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# Prologue

*The humans will vanquish us all.*

Dread coiled in Nowle Orriven's breast as he looked down into the vast hollow. A churning mass of war-worn wingfolk filled the grand chamber, packed shoulder to shoulder like trembling hatchlings in the shadow of predators. They were the final remnants of their kind.

He released a sigh, head bowing beneath heavy sorrow. *Only a sun-cycle has passed since the first human ships crossed the horizon. A single cycle, and already they have reduced our entire kingdom to ashes.*

Thousands of mergansil refugees huddled beneath the open canopy, their roosts burnt into blue cinders by human sorceries. Wingwardens slumped in their blackened armors, stormseers murmured desperate prayers, and ash-winged survivors clung to each other in silence.

The defiant, the broken, and the grieving—all had fled to Mount Valkarahm, all had fled to the last roost.

Built on the edge of a pronged peninsula, the ancestral citadel of the mergansil jutted from jagged coastal cliffs like the ivory spine of a long dead giant. Whitewood towers and bone-colored spires coiled upward, piercing a starless twilight alive with nightmares. The cast shadows slithered over the horizon, curling at the foot of the white gates of the citadel, awaiting the feast's beginning.

Within these stalwart walls of false salvation, the heights of rising darkness swam with circling frenzies of wingkin. Their screams cut like a blade through the hollows, a siren-song bleeding the will of all who heard. This was their answer to the heavy pulse that thundered across the land, war-drums of the human horde echoing through the sky — a ballad of death imminent.

Nowle lifted his gaze as the suns sank beneath the smothering night. A black maw gaped over the world.

*The Voidnight.* He whispered, as if it might hear. Though he had long grown past his chick-hood, the barren heavens never ceased to unnerve him. And as the screech of his maddened kin echoed across the thundering sky, that fear deepened. The void felt ravenous, starved for millennia. Looming over the wingfolk citadel with a hunger

older than the suns themselves. And tonight, it had finally cornered its prey.

High above the swarming chaos within the grand hollow, Nowle and the remains of his Galesong Covenant gathered on their stark skeletal perches. Once, the council had been a choir of wisdom and gleaming feathers, weaving songs composed across ancestries. Now, vacant stone perches loomed in tragic silence, waiting for masters reduced to dust.

With his seeing eye, Nowle counted the familiar wingfolk that still stood alongside him, but the blind glimpsed nothing but phantoms of a fading brilliance. These were the voices that remained of the Galesong. This was the council upon which the fate of all Mergansil now rested. With another weary sigh, he shut his eyes, and listened to his estranged covenant argue amongst each other.

“They march on the Clutchspires!” cawed a trembling Tybal Carrion. His eyes darted across the sky as if he alone saw doom’s descent. “We must strike now, or our children will be killed in their nests!”

“Strike?” The distraught Sparrowhawk squawked. “You saw what became of my roost. The wingfolk were struck down the moment they flew from their solar ships.”

“Certainly you didn’t think flying blindly at them would work, did you Thereu?” Lybann the merchant chirped. “If you were wiser, you’d have focused on bringing down their border towers—breaking their lines of supply. Then we could starve them!”

“Yes!” another member of the merchant’s company agreed. “We can seal our sanctums and watch as the humans tear each other apart!”

Amidst the roar of arguments, Nowle heard the faint whisper of a quill on parchment beside him. His oldest companion, Iesif the Aerosmith, bent low over a curling scroll, as if the chaos could be ordered by ink. A reed in the howling wind, Iesif was more fit to record the clamor rather than join it.

The hulking storm, Tensyll Tyrkoon lurched up from his spire, motioning indignantly to the burning landscape with his vast wing. “And what of all the peaks they’ve already stolen from us? Would we abandon those wingfolk to suffer? To be branded and used like livestock? We should set our focus on reclaiming them.”

The boy behemoth filled the place of his slain father, plumage still black with youth and the ash of battle. Broad shoulders quaked with unspent fury. Nowle could hear the tremor in his breath, the fire caged in his throat. He still grieves, and such grief hones an unyielding vengeance. He thought. He will be difficult to convince.

Beside the brooding figure, Zaygra, the Angel of Aurucal, a lasting member of his previous council, laid a wing upon the behemoth’s back. “My son is right, enough of this talk,” She spoke low, but powerful, and the boy strengthened at her word. “The humans made their choice when they marched. We will fight now, or our people shall continue to suffer.”

Her grip was tight around Heavensong, her spear— as beautiful and dangerous as its master. Beneath the calm marble of her face, Nowle could

see the pulse at her temple. She was far from composed. She was a weapon strained to the edge of shattering— but even the most brittle steel can be tempered, with the right fire. If only Nowle could win her allegiance, then her son might follow. Perhaps then, even the entire hollow could be swayed... All save one— The stranger among them that would never bend to him, Vaator Gnott.

Vaator the Vulture reclined with ease, one talon hooked drowsily around his perch, the other raised a glass of nectar-wine. He nursed the drink as though the entire gathering were a play performed for his amusement. His beak glistened black, eyes glimmering and sharp. The exile had chosen a grim hour to return to the Highroosts— a return Nowle had long dreaded. In this time of desperation, the covenant had put aside Vaator's great crimes, but Nowle never would. He would not forget what the vulture had done, nor what he was capable of. The two met eyes. Vaator raised his wine, he drank, and his black smile bled red.

Nowle's feathers bristled and he turned his gaze away. Fear and fury swirled between the rafters. Even the wind seemed restless, howling through the vaulted stone, tugging at banners and

loose feathers. Then came a voice— low and broken like a snapping branch.

“Silence.”

It was Nowle’s own. He was startled at how thin it sounded. Yet the word cut clean. The hollow hushed. Even Vaator paused, his glass suspended at his beak.

From the central perch, the Featherkeeper stepped forward, great umber wings trailing like a worn cloak, talons clacking against the crystal floor. *Be decisive, Nowle,* He whispered. *You must show them the strength and wisdom of our forebearers.* He steeled the doubts within himself, and when he spoke again, his voice roared like wind through the ruins of an ancient temple.

“We gather here as one people. But within us, many tempests rage. We call for justice. We call for revenge. For war. And perhaps...” His eye swept the chamber. “Perhaps we are right to do so. But before our wingkin are sent to bleed for our pride, we must know the shape of the things we war against. We must remember why the sky is black and starless.”

Murmurs flitted through the air. Beaks turned upwards. Even the wail of the spiraling doomkin faltered before him.

“Before there was darkness,” Nowle began, wings unfurling, “The sky was still alive. Not empty and black as it is now. The stars were no mere fires, nor cold lifeless lights— They were Gods. Eternal and endlessly burning. Whom lit the heavens not out of need, but out of boredom. Each one charged with almighty will, yet cursed without purpose.”

Nowle pressed a talon against his breast. “And so, they forged the mortals. Not of love, but of vanity. Mortals were toys, dust shaped for play. Made, broken, and made again.”

A ripple of unease coursed through the hollow.

“And among all their playthings,” Nowle’s voice hardened, “one creation drew the gods’ gaze above all others— The humans.”

“Curse the humans!” The croak of an elder rang through the hall. “Favor or no, they must be punished!” A chorus of rage rose, and the wing-folk began to chant, “Death to the humans! Death to the humans! Death to the—”

Nowle lifted his wing, hushing them. “Punishment?” he thundered. “What punishment can strike beings who have silenced the heavens? The humans were the gods’ most formidable craft. Cunning beyond any other mortal, bold enough to wrench fate from eternal hands. And the gods— could not help but fear the mirrors they had made.

He spread his wings wide, feathers crackling in the firelight. “In the hour when mankind’s worth was weighed upon the scales, and the masters chose destruction as they so often did— the Fell-Star came to them. Neither mortal nor god, but a dark wanderer from beneath the void. It emerged unto the first human lands and offered them knowledge. Forbidden things, blasphemous to the wheel of fate, yet boundless in power. The humans resisted at first. But the nectar of temptation calls even those who know no hunger. In the end, they drank deep.”

He lowered his great wings, voice dropping to a rasp. “And in that moment, the fate of the gods was sealed. The sacred flame of the almighty was reborn in the hands of men.”

The hall echoed with gasps and bristling feathers, fear fueling the chaos. But Nowle's intensity roared, deaf to his people's dismay. "Humans bent the laws of creation itself. They slowed the call of death, rended the seams of nature, boiled the seas. And finally, when the champion of the gods came to temper their insatiable hunger, they rose. And the first of heaven's stars was slain. Then another. And another. For an eon the gods' cries tore through the firmament, the sky rained with endless fires, until all went silent. It was only then that the humans rejoiced— for in the dark, they alone burned." He paused for breath.

"Save for two greater beings." Nowle thundered with a sharp gesture toward the dimming horizon. "The twin suns, Arceris and Nemisin. With their final breath, the last stars gave what remained of their almighty spirits, and birthed the Agathions. Our ancestors. Wingfolk. Clawfolk. Beasts formed of flesh and light."

He bowed his head. "But the twin gods feared what we might become. For they bound us in burdens far heavier than any sin of man. Gifting us strength of body, but denying us the wisdom of Magick. And so, though we fought

bravely, we were broken. Cast down by the new gods of our age. And the corpses of Arceris and Nemisin rose into eternal orbit, twin dead embers, circling the tombs of heaven.”

He swiveled, gaze and wing, to the black void, his burning eye, but a speck in its great span. This sky above us—” his voice cracked, talons rising, “—is not empty. It is the graveyard of our gods.”

The wingfolk wailed and cried. Nowle’s reply to them was cold as the dead, chilling bone and shattering their spirit. “If we persist in this war with humans, we will be destroyed. Surrender is all that remains to us.”

Silence sat heavy in the hollow, doom lingering without a word. Save for the distant drone of circling screams, not a wing stirred. No breath willing to break.

A single voice shattered it—loud and trembling with fire.

“No!” Tensyll Tyrkoon rose from his perch, a mountain of black feathers. His wings stretched wide, casting shadows across the hollow. His voice cracked like thunder through the spires.

“What wisdom is this, Nowle Orriven? You, Featherkeeper, charged to guard our people’s history, speak of surrender? Of kneeling to the butchers of our kin? This is treachery to our ancestors! Treachery to all Mergansil!”

Zaygra Aurucal was at his side at once, her wing on his shoulder, her voice low and urgent. “Peace, Tensyll — please —”

But he cast her aside, talons screeching against white marble. His young face was torn open with grief. “The monsters burn our families, steal our children, march upon our nests — and you would speak of peace?” His chest heaved. His feathers shuddering with each breath. “Do you think they will stop? Their boot is already on our throats! They will never leave us be!”

Nowle bowed his head, slow and solemn, wings folding closed, as if bracing against a storm. “Your wisdom does not fail you, Tensyll. The humans will not stop. Not by mercy. Not by treaty. Least of all by war. We will never be at peace.”

The black storm flicked his eyes up at him, his beak parting to say more. But before he could begin, Nowle met his burning gaze, his blind eye dark as stormclouds, the other shimmering with a

hidden knowledge. “Unless... we give them what they hunger for. The prize they slew the stars to claim.”

“And... what would that be, Featherkeeper?”  
The black storm crowed.

Nowle’s answer was quiet, yet it carried like a tolling bell. “Godhood. Godhood, and all else they might desire. Our families. Our children. Our roosts and our capital. And, should they demand it, even ourselves. For what is left to us but worship? Submission is the only path by which our people may endure.”

Gasps rang out, sharp as daggers. Murmurs boiled into cries. “Never!” “Blasphemy!” “Traitor!”

Tensyll’s beak clicked shut, chest heaving. His bitter voice broke free, “Then the Galesong has failed.” He unfurled his wings. Vast, dark sails blotting away the dwindling twilight. “I will not stand idle while the monsters devour our kin.” His voice roared across the hollow. “Any who are not traitors to our kind, follow me! Together, we will scour the humans from the peaks!” With a single beat, he leapt skyward.

“My son,” The angel rose to and clutched his arm, her voice soft yet unyielding. “Your grief is mighty, but grief alone will grant you no greater power over the humans. Your father is slain by their hands. What hope could you have against them?”

He shrugged her off with a glare. “We shall see, Mother.” Then he launched himself through the open roof, soaring into the sky.

For a heartbeat, no one moved. Then, Thereu the Sparrowhawk spread her wings, feathers patchy and scorched. “The boy is right. I have seen their cruelty. I will not leave my people at the human’s mercy.” She rose, the remaining flock of Cloudnarrow with her.

The others and their own followed. The merchants, Lybann and Thurian, and the mad Tybal Carrion streamed after them in a storm of wings. One by one, the clutches emptied. The roar of departure filled the chamber. What remained of the wingkin’s morale vanished along with them.

When the gale settled, only a third remained. The air reeked of loss. Nowle watched the feathers drift downward, his heart alongside them. I have failed them all. He lamented. What good is a Featherkeeper, when every feather has turned to ash?

After the council had finished, all that remained in the hollow were the howling souls of wingfolk too weak, or too terrified to leave.

Iesif who had been perched silent at Nowle's left glanced up from his writings. "Well, that was a rousing success," the bird muttered. "I do hope your plan runs deeper, Nowle. I prefer myself a little less... roasted."

His grey feathers sagged with age, though they were not as old as Nowle's. Because of Iesif's quiet nature, his word was often overlooked within the covenant. And yet, among the wingfolk, Nowle knew no wiser wingwright had ever lived. Sensible his friend was, yes, but timid. Iesif would not dare rise against him.

Nowle smiled weakly, looking over the remaining Mergansil below, huddled against each other shivering. "I agree, old friend, I only hope that the behemoth's war will give us enough time to find it."

Iesif's brow arched. "Find what?"

"The Fell-Star." Zaygra said glumly, landing back on a spire beside them. "What is your scheme Nowle? I trust surrender isn't the end of it. Otherwise, I'd be better off dying in battle at my son's side."

The ancient bird shook his head. “Let us hope that it does not come to that, Zaygra. As for my plan, the legend of the Immortal war tells that the humans tried to subjugate the Fell-Star along with the gods, but its unmatched mastery over cosmic forces allowed it to escape. Somewhere in this world, it remains hidden still.”

Iesif snorted. “If the humans couldn’t find it, what makes you think we could? How do you know if it even exists?”

The Featherkeeper raised his wings. Each of his feathers were different, some ornate some not. But all were heavy with strange baubles and beads. Nowle’s talon swept across a special feather, one gilded in gold and decorated with diamonds. “I know, because the feather of the first Mergansil, in which we are named, tells me so.”

Iesif squinted at the glimmering feather, scratching his head. To any other, these feathers were a confusing mess. But to the Featherkeepers, it held the whole of Mergansil history.

Nowle lowered his wings. “But, it is not the Fell-Star we must find,” he told Iesif. “It is the knowledge it left behind. Humans have long abandoned those cryptic spells for steadier arts,

but there are known sorcerer lords who still wield those ancient powers. They are whom we must seek."

Zaygra leaned forward, feathers bristling.  
"Where do you propose we find such sorcerers?"

Nowle stroked his chin with a talon. "By traveling to the source," he replied. "To the place where the Fell-Star first descended."

Her eyes widened, voice cutting into a sharp whisper, "That would carry us into the very bowels of the human continent! To the heart of Thaum itself! The sorcerer lords would never suffer an Agathion near such a sacred site— let alone a Mergansil! Such a journey is impossible, Nowle."

The Featherkeeper placed a wing across her shoulder, the other on Iesif's. His gaze was steady. "Patience. In time we shall gain their favor. This is the only path in which we are sure to succeed in protecting our people. Only through the human's trust can we hope to uncover the Fell-Star's true place. And with it, we will undo them— as they have undone their own gods."

"Well said, Featherkeeper," Iesif nodded.  
"But how might we come to arrange this treaty?  
Do you already know of a sorcerer lord that might  
hear our plea?"

A cough and a clink of glass cut through their thoughts. Vaator Gnott fluttered down from his perch, landing with a theatrical sweep of his wings. One talon hooked the spire. The other raised his cup high. "You told a splendid tale, Featherkeeper," he crooned, voice rumbling low, thunderous as stormclouds. "But it seems you and your council have flown yourselves into a snare. Allow me to loosen it."

His dark beak gleamed with nectar-wine, black grin wide, stained an umber red. "I have dealings with a powerful human sorcerer. His knowledge may be the very thing you seek. He would grant you what remains of the Fell-Star, magicks lost even to men themselves."

Iesif stiffened, feathers rising. "Treachery! You would place our Featherkeeper in the talons of a sorcerer king? This is madness—"

Vaator laughed deep in his throat. "Is it Madness? Or survival? Tell me, Aerosmith— what is more treasonous? Offering our Featherkeeper a new path, or allowing our people to be slaughtered?"

Zaygra's spear lifted, her eyes hard as stone.  
"You are drunk on your own lies, Vaator. Sit  
down before I cut your black tongue from your  
skull."

"No," the Featherkeeper told her, wing raising  
between them. His gaze did not leave Vaator's. "Let  
him speak."

The vulture dipped his head in a mock rever-  
ence. "Wise words, Nowle." His grin widened.  
"Hear the truth of it— his gifts are not free. He will  
have... demands." Vaator's eyes flicked slyly up at  
Nowle, a shadow of amusement crossing his beak.  
"If you desire it, I could guide you to him myself."  
The chamber tensed.

Nowle's voice came, steady and sure. "I accept."

Zaygra spun. "No! It should be me—"

"Yes," Iesif sputtered, "better her than—"

"Then it is done," Vaator cawed, his voice  
rumbling like a distant hurricane. "But beware,  
great Featherkeeper. His price knows no end, and  
his pacts bind tighter than any chains."

He tipped back his glass and drained it dry, not a drop remaining. Then, his eyes locked on Nowle's, gleaming with what—he would not say. "Next we meet, Featherkeeper," he rasped, "it will be at his side."

The cup slipped and fell, turning, glinting past empty spires, past huddled stragglers, into the sea of feathers below. It shattered, shards exploding in the air like frozen lightning. The sound echoed. Once. Twice. And then the echo deepened. A low boom bore through Mount Valkarahm. Another. And another. War drums. Low. Deep.

The deafening roar of the death spiral rose higher, their screams joining the steady boom. The hollow trembled. Burning feathers fell from the skies. Crystal branches cracked.

Nowle turned back, but Vaator had already vanished. The suns dimmed. Not by cloud, nor by storm, but by shadows. Vast hulls carved with sigils drank the fire of every light in the citadel. Engines growled. Wings of iron spread across the sky.

A single scream from a hatchling echoed through the jagged spines. Mount Valkarahm

drowned in darkness. Every song went silent as the broken choir turned their gaze upward.

And Nowle Orriven, who had known the fall of stars, fell to his knees. His burning eye wide with a recognition of something far worse than memory or myth. Beneath the howls of sorcery, his voice trembled. "They have come."

## Chapter 1 : In the Shadow of Suns

“I hate the suns,” Cullun croaked, staring up at them. Their sweltering heat roasted him without mercy, cooking him like a beast bound to a spit. He shifted in his wobbling seat at the head of the wagon, rubbing his ass to give it some feeling again.

When would it be his turn to take a break from the reins? He wondered, looking down at his throbbing hands. He had spent hours at the whip, fingers raw and bleeding from grappling the reins of the monstrous beasts that pulled their wagon. They alone had turned the journey across Chimerac into a slogging torture. The terrible Agathion monsters. The Minosaurs.

His knuckles whitened around the lead, he realized that he hated them more than the twin suns. The pungent smell of soiled half-rotten meat clung to the scaled beasts wherever they went, scorching Cullun’s nostrils as they rode. They hadn’t been cleaned in a month, maybe longer. Good, He thought. They deserve to rot for what they did.

A sharp groan wobbled through the burning air, and behind Cullun, a stocky frame was sprawled out in the cargo bed. The shriveled old man, Gile.

"The powers have cursed me!" The old hunter wheezed, and black smoke puffed out from his dark grey mutton chops. The old man was seared near pink, with flaking skin rough from a lifetime under the suns. It sagged beneath his bald chin like melted wax. He raised a trembling arm to shield his eyes from the glare. "If there's any great beings still listenin, don't let me die sober!" He wailed.

"Could be worse, you old goat," Cullun grumbled, sweeping dirt caked strands from his sharp amber eyes. His black hair was wild and greasy with sweat, swaying in the hot winds as their wagon crept higher into the mountains. Lean skinny arms were scored with scars, but his bronze face was flawless and young— too young, for the life he lived.

He watched Gile crawl over to the net strapped to the wagon's rails, where they kept the last of their supplies. Gile was old, but not frail. He was squat and heavy, but very strong— strong

enough to grapple a hulking minosaur alone, which counted itself eight feet in height and was only just on the verge of starvation. Cullun had seen it himself— of course Gile had been drunk at the time.

Gile unfurled the rope and threw it aside, rifling through the supply net. He's looking for something to get him drunk again. A painful mixture of disgust, pity, and shame welled up— as Cullun watched his once mighty captain slobber through their things.

He and the old man had been Agathion Hunters, often hunting other things too— for the right price. An honorless profession, a life of pain and suffering, for those the hunters deemed profitable. This had been the only trade that Cul-lun was useful for. At least, that's what Gile had told him. The cruel wrinkled wretch who was his surrogate father, purchased Cullun as a pup— in exchange for five polished coppers.

I told the stupid beasts it was gold! Gile had revealed to him once, drunk to drowning, celebrating a particularly splendid haul. And they worshipped me, boy! They fell at my feet weeping in gratitude!

The echoes of his laughter rang cruel in Cul-lun's memory. Maybe they were weeping for me. He thought miserably.

From then on, he had been enslaved into Gile's band of Agathion Hunters. A ruthless bunch of killers and skinners, whom raised Cul-lun by fist and blood.

Once, a hunter known as Softfinger promised to visit Cullun while he slept. Gile gave him a dirk from his own belt. When Softfinger died that night, Cullun was finally accepted among them. What came next was seven long years of savage hunting and slaving, in which he took to unnaturally well. As if within him was born a natural taste for senseless violence.

Cullun's hand tightened around the hilt of his old dirk, hung from his rope belt. The frayed leather was rough, its blade stained and chipped from the dealing of past wounds. From the moment it had passed to him from Gile's hands, Cul-lun had kept it close to his side. It reminded him of who he was, and who he had to thank for it.

A sudden lurch of the wagon snapped Cullun back from those bitter echoes. The mountain path they followed twisted along a narrow cliff's edge, with nothing but a dead drop beside them. Beyond, lay the western expanse of Chimerac, the wild lands of the agathion beastfolk.

The acrid wastes before him were pummeled with deep craters and splintered peaks, war-scars upon an unhealing world. Of what war, or what damned battle, Cullun knew little about. Only that it had been vast, and old, and merciless. For even now, the air carried the remains of choking ash, as if the land itself had not drawn a peaceful breath since.

He scanned the barren sweep of scorched plains and withered rivers, their channels dried and boiled away in their beds. The wasteland stretched endlessly before him. Cullun felt small upon it, a lonely shadow in a place without shade. The hot winds howled, gnawing at him, but its cry carried no life. No birds. No beasts. Nothing but dust, mountains, and ruin.

"Still no sign of the other beastfolk. Or—anything else." he muttered, though the words felt more like a curse than comfort. Gile lolled

about on the wood planks but did not reply. Cullun was sure he had heard. "Hey, you goin deaf, Old Goat?" he said louder.

"Stop calling me that." The old man snarled, "Don't forget who kept you breathin' boy. They'd be gnawin' on yer cooked hide if I hadn't pulled us out of that piss-hole camp."

"You pulled us out?" Cullun reared, yanking the reins of the plodding Minosaurs. The huge scaled beasts groaned and halted, turning their weary eyes to their masters. "No, I pulled us out. You're the reason we got ambushed, dead asleep in a drunken stupor. As usual."

"I wasn't asleep," Gile muttered back. He glared at Cullun, eyes rimmed pink with heat and hate alike. "Least I kept us alive, boy."

"Aye," Cullun said with a snort, whipping the Minosaurs forward again with a snap of the chained reins. "Shame the rest of the hunters can't say the same."

Gile's eyes sharpened, and his lip curled into an angry sneer. "And what of it? They ain't done us no favors. They were thieves, trying to steal what was ours."

Cullun let out a mocking guffaw. “Ours?” he hissed, stabbing a finger toward him. “You selfish bastard, cause of you, we don’t got a single damn crown left. It’s all gone. Rotting in a pit with the rest of em’. All we got now are these stinking— fucking— Minosaurs.”

“Ain’t a right world where you can call me selfish!” Gile roared back. “I shared everything with you! My treasures, my women— my crowns! Hell, I raised you! Saved you from yer damned beast kin! And how have you repaid me? With nothin! You ain’t never done nothin for me!”

Cullun turned away with a snort, spitting a wad of dust onto the road. This is why he hated the old man most of all. He’d never be thankful. Never acknowledge that Cullun had saved him. Bitterness welled in his throat. “You’d be bones in a ditch without me. I should have let the slaves kill you.”

Gile growled. “That’s enough.” He stood in the cargo bed. His voice cracked with a ragged cough, and with it came a choking plume of black smoke. It spilled from his mouth like tar, coiling and curling until one tendril slipped toward Cullun’s face. Gile’s bright yellow teeth were bared. “Or I swear by the powers of men, I’ll shut you up for good, boy.”

Trembling with rage, Cullun watched the old man's black magick slithered down his beard. He glared at Gile indignantly, deciding it was time he stopped holding himself back. "Try it then— you wrinkled— old— goat." He stretched the words out scathingly.

The old hunter roared, and the tendril of smoke crept higher, brushing Cullun's lips. His chest clenched at the sour taste of liquor. Then he lashed an arm out, sudden and savage, and the back of his fist cracked across Gile's face, breaking the wordless spell in a single strike.

The old slaver was stunned, and he stumbled on the shifting cart boards. His knees slammed into the rail, his legs twisting in the stray length of rope. He was yanked off balance, and it knocked him up and over. He tumbled, eyes wide, headlong off the cliff.

"Oh, fuck!" Cullun shouted, lurching forwards. He leapt into the cargo bed, leaned over the rail and flung his arm out towards the flailing old man. Just as Gile's legs dipped beneath the edge, silver chains, glowing a bright blue, sailed through the empty air and twisted around his arm. The chains shrieked as they uncoiled, then

went slack, yanking the old slaver to a stop with a savage snap.

Gile roared in pain, and his other hand shot out and gripped his chained arm. “You— pulled out my damn shoulder!” he said between gasps. But before Cullun could reply, the wagon pitched into the air, stumbling over a jutting stone. The whole thing bucked and Cullun was hurled skyward.

“Ohhh, fuuuckkkk!” Cullun shouted again, as both the hunters were thrown off the cliff.

The ground rushed to meet them. Gile roared, “You stupid bastard!” Fury shredded his throat as they streaked past a thick wooden branch. Cullun threw his arms towards it, hoping it was sturdy. Chains spun around the wood limb a dozen times, silver links tightening. Cullun and Gile slammed to a halt, their bodies whipped down as the brutal yank seized them.

His hopes were dashed. The branch was not sturdy. It exploded outward, pulling the whole of the cliff face out with it. The entire wall of stone ripped apart, splintering like lightning.

Cullun's eyes widened with fear. "Hold on!" He bellowed. The stone convulsed as the mountain ruptured. A storm of boulders tore free, crashing down on them like vengeful fists of the dead gods. The impact struck like a thunderclap, smashing the cliff road above into rubble. This sent the cart above them tumbling sideways as the path fell away beneath its wheels. The Minosaurs bellowed, claws raking for hold as a shower of stony debris poured over their scaled backs.

The hunters let out muffled cries as the collisions dashed them against the mountain. Cullun's chains lashed out once more from within the dust cloud, binding quickly around the cart's rail as it tumbled off the edge. Stone thundered past them in torrents, sheering free from the mountain. Their falling cart caught hard on the Minosaurs' bloodied claws and Cullun's chains, and dangled in the midst of the rubble. Their screams were lost in the roar of rocks and chaos, swallowing them whole.

A heavy silence settled among them like a shroud. The avalanche had passed, and somehow— they were still there— still alive— suspended over open air. The wagon swayed beneath

them over the distant ruins below. Above, the crumbling mountain had cracked open, and a black chasm, cut across the rock like a festering wound. Cullun's arms were screaming, and his chains wailed beneath the weight.

"I'm losin' my grip..." he rasped through blood and grit. "Gile!" he shouted, "Make the Minosaurs pull us in!"

Along with a hacking cough, black tendrils shot past Cullun, scaling the Minosaurs hides. For a moment, panic flashed within their eyes, and then calmed as Gile's control swept over them. Their pupils turned dull, and they became still as stone-carved grotesques, awaiting command.

"Lift— us— up, you damn monsters!" Gile hollered. Despite their torn claws, the Minosaurs obeyed, lifting cart and men up the stone wound. The beasts crawled into the cool shade, dragging the haggard hunters inside.

As they drew deeper, the darkness closed around them, smothering the light of the suns. Breaking only when Cullun let his dim blue chains flare to life. But, something here set his skin crawling.

His silver links glowed their blue, yet their color flickered oddly, contorting into shapes that didn't match his movements. Some coils stretched longer than they should, writhing like crazed serpents.

"Stay steady," Cullun called, but the words came back warped. His voice returned to him as if carried by some other presence. Tremble, it rang, cold and hollow. The scaled beasts faltered, and Gile barked a command at them. It came back split in two, his voice, and another beneath it. When he shouted "Pull, beasts!" the cavern willed them— Fall. The beasts shuddered again, claws slipping, until another hacking plume of smoke lashed from Gile's mouth and forced their obedience.

Even that looked strange. The tendrils didn't coil upward as they should. They slithered along the floor merging with shadows, stretching Gile's dark likeness into gnarled shapes. Twisted black horns sprang from atop his shade, legs mangled into that of a hooved beast.

But the hunters were blind from exhaustion. Their bodies ached from the mountain's wrath, their throats raw with dust, and their vision obscured by a veil of powder. They marched on relentlessly, consumed by the stone.

Gile slumped against the cavern wall, thin trickles of black smoke spilling from his cracked lips, swallowed by the dark bowels of the cavern. He placed his dangling arm palm-down on the ground. And with a heavy jerk, he threw his weight into it. The joint snapped back into its socket.

Cullun collapsed into a heap beside him, his chest heaving and his fingers twitching with strain. He dragged his chains back to his side, forcing them still, though the silver links continued to twitch restlessly.

“How—” Cullun began through ragged breaths, “How did we survive that—” Gile’s fist smashed into his face before he could finish. A spray of bright blood shot from his shattered nose, his eyes welling with stinging tears. Of course he would do that.

“You tried to kill me!” The old man’s voice thundered through the shadowed depths, he leapt atop Cullun, a hand clamped around his throat. “Now— now I’ll kill you!” he bellowed, drawing back a fist.

But before the old hunter could land another crushing blow, Cullun saw a glimmer stir in the dark behind them. His gaze snagged on it and he craned his neck to see its source. Past the heaving forms of the Minosaurs, the chasm opened up into an impossible radiance.

Cullun knew Gile had seen it too, because his grip briefly faltered. The younger man seized the moment, flinging the old man off and surging forward, fists spinning in a blur. Gile ducked easily beneath the wild barrage, and Cullun's knuckles sliced air. With a grunt, the old hunter hooked his leg, and swept Cullun's feet from under him, slamming him onto the rough cavern floor.

He fell hard, breath bursting from his lungs. Gasping, he scrambling to rise, but the old man's broad palm pinned him by the chest. "Quit messin' around and look," he growled, jabbing a finger toward the light. "You seein' that?"

Breathless, Cullun followed the elder man's gaze, squinting through the gloom, eyes narrowing at the glow. "What the fuck is that?" he whispered.

Gile lifted his arm from Cullun's chest and rose to his feet. Step by step, he edged toward the blinding light. The nearer he came, the brighter it glowed. The fragile brilliance pressed against the dark until even the shadows shrank back. Gile crept closer, the light spilling across his weathered face. As the light swelled, its source emerged. Resting on a flat slab of cracked stone was a casket, gilded in gold.

Faint traces of engravings ghosted the slab, worn smooth by centuries. The casket, though, showed no such wound. It gleamed with an unnatural preservation beyond the reach of decay. Its surface, alive with scarlet rubies pulsing like glowing coals in the dark.

For a moment, neither man spoke, and the air itself seemed to hush around it.

Cullun staggered to his feet. He couldn't believe it. Was it an illusion? Had a falling rock knocked his head loose? He wiped dust and blood from his eyes. No. Whatever its origin, the gold coffin was real. His lips curled into a wolfish grin. "Well, I'll be damned," he chuckled, stumbling over to Gile's side. "It's a golden fuckin' coffin! All done up for a royal funeral or somethin'!"

He rubbed his palms together, eyes gleaming. “And guess what lucky sons of bitches get to dig it up?” He clambered closer to it, all memory of their fight erased by its soft rays.

The old man stood over the gilded coffin completely transfixed, his face pale in the light. He looked as if he had seen something wholly profane. He ran his fingers across the smooth glimmering edges and brought them to his face. “It’s— beautiful. Ain’t even a fleck of dust on it,” He murmured.

“Beautiful? It’s the most gorgeous god-damn thing I’ve ever seen!” Cullun said excitedly. “How many crowns d’you think we’ll get for it? Ten thousand? No— no— twenty thousand!” He squealed, near breathless with excitement. “And that’s just the coffin! The rich bastard inside is probably made of diamonds! Help me crack this thing open, Gile!” He scrambled to the far side, planting both hands on the coffin’s seal.

Gile just stared, hollow-eyed, as if he hadn’t heard.

“Gile!” Cullun barked again.

The old slaver blinked, his focus snapping back. "I— I don't—" he stammered.

"C'mon! Ain't no harm in havin a quick peek!" Cullun said. "Think of the diamonds!"

Gile hesitated, but in the end he stepped up, setting reluctant hands on the heavy lid.

"On three," Cullun hissed, grinning like a madman. "One... two... three—" With a grunt of effort, they shoved. Metal grated on metal, the seal shattering as the lid slid aside. Light erupted, and a flood of brilliance seared the chamber. Both men reeled back, shielding their eyes from the blinding blaze. Until the light slowly dimmed away like a retreating tide. Cullun blinked furiously behind the shade of his arm, his grin fading as his vision sharpened.

Inside the coffin, the source of the radiance was no jewel, no gold, and no hoard of treasure. There was only a body. The corpse lay motionless and peaceful on its back, skin tinted a cold and unnatural blue. Black hair fell in loose strands across his brow, framing a face that was eerily whole, as if death had claimed him only hours ago. His lips were pale, his flesh tight against the bone, but there was not a single sign of rot nor decay. And upon

his head, bare against his cerulean flesh, was a simple circlet of black metal. It bore no ornament, no carving, nor any sign of worth, and yet, its weight seemed greater than any crown of a living king.

Cullun's face fell and he leaned over the casket, his breath trembling. "No... no diamonds? No gold? Just... this blue bastard?" He scowled, his knuckles turning white on the coffin's edge. "What the fuck is this, Gile?"

But Gile did not answer. His eyes were fixed on the corpse, wide and unblinking, as if its pale blue face were familiar to him. He searched his thoughts, but the memory slipped away, lingering like a nightmare shrouded in fog. All he knew was the sight of it filled him with an overwhelming dread.

"Welp," Cullun drawled, eyeing the corpse. "At least he's wearin' a crown. How much you reckon it's worth?" He stretched out an arm toward the black circlet, but before his fingers could graze it, Gile's calloused hand snapped tight around his wrist, eyes burning with sudden intensity.

"Don't touch it, Cullun," He said darkly.  
"Somethin ain't right with it."

Cullun yanked his arm free from Gile's iron grip. "What the hell are you talkin' about Gile? He said confused. "It's just a damn corpse!"

"It ain't just a corpse," Gile hissed, backing away slowly. "Ain't none of this right. We should just leave it here, be on our way. Forget we ever saw it."

"What?" Cullun sputtered. "We can't just leave it! This is our ticket to bein' filthy fuckin rich! The coffin alone will make us into goddamn kings!"

What was the old man saying? Gile thought. Treasure, gold, and crowns were the only things Gile had ever truly cared for. The pursuit of them was the reason why Gile and him had done such terrible things as Agathion hunters.

"We can't go disturbin' somethin' we don't understand," Gile muttered uneasily. "What if it's cursed and does something to us? What if it already did?"

"It sure has cursed us," Cullun cackled, "cursed us with bein' filthy motherfuckin' rich!"

The grin reigned across his face. "Look, we ain't keepin' it long! I'd say we're a couple days' ride from the Spine right? As soon as we get there, we can sell it off in Bloddskall, and if not, we can cross the border to Caudall and let it off there! Then, Filthy— fuckin— rich!"

Gile's jaw worked as he stared down at the corpse, unease carved deep into his weathered face. He stood there for a moment, an old man choking on thoughts that had long concerned him, too dark to voice. A silence dragged between them, thick and heavy. Until at last he exhaled through his teeth. ". . . Aye. Yer' right. Gold's gold. If it'll buy me a strong drink, cursed or not—we'll take it." he murmured. "But once we reach the Spine, it's gone. Crowns in our pocket or no."

Cullun's grin flared back to life, and he clapped his hands together, the sound sharp as the crack of a whip. That was the Gile he knew so well. "Now we're talkin!" He jerked his chin toward the coffin. "Now, help me shut the bastard back in, don't want him crawlin' out while we sleep, eh?"

Gile stepped to the opposing side. With an uneasy sigh he nodded, and together they heaved, muscles straining. The gilded gold shrieked as the lid scraped across the coffin, the sound echoed within the chasm as if the casket itself protested their plans. With one last shove, the seal slammed home, and the chamber fell deathly silent.

## Chapter 2: Claws in the Dark

His name was Ginnian, but everyone called him Ginni. His job was to dig tunnels. The more tunnels he dug, the more the village grew. When the chief was happy, there was more food. And food was the most important. Not just for him, but for Darianne too. Everyone called her Dari.

Dari was his twin sister, and she worked with him. She was the tunnel-keeper. She braced the walls with stone, wedged loose boulders, and kept the dig-spot safe. She also carried their glow-shrooms, their tools, and their food — And when Ginni clawed open a new tunnel, she was there to make sure it didn't fall on their heads. He dug, and she kept them safe. That's how the orphans survived.

Ginni's claws spun furiously, flinging dirt behind him and pelting Dari's fur. "Hey!" she yelped, brushing the grit from her whiskers. "You're burying me alive back here!"

Ginni stopped digging and looked back at his sister sheepishly. “Sorry, Dari. It’s just—” he broke into a goofy grin. “Today feels different.” The light of the glowshrooms hummed blue, painting a funny look on Dari’s dust covered face.

Ginni tried not to laugh as she narrowed her eyes at him. “Different doesn’t mean you get to crush us flat, you idiot. If you die, I die too.”

His grin faltered. He dug for the food, he dug for the village, but mostly—he dug for Dari. He muttered, “Alright fine, I’ll dig carefully.”

“Thank you.” Dari said, her face softened. “What would you do without me?”

“I’d dig faster,” he muttered, then finished with a thought—*straight off a cliff.*

Dari pulled another glowshroom from her pack and shook it alive. “You’ve got the claws, and i’ve got the plans— That’s how we dig. That’s also why we find the best treasures.”

He smirked. She was right, his favorite part about digging was finding treasures. Ginni felt the excitement grow in his chest at the thought of it, and his claws began to pound with energy. He turned all his enthusiasm to his work—and dug.

Hours passed and they squirmed far deeper into the depths than ever before. The glowshroom lights began to bend strange shadows along their tunnels. Suddenly, Ginni's claws scraped and sparked, and he pulled free a clump of ground to reveal a massive stone.

He clacked it again with his claws, and it rang hollow.

Dari's ears twitched. "Wait... did you hear that?"

"Treasure—" Ginni's eyes grew wide. He dove at the hollow rock, dirt flying around him.

"Ginni, wait!" Dari shielded her eyes, "Be careful—"

But it was too late. The stone cracked and fell, their tunnel yawned and the ground roared. Both twins were swallowed screaming into the dark.

Ginni woke with a groan, Dari sprawled heavy across his back. His head ached, his mouth was full of dirt, and his ears still hummed with the echo of their fall. He blinked up, and far above, their tunnel glimmered faintly. A blue speck of glowshroom light so distant, they would need to stack twenty of themselves to reach it.

He shifted beneath his sister's weight and nudged her gently. "Hey... you okay, Dari?"

There was only silence. A chill shot up his spine. Ginni's heart pounded as he gingerly shouldered her off. He fumbled in the dark for her pack. His claws brushed the rootweave bag, and he yanked it open, searching with shaking hands. At last he found a glowshroom and he shook it until it coughed pale light. It flickered just enough for him to see.

Dari's face swam into view. A dark wet stain matted her fur at the crown of her head.

"Dari!" his voice cracked, breaking. He eased her down onto the stone and lept to her pack—spilling it open. His claws snagged on a tunic. He placed the glowshroom by her head, tearing the tunic to shreds with his teeth. He

bound her head clumsily, blood seeping through his paws.

“Don’t die,” he whispered, knotting the cloth tight. Tears streamed from his eyes “Don’t—.” he choked.

When he was done, he laid her on her emptied pack, the glowshroom light painted her pale. Her breaths were ragged, but steady for now.

“Dari,” he sobbed, touching her face gently. “Please don’t—”

She groaned, “Be quiet,” she croaked. “And stop poking me, idiot.”

Ginni was engulfed in tears, throwing himself on top of her, smothering her in a hug. “I—ugh... I thought you were—”

Dari pushed weakly against him, her breath thin. “I think I’m okay,” She lifted a trembling hand to her head. Her eyes widened when she felt the bloody bandages. “Oh—” she groaned. Then her face turned white, and she sagged against his arms.

Alarmed, he laid her back down, “Just rest for now, Dari.” he whispered.

She smiled weakly. "Ok, but only for a bit," she shot him a sharp glance. "But promise you won't leave me here."

He nodded, giving her a warm smile. "I promise."

Dari nodded back then closed her eyes, and soon enough, she began to snore politely.

Beneath his smile Ginni was terrified. What would I do if Dari died? The thought made his chest clench, I would be all alone.

The faint blue light made the shadows darken on her face, she looked a lot more gaunt than Ginni remembered. Her breathing was shallow and strained — but at least the bleeding had finally slowed... right? Ginni sat beside her, claws still sticky with her blood. He trembled as he listened to the silence of the deep. It pressed in on the twin furred figures, vast and suffocating. He shut his eyes tight. We need help. He whimpered.

The quiet broke with a whisper of sound. At first, he thought it was his own breath, but when he strained his ears, he heard a thin, silvery murmur drift through the dark. It was the sound of a stream, not far off, trickling through the stone.

He stood, raising the glowshroom above his head, squinting past the shadows. What he had thought was just the wall of a cavern, turned out to be something much stranger.

It loomed out of the dark. A figure as tall as a barn, caught mid-step, with six sprawling limbs outstretched as though to fend off some terrible blow— Ginni was terror struck.

Its face was twisted in pain, with wide eyes and a mouth hung half-open. And its skin was no skin, no fur, no scale— it was a strange black sheen, made of something between stone and metal.

The pale light faltered weakly at the strange statue's surface. Ginni circled it, studying it with a horrified curiosity. He marveled over the intense and vivid details of its make.

The muscles and veins of its form were perfect in its recreation, as if they still pulsed with

living blood. The sculpted overcape that was draped over its many limbed shoulders, fluttered and tore with incredible animated reality. Its final stance, tragic and humiliating.

But most striking of all, was the lines of terror that had been carved into its face. The little creases and folds contorted as if they saw what true horror awaited just beyond the veil of death. Its sad screaming eyes filled Ginni with fear, and he had to look away.

A few feet behind the statue was an arch made of carved rock, leading him deeper into the darkness it framed. He shuffled toward it. The arch was unlike any he had seen before.

Unlike the cobbled mess of stone structures built within Oredan village, this one was polished smooth, made with some jet black ore, almost similar to the material of the statue. Beyond it, a long passage stretched into shadow. Along its walls were carved a precise pattern in which no claw could ever match.

The light barely clung to the edges of the walls, swallowed quickly by the dark. He sniffed the air, and it reeked of old fires.

When he bent his ear towards the dark passage, he heard the dull scream of a distant wind, and the rushing of water. This must be the way out— but he had to be sure. Ginni hesitated, glancing back toward Dari's slumbering form, her chest rising and falling softly. He swore to return to her. Then he stepped inside.

The passage ended in a cavernous chamber. An underground stream cut across the center, flowing out of a stone maw blocked by iron bars. The water murmured softly along a trench of worked stone. A sturdy stone bridge connected either side.

Looming in the glow beyond, Ginni saw the forge of a giant. It was made for a being several times his size, the massive charred stones sat in desecrated silence, its bellows collapsed, every trace of fire long extinguished. Yet it felt emptied rather than ruined, as though something had stolen the flames.

Opulently designed at the room's center was a massive anvil. Stumbling over himself, Ginni crossed the stone bridge and scrabbled up to the ornate slab. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. Standing before it, he felt the weight

of something immensely powerful pressing upon him. And there, hanging just over the edge of the anvil, was a pair of gleaming gauntlets. It was more beautiful than anything Ginnian had ever seen.

They shimmered strangely, sometimes silver, sometimes gold, or by something else entirely. It was as if the metal could not decide what it was.

Ginni's breath hitched. Treasure... but no treasure has ever looked like this— He glanced around nervously, as though the master of this ancient forge might lunge from the shadows at any moment.

“There you are!”

Ginni yelped, whirling around— But he saw only Dari, staggering toward him, fists clenched.

“Dari?” Relief rushed through him.

“I thought you left me! I was gonna beat you so bad!”

He threw his arms around her, crushing her tight. She pushed him off with a groan. “I’m fine,” she muttered, though her bloodied bandages said otherwise. Her eyes widened at the giant forge, and she too was struck by awe. “What is this place?”

"I dunno. But it's old. Probably older than Oredan village." Ginni guessed.

"Older than Oredan?" She scoffed. "That's impossible." Her eyes searched the room. "Maybe it's just... part of an older tunnel."

He shook his head. "I don't think so. I've never seen these types of stones in the village before," he pointed toward the black archways.

Dari's gaze landed on the anvil, and her ears flattened. "And what about... that?" she pointed.

Ginni followed her gesture. The gauntlets shimmered faintly, metal shifting like liquid into different forms of itself. He swallowed. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Maybe the chief will know," Dari said, sidling past him. "Help lift me up and I'll grab 'em."

He nodded, running over and kneeling on the ground. Dari clambered up on his shoulders, and Ginni slowly stood.

That was when they heard it. From the black mouth of the aqueduct, where the river came rushing in, was a low moan, eerie and hollow. At first Ginni thought it was the water, but then a

chill slithered past him, prickling every hair on his skin. A draft. Fast moving air. They both froze.

“Dari...” His teeth clicked as he shivered.  
“Did you feel that?”

She nodded, ears twitching as the current tugged at her fur. “There shouldn’t be wind down here... not like that.”

Another sigh rolled from the tunnel, carrying the bite of ash and rot. The water whispered faster, churning as if it too wanted to flee from the darkness.

Without another thought, Dari swiped the shifting gauntlets off the table. They shimmered at her touch, plates of metal folding in until they shrank neatly into her hands.

“What the—” Dari murmured, cocking her head. “They just became small.”

Her brother grunted beneath her weight, arms straining. “Hurry Dari! You’re heavy!”

She shot him a look, stuffing the gauntlets into her pack. “Heyyy, don’t blame me if you’ve got twigs for arms!”

He set her down, huffing, looking around at the stone around them. "I don't think we can dig through any of this. It's all that same shiny rock" He tapped his claws on the oily black floors.

Dari looked back at the way they had come. "There's no way we're going back the way we came either, our tunnel is too high, and I really don't want to climb up that creepy statue." She crossed her arms and shuddered.

Ginni nodded in agreement, "Nooo thank you." He scanned the room. "How about this trench?" Ginni pointed. "If there's water and wind moving down here, maybe it leads somewhere out."

Together they edged toward the trench, listening to the woosh of unseen currents threading through the black. The aqueduct water foamed white where it struck the stone and then funneled into a low, narrow channel. Ginni eased down into the trench and crouched, peering into it. The current slid away into darkness, the walls pressed tight so that only one of them could crawl through at a time. The ceiling was low, but not too low that they did not have a gap to breathe above the flowing current.

Dari's ears flattened. "We have to crawl through the water?" She squeaked, "What if we drown?"

"It's the only way forward," Ginni said, though his voice quavered. "I'll go first."

"Fine," Dari muttered, clutching the glowshroom, "But don't you dare leave me again."

He nodded and smiled at her, "This time, I really won't." Then he fell to his hands and knees.

The slice of the current was freezing, a sharp sting that made him numb. The flow was insistent, urging him down the channel. He took a gulp of air and sidled inside. Stone scraped his ribs, and the draft roared like a beast's breath. The space was so tight he could barely move his elbows, scraping his shoulders with every shove. Behind him, Dari crawled in, her glowshroom bobbing in the tight dark.

For what felt like forever, there was nothing but the choke of wet stone, and the pull of water. Then a pinprick of light appeared in front of them.

“Ginni!” Dari peered through his legs, her voice carrying a tremble of hope. “Do you see it?”

“Y-Yeah I do!” The pinprick of light grew with every shove of his claws. Ginni dragged himself forward, water surging against his chest, his breath became ragged in the tight air. Behind him, Dari grunted, the glowshroom’s light flickering against the slick ceiling.

“Almost there...” he rasped.

The tunnel spilled out, and Ginni tumbled into the open space, coughing as the water rushed past him. He surged off a lip and into a pool gathering in a wide stone bowl.

He staggered up the lip, chest heaving, and Dari clambered out behind him. Together they took hold of their surroundings. The tunnel continued on the far side across the pool. A shaft of pale light poured down from above. The bright shaft rose high into the dark, stone lined with moss and the flickers of the water’s refractions. And from the top, dangled a rope.

“It’s a well,” Dari smirked, tucking away the glowshroom. “See, I knew that place was a part of the old tunnels.” A bucket swayed gently where

the water collected in the deep pool, bobbing as though it had been waiting for them all this time.

Ginni laughed— a wild, breathless sound.  
“We made it.”

Dari’s paw smacked his shoulder. “Not yet. Let’s get out of here before we fall into another cave.” They clambered into the bucket together, claws wrapped tight around the rope. Hand over hand, claw over claw, they climbed, the stone walls damp and cool against their backs.

Their muscles burned, their paws began to shake, and at last, with a final heave, they hauled themselves over the ledge and collapsed onto cobblestones. They were in the middle of the village. The familiar square where they had played as kits. The same well where every family came to draw water.

Ginni lay flat on his back, chest heaving, staring up at the lanterns swinging overhead. Dari sat beside him, soaked and shivering, her fur still stained with blood. They met each-others eyes. No one would ever believe what they had seen below.

The twins jogged into the square, dripping from head to toe. A crowd of tunnelfolk had already gathered around Chief Bardek. His voice rose over the crowd's clamor, hard and tired.

"Quiet down! I hear it same as you—the stone's been shaking all day. I know it's bad, but panicking won't hold the ceiling up. This canopy's stood for thousands of cycles. It'll hold again—if we keep it braced, if we work together. That's what keeps Oredan alive."

But the crowd didn't quiet. A miner shouted back, "The quakes are getting worse, Bardek!"

Another woman cried, "The canopy's gonna bury us all!" Angry voices swelled, mutters turning into curses, searching for a place to direct their fear.

Bardek's jaw worked as he planted his hands on his hips. His eyes flicked up at the vaulted canopy, then back to the crowd. His voice cracked sharp. "I said enough! We'll fix what needs fixin', just like always—"

That was when Dari barreled into him. She stumbled back, blinking up at him.

"Watch it!" Bardek barked.

“Chief Bardek!” Ginni gasped, rushing to steady her. “We were just looking for you!” Dari swung her pack forward, her grin flashing despite the tense square.

“And we got treasure!” She tugged free the shimmering gauntlets and held them high. The plates shifted faintly, gleaming in the lantern-light. “Look what we found!”

The crowd froze. A wave of whispers hissed out like escaping steam. Heads craned. Mothers yanked their children back. A miner spat chalk dust and muttered, cursed tools...

Bardek’s face drained. He stared at the gauntlets as though they might sprout fangs. His gaze shot upward to the ceiling just as another faint rumble shuddered through the square. The crowd groaned and pressed tighter.

“Where’d you get those?” His voice was cold and strung with stress.

“We—we were lost in the lower tunnels,” Dari stammered. “We fell into a cavern, crawled out of a well—”

“Lost?” Bardek snapped, his fear breaking through. “You two, always draggin’ shiny junk

out of holes— you think this is treasure?!” He pointed at the gauntlets, his voice rising. “This is a curse! You dragged the quakes down on all our heads!”

The murmurs turned into shouts. “Orphan brats!” someone barked. “They’ve doomed us!” Bardek strode forward, snatching the gauntlets from Dari’s hands. They twitched in his grip, and he held them out like hot iron, his knuckles white.

“You don’t understand what you’ve done!” His words were hoarse now, almost frantic. “The stone’s been rumbling all day— and now I see why! These aren’t tools. They’re demon trash! They’ll bring the roof down on every last one of us!”

The crowd hissed louder, voices rising like a nest of snakes. Fingers pointed at the twins, some trembling, some curled into fists. Mothers dragged their children back as though the pair carried plague.

A miner shouted, “They’ve cursed us all!” Another spat, chalk dust spraying as he swore, “Bury those things before the roof buries us!” An old woman wailed a prayer to the canopy. A boy hurled a pebble that clattered at Ginni’s feet.

Dari's grin had vanished. "We— we didn't mean to."

Ginni stepped in front of her, voice breaking. "We just wanted to bring something useful—"

"Useful?" Bardek barked, he squared his shoulders and anger flashed across his face. "You put all of Oredan at risk. And you think you'll eat tonight? No. No rations for either of you. Let your empty bellies teach you."

"That's not fair—" Ginni blurted.

"Enough!" Bardek bellowed. His shout cracked like stonefall, echoing up into the canopy. The gauntlets twitched in his grip, a faint glow crawling down the plates like veins of fire. The crowd recoiled with a hiss.

The twins hung their heads and shoved into the press of bodies, eyes following them like knives. Bardek stood rigid at the center, hands shaking around the gauntlets, his weary face tight with strain.

To the twins, the tremors shuddering through village streets were somehow less harrowing than the rumble in their stomachs. They had not eaten in six days, and now, as the numbness of adventure died in their hearts, sharp pangs roared back to life in their empty bellies.

When they had washed in the hot spring two days ago, Ginni had counted twenty three rib bones— but now he was sure it'd be twenty six. He sighed and looked over at Dari.

She was much worse for wear. The bandages on her head had loosened and swelled in the water tunnel, and dripped all over her. A dirty concoction of dried blood and mud still clung to her coat. And most miserable of all, her eyes were nearly full to bursting. Guilt pounded in her chest, but she would not cry— not in front of her brother.

Ginni saw through her, knowing well the tendency she had to weigh all blame on herself. His eyebrows knit and he tried to give her warmest smile he could manage.

"Don't worry Dari," He said weakly, "Maybe the mender will have something for us to eat!"

Unwilling to forgo her still tremulous emotions, she nodded solemnly, and plodded past her brother on the path to the upper caverns.

The home of the mender was built around a cliff at the edge of Oredan Village. The only way to reach it, was by a row of scraggled stones that, whenever stepped on, little flecks of pebble would fall. The steps jutted out in varying crooked directions, worn by centuries of paw and claw. The home itself was a humble amalgamation of root and stone, protruding from a smoothed cavern wall.

It watched over the village calmly, and the soft sprinkle of lights far below in the bed of the cavern, was the closest the world of Dargoul had to resemble stars. There was smoke billowing from its rusted chimney, carrying the smell of a delicious simmering supper. The twins' noses twitched as they walked up to a charming round door, and knocked.

There was a quick shuffling and the clink of glass, then the bulky thunder of approaching footsteps. The twins glanced at each other, had the mender's steps always been so heavy? But they had no time to think twice.

The round door clunked open, a warm glow spilling across the cold underdark floors. First, they saw a black claw emerge from behind the door, shadowy fingers wrapping around the wood. Then the long hairy snout of a beast emerged, its neck craning, Its eyes bearing down. They were deep bloody red, a chilling muddy blackness within its gaze paralyzed them. Dari gasped and went white, Ginni squeaked and took a trembling step in front of her. Its bleeding eyes regarded them, and black ebony daggers of teeth ground together, as it spoke.

"What's got you two looking so grim?" the beast asked with an impossibly civil tone.

Ginni tried to sputter a reply, but all he could manage was, "M- M- Men—"

The beast smashed the door open and emerged fully. "Did you say Men?" He was massively tall, and as he spilled out, the supports of the home seemed to bend beneath his weight. "Where are they?" He roared with a terrible savage rage. But immediately, a flash of pain shot through him, and he fell to a knee with a grunt, clutching his bandaged core.

Still, towering and lean as he was, bared fangs and the sudden spout of rage made for a terrible scare to the twins. They yelped, scrabbling along the floor, and backing against the cliff's edge.

"Mender!" Dari squeaked, peering over her brother's shoulder. "We need the mender!"

"And you have found her." A smooth and honeyed voice called from the steps. In her arms, the lovely mender of Oredan, bundled a pair of bioluminescent bread rolls made from glowgrain. She had pulled an expensive silk hood over herself, and when she flung it back, silvery hair fell like a sheet around her shoulders. Bright yellow eyes were sharp against her pale scales. She flicked a forked tongue at them "Hello, little Bandalss, please excuse my guest's nasty manners, he's unused to company."

The beast, still doubled over, looked up at her with a pained smile, "You know these pups, Elriss?"

With a nod and a sigh she turned to them, "I see these troublesome Bandalss more often than I should." A sweet smile flicked across her face. "Though I don't mind it."

Her sharp eyes snapped to the beast, suddenly full of annoyance. “I’m more concerned about you, Kamion, shouldn’t you be in bed?”

He smirked, and the flash of his dagger teeth made the twins twitch. “I would be, but it is impolite for a man to sleep without his wife’s dinner.”

Elriss’ gasped and her pale scales flushed pink, her mouth turning to a pout, and suddenly she had lost her voice. Ginni narrowed his eyes, arms crossing tight over his chest. He muttered under his breath, with a tinge of jealousy. Who does this raggedy beast think he is? He had no patience for these silly faces and bashful looks. His tail flicked with annoyance. And he liked even less the way Kamion leaned in, smug and sharp-toothed.

Dari, on the other hand, couldn’t look away. Her ears twitched, and she nudged Ginni with her elbow, whispering, “Are they— are they flirting?” Her whiskers trembled, eyes wide with half-scandalized delight. She bit her lip to keep from giggling, but the sparkle in her eyes betrayed her.

Satisfied with Elriss's stunned silence, Kamion nodded toward the smoke of the chimney. "I've already prepared the stew to go with our supper, and now we have guests to share your glowing bread with." He looked down at the twins, the gleam of his sharp teeth looking a bit less threatening.

Elriss snapped out of her bewilderment, "Y-yess, of course little Bandalss. Rest by my fire, and as we prepare our meal I'll see to your wounds." Ginni and Dari's eyes widened, and with a grin and a shared glance, quick as thieves they scrambled around Kamion and into the men-derhome.

The beast gave a warm smile to the scaled lady, and bowed, moving aside to allow her in. Her pale scales beamed a bright red, with a curt nod she hurriedly slithered past him. Kamion watched her politely, lingering before he shut the door.

He gave the canopy above an uneasy look, the wound at his side throbbing beneath its wraps. A cold wind prowled through the tunnels, and every flame within Oredan trembled. Kamion shuddered, whispering a silent prayer, urging the darkness to return another day, he shut the door tight.

## Chapter 3: Heart of Gold

Hauling the cart and coffin from the chasm's gut to the cliff's battered edge had proven much more difficult than Cullun imagined. Half a day was lost to haul the wagon alone. The bulk of it made the lifting awkward.

When at last it sat on the broken road, they took time to take note of what little supplies they had recovered. Two half empty water skins, a bundle of rope, a stack of thick furs, a sack of dried jerky... and Cullun's dirk.

After either hunter had inhaled their sliver of jerky and taken a deep gulp of water, they returned their focus to hauling out the casket. Immediately, the emaciated minosaurs broke out into a roaring revolt. They collapsed onto the floor, exhausted and refusing to rise. With a hiss of smoke and a barked command Gile forced them back into obedience. But even so, their low guttural moans never ceased, echoing miserably as they worked. The coffin had been somehow lighter than the wagon. After they yanked it out, Cullun securely strapped the gold bulk in the bed, and Gile ordered the minosaurs to pull. Cullun

wanted a break from the reigns, but Gile wouldn't allow it. The old hunter claimed that it was Cullun's idea so Cullun had to drive. "Don't think, Just drive." They set out again along the cliff.

Eventually the path wound down into a valley, and a few hours into their journey they came across a stream no wider than Cullun and as deep as his ankle. They allowed the minosaurs to drink, and the beasts laid on their stomach's with their snouts submerged in the stream. They gulped the water greedily, and would have drowned if Gile hadn't forced them to stop.

The hunters refilled their skins of water, and crossed the stream heading northwest. In the shade of the valley, they traveled until the twin suns sank over the mountains. Setting their camp before the night transformed the world into complete and utter darkness, where navigation was incredibly difficult if not impossible. By first light, they were already packed and gnawing on their portion of dried jerky for the day. Soon they left the hills and valley behind, and pockets of lush green and lonely trees began to appear in the flat distance around them.

On the fourth voidnight since they first encountered the coffin, Cullun and Gile shivered beside the meagre flame they had built in the shade of an isolated cracked boulder. The fire whispered low, and beyond its glow, rubies blinked like eyes in the dark. Theirs was the only spark of life in the vast plains, obscured by the suffocating dark of the voidnight. A wind howled through the grass of the plains, and the flame bowed and sputtered.

Cullun shifted closer to shield it, and beyond the fire, the faint glimmer of the gold coffin caught his eye again.

It loomed above the snoring bodies of the misnosaurs. A golden sheen that glowed brighter even than the twin suns, and for the hundredth time he imagined it— riches, alehouses, laughter, a home that didn't echo with someone else's misery.

"Think of it, Gile," he said, eyes lingering on the rubies. "When we sell it off, we'll live well. No more breaking backs for piss-stained coppers, no more stinking slave-pits or bloodstained shackles. We'll have our own place, our own hearth. I'll even get us a cook, a proper one! You can teach em' how you burn rats." He grinned, waiting for Gile's bark of a laugh. But it didn't come.

Gile sat at the very edge of the firelight with a half lidded glaze in his eyes, black smoke curling up his teeth. He was smiling, but not at Cullun, not at the fire either. His strange thin grin was for the casket, his sunken eyes set hard. His lips were moving, muttering words too faint to catch. Cullun frowned. “Are you listenin, Gile?”

He twitched and looked up as though he had finally woken from a nightmare. In the few days they had spent with the coffin, the harsh wrinkles of his face had grown deeper. His skin turned an unhealthy sallow, and his unnerving eyes— bloodshot hollows.

“Place? Hearth?” He rasped. “There ain’t no hearth for men like us. Only fire, shackles, and an unmarked grave.”

Cullun stiffened. “That ain’t true. We just ain’t had the right chance yet. And this—” he pointed toward the casket, “—this could be that chance.”

Gile pulled a hand over his face, as if to hide an expression. From between his fingers black rectangular pupils fixed on Cullun. His voice dropped, oddly fragile, “What if I don’t want a chance?” Silence fell. The fire popped.

Cullun blinked in confusion and laughed nervously. This sudden vulnerability was wholly unnatural to him. The old hunter had never allowed himself to reveal any sort of weakness before— but now...

“You don’t want a chance for riches? For freedom? What are you sayin, Gile, that’s all you ever preached to me—”

“Maybe I was wrong.” Gile’s words turned darker, muttered like a curse. He leaned forward, breath black with smoke. “Maybe I damned us both. And maybe that box ain’t a prize. Maybe it’s just a trap to keep me what I am. And to turn you into me.”

Cullun stared at him, an unsettled feeling rose in his chest. What did Gile mean by that? He wanted to push further, but the look in the old hunter’s eye— half-crazed and unblinking, froze him. So he sat back, swallowing his words, telling himself that the old bastard was just too tired, too sober. But in his chest, he knew something strange had taken root within Gile.

“The Spine is only a day’s ride now,” Cullun muttered through a forced yawn, trying to change the subject. “Powers-willin’, no more

trouble'll find us." He stretched out in his sleeping furs, his body exhausted by aches.

His gaze fell on the minosaurs, laid out in a worn heap just beyond the flame's reach, their snoring like the roar of an earthquake. It was good that they kept them so weak, it made them much easier to control. He couldn't trust them if they were strong. Never again. Not after what he had seen them do to the rest of the hunters at the camp. He stared at their monstrous bodies, rising and falling, their giant razor claws shimmering in the fire— and the screams of the dying men echoed in his mind. Fucking monsters. He shuddered. Cullun had wanted to kill them after they had first escaped the hunter camp massacre, but Gile wouldn't allow it.

"These are the only agathions we got left." Gile had told him. "I ain't lettin' you kill em. Not while they still might be worth somethin."

Cullun grit his teeth. Gile was a fool. What happened once will happen again. No matter how many clouds of black smoke the old hunter filled the beast's heads with, eventually the minosaurs would return to their savage natures. And when that happened, he wasn't going to let Gile stop

him. Next time, Cullun would be ready. His hand settled on the soft leather pommel of his dirk. He yawned, and somewhere within his wandering thoughts of hatred for the beasts, he fell asleep.

Gile laid awake sleepless, staring into the black sprawl beyond the fire, as he had done every night since their fateful encounter with ornate death. His eyes swept across the nightlands, and a tireless gaze locked on the cursed cargo resting in their profaned wagon.

The hulking monument glowered in the gloom like a gilded mountain, crushing the firelight beneath its mass. Flickering shadows crept hungrily along its sides, rattling the chains of the thing confined in its golden bowels. Whatever it was that slumbered within this holy artifact thrummed with some ancient sanctified curse, Gile knew it. The silent tomb beckoned to him, summoning its damned victim forth. The minosaurs trembled in their sleep, as if they too heard this call. Gile shuddered and turned away from it, trying to smother the sound in his furs. Still, it sang for him. He clamped his arms over his ears, begging it to stop— until suddenly, everything went still and silent, all at once.

The gentle sound of a sweet lullaby began to fill the icy night air. A deep mournful melody that urged him into peaceful rest. Another voice rose beside the other, joining its sibling in somber unity. Exhaustion was heavy on his mind, and eventually, though he tried to resist, he fell into a deep enchanted slumber.

In the darkness of his dreams, Gile heard only whispers, ones a weary mind might manufacture in silence. At first there were only murmurs. Then a groan drawn out too long. He rolled in his furs in an attempt to ignore them. But the sound sharpened, and began to thunder in his ears like the echo of his own heartbeat. Gile winced, as the two singing voices that had lulled him to sleep soured. The lullaby warped and groaned like the grind of bones. Now, they sang without rhythm, discordant in their unnatural harmony. He felt the land begin to tremble beneath him. Somethin' ain't right! The weight of fear grew in his chest.

His eyes snapped open. The fire had long burnt away into embers, but somehow still, a soft light glowed around their camp. He quickly

scanned his surroundings, searching for the sourc of the subtle glow. But Gile had already known what it was long before he had ever laid his eyes on it.

Beyond the dead fire, gold and rubies lit the silhouettes of two hulking shadows. The Mino-saurs towered over it, looped horns quaking, their throats tearing with a scream that rattled the lid of the casket.

Gile leapt from his furs screaming, “Get back, you deaf bastards!” he barked, black smoke curling from his yellowed teeth. The beasts wailed on, deaf to his command. With burning eyes, Gile sent his smoke into them but they did not bend. “I— I said down!” The words faltered, swallowed by their howling, that had turned to resemble sounds of agony.

Cullun appeared at Gile’s side, still half dazed, but quickly waking up. “What the hell is happening?” he roared.

“It’s the Minosaurs! The casket is controlling them! They— They ain’t listenin’ to my breath!” Gile replied shakily.

“What the hell?” Cullun staggered forward, fingers twitching. “Quit it you fuckin’ monsters!” he yowled, flinging his chains into the dark. Links uncoiled like serpents, hissing through the air. But they did not heed his command.

Instead of lashing, the chains writhed and slithered along the ground, crawling up the Mi-nosaurs’ hides as though tasting them. One loop curled upward and froze, snapping about like serpents. Cullun’s jaw clenched. His chains had never betrayed him before.

“My magick ain’t workin either— how is this possible?” he shouted confused.

“It’s the coffin!” Gile cried, “Look!” It bucked and reared against its constraints. As if the thing inside had woken up, and was attempting to break free.

Gile was beside himself with terror. “No— We gotta stop it! They’re wakin’ it up!! We gotta stop it!”

Cullun grit his teeth and pulled the dirk from his belt. He flipped the blade in his hand and lurched forward.

"Finally, I can give them what these monsters deserve." His dirk whistled as he ran up the side of the cracked boulder. He leapt through the air, landing on top of one of the minosaurs. He roared as he plunged the dirk into its soft scales. The minosaur snapped out of it's trance, roaring as a spout of yellow blood burst from its neck. The wounded minosaur fumbled back, attempting to either fling Cullun off or grab onto him. He held on, as it stumbled into the darkness.

Gile watched as they disappeared, before turning his attention to the remaining minosaur who continued its scream. There was a pounding on the lid of the coffin, and the sound of metal collapsing. His heart pumped liquid fear throughout his body, but Gile knew that he could not let whatever it was inside escape. His body moved on its own, scaling the screaming minosaur until he reached its horns. The black loop on its skull was shaking violently. His hands latched around them. Gile's eyes rolled to the back of his head, and he began to convulse and froth at the mouth. Suddenly his own voice joined the screeching cacophony.

"Gile!" Cullun shouted, bursting out from the veil of darkness, "Hold on!"

Cullun forced his chains alive, straining, fighting against whatever antimagick was present. His chains swayed, but still they would not listen. With a roar of frustration, Cullun called upon every last source of magick he held within him, and forced them to obey. The light of the chains flared, whirling around the Minosaur's legs. Cullun was breathing heavy, and the effort of keeping his chains under control set every nerve in his body alight with searing fiery pain. He screamed through it, yanking the chains with his entire gathered strength. Gile and the minosaur tumbled over, smashing into the ground with a sickening crunch.

Cullun fell to his knees, pale and gasping for air, his chains evaporating instantly. Everything returned to void's stillness. Beside the light of the flickering fire, Cullun raised a trembling hand to his face, and gasped. The tips of four fingers on his right limb, from index to pinkie, had turned into dusky purple stalks. The nubs of flesh were cracked and shriveled like burnt wood. His breath caught in his chest, and a single word sprang into his mind — Necrosis...

His head swam and his body felt suddenly frail, as if it had reached beyond the limit in which it was capable, and was now rapidly adjusting to the effects of such strain.

Necrosis... Cullun's mind echoed. He had pushed too far, asked for too much at once— and now his body had paid the price. His breathing quickened, and his vision turned watery. But before any release came, He grit his teeth and clenched his black fingers tight in his fist.

This was no time to allow himself to be weak. Now, he had to focus on saving Gile. He stood, and limped over to the Minosaur's unmoving body. As he came around, he saw the extent to which Gile had been broken. The minosaur had fallen on top of the old hunter, and though it had not killed him, Cullun could see one of Gile's feet splayed out in a crooked angle, sticking out from beneath the beast. Cullun squatted down and took a firm hold of Gile, yanking the man free.

Cullun grimaced. Gile's legs had been mangled. His back had been snapped at the very base of his spine, bending him into an 'L' shape. His flattened legs were fractured into a dozen different directions.

“By the powers...” Cullun murmured, overwhelmed by what he saw. “Gile...”

“I heard it—” Gile gasped suddenly. Cullun’s gaze flicked to his face. His sunken eyes burned with fear. His gaze was fixed on the coffin.

“What— what are you talking about?” Cullun asked.

“The corpse! I heard the corpse!”

“No— that’s not—”

“It was talkin! It was talkin I swear!”

“The dead don’t talk, Gile.”

“No!” Gile roared “The minosaurs were talking to it! We gotta leave it here! Bury it in the desert! Leave it behind and never think about it again!” He lurched forward gripping Cullun by the front of his shirt, bringing his face close. Cullun could smell the rot that had overtaken his insides.

“Please son, you have to trust me!” Gile wailed. “We have to get rid of it!”

Cullun stared at the golden casket. Its silver rubies glared back at him. The ropes had been loosened and the lid was slightly cracked ajar.

Cullun stood and walked over to it, peering into the darkness.

A single golden eye stared up back at him. A chill ran up his spine. Was it awake? Cullun glared, but the beauty of such gold was empty— devoid of any sign of life. And still, Cullun found himself entranced. They could be rich... Bloddskall was just over the horizon. If they could just hold on to it for one more day, every problem he ever had would be solved. A dark selfishness overcame his doubts.

"No. We don't." Cullun told Gile. "This might be our only ticket out of this life. I'm not going to give that up."

"What the hell are you sayin, you stupid boy?" Gile hissed, "Have you lost your mind to greed?"

He shook Cullun's collar, "That thing is cursed! Look at what it's done to us!"

Cullun took Gile by the wrists and wrenched his hands free. He let the old hunter fall to the ground. "We can fix this. All we need to do is reach Bloddskall. Then after we sell it, we can hire you a healer."

“What fuckin healer is fixin’ this?” Gile shouted, gesturing to himself. “It ain’t done with us. It’ll just keep doing this again until it’s escaped and killed us! Listen to me you stupid boy!”

“Don’t call me boy. And, I’m done listening to you. If you had let me kill these minosaurs in the first place this all wouldn’t have happened. Now, it’s up to me to save us.”

“You ain’t gonna save nothin boy!” Gile coughed angrily, but instead of black smoke, a spurt of orange blood splattered on Cullun’s tunic. Shocked, Gile’s eyes went wide.

“I— I can’t use my—” But before he could finish, Cullun’s fist smashed into his nose.

“You tried to smoke me?” He shouted between thunderous strikes. “After everything I did for you, after all we’ve been through— and you still treat me like I’m a little slave pup?”

Gile could not answer, and he could not defend. Cullun’s barrage continued far after he was satisfied. All the rage that he had built up over the years of Gile’s torment exploded outward. A swollen eye for stealing me from my parents, a shattered nose for selling me off to Softfinger,

pulverized teeth for every back you forced me to break, a broken jaw for—”

The pain of every single scar Gile had ever caused upon Cullun, burned as though they were fresh. He beat him until all that remained was crumpled, bloody meat— lying still in the dirt.

Gile's face had been turned to pulp. Both eyes swelled purple and shut, his features beaten anew. His breathing was shallow, and when he spoke, his swollen lips trembled. “We're damned—” He coughed up more orange blood. “I— damned us...” His battered eyes traveled to the casket. “Promised us to the devil.”