

My name is Thomas, though now I go by Nif. I suppose my story began when I was born, it was a warm summer day in late June. The next day rained, according to the village Oracle this warned of my destiny of sadness and misfortune. As a child, I learned to ignore her; however, with the benefit of hindsight, I now realise that she was right.

For most of my early life, we lived in that village, the village that witnessed my birth and my initial “crimes”. These consisted of stealing bread, breaking into the bakery, and vandalising homes of people I didn’t like, mostly the Oracle’s, along with a few other minor crimes. We moved from this village for reasons I did not yet understand. We left when I was six.

After we had left, we had moved around Brách mostly in the North. We lived in the Forest of the Ancients for some time, both in cities and in tents. We never lived in one place for long, perhaps no more than three months at a time. We lived in the Dwarven kingdoms; most memorably Grondor as the children of the barkeepers would sneak me a flagon every time they knew they wouldn't get caught. They even taught me some Dwarvish. I managed to befriend a few Elven children in the few Elven cities in which we were allowed. Though none snuck me any drink, they would teach me a few words in Elvish. Many of the friends I made, Dwarf and Elf alike, were upset to find me leaving so soon. However, my parents decided the quick relocations to avoid the danger that, at the time, I believed was their fear of the Oracle's correctness. Through time I have learned that their belief in the Oracle was not the source of their fear. No, they were brave people and couldn't be frightened by pure superstition.

We first moved directly North into the Forest of the Ancients. At first, my parents didn't want to get too close to any civilisation, so the first eight months in the Forest was a "camping trip" as Mother so kindly put it. After a while, and a few attempts, we were accepted into an

Elven city. We only stayed in the first two towns for three weeks each, no time to learn any Elvish, nor to nurture any friendships. The third city we managed to stay in for two months, this town is where I made my first Elf-friends and learned my first few words in Elvish, despite their reluctance. I think my parents began to fear a few people also admitted into the city as Mother once said to me, "We must go now. It is no longer safe for you here." Next stop for us was the heavily Dwarven managed mountains.

When we first got to the mountains Father said to me, "Welcome to the Thydirian Mountains." Much like in the forest we waited some time before going into any city, I believe it took us three months to get into a Dwarven city. I don't think at first my parents trusted the dwarfs. We spent only a week in the first Dwarven city. Grondor was the fourth Dwarven city we spent time in and managed to stay a staggering four months. Was was the first town I was genuinely upset to leave. My friends that I had made here were the greatest and continued to be high on that short list. Though I haven't seen nor heard from them in over twenty years, I still consider them among my greatest, in more ways than one, friends; as we left one gave me a golden ring that I now wear on a leather necklace. I digress. My parents wanted to get back into the forest for reasons I have only now gathered. As we began leaving the mountains, and the safety of the Dwarfs, I started to get a bad feeling, though I must admit it may have been due to the water I had drunk earlier in that day. That was the day.

Perhaps only two hours from the forest we heard a rock begin to roll, Father quickly drew his sword and Mother rushed me to a small cave. I listened to the sounds of swords clashing, the screams of agony; then the silence pierced my ears harder than the other noises. The little bush covering the entrance of the cave was pushed aside four people stood before me. Their dark

coloured cloaks pulled against the wind; hoods hung low obscuring their faces. The sight of me caused them to sheath their swords and daggers; the leader looked at me through his cloak. Though I could not see his eyes, I felt their weight. He spoke, "I am sorry for what happened here this evening. To show the sincerity of this claim I shall share with you the name of our clients and our organisation." Another gave a half-hearted attempt at stopping him. He brushed them aside and continued, "Those who ordered this to happen belong to a group known as the Brotherhood of Shadows. As for us, we belong to the Carnage Club, a group of mercenaries who have yet to fail a client." At this last sentence, another member snarled, "nd we ne'er 'ill." With that they left, leaving me with nothing more than two names and fury.

I never went back to any of the Elven cities as I didn't like them much nor do I think they liked me. I did go back to my birthplace once and left quickly as the one to remember me was the Oracle. I returned to the Dwarven cities most often. I never went to see my friends. I went to remember my parents. On one of these visits to Grondor I overheard some miners talking about a human settlement on the East coast of the Thydirians. I felt I should go there as they would surely have some texts about this Brotherhood and this Club. Honestly, I don't quite remember how I was planning on reading these stories, as at the time I could only read a few words in Common, and I only could speak a few words of Dwarvish and Elvish. Still, I searched. However, I found no such documents. As I was leaving the city I heard a voice calling to the Dwarven Centre of Magic; I only knew the place from the stories surrounding that heavily enchanted and rarely opened door. These stories included: they run the kingdom, they have many magical artefacts inside, and they can force their way into or out of any situation needed.

I made my way to that door; the door I, nor any of my friends who had told me of it, have never seen open. This door which continues to be surrounded by mystery, intrigue, and children's tales. The Dwarven Centre of Magic. I stood before that door, and as I settled into my stance that door opened for, what seems like the first time. There stood an Elf, an odd sight in a city with such a stigma of the race. This oddity bade me entrance. Inside these halls were decked in tapestries of times long past. The same sturdy Dwarven voice that drew me towards the place came from inside. It was speaking Elvish, though I know not what words he used. Then it spoke to me, wishing me his sympathy, the first I had gotten. He told me he craved to help me in my search; he offered me a book to help me learn to read and speak Dwarvish and Elvish. However, it was a trade, in return, he expected a favour. I asked what he wanted to be done, that's when he told me he needed nothing from me now. In the future, however, he would call upon me using the book, then is when I will return the favour. I accepted. I was now eight and leaving the only city that ever felt like a home of any kind.

I left the city with a small bit of bread I managed to steal from one of the taverns I had not visited in my time living there. The first night I ate nearly half the food I brought and fell asleep. That book loomed in my dreams, a curiosity of its contents and of what I could learn from it. The next day I had to cross three rivers and climb numerous boulders; however, I would not be slowed by these mere obstacles. The second night I choose not to eat but rather study the book. It became difficult to read from lack of light; I found the sun had set. I gathered some wood and began a fire; I continued to read. Through the next days, I found myself studying it more than eating or sleeping; I was hungry, but not for bread. After seven days of rough travel, I

found myself only a mile South of that Human settlement I had heard of existing on this side of [\[JS1\]](#) Bràch.

I finally made it to the Human settlement. The large stone wall "finally being finished", as I would learn shortly after entering being inside those very walls. The Dwarven design unmistakably inspired the walls. The walls themselves being massive and formidable; however, excellent attention to detail, fine lines marking themselves everywhere. These lines added strength and simultaneously elegance.

The guards at the front gate were too busy clearing the body of a fallen Carver to notice a young boy slip through. The first thing I did when I got into the city was to look for anyone who may have known anything about my parents or the two organisations. That is when I saw the bookstore. In front of the door, I saw two men talking to each other the first said, "... they're finally finishing the walls; it has been months. What if a horde of Orcs had traipsed on by?" When I heard this, I forced myself to hold back laughter, as a Dwarven settlement would have finished twice the wall in a third the time. I then went inside. I had never seen so many books as there were in this bookstore. There were twelve bookshelves each holding more than their fill. Stacks of books starting at the floor and scraping the ceiling. On the other side of the bookstore stood a counter and behind this counter stood a young, slender, and visibly intelligent man. This man allowed me to stay in this bookstore, he let me into a group of children who were learning to read under his guidance, and he helped me find information on the Brotherhood of Shadows and the Carnage Club. I fear if I had never met this man I would be unable to write this, for more than the reason of literacy.

This bookstore housed a few stories of the Carnage Club; however, the vast majority of these stories were intended to fill children with fear. These stories explained how if they should choose to misbehave the Club would come for them and their friends. Stories which I may heed; if my parents had not killed by their hand. We found no written account of any Brotherhood of Shadows. The bookstore owner promised me we would find someone who had some information about the Brotherhood. Three weeks after this promise he found someone. An old, paranoid, man met with us he quickly told us his story and bade us leave. The next day we went to speak to him again after questions revealed themselves through the night. We found his corpse only a few metres [\[JS2\]](#) from where we talked to him yesterday. His story was one of a secret organisation placing people in power and ruling kingdoms from behind a curtain of shadows. Commanding armies, and rulers. Should a family disobey they would disappear and a new, unknown, family would come to the forefront of power. When we found the old man's body, the bookstore owner told me to sleep in the store, rather than bedding on the streets.

It was a few weeks had gone by without any other information being brought to light. One night I woke to that same Dwarven voice calling to me. I woke to the shimmering light of that book. As the voice spoke the pages flapped, as though they were the ones issuing the words. The pages told me to go back to the entrance to the city of Grondor, to wait there for a group of three Elves and help them to the Eastern coast, and that shall repay my debt. I snapped up wrote the shopkeep a note and made my way West. Four days later I made it to the entrance of Grondor, not an Elf in sight. I made camp behind a large bolder. The next afternoon three Elves rushed past my campsite. I gave chase; once I was upon them, I told them I was their guide to the

Eastern shore. At first, they didn't trust me, maybe they never did. We kept up a good pace on the way back, three days.

I left them five miles North of the town I had been staying in for the past month. There was a ship waiting for them; I saw no crew aboard it, however. They swam out to meet the Ship of the Line, climbed to the deck and the ship made its way from the coast. I made my way back to the town.

When I got back, the storekeeper asked me if I knew how long I had been travelling, apparently annoyed. I frankly told him, nine days. He asked if I remembered that old man we had spoken to; I nodded. He said he found another person who knew of the Brotherhood. We went to meet him; he stood in the depths of an alleyway, fear gleamed in his eyes. He told us his story, "The Brotherhood of Shadows is not an evil organisation. They have this view amongst people as this group of evil powers working to bring the evil Drow back into the densely populated parts of the world. While in reality the Brotherhood work for the opposite purpose. Their sworn mission is to prevent the re-entrance of these evils. I cannot answer why your parents were killed; I would say it was an accident; however, the Brotherhood of Shadows rarely makes such an amateur mistake. The Brotherhood of Shadows may commit some evil acts, yet they will not commit such acts if they didn't prevent greater evils." The storekeeper's grip tightened on my shoulder.

After we had left, I asked the storekeeper why the two men's stories were different. He said, "What you believe is the truth to you; however, every person has their truth."

We didn't hear from that man for a few weeks. Then we got a note slipped under the door to the bookstore. It told of this man's fear; it claimed people following him. We left shortly after reading; found his corpse only a few metres from the door.

Months went by without a word about the Carnage Club nor the Brotherhood of Shadows. Then years, it felt as though we have yet to find anything new on these groups. I was now thirteen; I was beyond impatient. I had waited for five years to finally strike back at the people who struck my parents down, yet I waited for five years to achieve nothing. The bookstore owner pushed me to write my tale; perhaps he thought it might help me get through the matter. Maybe he wanted to see how far I've come. I suppose it is even possible that he just wanted to know more about me. Whichever it is here I am writing this sentence hoping that one day I will find those who found my family prevent them from harming anyone else's.

-Nif