs about the flowers within not quite being what Nibb was expecting. This drew a bout of uncontrollable laughter between them all – the first true sense of actual companionship.

They passed another tavern, smaller than The Fort and clearly catering to a wealthier level of patronage. Ari made a mental note of the place as a target for lining her pockets. Eventually they came back to the western side, this time cresting around the upper walkway. They wove between countless bodies, their eyes fixed on the glistening river which snaked below.

Beautiful brick bridges spanned the water at equal intervals – five in total – providing passage to a collection of upper-market stores and gardens. Ari could make out a medium-sized shop over the other side which displayed a sculpture of what looked like conjoined spheres on its roof.

A shop for sorcerers, probably.

The only people less trustworthy than thieves.

In front of the furthest two bridges and closest to the dock gate was a large three-story building surrounded by armed guards. The barracks of Gratia was a giant complex. It appeared more than large enough to keep order in such a populous city. Ari pulled her hood

up as far as it would let her. It was almost a marvel of tailoring that the cowl had not yet torn from the frequency with which she yanked its tenebrous material.

The rest of the buildings that the group passed were relatively bland, and Ari's companions had begun to show signs that the city environment had lost some of its lustre. However, two ahead stood out against the monotonous murk. The first was a massive edifice of marble and stone crested by a giant, winding copper structure which spiralled like a conch shell towards the sky. A grand staircase led up to its foundations from the street, but the craftsmanship of the metalwork dwarfed all other aspects of its impressive design.

At the peak of the conch shell sat the sculpture of a ship, almost looking like it sailed upon the waves formed by the curved copper. An obvious nod to the port city that housed it. The Gratia Archives – the vast library of the city – stood with majesty above its citizens. Ari could not fathom how her eyes missed this on their initial entrance into the city – maybe she was too busy assessing for danger.

Danger.

She had let her mind wander for too long. Her eyes darted around, surveying dwellers and dwellings. No more sets of eyes watched her. At least none that she could see.

The other building which caught their attention was a comparatively simple single-story structure. Its patronage far exceeded any other place they had encountered so far, and shelves upon shelves were visible inside. Racks of small goods and dried meats hung about the entrance on the outside. *Gratia General* its weathered sign read.

Bogs could not keep her eyes off the jerky strung up out the front. A short debate ensued before it was decided that they would peruse the Archives first since they had no coin. The store and the jerky would have to wait until tomorrow, much to the dismay of the Dwarf.

It wasn't long before the group found themselves in the cavernous ground floor of the marvellous construct. A large desk faced the entrance, and a variety of people were going about their business on the inside. Some were reading quietly; others were traversing the staircases that connected the floors. Countless scholarly figures in robes and well-maintained tunics were standing engrossed in conversation.

A middle-aged Mûthríen man with lunar-blue skin sat behind the desk. He wore tight-fitting spectacles and well-kept robes that shimmered between a deep purple and black depending on the angle Ari stood at. He had glistening white hair with an undercut that was swept perfectly across his brow.

'Welcome to the Gratia Archives,' he muttered, disinterested. 'What subject matter are you seeking? This level is for general interest, level two is for beasts and famed adventurers, level three is for potions and magics, and the fourth is restricted to noted scholars only – which your mere scent tells me you are not.'

The man finally looked up and turned his nose at the group's weaponry and soiled clothing. 'Please do try to not get any of your grime on our texts. Some people actually try to learn here.'

Ari scowled for a long moment but did not get a rise out of the gatekeeper.

Fucking sorcerers.

The group turned away, annoyed at the slight. Well, all of them except for Nibb, whose usual demeanour had not even so much as budged. Uallaack broke the rising tension by producing some kind of rolled-up parchment from the satchel strapped across his feathered chest.

'I do not know what interests you all, but I should like to visit the second floor,' he said. 'My father has written of some things he has seen in his travels, and I would learn what else I can.'

Without much scholarly interest between them, Ari, Bogs, and Nibb followed Uallaack up the staircase, passing numerous sets of inquisitive eyes who stared a little too long for Ari's comfort. They stepped onto the expansive second level and were greeted by corridors of books stacked high along countless shelves. Each corridor contained its own trundle ladder for access to the upper volumes.

Ari looked around and saw a table of Leathgrûskh sitting around a map sprawled out on a table, laughing quietly to themselves. She saw a Goblin couple sitting side-by-side in chairs, taking turns reading from a grey leather-bound journal of some kind, incorrigible in their desire for understanding.

Uallaack set off to find a tome called *Whispers from the Trees in the South* by some author whose name Ari did not catch – mostly due to a lack of care on her behalf. He climbed on a ladder resting against a tall shelf and pushed himself a third of the way along the corridor. Uallaack carefully thumbed a few of the spines before what he was after.

His prize was a monstrous volume which required two hands to hold – leading to a precarious exit off the ladder. He opened it on a nearby table and began reading, clearly pleased. Bogs quickly lost interest and began to wander. Nibb fluttered about, taking a look over Uallaack's shoulder briefly before she skipped off to find books on animals.

‘What are you looking for?’ asked Ari, not really caring about the answer.

‘My father has travelled further than most of my kind. He chronicled much of what he saw, but there were many things he could not recall or understand. He told me of a book he heard about – this book – from a traveller that was said to contain details about places and things he had seen but could not describe upon his return.’

Uallaack fumbled through his pouch and found some blank rolled up parchment in relatively poor condition, followed by a small quill and ink to copy down passages. They read more like poetry rather than historical accounts.

Before long, Ari found herself bored as well – Uallaack was completely consumed in the pages. She made her way to where books on hunting were located. Much to her surprise, she found herself engrossed in a few volumes. After some time, Ari returned the books and found Bogs asleep in a chair – her snoring keeping away any would-be readers in the area. Ari roused her with a firm grip on the shoulder and after a short discussion, the foursome retired to The Fort. Their return journey took them past the other tavern Ari had marked so she could procure coins off drunken patrons to pay for their rooms.

By the time they returned, The Fort was only half full, but somehow still loud from the outside.

Regulars, plus the city drunks who pay no mind to murder.

If Fireta's account can be trusted...

Ari squeezed her way between patrons who were singing, arm-in-arm, celebrating some unknown occasion. Uallaack shouted in surprise as half a mug of frothy ale was spilled onto his feathered arm. He turned to the man who wronged him, but the drunkard was pulled away by the iron grip of his wife who apologised profusely. At the bar, Fireta had just finished serving a pungent brew to a silver-scaled Nyostath.

‘You’ve returned!’ she said with a smile that only a bartender could make.

‘Yes! It’s so nice to see you again!’ beamed Nibb with her perpetual childish zeal.

‘What will it be?’

‘Two rooms and some food. Meat, preferably,’ answered Bogs.

‘Very well. I have a few rooms with space for two remaining. I’ll have your food sent up.’

‘Actually, add a mug of your strongest onto that too,’ said Bogs, flicking an extra coin pulled from some other unknown place on top of the five silvers Ari placed on the bar.

The solace of a room was welcome. Ari finally permitted herself to feel a moment of respite, despite Uallaack sharing the space. He mostly kept quiet, journaling in some book before drifting off to sleep.

It took Ari much longer. She was unable to really get physically comfortable in the small bed, but at least she had her thoughts. She spent a good while recounting the events of the past two weeks, including the murky conversation which transpired in the depths of Murkburrow Enclave. But her mind lingered the longest on the night at the tavern in Fortitude prior.

The night that set her on this course of seemingly unpredictable peril.

She concentrated, tried to pry out the details. It all happened so fast. Daggers. Subtle whispers of murder. Death. Patrons wailing. The tavern-keep beheaded as he dove in front of a confused Gnome-kin off to the side.

Nibb!

That's right.

They were there too.

She remembered the blade that glanced her shoulder as she ducked out of the way. Ari rubbed the wound reflexively even though it had healed. She recalled the cloaked form of the figure who wielded it, gutted by her own knife she had slipped underneath his ribcage.

The robes!

He wore white robes, long and with a strange ornate hem. She could not recall the exact pattern – it was too small of a detail for such a frenzied encounter. But the eyes. The pitiless, determined eyes of the madman who charged her. She would never forget those.

Ari woke, found herself shrugged against the furthest wall beneath the window sill. Uallaack awoke on the floor in the centre. Early rays of sun teased their way through the

small window above her, and the crowing of roosters informed Gratia that the day was beginning in earnest. Ari went about her morning ritual, checking her weapons and counting the arrows in her quiver. Her sleep was restless and filled with strange dreams. She fought down a general feeling of rising uneasiness. Uallaack looked like a similar night had also befallen him.

Bogs and Nibb met them in the bar below where a small number of patrons were gathering for breakfast. Some were dressed in worker's clothes, ready to toil in the field for the day, others looked as though their business was less gritty. But the bar seemed particularly devoid of any particularly well-off individuals.

A product of the murders, no doubt.

Fireta greeted them and prepared a basic breakfast of crispy bacon and fried beans that was apparently included in the cost of their rooms. Ari harboured doubts about the truth of that – it felt more like the Kûrasti felt guilty sending them towards some unknown horror. Once they had eaten, she bid them farewell.

‘Head east of here, no more than a few minutes at walking pace. To the left of a large stone building with a broken outer wall you’ll see the drain where we found the finger. It’s an entrance to the sewers. One of many throughout the city. Be safe, I do wish to see you return.’

The drain was large and a draught of putrid air billowed from it as Bogs lifted the iron plate covering. ‘Fuck it. Let’s get this over with,’ she grumbled.

The sewers were damp and impossibly repugnant. No source of light was present other than what filtered through the open drain.

‘*K’lck’Mi!*’ cried Uallaack as he drew a conical shape in the air to beckon forth a small radiant moon that drifted in front of his hands and illuminated the nearby surroundings.

Though Ari did not need it to see, there was a strangely reassuring warmth to the light that she appreciated nonetheless.

The underground system was vast and littered with pollutant. Ari stepped to the left without looking and her boot splashed into a stream of waste that trickled into a larger waterway. The estuary of muck ran to the east towards a set of rusted iron grates that marked the subterranean outskirts of the city. Rats darted around their feet, bloated and far larger than any she had ever seen. Uallaack turned his beaked face away in disgust.

Bogs – her eyes finally coming into their own in the underground – started off towards the main tributary, noticing some wooden planks that could be used to cross. A single passage continued onward into the inky darkness on the other side of the wastewater.

Footsteps.

Ari whirled, dagger in hand. She peered into the shadows.

Nothing.

She lowered the dagger but kept it ready. Bogs climbed over the railing and landed with a thud, the squelching of water enveloping the slapping presence of her boots. Uallaack and Nibb were quieter in their descent and Ari as silent as death. There was no sign of life yet. No sign of whatever evil befell the children above.

The group continued on warily, Bogs with her greataxe drawn, Ari her dagger and shortsword, Nibb weapon-less, and Uallaack still projecting arcs of pale light. Some time passed before they came to a large space where sewage from five directions spilled into the main waterway. Noise roared through the cavern, deafening Ari's ears. But the loss of one faculty only sharpened that of another. Peering through the dark beyond Uallaack's light, Ari could make out faint scrawling on one of the walls between two of the wastewater flows.

It was a language she had not seen nor spoken for a long time.

A shiver trickled down her spine.

‘Did you see something?’ asked Bogs, noticing Ari’s momentary quiver.

Watchful bitch.

‘No, the stench just hit me stronger all of a sudden,’ she lied.

Much to their surprise it did not take much longer to find the lair of whatever stalked the city streets. Large lattices of thick, viscous webs – each the width of Ari’s wrist – spread across the middle of the third passage about halfway in. A giant spider-like abomination rested in the centre of the network. Its mandibles were each the length of Nibb and serrated teeth lined their insides. Twelve eyes were arranged in a grotesque diamond above its giant mouth. They were all currently closed, though this did little to calm any of their nerves.

But the most horrifying aspect was not its head. Where a spider’s legs ended in points, this creature’s legs ended in *hands*. Human hands, blackened and decayed. Dead appendages stitched onto ungrateful legs.

Ari had no idea how such a creature came to be, let alone how it could function. The sheer sight of it dissuaded any hesitation they might have had. They struck in unspoken agreement.

Ari sent a flurry of arrows towards its eyes, Uallaack projected radiant light onto its swollen abdomen, and Nibb wound thorned vines around its legs. Bogs drove the final dominating blow into its skull. The horror was dead before it even had a chance to register its doom.

Purple-black liquid spilled over the foul masonry, further adding to the intensity of the sewer. The creature’s stomach mostly contained rats and other subterranean creatures in various states of decay, but something shiny caught Ari’s eye in the dark fluid. It was the buckle of a single sandal – the size of which would fit a child.

Uallaack murmured a prayer in a language Ari did not know and offered to carry the sandal back to Fireta. Bogs strapped the mandibles to her back with a small coil of rope as proof of their success. As they were about to depart, Nibb placed a single tan-coloured flower onto the rotting body.

There it was again. That strange funereal ritual of hers. Ari decided to ask her about it when they returned to the tavern.

The quartet retraced their steps, each breathing a deep sigh of relief that the task had actually in fact been relatively simple. Had they happened to arrive later in the day when the creature was awake, things might have gone very differently. But they hadn't, and Ari could almost feel the weight of gold in her pockets again.

They passed the merging chamber and returned to the lower platform where a climb over the railing would return them to the surface. But they were no longer alone.

Were they truly ever?

The dirty faces of three kids – no older than nine – stared at them through the gloom, two of them holding candles which provided pathetic light against the pervasive darkness. They looked impoverished but at the same time full of resolve – confident in who they were. It was a strange juxtaposition. The two candle-bearers wore no shoes but the one in the centre had basic sandals that looked like they barely held together.

‘We don’t get no visitors down here,’ said the one in the middle with a callous coldness that Ari knew could only come from those who have fought to survive.

Uallaack just stared, dumbstruck.

‘This is no place for children,’ answered Bogs, flashing the mandibles strapped to her back.

‘This is our home. Our passage,’ the left candle-bearer responded blankly.

Ari started towards them carefully, showing a staying hand to her three companions while she attempted to defuse the situation. She approached slowly with palms open to show she was not close to drawing any of her visible weapons. Ari stopped a few paces from them – a distance she knew to be attentive yet non-threatening – and looked down at their grimy matted hair and sour expressions.

‘No ordinary kids would roam these sewers,’ she said. ‘Where I’m from, children such as you had tasks. *Jobs*.’

The trio looked about themselves. The one in the centre was clearly the leader. ‘Maybe you’re right. Maybe you aren’t,’ he replied with a distant glare that seemed to measure Ari with intellect or disdain. It was hard to determine if they were even mutually exclusive. A slimy grin crept across his sallow face. ‘But that means you are far from home.’

Ari considered him for a long while. She knew these children to be under the employ of someone whose business was not above board. Someone who had work to be done that needed to stay quiet. So, whose hand was it that provided the coin? Ari gulped probably more visibly than she would have liked.

‘How do you know of those like us?’ the bold one asked.

‘My employer made use of those like you,’ Ari replied carefully.

‘Your employer? You are here for a job?’

Ari paused. She had backed herself into a corner. This was not like her.

Travelling with others has made me weaker.

‘Of course,’ she lied.

‘Show us your mark then. If we approve, you can pass,’ replied all three of them, surprisingly.

Ari shot a glance to her companions who were several paces behind her. Bogs had a hand on the hilt of her axe, her war-bred eyes scowling into the darkness about the children.

Nibb seemed indifferent, clearly not used to such situations. Uallaack was somewhere in between, his right hand still controlling the floating orb of light, unable to see the children due to light blindness, but clearly able to hear them. She turned to face the children again. They seemed a pace closer this time. Maybe it was just the darkness playing tricks.

Ari slowly drew her right hand to her left sleeve and rolled it up, revealing the ink of a tattoo. The trio stepped forward to inspect it.

‘One of us...’ the leader said. His eyes raised to meet hers, his sandals kissing the toes of her light boots. Hollow brown pupils stared straight into her. For a moment it was all she could see.

That was all the time they needed.

She suddenly noticed that the other two were no longer visible, their candles extinguished.

‘... no longer,’ the leader finished.

Ari panicked, her brain activating the connections to drive her muscles to movement. To murder. For the first time in her life, she was too slow.

She felt the piercing cold of two jagged knives jammed into her sides, twisting and cruel. Violent shivers wracked her spine as she collapsed to the ground. The unseen children wrenched the rusted steel from her shaking near-corpse before all three of them were briefly visible to her again.

Where were her companions?

Through closing eyelids, she saw the children for the last time. The leader knelt down and spoke a final farewell into her deafening ears.

‘We were told to look out for someone like you after what you did. Even all the way out here. Traitorous bitch.’

Ari's vision faded to black. She thought she could hear a voice. Maybe shouting.

Then again, the mind does peculiar things when one is dying.