

STEPHEN L. NOWLAND
**NATURE ABHORS
A VACUUM**



BOOK ONE OF THE AIELUND SAGA

Nature Abhors a Vacuum

The Aielund Saga - Book One

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After completing book 3, the author returned to heavily revise this story. This is the result of those efforts.

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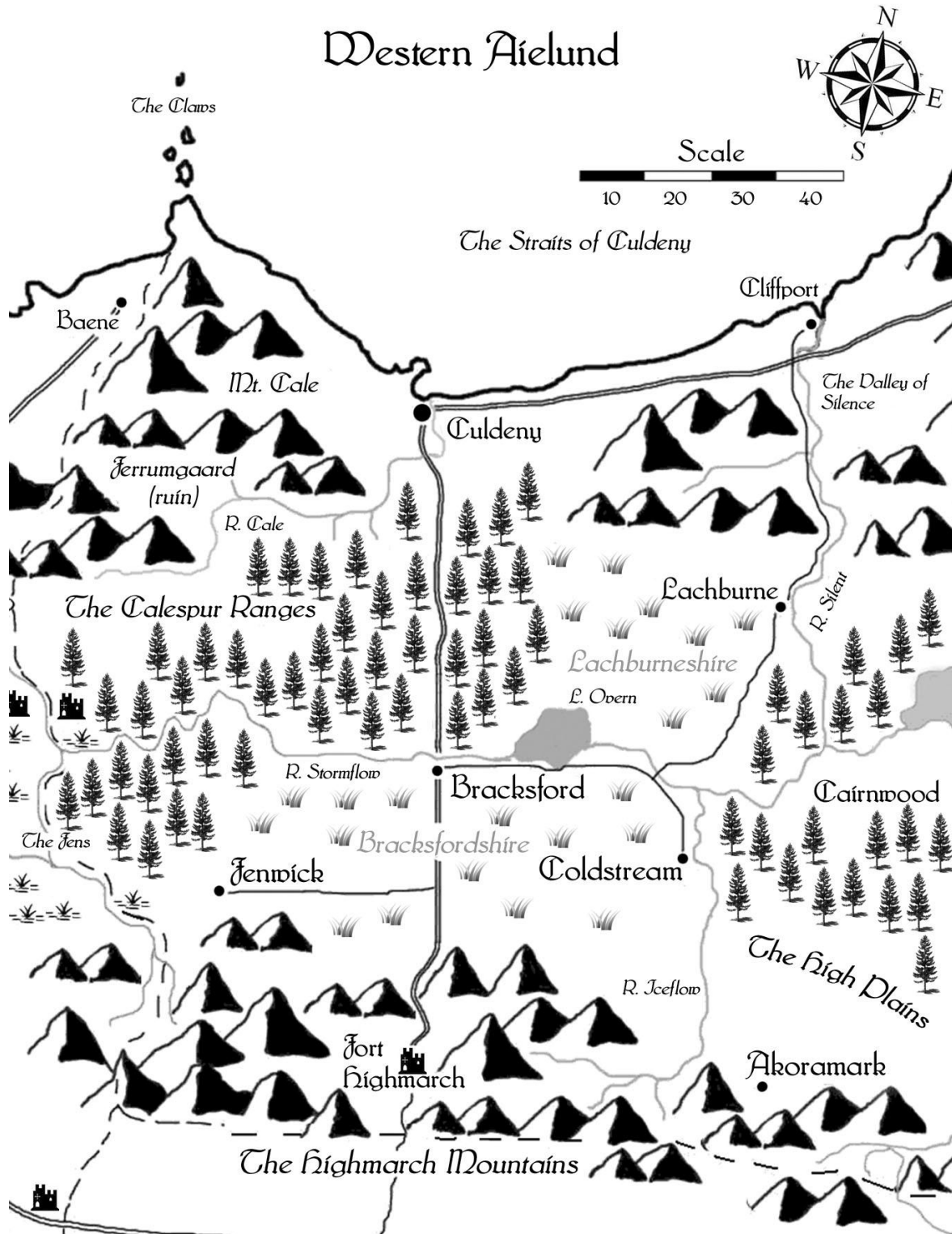
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Prologue

The chill winds of late autumn rushed past Aiden's ears as he ran but he paid them little heed, for as fast as he was running, he needed to go *faster*. His dark, shoulder length hair streamed behind him as he sprinted through long, knee-high grass, his blue eyes focused on the distant treeline with singular purpose.

He felt his strength flagging, but spurred himself on for one last burst of speed before he crashed through the undergrowth and staggered to a halt, gasping for breath. Turning to look behind him, Aiden grinned breathlessly at his pursuer, who had apparently been unable to keep up with his breakneck speed.

"You owe me a copper jack, Pace!" the young man called out between breaths. "I told you turning thirteen makes all the difference!"

His friend, Pacian, merely waved dismissively at him as he staggered to a halt, probably not wanting to waste his breath by yelling across the twenty yards that remained between them. It had been Pacian's idea to ditch their chores in favour of something more entertaining, for Aiden had turned thirteen this very day. Although not overly fond of work, he didn't feel that running out on his family was an entirely honourable endeavour, but his friend had been very persuasive.

Before long, they found themselves leaving the village of Coldstream, their home for most of their lives, in the distance behind them. A few months younger than Aiden, the two boys had been friends since they were young, a source of some concern to his parents, as Pacian had a knack of getting into trouble and generally liked Aiden to be there when it happened.

"I let you win, since it's your birthday," Pacian shrugged, taking the time to tidy up his short blond hair and absently brush non-existent dirt from his tunic. "If it was any other day, I would have beaten the pants off of you."

Aiden laughed scornfully, knowing that Pacian's pride wouldn't permit him to admit defeat, but he decided to play along with this little fiction to spare his feelings. His friend was always good at making up plausible lies when pressed, something Aiden never could manage.

"Anyway, I suppose we should get back now," Aiden suggested. "If we stay away much longer I'm going to be missed, and I don't want to get into trouble today."

"Okay," replied Pace hesitantly, "but I wanted to show you something first." Pacian started walking into the forest, evaporating Aiden's light mood in an instant.

"But that's the Cairnwood," he protested, gazing at the ominously dark shadows in the thick forest with trepidation. "We're not supposed to go in there."

"I don't see anything dangerous about trees, do you?" Pace asked as he looked around innocently.

"Somehow I think there's something in there besides trees that might be dangerous, Pace."

"Such as?" his blond friend prompted. Aiden was at a loss. All his parents had ever told him was that Cairnwood was a dangerous place, and sometimes people who went in there never came out again. But he was never told anything specific, such as if they were eaten by bears or ghosts, or possibly the dreaded Ghost Bear Pacian had once told him about.

"Look, we're only going in a little way," Pacian confided, "and all the times I've been in there I've never seen anything that you could call dangerous."

"How how often have you gone into the forest?" Aiden asked, drawing a shrug from his friend.

"Perhaps a dozen times... I don't really keep count. Hey, you're not scared are you?" Despite knowing better, Aiden was thirteen now, practically a man, and would not stand for being called a coward.

"Of course not; if you say there's nothing to be afraid of, then lead the way."

Pacian beamed, then turned and walked into the forest with Aiden close behind him. The young man suppressed any feelings of trepidation he felt at leaving the sunlight behind, and focused on keeping up with his friend.

For nearly twenty minutes they walked inbetween the thick trunks, their footsteps muffled by the fallen leaves of late autumn that lay in a thick blanket on the soft grass. For a place that was forbidden to them, Cairnwood seemed like a pleasant place indeed, though Aiden couldn't shake the feeling that they weren't supposed to be here.

The wind blew gently through the boughs and the sounds of birds could be heard in the distance, all contributing to a sense of peace. Aiden was about to ask how much further they had to go when he suddenly felt the sensation of floating in the air, quickly followed by an explosion of pain on his chin that stunned him.

The next few moments were a blur as he tumbled and crashed downwards, before finally coming to a stop on a hard, rocky surface. Bewildered and smarting from half a dozen scrapes and bruises, Aiden struggled to clear his head, trying to figure out what had just happened. The daylight had disappeared completely, except for a small shaft that came from above to pierce the darkness around him; clearly he had fallen down a hole of some sort.

"Aiden! Aiden are you okay?" Pacian called from above. Slowly, Aiden lifted himself onto his shaky legs, relieved to find that he hadn't broken any bones in his fall.

"Yeah... I think so," he called up to his friend with a tremor in his voice. Aiden judged it to be around twenty feet straight up, and he felt lucky to be alive at all. Tentatively, he touched the walls but met nothing but loose dirt and rocks for hand holds on the wall. "I don't think I can climb back out Pace. Go and get help!"

"Are you sure?" Pacian answered hesitantly.

"Yes! Go get help!"

"How about I go and get some rope?" his blond friend hedged. Aiden found this apparent reluctance baffling, until it dawned on him that they had ditched their chores and entered Cairnwood without permission, and Pacian was responsible. Knowing his unreliable friend, he wasn't about to own up to any wrongdoing unless Aiden was in *real* danger. Apparently falling into a deep hole and injuring himself didn't qualify.

"Okay go and get some rope, but hurry back!" Aiden relented.

Pacian sprung into action. "I'll be back before you know it. Wait here!"

Aiden groaned inwardly at the poor attempt at humour, but at least help was on the way. Aside from the light streaming in from above, there was only blackness before him. Stretching out his arm, he encountered nothing solid, so apparently what he had thought was a hole had in fact turned out to be some sort of cave. He slowly crouched down, too scared to leave the shaft of light and trying not to think of the horrible things that could be lurking out there in the darkness.

His aches and pains gradually subsiding, he sat there shivering for nearly half an hour, shaking from the cold and the fear. The sun was well past its peak now, the angle of the light becoming sharper by the moment, and fading as it went. Aiden fought rising panic as each second of waiting seemed to last forever.

In the deepening gloom before him, he thought he saw something shining in the dark with a soft blue radiance. Curiosity getting the better of him, he crept forward to try and find the source of the faint glow.

Figuring the light to be from some sort of glowing fungus that his Mother had once shown him, he crawled towards it, judging the curious light to be only a few yards away. Loose dirt and small rocks on the ground poked at him as he blindly felt his way forward, but after brushing some of it aside he felt a smooth, solid surface underneath, almost as if it were made of metal.

Avoiding the worst of the sharp rocks, Aiden reached the source of the dim blue light. It was coming from the floor before him, and seemed to be no larger than his fist. It appeared to be emanating from something metallic, but it was hard to tell in the darkness. He reached out and grasped the object, which was round, cold and hard, not unlike many of the other rocks that were scattered around the cave. Picking it up on one hand, he swept away some dust from the object to get a better look at it. But the instant all ten of his fingers closed upon it, his world changed.

The darkness of the cave was replaced with the near-blinding light of midday, dazing Aiden as he squinted against the sudden brightness. Gaping in astonishment, the young man found himself crouched upon a snowy plateau with majestic peaks looming around him. The beauty of the scene was lost to him, however, for across the snow-covered field before him was a scene from his worst nightmares.

He stood amidst a great battle, surrounded by armoured men wearing the gold dragon tabard of the Kingdom clashing against hooded and robed warriors, with signs of steel armour hidden underneath their garb. The fallen from both sides of the battle littered the landscape, and the ringing of steel and the cries of the combatants were deafening.

Aiden's mind struggled to comprehend what had happened to him when one of the Kingdom soldiers suddenly ran right through him, appearing out of his chest as though he were a ghost. Gasping with surprise, Aiden looked down at his body, wondering if he had perhaps died and become a ghost when he noticed that the ground immediately underneath him was quite clearly that of the cave he had been in moments before.

The black-robed assailants, as if hearing some sort of order, disengaged from the fight and pulled back down the road to Aiden's left. They quickly disappeared below the horizon, prompting some of the defenders to cheer, but most of them appeared to be steeling themselves for something else - something... *worse*. For the first time, Aiden noticed a large fort to his right, almost completely shrouded with mist. Its stone walls were fifteen feet high and stretched across the field behind the defenders.

These ruggedly-hewn walls were lined with archers, and some kind of siege machines that were loaded with massive bolts of wood and steel. Behind them, the fort itself rose up in defiance of the attackers, with the flag of the Kingdom of Aielund flying high.

One man in particular stood out amongst the defenders, dressed in shining, gold-trimmed armour, and appeared to be in command of the Kingdom forces. He pointed across the field in warning and as if on queue, the ground started to shake from what

seemed to be a minor earthquake. Aiden felt all this as if he were standing right there amongst it all, but the soldiers around him paid him no heed.

The shaking of the ground grew more intense until the head of some armoured creature appeared, revealing more of its body as it closed the distance. It was easily over twelve feet in height, with shoulders eight feet across and completely encased in ornate armour. It gleamed with the appearance of burnished steel, and the face etched onto the front of the helmet was forged into an expression of haughty superiority.

It was joined by another, and another of the massive creatures, and a wail of despair arose from the defending soldiers. A shouted order came from the walls, and the siege engines unleashed their massive bolts of steel, which struck the first of the huge armoured beings square in the chest. A dent appeared in the fine armour, but it did not stop its relentless march to the walls.

The defenders held their swords and pikes nervously, and it appeared that their morale was about to break when a rallying cry came from one of their number - a huge man nearly seven feet tall, dressed in black armour topped with a great horned helm leaped to the front, bellowing out a challenge to the monsters that approached. He brandished a massive greataxe that seemed to glow of its own accord, and his challenge was met by the first of the lumbering behemoths.

Unafraid of the approaching monster that loomed over him, the warrior swung his weapon and sheared off one of its legs with the deafening sound of tortured metal echoing over the field. The great armoured foe, unsupported, crashed to the ground, where the mighty axe-wielding warrior severed its head from its metal form. Aiden recoiled, expecting to see blood gushing forth from the terrible injury but nothing of the sort happened.

With the fall of the first of these behemoths, the rest of the defenders rallied behind the warrior, calling out their battle cries as they charged into the fray. The black-armoured warrior was the only one that was truly effective against these fearsome opponents, however, and the other men could only delay the massive armoured creatures at the cost of their lives. Yet they did so, without question or complaint.

After long minutes of untold bloodshed, only the black warrior remained to defend the castle, and he faced off against the last of the armoured creatures alone. This one was different to the others though - shorter by several feet and wielding a huge sword in one of its hands, the edge of the blade rippling with light. They came together in a devastating dance of savagery, sparks flying from their weapons and armour as each combatant sought an advantage over the other.

Aiden, clutching the glowing orb and entranced by the scene, could not look away from the fight as the two titanic figures clashed. The metal creature seemed to be fighting differently to the others that had fallen, somehow more graceful and intelligent, and the black warrior was hard-pressed to keep the monster at bay.

A shadow grew over the battlefield as something immense obscured the sun at that moment. Aiden squinted against the light to see what was happening, and was awestruck by the appearance of a creature from legend. An immense gold dragon was descending onto the battlefield, its wingspan easily over a hundred feet across. Talons the size of a man dug into the ground as it crashed to the surface behind the black warrior and its tail swept over the battlements of the fort. Its fine scales gleamed in the cold light, the majestic creature both immensely beautiful and terrifying beyond measure.

Distracted by the sudden appearance of the dragon, the black warrior was struck by the sword of his metal foe, severing his neck and dropping his head to the ground, followed by the rest of his now lifeless body. Aiden watched aghast as the battle seemed on the verge of escalating into something beyond his comprehension.

But then, unexpectedly, the dragon turned its great head to look directly at Aiden, the first thing to in this unreal scene to take note of his presence. The young man, bewildered by the shocking events he had witnessed, froze, his eyes locked with that of the dragon. The moment passed, and the great beast turned its attention to the steel warrior before it.

A flash of white light engulfed the battlefield and a blast of wind sucked Aiden off his feet, causing him to stumble forward. Reflexively, he reached out his hands to stop the fall and dropped the glowing orb, shattering it upon the ground of the cave and leaving Aiden staring into the quiet darkness once more, too overcome to even noticing the blood gushing from his hands.

Chapter One

A splash of cold water on Aiden's forehead jolted him out of his nightmare. The ever-present sound of rain on the roof tiles brought the young man back to the present, and as the nightmare faded, his racing heart slowed. He unconsciously rubbed his right hand, the memory of a large piece of glass sliding into his flesh all too real after the dream.

Wiping the drops of water from his forehead, Aiden noted that once again, the roof of the inn room was leaking, despite registering a complaint with the Innkeeper several times in the past few days. The horrid feelings associated with his nightmare quickly diminished, as they always did; it was a common experience for him these days, and one he had become used to enduring every few nights.

Aiden didn't wake up like this every time, but the dream was still as powerful now as it was when he had fallen in that hole over five years ago. Whether it was the shock of the event that had burned it into his mind, or an after-effect of whatever magic was involved in the strange vision, Aiden always experienced the memory of that event as if it happened yesterday.

Another splash of water smacked into the side of his head and in a sudden fit of frustration, he threw back the blankets and sat up in bed. He cast a baleful glance at the ceiling, but his anger quickly subsided. After all, the ceiling wasn't leaking upon him on purpose; it was simply constructed of wood and thatch, and bore him no malice.

The shifting of blankets on the bed across the small inn room let Aiden know that Pacian was awake, to some degree.

"Has it stopped raining yet?" he asked, sleepily.

"Nope, still raining," Aiden replied curtly. "Go back to sleep Pace." A light snoring sound began emanating from the bed almost immediately, and Aiden shook his head in envy, wishing he too could shrug off the stresses of life and fall asleep at will.

A rooster could be heard crowing somewhere in town, hinting the approach of dawn. Resigning himself to remaining awake, Aiden stood, stretched, and quickly dressed himself, as the small room was bitterly cold.

After pulling on his leggings and tunic, he absently touched a small piece of broken glass attached to a simple string, hanging around his neck. The glass was carefully

worked to ensure there were no sharp edges on it, for this was the very piece that had been removed from his hand after finally being rescued from the hole that day. His father had fashioned into a necklace for him to keep as a memento of his ordeal, and it had made a very odd birthday present indeed.

He opened the curtain to the small window in his room and leaned against the frame, peering out at the small town of Bracksford as the grey light of dawn began to creep over the horizon. The heavy clouds that had persisted over the rural community were still present, and the unrelenting rain cast a pall over the otherwise scenic view.

Although he wasn't planning to go outside if he could help it, Aiden put on his longcoat for warmth and then quietly crept over to the door, turning the handle as slowly as he could to leave the room without waking Pacian.

Aiden took the stairs down the hallway which led to the common room of the Bracksfordshire Arms Inn, the comfortable and more importantly *affordable* inn where the two friends had been stuck for over two weeks. Although accustomed to inclement in winter, the rain had been steady and unrelenting for as long as they'd been here.

When he and Pacian had shown up at the town gates, soaking wet and seeking shelter, they hadn't realised that the entire town was about to be sealed by order of the Mayor, effectively ending their little expedition from Coldstream shortly after it had begun.

Answers to the inevitable questions such as 'Why?' and 'Are you mad?' were not forthcoming, save that the Mayor deemed such measures necessary. There was a rumour going around, as they do in small towns, that bandits were killing anyone unfortunate enough to wander outside the town gates. Nobody had yet confirmed this of course, leaving the population of sixty or so villagers in a state of perpetual anxiety.

In spite of the early hour, the common room had its share of patrons, sitting around in comfortable overstuffed chairs illuminated by flickering lamplight. Bracksfordshire was a farming community spanning over a hundred square miles, with many small towns and hamlets dotted around the place. Even if there was little work to be done in the fields, farmers were in the habit of rising early and Aiden recognised several people sitting around the common room, people he'd come to know quite well, as one does in a small town with nowhere to go.

There was Jim Clifton, a wheat farmer of advancing years who grumbled about the loss of his crops to anyone within earshot. It was hard to avoid a conversation with the man, given the tight quarters and as such, Aiden knew more about wheat farming than any one man should. Laura Patel, a charming young lady more suited to a thriving city than a simple country life ran a clothing store across the street which had done some brisk business in cloaks and longcoats at the start of the bad weather, but her stock was now depleted and with the town closed off, was unable to bring in more.

Along with a few other farmers and shop owners, these people were huddled around the fire for warmth and to dry their clothes from the dash through the rain necessary to reach the inn. The musty smell of wet clothing and damp skin was ever-present, although the innkeeper apparently had the brilliant idea of attempting to mask the odour by burning some scented candles at the bar.

Aiden nodded in silent greeting to some of the locals as he passed the fireplace, on his way to the counter. The inn was by far the largest building in town, and featured the finest appointments present in the small community. Bracksford was built on a major

highway between the port city of Culdeny to the north and Fort Highmarch to the south, so traders always stopped by for at least a few days to sell their wares to the locals, but this time their stay was much longer than they'd bargained for.

"Mornin' Aiden," said the burly innkeeper as Aiden pulled up a stool. His thick beard was iron grey and did a fine job of disguising his heavy jowls. "You're up early today."

"I'm just too tired to sleep, if that makes any sense," the young man mumbled.

The innkeeper chuckled while wiping down the counter with a cloth. "I think everyone in this room knows what you mean. Well, except her maybe." He nodded to a young woman of incredible beauty sitting at the other end of the bar, warming her hands on a steaming cup of broth. Aiden had seen her around the inn before, but never had the courage to speak to her.

She had long, flowing hair that seemed to be blonde, but was so pale as to be almost white. Her delicate features were matched by her graceful movements - the way she blew on the hot cup of liquid to cool it, the thoughtful expression that crossed her face as she pondered what Aiden guessed were 'deep thoughts', and the way she smiled at him when it became obvious she was being stared at by a young man of about Aiden's age, height, and appearance.

Aiden snapped his head straight back to the innkeeper, suddenly aware that he had been gazing at her *again*. The innkeeper grinned at him, but tastefully refrained from commenting. Instead, he offered to provide him with some breakfast. The options available were slim, so he settled for something simple and then sought to engage the man in conversation.

. "It was a good idea to use those scented candles to cover the smell, by the way," he remarked. "The air was starting to get a little pungent in here."

"Oh that wasn't my idea," the innkeeper replied, nodding once more to the other end of the bar meaningfully. "I'll go fetch your breakfast."

Aiden turned to see the lovely young woman smiling at him. Although rarely short of words, something about her took his breath away. When she spoke, her voice was crisp and clear, and she had obviously been well-educated. In the dimly lit room her light brown eyes seemed to shine like gold as the firelight danced over her features.

"I think we've all had enough of that smell, so I thought a few scented candles might be a pleasant change," she told him in her sweet, honeyed voice.

"You were right about that," Aiden replied, wincing at his choice of words. He was going to say more but decided that the less he said, the less chance he had of making a complete fool out of himself. At times like this, he regretted that his parents had never made enough money to provide him with a better education.

"They won't last, though," the lady continued. "I only brought a few with me from Culdeny and packed them as an afterthought. If I had known we'd all be stuck inside here for a month, I'd have brought a sack of them."

"If we'd have known that we'd be stuck inside together for weeks at a time, none of us would have come here in the first place," Aiden remarked. "I certainly have places I need to be."

"Most of us here do, I suspect. Bracksfordshire relies on trade quite heavily." She paused for a moment. "My name is Nellise Sannemann, by the way."

"I'm Aiden Wainwright. Nice to meet you."

"The feeling is mutual, Aiden," Nellise replied, smiling warmly. "Wainwright, is it? Do you make wains and wagons for a living?"

"My father does, yes. Third generation. I don't really have much to do with it, though."

"Not following in your father's footsteps?" she inquired politely.

"I... have other areas of expertise," he responded carefully. Aiden wasn't in the habit of telling people that he was hunting relics and legends for a living. Ever since his experience in that cave years ago, he felt compelled to find out what it all meant, but he was reluctant to mention such things to anyone else, a lesson he'd learned the hard way.

Nobody had believed his story about the vision he had seen, so after he finally gave up trying to convince people, Aiden had taken every opportunity to learn more about enchanted relics, ancient languages and history. Every copper jack he could earn or get his hands on went towards buying old books from merchants who passed through the town, and in this fashion Aiden had been in charge of his own education.

For more than four years he scoured through dusty old tomes, a vocation that his parents were not at all impressed with. They would have preferred that he spend more time with the other children of his age, or learning the trade with his father instead of chasing dreams. A few weeks ago, the tension that had been brewing in his family came to a head, and after a heated argument on an early winter's morning, Aiden made the decision to set out on his own.

Pacian had come along for other reasons, and Aiden suspected his friend didn't believe his story of great battles and a golden dragon either, but his presence here with Aiden probably had a lot to do with the roguish blond lad's own father. The two of them had a painful past that living together only served to remind each other of. It was always uncomfortable being in the same room as the two of them, for the silence was deafening.

Nellise studied Aiden's distracted face for a few moments before she spoke again. "You had a disagreement over what you wanted to do with your life, that much is obvious."

Aiden looked at her in surprise. "How did you know that?"

"You're not hard to read, Aiden," Nellise confided with a warm smile. "I have a knack for that sort of thing. I do apologise if I'm being too nosey, by the way. It's just nice to have some pleasant conversation for a change."

"It's quite alright, I know what you mean," the young man smiled, trying to hide his enthusiasm for speaking with this beautiful woman. At that moment, a small girl of roughly eight or nine years of age appeared behind the bar with a plate of food, and placed it on the smooth wooden counter in front of Aiden.

"Your breakfast is done, sir!" she beamed.

"Uh, thanks, it looks delicious," Aiden offered. The girl's smile almost took in her ears, so he felt the compliment was in order. It seemed to work, as she turned and headed back into the kitchen, her mission accomplished.

"Now *that's* service," Aiden quipped, drawing a quiet laugh from Nellise. "Sorry to interrupt our conversation but this plate of food and I have a prior engagement."

"Oh, of course. Enjoy your breakfast, for it may be the last decent one you have for some time."

Aiden's fork, laden with food, stopped a few inches from his open mouth. He looked at Nellise and raised an eyebrow.

"If Olaf doesn't open up the gates soon, we're all going to be dining on shoe leather," she replied to his unspoken question.

"Olaf?"

"The Mayor," Nellise clarified. "I spoke with him two days ago about opening the gates but he flatly refused. He seemed rather out of sorts, to be honest. Very strange. But don't let this bother you now, Aiden. We'll talk about it more after you've eaten."

Aiden blinked at her, then slowly returned his focus to the food before him, which suddenly tasted like the best eggs and toast he'd ever eaten.

He was nearing the end of his meal when a man strode up next to him at the counter and slammed down a large wooden mug. The smell of stale beer and body odour washed over Aiden, making him glad he was just about to finish eating.

"Beer me," the man said in a low, gruff voice. The innkeeper strode over to the counter from where he was preparing some food and looked the newcomer straight in the eye.

"Alright, but this is the last one, Colt."

"It's the last one when I say it's the last one," the gruff man explained. "Now fill 'er up." The innkeeper shook his head, but proceeded to fill the mug from a tap behind the counter.

"A little early in the morning to be drinking, isn't it?" Nellise asked of the man called Colt.

"Since I never slept, I don't think it matters, Nellise," he grunted in reply.

"You can't just hide from your problems like this," she counselled, her voice conveying genuine concern. Colt's face, which had the sluggish, unfocused look of the professional drinker, suddenly focused on Nellise with alarming clarity.

"You think I *like* sitting around in this bloody inn getting drunk off my ass? It's not like there's anything else to do." He quaffed his mug of beer quickly and slammed it down on the counter. "Another!"

"I told you, that was the last one," the innkeeper reminded him, his stern face hinting he was not going to relent so easily this time. Sensing a potential fight, Aiden quickly sized-up Colt. He was a heavy-set man, just over six feet in height, with a considerable build that gave Aiden pause.

The innkeeper, however, didn't seem to be fazed by Colt's aggressive attitude. He may have been past forty years of age and carrying a lot of extra weight, but didn't show any fear of a rowdy drunkard in his bar. Aiden hoped his confidence wasn't misplaced, for he guessed Colt could probably make an innkeeper-skinned rug from the old fellow if he really wanted.

"Don't start holding back on me now, mate," Colt growled. "I've still got a ways to go before the room starts spinning. So keep 'em coming, I say."

"No, you don't seem to get it," the innkeeper informed him patiently, leaning forward over the bar which creaked under his weight. "I'm not holding back 'cause I think you're getting drunk." In one movement he hefted a keg onto the counter and pried open the top. "I told you *it was the last one*. As in, *we're out of beer*."

Colt's eyes, which had been narrowed with terrible focus on the obstacle between him and drunken oblivion, suddenly grew wide with understanding. He leaned forward and looked into the keg, then back at the innkeeper.

"Hang on a moment. Are you telling me you're out of beer?"

“Yep, and out of just about everything else too,” the innkeeper added. “Was expecting a shipment from Culdery a few days ago but of course, the town is sealed. So if you’ve got a problem with this, I suggest you take it up with the Mayor.” With that, he turned and walked over to where the little girl was chopping up tired looking carrots near the kitchen.

Colt watched him walk away, and then slumped down in the seat next to Aiden, appearing thoroughly dejected. After a few moments of awkward silence, he decided to break the ice.

“So, what’s your story?” Aiden asked, smiling faintly to show he appreciated the absurdity of the question. Colt turned a pair of baleful, bloodshot green eyes toward him, ignoring his smile.

“And you are..?”

“My name’s Aiden. You are called ‘Colt’, which I assume is a family name?” Colt remained silent. After a few moments, Aiden figured there would be nothing else forthcoming, so he attempted to find something to talk about. Colt was dressed in grimy leathers, dyed green and brown in various places. They looked vaguely familiar, although he couldn’t quite remember where he’d seen the like before. The burly man was unshaven, with short dark hair and a heavy jaw, but his age was difficult to guess at.

“That’s an interesting outfit you have on,” he commented, genuinely curious about Colt’s attire.

“Is there some reason we’re having this delightful chat, or are you just interested in a bit of company?” Colt asked sarcastically, his voice hoarse from too much drinking. Or perhaps not enough? It was hard to tell. “If it’s companionship you want I’m sure Nellise will talk your ears off, and she’s a lot better looking than I am.”

“Better smelling, too,” Nellise observed quietly.

“I’m sorry if I’m disturbing you-” Aiden continued, but was interrupted by the belligerent man.

“You are. Beat it.”

Sensing the end of the conversation, Aiden returned his gaze to the empty plate before him, realizing he’d forgotten to pay. Looking up, he noticed the small girl looking expectantly at him. Smiling back, and managing to look a little ashamed at the same time, Aiden reached down and pulled out his coin pouch from inside his longcoat.

He frowned at its lack of weight, and then turned it inside out over the counter. Three copper jacks rolled onto the bench top, making a neat yet minuscule pile of coins that would barely cover the meal. The girl quickly took two coins from the pile.

“Thank you, and have a nice day,” she declared in the uncertain voice of someone new to the field of customer relations. Aiden nodded absently as he stared down at his last coin.

“I think I have a problem,” he commented quietly to no-one in particular. Nellise glanced over and noticed the coin.

“If that’s the extent of your personal fortune, then yes, I suppose you do.”

“You have to understand,” Aiden replied, agitated. “You see, I had a *plan*. I had work lined up! If I hadn’t been stuck in this bloody inn for two weeks I’d *have* money.”

“You’re not the only one here with that problem,” Nellise pointed out. “I’m not exactly draped in riches either, and poor Colt over there can’t even afford a bath.”

“Bathing in winter is bad for you,” Colt grunted, glancing at Nellise. She ignored him, and instead moved closer to Aiden and spoke in hushed tones. He tried not to let her proximity distract him.

“I’ve asked around. The entire town is running low on supplies. Bracksford relies on traders bringing in goods and buying produce from the local farming community. This... *lockdown*... is strangling the town.”

“Perhaps someone should talk to the Mayor? It seems like madness to keep the place shut for so long,” Aiden mused.

Nellise nodded. “I spoke with him only yesterday. He is definitely agitated about something, and he refused to listen. I... don’t have as much influence in this town as I’d like.”

Aiden raised an eyebrow as he picked up on something. “Are you someone who would normally have influence? Perhaps a noble or some such?”

“In my home town of Culdeny, I help run the local Church. I’m an acolyte with the Resolute Heralds chapter of the Church of Aielund,” Nellise explained.

“Oh, I see,” Aiden replied, slightly crestfallen. He was fairly certain that priests took a vow of chastity, or something similar. It put an end to certain plans that may or may not have been forming in the back of Aiden’s teenage mind. In a way, this was a good thing – he was normally a quick thinker, but Nellise’s presence had addled him somewhat.

“Well... I can’t wait around in town forever, hoping that the Mayor has a moment of sanity. I think I’ll stop by and have a few words with him and see if I can’t convince him to open the gates once more.” Colt made a strange grunting sound, apparently scoffing at Aiden’s proposal. The young man had heard just about enough of this attitude from the dirty, angry drunk.

“You have something to add?”

“Yeah, I went and spoke to him a few days ago too. Seems like most people have lately, but I went in there and told him I’d throttle the pompous bastard with his own neck fat if he didn’t let me out of here.”

“The fact that you are still here leads me to think that you weren’t altogether successful,” Aiden observed dryly. Colt looked a little ashamed as he reluctantly nodded.

“He called the guards on me. Took a knock to the head from one of their billy-clubs and woke up in the local barracks.”

“Oh Colt,” Nellise admonished, shaking her head. “Force isn’t going to work here. Olaf requires a delicate touch.”

“But you already said you didn’t have any luck,” Colt argued, perhaps not thinking out his words fully before speaking. Nellise flushed shyly, suddenly understanding his meaning.

“Not like *that*, I mean... making him see *reason*.” The look on her face practically begged Aiden to change the topic. He noticed Pacian enter from across the room, apparently having just woken up a few minutes ago, making his way towards the bar. Aiden signalled him to come over but didn’t wait for his arrival before turning back to Colt.

“Apparently neither of your methods has worked. I propose we *all* go over there and calmly explain to him the situation, and how critical it is that the gates be opened once more. We’re not going to threaten him” - Colt gave him a sour look but remained silent - “but we’re not going to leave until we get what we need.”

"We're doing what now?" Pacian asked, completely oblivious to what was going on. Breakfast around this place rarely involved anything more than food, and Pace was always a bit slow first thing in the morning. Aiden summarised in the name of expediency.

"We're getting out of this town."

"Finally. Can I eat first?" he asked. Aiden nodded and stood up, allowing his friend to use his seat. "Anything good here?" Pace asked no-one in particular.

"I think they have a bit of leftover stew from last night," Aiden recommended, mostly due to its low price. His blond friend had run out of money earlier in the week and Aiden's last copper jack was all they had left of the few dozen coppers they'd manage to put together before leaving Coldstream a month ago.

"Who the hell is this?" Colt grunted.

"Pacian Savidge. A friend of mine. We're travelling together."

"You look to be about the same age," Nellise observed. "Did you grow up together?"

"We sure did," Pacian answered, glancing at the beautiful young priestess and then doing a double take that almost made Aiden laugh out loud. "Someone had to keep an eye on Aiden, 'cause he's one shifty character, always getting into trouble and whatnot." His grin almost took in his ears, and it was aimed straight at the young acolyte. Pace always seemed to have an easier time talking to girls, and he had only become more confident with age.

"I have the distinct impression you are describing yourself there, young man," Nellise chided, evidently aware of Pacian's intentions. Aiden resolved to inform his friend of Nellise's vocation as soon as possible, just to avoid any unpleasant consequences.

Pace just laughed, not ashamed at being caught out at his little game, and then turned his attention to his breakfast as it arrived.

"I could use some bread with this, and maybe some extra ham, if you have any."

"Well, I wasn't going to mention this until later, but we're kind of broke now," Aiden replied. "That's going to be your last meal until we figure out how to get out of here."

Pace stopped eating and turned to look Aiden straight in the eye. Seeing no attempt at humour, he paused for a moment before continuing to eat, albeit much slower.

"If you lot are looking to get out of here," the innkeeper said, "I hear all sorts of nasty rumours about what's happening on the roads and I don't want to hear that you've met an unfortunate end. You'll keep a close eye on them for me, won't you Colt?"

"What, so I'm a babysitter now?"

"I'll clear your tab if you go along with them, mate. You three seem to be nice folks lookin' to help the town, and you could use a man like Colt to keep you safe."

"Drunk and covered in dirt?" Pacian quipped. "I could probably manage that in a pinch." Colt didn't reply with his voice, instead reaching over and strapping an impressive looking sword to his back, along with a longbow wrapped in oilcloth. It became obvious that he was a fighting man of some sort, and the innkeeper's offer suddenly made sense.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," the innkeeper chuckled. Aiden, unsure what he'd just gotten himself into, headed to the door and stepped out into the cold light of day.

The mud in the streets was barely visible beneath the eight inches of water that cascaded across the surface, but it was there nonetheless. Aiden led them in a quick run

across the street that ended up covering their legs in more water than would have been the case if they'd simply walked slowly, to say nothing of the mud that had been kicked up.

By now the mid-winter sun was just beginning to appear over the eastern horizon, the only glimpse of it that anyone in town would have of it for the rest of the day. As usual, the rain was mild yet unrelenting, with no trace of wind that might push the bad weather away, leaving the town perpetually covered in the foul weather.

The small group entered the Mayor's office a few moments later, which turned out to be a converted two-storey house. Aiden was impressed by the lavish furnishings placed around the office, including an elaborate candelabrum perched on a small polished table. A painting of a strange desert landscape hung over a comfortable looking sofa, and intricately woven carpets covered the floor.

Aiden decided that it was probably a thoughtful idea to remove his coat, already wet and muddy from the brief trip across the road, and the others followed his lead. Across the hall, a pretty young lady with narrow lips and large brown eyes sat behind an oaken desk, busily sorting through a pile of papers before her. Although it was unlikely she missed the entrance of the four people, she nevertheless remained focused on the task before her.

"Pardon me, but we'd like to see the Mayor, if he's available," Nellise asked politely, moving to stand before the desk.

"The Mayor has only just risen for the day, and isn't ready to see visitors yet," she informed them curtly. Although young, she was showing great potential to become an irritating, obstructionist secretary that such people aspire to. Her parents must have been very proud.

"We can wait," Nellise conceded, turning to the others with a shrug and indicating they should make themselves comfortable. There was only room for three people on the sofa, so Colt stood by the small window near the door and looked out into the grey light outside. Aiden sat next to Nellise and once again found his mind revolving around certain thoughts of a physical nature, in spite of her career choice.

A few minutes later, a bored looking Pacian stood up and in one swift movement, walked past the secretary and into the room beyond.

"Excuse me, you can't go in there," the young lady protested. Colt laughed softly and followed him. Seeing his attempt to coerce the Mayor with subtle dialog slip away, Aiden groaned inwardly and followed them, with Nellise right behind him. He caught a glimpse of the secretary's face as he strode past and felt a little guilty about running roughshod over her fledgling authority, but one thing he'd learned growing up was that once Pace set his mind to doing something, nothing was going to stand in his way unless it punched him in the face.

Stepping into what was apparently a converted dining room, Aiden saw his friend standing before a middle-aged man of means, wearing fine clothing and with a carefully groomed grey moustache adorning his face. He sat at a fine table near a blazing fireplace, holding a spoon in one hand and a bowl of untouched soup before him. His gaunt appearance told Aiden that he hadn't been eating properly for some time now.

"Are you the Mayor?" Pacian asked shortly.

"I am indeed," he replied gruffly, startled at their appearance. "Who in blazes are you?" The old man was clearly upset about the interruption to the breakfast he wasn't eating.

"My friends and I are travellers who happen to be stuck in this damp little town of yours, and we want to leave," Pacian continued. Despite his initial shock at the abrupt introduction, the Mayor quickly recovered.

"I'm sorry, but it's out of the question," he muttered impatiently in the manner of one who was used to being obeyed. "The gates are sealed for the protection of the town. I thought I said I never wanted to see you in here again, Mister Colt," he added, noticing the burly man looming in the background.

"Relax Olaf, I'm not going to threaten you," Colt grunted. "But these three seem to have something important to tell you, so listen up."

"Three? Oh yes, Nellise and some... friends," Olaf remarked. "Is this impertinent rapscaillon an acquaintance of yours?"

"I only met these two this morning, Your Honour," Nellise protested, raising an eyebrow at Pacian. "We're all in agreement, however. I don't know why you've closed the town for so long, but people are running out of supplies and they may start getting desperate very soon."

"I assure you, I am not insensitive to the plight of the townsfolk," the Mayor replied brusquely. "But it is simply far too dangerous to allow anyone to travel outside the walls at this time. Thank you." The last was delivered with a note of finality.

"Two of those desperate people Nellise mentioned are standing right in front of you," Aiden pressed. "We just spent the last of our coin purchasing meals here this morning, and if we can't leave this town today we're going to go hungry. Hungry people do desperate things, and I don't think we're the only ones either."

"Honestly, this could not have come at a worse time," the Mayor muttered.

"And why is that, sir?" Nellise inquired. Aiden sensed that the Mayor's blustering facade had broken with this latest news, and he silently applauded Nellise for softening her language.

"I have something of a personal crisis going on which has me rather distracted," Olaf apologized, glancing around at the small group with quick eyes.

"I see," Aiden remarked, not really seeing anything. "Well, we're just seeking permission to leave via the northern gate to Culdeny so if you can see your way--"

"The north road? Good heavens no," the Mayor interrupted, standing up quickly with sudden agitation. His clothing, while rich and fine, hung from his shoulders, giving the impression the man had lost a lot of weight. "There are bandits to the north, sir, and word has reached me here that savage tribesmen are beginning to gather to the east. With our local garrison depleted, I dare not authorise anyone to travel outside the gates until we have received reinforcements."

Aiden glanced around at the others. Colt rolled his eyes at that statement, and Nellise seemed more than a little concerned about this revelation.

"Olaf, why didn't you mention this to me before?" she quietly asked.

"To be blunt, my dear Nellise, this was none of your concern," Olaf explained. "When His Majesty swept through here months ago, I protested the quantity of soldiers he requested, but my words fell on deaf ears. I have had to cut back on patrolling the highway, and the result was predictable – lawlessness and brigandry."

"Have you tried sending someone to Fort Highmarch?" Colt asked gruffly.

"I have sent several messengers, and two of the local town guards over the past ten days. None have returned." Olaf paused and looked around at his guests. "Perhaps now you understand our predicament a little better?"

"You said that you refused to let unauthorised people wander about," Pacian observed. "Authorise us, and then we'll wander about to our heart's content."

"Simple clothes, sparse equipment," Olaf mumbled as he inspected each of them. "You hardly seem capable of dealing with any of the threats to this town, and I wouldn't wish to endanger your lives needlessly."

"It has come to the point now that we're being endangered just sitting around town, slowly starving to death," Aiden pointed out. "Fort Highmarch is nearly three days travel south of here, so the sooner we leave, the sooner we can bring back food and reinforcements."

"I can guide them there well enough," Colt grunted reluctantly, prompting Aiden to look at him incredulously. He hadn't expected the oaf to volunteer for anything, given his attitude. Olaf seemed to consider this, and then his expression took on a more considered look.

"I'll tell you what," he offered. "I'll give you a task to accomplish, and if you succeed, you'll have convinced me of your resourcefulness and genuine desire to help the town."

"I suppose that's fair," Aiden hedged, disliking the direction of this conversation but having little choice but to carry on. "What's the task?"

"It's rather delicate, actually," the Mayor explained. "A former associate of mine is seeking to discredit my name and oust me from my position as Mayor. She wants *five* gold sovereigns to keep her silent." Aiden's eyes inadvertently widened in surprise – it was a small fortune by anyone's measure.

"I've tried reasoning with this individual but she simply won't co-operate. I'm not one to employ 'strong-arm' tactics myself, but if you were to... *persuade* her to see reason and return the documents she is attempting to blackmail me with, you will have proven your worth."

"Do you expect trouble from this person?" Nellise inquired. "I doubt she will simply hand over something quite so valuable simply because we ask her to."

"I can be very... persuasive," Pacian offered, smiling coldly. For someone barely eighteen years of age, Pacian had lived a hard life and Aiden knew what he was capable of.

"Oh, I don't think violence will be necessary," Olaf replied, dismissing the thought with a wave of his hand. "By all means, talk with her first if you will, but do not underestimate her. If she still refuses, feel free to use whatever means you deem necessary to change her mind."

"Okay, we'll look into it," Aiden agreed hesitantly. "Who is this person and where can we find her?"

"Her name is Merin Teas, and she resides in a small house on the eastern edge of town, right next to the smithy," Olaf explained. "Just follow the main street down towards the gate, and you'll see it just off to the right, you really can't miss it."

"Okay, we'll do what we can," Aiden agreed. "I expect you'll see us again shortly." Without another word, the small group moved out the door, donning their longcoats as they passed. Aiden was the last to leave, avoiding eye contact with the secretary as he

went past and closing the door behind him. A modest awning gave them some shelter from the rain as Aiden pondered the agreement he had just made. A few people moved along the street in the dim morning light, similarly garbed in longcoats or the more old-fashioned hooded cloaks, going about their lives as best they could.

“So, instead of being *allowed* to leave, we're doing his dirty work now?” Pacian observed wryly. “You realise you didn't even ask for money, right?”

“Who the hell asked you?” Colt growled.

“I trust him a lot more than I trust you, Colt,” Aiden retorted. “What exactly did Olaf mean by you having experience to 'survive this journey' anyway?”

“I'm a ranger with the local Garrison, operating out of the Calespur ranges,” Colt answered. “I'm just... on a personal leave of absence is all.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Yep,” Colt replied with a brief grunt. Aiden waited for more information to be forthcoming, but was disappointed.

“Would you care to elaborate?” the young man pressed.

“Why the hell should I answer something as personal as that?” Colt growled, his eyes bloodshot in the morning light.

“I think I've figured out why actually,” Aiden observed dryly. “Can you use that sword on your back?”

“No, I'm just holding it for someone. Idiot.”

“You have a real attitude problem there, Colt,” Aiden commented darkly. He'd had just about enough of this – hung over or not, it was a lot to put up with.

“You sound just like my commander before three of his teeth flew out of his mouth and across the room,” Colt observed.

“And the mystery of your expulsion from the Rangers is solved,” Pacian smirked. “Here I was, wondering why you hadn't been called to service with the King. Some mysteries solve themselves.”

“So now that you know my terrible secret, what are you going to do about it?”

“Assuming we pass this ‘test’,” Aiden mused, “I want to know if you're capable of protecting us outside the gates. If it's as bad as we've heard, we need you to step up and do your job. There's a phrase I've heard; ‘once a Ranger, always a Ranger’. You may not work for them anymore, but what I'm asking here is, are you going to be a drunk, surly bastard, or a proper servant of the King?”

“Can't I be both?” Colt shrugged, the shadow of a smile playing across his unshaven face. Aiden slowly returned the grin in spite of himself. He wondered how much of Colt's apparently abrasive personality was simply bluster. He decided to withhold judgment on that point until Colt sobered up, but for now, he was simply relieved that he'd come to some sort of agreement with the man.

“Right, well, I'll admit that meeting didn't go quite as smoothly as I would have liked,” Aiden glanced at Pacian, who merely grinned wolfishly at him. “Still, we should talk with this ‘Merin’ and see what we can make of it.”

“I have the distinct impression that Olaf isn't telling us everything,” Nellise mumbled. “If Merin is holding something over him, there is a good chance it's something Olaf doesn't want becoming public.”

“I had that feeling as well,” Aiden agreed. “Let's just be cautious, shall we? Pace, do you have your knife?”

“Always,” he replied, reaching inside his longcoat to rest his hand upon the kitchen utensil turned weapon.

“You and Colt keep an eye out for trouble. Nellise and I will try to reason with her first, but that doesn’t work, just grab her and search the place. The smithy is down the end of this road, yes?” Aiden asked Colt, who merely nodded. Without further comment, he started walking down the road with the others following closely behind, an odd group of people working together under strange circumstances for a man none of them could trust. What could go wrong?

Chapter Two

A short walk down the main street in the ankle-deep water brought them to a sturdy cottage, situated next door to the town smithy. The smithy itself was quiet, probably due to the early hour, but Aiden did find it a little strange not to hear the rhythmic sounds of a hammer on metal coming from within.

They stopped outside the cottage door, a solid looking oaken affair with metal bracing around the edge that practically screamed 'go away'. With a strong desire to get this over and done with, Aiden knocked on the door and waited for a response.

“Who is it?” came the muffled voice of a woman from the other side of the door.

“Merin? My name is Aiden. I need to speak with you.”

“I’m not interested in anything you have to say,” she replied after a moment's hesitation. Aiden glanced at Nellise, who shrugged in silent reply.

“It really is quite urgent that I speak with you, ma’am,” Aiden tried again, this time more forcefully. “I must insist that you open this door immediately!”

“Let me think about it for a moment,” Merin replied, pausing for only a fraction of a second before she added, “No, I don’t think I’m going to do that. Go away.” Aiden was on the verge of yelling at her, but Pacian put a hand on his shoulder and shook his head, gesturing to himself with his other hand.

“Very well,” Aiden said, forcing a note of defeat into his voice. “Perhaps I can meet with you later in the day, as I have other business to attend to. Good morning.” He motioned for Nellise and Colt to follow him, as he walked away from the door and stood nearby to watch what came next.

“What was the point of that?” Colt inquired. “You should have just let me bash in her door.”

“We have other methods at our disposal,” he answered, nodding to where Pacian was attempting to pick the lock. Colt grunted in understanding and huddled underneath his cloak for warmth while the blond rogue carefully went about his work. Aiden glanced around casually to make sure he wasn't drawing too much attention, but he needn't have worried – the townsfolk were too mired in their daily lives to bother with one man seemingly having trouble opening a door.

A few moments later, Pace turned the handle on the door and opened it a crack, peeking through the narrow space and signalling the rest of them to come closer. Checking to make sure everyone was ready, Aiden nodded to Pacian, who opened the door carefully and stepped inside.

Despite being only a modestly sized cottage, it was lavishly furnished. It was warm and dry, and the aroma of freshly cooked food wafted through the air. The small

entryway featured a curiously short hat stand perched next to a very small and highly polished round table. The height of it was ridiculous; one would have to crouch down to make proper use of it.

Several pieces of art were hanging on the wall that lined the short hallway leading to the rest of the cottage, but they were all hanging below chest height. Finding this whole house very strange, he led the others into the dining room, complete with what appeared to be a child's dining table and chair. A small girl in an elegant dress sitting at the table looked up at them in surprise, and then smiled in a very devious way.

"Breaking into my house, hmm?" she observed coldly. "That's very bold of you. I'm actually surprised you made it past my door... I should probably have invested in a better lock."

Aiden recognised the voice as the person he had spoken to through the door. What he had thought was a small girl was, in fact, a very short woman. Suddenly, he realised he was standing before a woman from the Rael islands, commonly referred to as the Raelani, a race of diminutive people that were in all respects the same as humans but roughly half the size. Her features were sharp and cultured, and if she were human, Aiden would guess her to be from a wealthy family.

"You are Merin, yes?" Nellise inquired. "We have come from the Mayor's office to talk."

"Ah, is that why you were so insistent?" she inquired rhetorically, wiping her mouth with a napkin. Before her on the table was a small bowl of soup and a slice of fresh bread, which was obviously her breakfast. "I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised, Olaf was bound to send someone over sooner or later. Four humans seems to be overkill for one little Raelani woman, though. Did he tell you to 'toss me about' or 'rough me up', as is human custom in these situations?"

"Not at all," Nellise assured her. "We have merely been instructed to have a chat with you. Tell me, why are you blackmailing the Mayor?"

"Because it's good money, my dear," Merin grinned with a measure of condescension. "Certainly enough for me to relocate back to Fairloch, where there is at least a little *culture*. I can't tell you what it's been like for me having to live in a boring little pile of dirt like Bracksford for the past year. No, I've had enough, and Olaf's little indiscretion is going to pay my way. Don't be too concerned for him, either. He knew what he was getting in to when all this started."

"We have an arrangement with the Mayor, actually," Aiden said, curious at what her words alluded to. "You have some documents of importance to him - I must order you to hand them over, immediately."

"Order?" she balked. "Unless Olaf had the sense to conscript or deputise you, you don't have any authority, sweetie," she winked.

"Well then, do it because I'm asking you to," Aiden shrugged, cringing inwardly at his choice of words. Understandably, Merin laughed.

"You seriously think I'm going to hand it over... just because you *asked*?" She continued laughing at him, compounding the young man's mistake even further. "Country life breeds really naïve people, it would seem." Aiden was shoved out of the way suddenly by Colt, who towered over the diminutive woman.

"Hey, pint-size!" he snarled. "My friend here may be all sweetness and light, but I ain't so nice. In fact, if you don't hand over the stuff, I'll smash your annoying little face

in. If you're so innocent, you'll just call for the guards, right? I'm sure they'd be interested in doing a quick search while they're here." Merin's smile vanished instantly, and her eyes widened at the sight of the angry ranger before her.

"Okay, look, I don't want any trouble," she replied with a tremble to her voice. "I can see you're clearly not as stupid as your friend there, even if you do smell a lot worse." Colt clenched his gloved fist and seemed ready to do as he promised, but Merin quickly changed her attitude. "Just take the documents and go, *please*. They're in the drawers behind you, just... don't hurt me."

"That's more like it," Colt growled, nodding to Pacian who immediately walked over towards the drawers. Aiden frowned, looking down at Merin cautiously. Certainly, Colt was an intimidating presence to the tiny woman, but she seemed to give in a little too easily, especially after her earlier defiance.

Pacian reached out and attempted to open the top drawer, but found that it was locked. At this moment, Merin called out 'Now!', and Aiden noticed movement out of the corner of his eye, turning to see another Raelani - this one male - suddenly appear from behind a cupboard and throw a small dagger in the direction of Colt's head. Reacting instinctively, Aiden lunged forward and pushed the big man out of the way.

Merin glared at Aiden, now standing right in front of her, and weaved her fingers in an intricate pattern, whispering words in a strange language. Before he could figure out what was going on, a stroke of electrical energy crackled from her fingertips and hit Aiden, scorching his right arm and sending him reeling backwards in shock.

He crashed into Nellise and they tumbled to the floor, the young man's eyes glazed over from shock. Colt regained his footing and drew his massive sword, taking a swing at Merin's tiny frame. She ducked underneath the clumsy attack and pulled a dagger out of a small scabbard attached to her right boot. All signs of her earlier levity had vanished, and the Raelani woman moved with practiced speed and skill.

She retreated under the table, but Colt responded by kicking it over then swinging his sword down in a massive overhead strike that would have split her in two, had she not leaped to one side. Merin rolled and sprang back to her feet, the pleats in her dress affording her excellent movement.

Pacian pulled out his knife, but Colt kicking the table in his direction blocked his approach. Neither he nor Colt had noticed that the other Raelani in the room, over near the fireplace, had pulled out another knife and was preparing to throw again.

"Pace, over there!" Aiden slurred, silently wishing that he had a weapon. Pacian snapped his gaze around, saw his new target, and ran at him as fast as he could. The little man threw his dagger at the blond rogue, catching him on his right shoulder, but Pace had too much momentum to be stopped by something that small.

He leaned forward as he ran and would have slammed into the Raelani with his other shoulder had his target not rolled out of the way. Pacian came to an abrupt halt when he connected directly with the wall and fell backwards, clutching at his injured arm in silent pain.

Colt recovered from his overhead swing to find Merin about to invoke another incantation. She may have been able to get away with it once while they were surprised, but in the close-quarters fighting now taking place, letting her guard down like that simply gave Colt the opportunity to give her a swift kick.

She had the presence of mind to step backwards, but not quite enough to avoid the tip of his boot which impacted with her stomach. She gasped as the wind in her lungs exploded out of her, ruining whatever she had planned to invoke.

Pacian and his opponent squared off briefly with their knives before they started slashing and stabbing at each other. Pace had always been nimble and light on his feet, but the little Raelani he faced off against was quicker still, and managed to gash the blonde rogue's right arm when he didn't move fast enough. Seeing his friend needing a hand, Aiden quickly looked around for something that he could use as a weapon.

Seeing nothing but miniature cutlery, he reached out for a small ceramic bowl and flung it at the back of the little man's head while he was preoccupied. The bowl struck true, shattering and dazing him for a brief moment, giving Pacian just enough time to step in and stab him viciously with his knife.

Colt was having much less luck against Merin. His greatsword may have been a fearsome weapon on the battlefield, but in a small house attacking an even smaller woman it was next to useless. Merin landed a series of quick slashes onto the big man's leg with her tiny dagger, and with growing frustration, Colt decided to change tactics.

He began swinging a little more wildly, appearing to be trying to bring the sword in from his left to slash at the diminutive woman, forcing her to roll to his right. This had the effect of forcing her closer to Pacian, who had just finished off Merin's diminutive assistant with his bloodied knife.

Merin practically rolled right into him and before she could regain her footing, Pacian's knife dug into her back, ending her life. She locked eyes with Aiden as a trickle of blood dripped from her mouth, before slumping down onto the floor, quite dead. The silence was broken only by the heavy breathing of those still alive as the realization of what had just occurred sank in.

Pacian reached over and removed his bloody knife from Merin's back, absently wiping it on his tunic. Nellise had one hand over her mouth, clearly appalled by what had just taken place before her.

"Are you alright, Aiden?" she asked with a trembling voice as she touched the blackened skin where the arc of electricity had struck him.

"I'm alive," he replied, wincing at her touch. "I wasn't expecting *that*, exactly, but I'll live. You'd think Olaf would have mentioned she'd had wizard training." Aiden looked over at Merin's prone form, lamenting that this was not the first dead person he had ever seen.

He glanced up at Pacian, who didn't seem to be having any problems with having just killed two people. The blond rogue sifted through the bloody remains for anything of value, his expression devoid of feeling. Aiden was chilled at the dispassion his friend was exhibiting, but thankful for his presence nonetheless.

"Hold still for a few minutes," Nellise instructed absently, fidgeting around in a small leather pouch with shaking hands until she produced a small crystal. "Just clear your mind and I'll take care of that arm." Aiden extended the wounded appendage to her, and the young acolyte started whispering quietly to herself.

"I don't know who her friend was," Pacian observed, gesturing down at the late Merin Teas' mysterious friend, "but he wasn't short on coin. Seventeen jacks and three silver nobles in his pouch. His clothing isn't anything special, and there was nothing else of interest on him. Maybe he was her 'special friend'?"

"Could be," Aiden muttered. "I guess we'll never really know now." Colt squinted down at Aiden, seeming to take issue with his choice of words.

"You're not feeling a little regretful over their deaths, are you?"

"No, not really, just... did it have to end this way?" Aiden asked. "Maybe if we'd tried harder I could have convinced her to give up the documents without resorting to... *this*."

"Don't even think like that," The big ranger said, glaring directly at Aiden. "This lady was no novice in a fight, and her death is entirely her fault. We're not the ones that started this, you hear me?"

"Maybe, but we had her back to the wall, and your little speech was rather threatening too," Aiden muttered, noticing with some relief that his burnt arm didn't hurt nearly as much now. "Perhaps we should find out exactly what she was willing to die for."

"Stop squirming," Nellise chided him, continuing to work on his arm.

"Sorry. Pace, see if you can get that drawer open. I want to have a look at those documents she was bribing the Mayor with."

"Sure," Pacian agreed, then noticed Aiden's diminishing wound. "Hey, your arm is looking better. What is she doing?"

"Channelling divine energy to heal him," Nellise whispered, sounding a good deal more relaxed. Aiden looked at her with more respect, for of all the members of the Church of Aielund, only a few had any real divine healing ability. He was fortunate to have one such individual with him now, to tend to his injuries far more rapidly than natural healing would allow.

Aiden glanced up at his friend in time to see his confused look turn into understanding, and then embarrassment as he realised he had been flirting with a woman of the cloth. Sheepishly, he went over to the drawers, pulled out his lock picks and set to work. Colt, who was leaning on his greatsword catching his breath, caught Aiden's attention.

"I think you're overestimating our strength," he observed, his voice still sounding dry from his hangover. "Merin may have been a crook, but she wasn't stupid. Hell, she was smart enough to learn magic, and that takes a sharp mind. She could plainly see that the two of you weren't armed. If her friend had managed to put that knife into my head and she'd hit me with that lightning spell, that would have just left your friend with the knife to do all the fighting. Yeah... the more I think about it, the more I realise that if you hadn't reacted so quickly, we'd have been in some serious trouble. Thanks for that, by the way," he added. "I prefer my skull intact."

"You're welcome," Aiden muttered, feeling mostly recovered from his injury. Looking down at his arm, he was amazed to see it was completely healed. "That's incredible," he remarked as he looked back up at Nellise. For the first time, in decent light, Aiden could see her eyes were actually gold in colour.

"You're welcome," she smiled serenely. "Pacian, when you're done over there I shall tend to your injuries."

"What should we do about the bodies? We can't just leave them here," Aiden observed, grimacing at the sight of the blood pooling on the floor beneath their prone forms. He noticed Nellise avoided looking directly at them, and he suspected this was the first time she had seen such violence.

"We'll let the Mayor know what happened and let him take care of it," Colt replied gruffly. "It's his mess we're trying to clean up here, after all."

"This whole business is... wrong," Aiden breathed, hiding his discomfort. Pacian suddenly made a triumphant sound as he pulled open the drawer, attracting everyone's attention. A few moments of rifling around produced a series of papers and a small pouch containing coins. He handed the papers over to Aiden, and opened the pouch himself to investigate its contents.

"Nineteen nobles, four jacks," he remarked, pouring the coins back into the pouch after a few moments of counting. Aiden had already started flipping through the documents he had been handed and he barely took note of Pacian's remark. The papers seemed to mention financial transactions on a large scale, but he was yet to find anything illegal or subversive about it.

"Hold still and I'll fix your shoulder," Nellise asked of Pacian, who complied while the beautiful cleric began her prayerful whispers.

"You see anything weird in those papers?" Colt asked of Aiden impatiently.

"Trading details, some notes about people to contact, nothing unusual..." He trailed off as he found something of relevance. "Merin's name is in here. So is Olaf's. It looks like he was partnered in some sort of deal with her and a few other people. She's listed as an 'expeditor', whatever that is. Wait... there's a signed paper here from the Mayor to Merin, to have her hire some local thugs up in Culdery to put pressure on local businesses to accept bad deals." The others looked incredulously at Aiden as he continued reading.

"Most of these transactions are to or from a business called the North Shore Trading Company, based up north in Culdery. I'm no expert on trade, but it seems from some of these numbers that they were forcing people to sell to them at lower than normal prices, and then reselling at greatly inflated prices. Unbelievable."

"Interesting," Pacian wondered, narrowing his eyes at Merin's bloodied corpse.

"Does it say what happened to make her want to blackmail Olaf?"

"No, but I think we can safely assume that the partnership dissolved in a less than friendly fashion. The dates on these notes start out over a year ago, and finish just last month. Whatever happened to them occurred only recently."

"No wonder Olaf has been under so much stress," Nellise remarked. "His whole operation was going to be exposed, and the town has been suffering as a result." She put away her crystal and Pacian thanked her absently as he rubbed his shoulder.

"He must have known we'd end up looking at these documents," Aiden muttered to himself. "He's clearly broken several laws, and even if he doesn't know Pacian and myself, you two are members of organizations loyal to the crown, so you'd be obligated to hand this in to the local guards or something, right?"

"I'm not exactly popular with the Royal Rangers at the moment, kid," Colt reminded him. "And Nellise is little more than an acolyte, when you get right down to it. Heh, maybe he sent us here to get killed, giving him an excuse to have Merin imprisoned." Although Colt was clearly joking as he said this, the thought of it was enough to steal the humour from his words. A long moment of silence ensued as the possibilities ran through their minds. Pacian broke the spell.

"I think it's time we had a nice personal chat with our friend the Mayor."

* * *

They were dripping wet as they once more entered the Mayor's office, but none of them bothered to remove their coats this time. Aiden could see the secretary was surprised to see them barge in unannounced, and was clearly about to protest, but a sharp look from Colt kept her quiet.

Olaf was standing before the fireplace in the next room, warming himself against the winter cold. He looked up as he heard Aiden enter, closely followed by the others.

"You're back already I see," he observed. "How did your meeting go?"

"We recovered the documents you wanted," Aiden replied, keeping his tone neutral. He pulled out the papers from his longcoat, but made no move to offer them.

"You have them?" Olaf exclaimed. "Hand them over, quickly now!"

"Not so fast. I've looked through these and found you're involved in some pretty shady dealings," Aiden began calmly.

"That's none of your business," the Mayor bristled. "I asked you to retrieve the documents, and that is as far as your involvement requires."

"But *we* are involved now," Aiden pointed out. "Merin is dead, and so is one of her accomplices. By all rights we should turn you in to the town guards."

"You killed them?" Olaf hissed in a quiet voice, peering past them to make sure they weren't being overheard.

"She didn't give us a lot of choice," Colt grumbled, also keeping his voice low. "Just about killed me, actually. You might want to do something about the bodies if you want to keep this quiet."

"I'll send someone over immediately, but I must have those documents."

Pacian stepped forward, taking the papers from Aiden's hand. "First, a question," he stated. "Did you send us over there knowing Merin would likely try to kill us?"

"You accuse me of... of sending you to your deaths? On *purpose*? Outrageous!" Olaf whispered harshly. "I sent you over there because you two boys aren't known to her, Colt lends an intimidating presence, and Nellise has a reputation for being fair-minded. If Merin was foolhardy enough to attack all four of you then her demise is entirely her own fault. But I certainly never meant for you to come to harm."

"Foolhardy... or desperate?" Pacian mused. "You had her backed into a corner and then sent us in to force her hand." The blond rogue glowered at Olaf for a few moments before continuing. "This whole situation is *properly* shady. I want five gold sovereigns, or I'm taking this evidence to the town guards."

"You... You're blackmailing me?" Olaf sputtered.

"I prefer to look on it as an investment in your continued freedom," Pace replied, a mirthless grin on his face. Aiden and the others glanced at one another, surprised by this sudden turn of events. They kept quiet, however, waiting to see how this played out.

"You cad! You bounder!" Olaf breathed in disbelief. "You're hardly any better than that Halfling woman."

"Do be careful what you say to me in future, Olaf," Pacian purred. "I'd hate for the authorities to obtain this evidence and ruin your political career." Olaf went silent, but his eyes spoke volumes. But Pacian's resolve did not waver, and the elderly Mayor relented.

"Alright, alright. Just... keep those documents hidden and we have a deal," he muttered, fishing around in his pockets to produce four gold sovereigns, and a pouch with

coins jingling inside. He hesitated before handing them over, though. "What's to stop you giving that evidence to the guards even after I've paid you," he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing, really," Pace replied coldly. "You'll just have to trust me." Seeing no alternative, Olaf handed over the coins, which Pacian pocketed, along with the papers. With them out of sight, the Mayor seemed to relax somewhat.

"I don't care for this at all, but I suppose we have a mutually beneficial agreement, yes?" he stated.

"Uh, yes, that's right," Aiden hesitantly replied, licking his lips in consternation. Not only was he involved with the murder of two Raelani, he was now blackmailing the town Mayor, two things he didn't see coming when he got out of bed that morning.

The Mayor turned and walked over to a small desk, pulled out a sheet of parchment and picked up a quill. "Now that we've settled this issue, I would like to send you down to Fort Highmarch to advise them of the situation," he explained, scribbling down some notes in elegant script. Only the scratching sounds of the quill and the crackle of the fireplace permeated the silence of the room.

Nellise had the look of someone completely out of her depth, and Colt scrutinized Pacian as if trying to determine the quickest way to skin him, but the blond rogue seemed oblivious to the intense looks from his companions. Aiden knew as soon as they left the office, a lively conversation was going to take place.

"There you go," Olaf said brusquely, dripping candle wax onto the bottom of the note and imprinting it with the seal on his ring. He folded it and handed the note to Aiden, along with some other papers. "These are the supplies the town needs. Hand this to the Captain of the guards at Fort Highmarch, and he will see to it these forms find their way to the right people."

"Didn't you say earlier that you sent some people to the fort a week ago?" Nellise asked hesitantly.

"Quite so, and they were never heard from again," the Mayor explained bluntly. "But you'll make it through, because I think you have what it takes, and you also do not have a choice in the matter. We each have the power to ruin our lives by allowing word of these events to reach the local authorities. Do not test my resolve on this matter, and I will not test yours. The town needs aid, and you are the ones who are going to provide it, understood?"

Aiden nodded, not trusting himself to say anything. Pacian's gambit had landed them in a delicate situation, and words were going to be said about this. Strong words.

"Now, I suggest you set off as soon as possible," Olaf ordered. "I have to arrange for the disposal of certain individuals who are no longer amongst the living, without drawing undue attention."

Without another word, Aiden ushered the others out of the office and into the ceaseless rain outside. Colt's mouth was open to speak before the door had closed.

"So this is what you do for a living?" he snarled at Pacian. "Blackmailing people? If this was your plan you might have let *us* in on it, before we went in there. I'm in half a mind to go grab a hammer and get creative all over your face."

"That was most certainly *not* the right way to handle this situation," Nellise scolded. There was something about seeing her beautiful face looking so disappointed that didn't sit right with Aiden. He felt ashamed, even if it wasn't his fault. "Going to the head of the

town guards and presenting this information would have been my preference, *if* you had bothered to ask me. I don't like being associated with common criminals.”

“Criminal? *Me?*” Pacian practically shouted back, prompting glances from people passing by in the street. “That man in there was responsible for multiple counts of extortion, not to mention hiring people to commit murder. If you brought the town guards in on this, what do you think would have happened? Justice for all, and the town freed from the clutches of a criminal mastermind? Not bloody likely. It would have created a huge mess, with us right in the middle of it. Like it or not, we were used to eliminate one of Olaf's 'problems', and we would most likely have been detained as well.”

“He didn't hire us to go and kill Merin, as such,” Aiden pointed out in a hushed voice, glancing around in case anyone passing by might overhear their conversation. “I might be splitting hairs here, but I don't think we'd be in as much trouble as you suspect.”

“You can't know that,” Pacian contested. “We have no idea how the guards in this town were going to react and we're not exactly well known around here. I suspect Colt here has a bit of a record with the militia, and Nellise might have been allowed to go free, because that happens to pretty women. But you and me Aiden? We'd be in irons, and how does that help the town?”

“Look, this way, we keep *his* secret, he keeps *our* secret, we both keep an eye on each other, and we have money to feed ourselves with and then some. So what if he's forcing us to do a few jobs, I mean, we get to leave, right? Nellise, we can use this money to help get this place moving again. Who cares how I got it?” The acolyte silently considered Pacian's words. Aiden was more vocal with his opinion.

“You better hope he doesn't just turn us into the guards when we're not looking, Pace,” he warned ominously. “When all's said and done, he's still the Mayor, and we're a bunch of nobodies.”

“I can't discount the possibility,” Pacian conceded. “But if we make it to Highmarch and get those supplies the town needs, I reckon he'd be a fool to try anything against us. We'll be heroes!”

Aiden shook his head, hardly believing the elaborate plan. It was a gamble, but it might just work. Pace had always pushed the limits of what civilised folk would tolerate, but Aiden had never considered him a criminal, even if he did know how to pick a lock and steal a coin pouch.

“That's a good point, though I find I'm profoundly disturbed by the way your mind works,” Aiden finally said. “Do you two have anything else to add?”

“Only that I feel as though I have fallen in with bad people,” Nellise lamented. “I find your methods deplorable, even if your intentions were honourable. Regardless of what else I may feel, we still need to help out the town, and we can't do that from prison. You win, Pacian, but don't think you've heard the last of this.” Pace had the good grace to look ashamed, though Aiden couldn't tell if he was being sincere or not. Turning to Colt for his answer, Pacian was suddenly grabbed by the front of his tunic and pulled up to face level with the big man.

“The next time you pull a stunt like that on me, I'm gonna take you someplace quiet and beat you senseless. I'm not a crook, and I don't hang around with crooks. Do you wanna know what I do with crooks?”

“You beat them senseless?” Pacian's inquired, his face betraying his apprehension.

"I sure do, blondie," Colt nodded. "Then I hand them over to the guards. They don't ask how the crooks got so bloodied; they figure they're just real clumsy and ran into a wall a couple dozen times. My point is, watch how you handle yourself, or you'll answer to me." Pacian nodded slowly, and Colt lowered him back down to the ground. "Oh, one last thing. Hand over the coins."

"Why?" Pacian asked cautiously.

"Because if we're going to make it to Fort Highmarch, we'll need to buy you lightweights some proper equipment. Come on, we're going shopping."

* * *

The Bracksford smithy was quiet as they approached, something Aiden had previously dismissed due to the early hour. The sun was well and truly up now, even if it would be permanently hidden behind the heavy clouds that continued to pour rain down upon the land, and yet the smithy continued to remain silent. Colt opened the door and stepped inside out of the weather, closely followed by the others.

The interior of the shack was cold, which came as a disappointment. Nothing would be more welcome at that moment than a blazing forge to dry out in front of. The place had clearly not been used in some time, though the entire room was absolutely clean. Aiden had seen the Blacksmith's shop in Coldstream on an almost daily basis, but never had it been... *clean*. A productive smithy was a dirty smithy.

An old blanket that had been draped across a doorway was pushed aside a moment later, and a hugely muscled man stepped out before them. He was as tall as Colt, but much heavier, with arms like tree trunks. Fairly small tree trunks, by the standards of trees actually, but quite massive by comparison to human arms. Numerous tattoos were etched onto his bare forearms, though the images had blurred with age and the increase in his muscle size. They must have been drawn on in his youth, long before he took up the hammer.

"Hullo," he rumbled to the four potential customers before him. Judging by his thick accent and impressive stature, Aiden surmised he must have come from the savage Akoran tribes that lived in the mountains to the south. Quite what he was doing working in a blacksmith's shop in Bracksford was another matter.

"We wish to purchase some equipment," Nellise asked politely, as was her way.

"Why pretty lady want weapons? What you doing here?" he rumbled, his brow furrowed with the intensity of concentration required to stitch his sentences together.

"I go where I need to," Nellise replied diplomatically. "My companions are looking for weapons and armour. What do you have?"

"Weapons, yes, but not armour. King's army take most. Almost put Hadush out of work."

"And Hadush would be..?" Aiden prompted.

"Me," Hadush grunted succinctly. "Was expecting delivery of iron, but never arrived. Can't make new things. But look 'round, see what you like."

A quick glance around the room revealed the limited selection available to them. Colt wasted no time looking, picking up one of the short swords leaning against the wall and examining it closely.

"Have you had any experience with swords, Aiden?" he asked.

“A little,” Aiden shrugged. “I know which end to point at an opponent, if that's what you're wondering.” The sword seemed to meet whatever standard Colt held it to, so he passed it to Aiden, hilt first.

“This will do for you. If you prove to me you can handle this thing without slicing off your own hands, we can talk about something bigger. How do you feel about wearing some steel, Nel?”

“As a rule, we try to avoid that sort of thing,” she replied, still somewhat distraught from the day's events. “But if push comes to shove, the clergy have been taught to defend ourselves. I have a staff in my room at the inn, and I know how to use it. But I daresay that encasing me in a full suit of armour would render me unable to move.”

“I wouldn't worry, there's nothing so elaborate here,” Colt grunted. “Just a couple of chainmail shirts here that you and Aiden can take.” Pacian looked bored with the proceedings, and made his thoughts known.

“I'm taking this dagger and looking elsewhere for some equipment. Pay the man,” he instructed.

“Wait, how will you pay for anything?” Aiden spoke up as he headed toward the door. “Colt has the money.”

Pacian smiled slyly and winked at him as he closed the door. Colt had a vague expression on his face for a moment, then quickly took out the coin pouch and counted them out.

“Crafty son of a bitch,” he growled, apparently discovering missing coins. “At least he left us enough to pay for this stuff.” Their business concluded, Nellise and Aiden put on their new armour while Colt grumbled about the price, but he didn't have a lot of choice in the matter.

After leaving the quiet smithy, they headed back over to the Bracksfordshire Arms. Colt and Aiden stood out the front under the cover of the veranda, while Nellise ducked inside to quickly grab her equipment. There was no sign of Pacian yet, so Aiden had a few slightly awkward minutes to stand around in silence with the gruff ranger.

After a few of the local farmers had passed through the doorway, Nellise reappeared with her staff and their backpacks over her shoulder.

“I'll take that,” Pacian said, suddenly appearing next to Aiden. His own pack was practically empty, but the blond rogue had spent his time buying provisions, which he carried around in a large sack. But more than that, he was wearing a suit of leather armour, dyed a patchwork of green and brown, just like Colt's.

“Where did you get that?” Colt exclaimed.

“You see that leather shop over the road there?” Pacian hiked his thumb over his shoulder, pointing out a store just down the road from the Mayor's office. “Funny thing is, they sell leather goods. Nice older gentleman and his young, young wife. A little too young for him if you ask me but-”

“I know of the bloody shop,” Colt interrupted angrily, “but that's *ranger* armour. It's practically a uniform.”

“Well, this elder gentleman I mentioned? Turns out he used to be a Ranger, years ago. Retired now obviously, but when I mentioned our mission to brave dangerous roads in an effort to bring urgent supplies to the town, well, he said to me 'I've got a little something here that might help you out'. And he brings out this very nice suit of armour, and insists I take it.” Pacian kept loading up his pack with some of the items and supplies

he found as he talked. His overly casual manner seemed to be infuriating Colt all the more.

"I refused at first, I mean, it's clearly fine quality and I couldn't afford it. But his wife said I'd look very dashing in it, and after all, this was for the safety of the town. Aiden, open your pack so I can put some stuff in there."

"Never knew Dave Patel was a Ranger," Colt mused. "He had that weathered look about him though. Might have to talk to him about that when we get back. But if he offered it to you, you must have made quite an impression. Either that or you've somehow swindled him, and if I find out that's what you've done..."

"I know, I know, severe beatings and such," Pacian sighed.

"As much I enjoy watching these little sparring matches between you two," Nellise sighed, "I really think we should start out immediately. It could take a week to get back here with supplies, and every hour could make all the difference." His pack full, Aiden hefted it onto his back, and secured the clasps.

"I couldn't agree more," he said, "you two can argue about whatever you like on the way south." Colt grunted in agreement, and Pacian simply grinned at him. This would prove to be an interesting journey, in more ways than one, Aiden thought.

There was no sense of order to their group, but Nellise seemed content to bring up the rear, ready to serve should the need arise. She seemed caught up in contemplation as she absently followed the others, her beautiful face framed by her white hood, giving her a sort of white halo.

Aiden almost laughed at himself, putting her up on a pedestal like that. Despite learning of her profession as a cleric, the two boys were still rather smitten with her. Pacian kept checking over his shoulder to smile at her, perhaps thinking to himself that she was still available, if only he could be charming enough.

After a few more minutes they reached the south gate. Like the wall surrounding the town, it was made of thick oak tree trunks, the next best thing to stone walls. There were four guards standing near the southern gate, looking miserable in their rusty chain armour and blue tabard. The armour itself didn't appear to fit any of them properly – some suits were too large, and draped heavily off their shoulders. One of them was even a young woman, far too small for her chain mail, but looking defiant and proud regardless.

They perked up when Aiden produced the official note from the Mayor, and moments later, two of them lifted a heavy bar and then swung the gate outwards enough to allow people to walk out in single file to the highway beyond. As Aiden and his companions strode through, the biggest of the guards quietly wished them good luck, and then closed the gate behind them, locking it in place with an ominous 'thunk'.

Chapter Three

The rain continued to hammer the ground unabated as they walked along the highway to the south. All of Aiden's companions had their hoods up to try and keep as dry as possible, but mere clothing could only do so much. Unless they wanted to be wrapped in oilcloth like Colt's longbow, this was as dry as they were going to get for the foreseeable future.

For the first hour of the journey, they travelled in silence, and Aiden couldn't help but spend his time thinking about their fight that morning, wondering if there was some

other way they could have avoided it, but in the end, he determined Colt was right – Merin had made her choices, and now she was dead.

The young adventurer hoped Mayor Olaf was, indeed, going to cover for them. The more he thought about it, the more he realized Pacian was right to blackmail the man. Olaf would probably do just about anything to keep his public image squeaky clean, and there was a good chance he would have put the blame on the four of them if things had gone differently. Still, it was never a pleasant thing to see people die right before one's eyes, and he dwelled on this somber thought for sometime. A quick glance at Nellise hinted she was dwelling on the same grim topic.

The flat terrain of Bracksfordshire slowly began to undulate more as they continued along the road, with small hills appearing over the horizon around them. The number of pine trees dotting the landscape was starting to increase too, though it could hardly be called forest. Aiden could just manage to perceive the outlines of the Highmarch Mountains to the south through the moisture-laden air.

Given the reduced visibility, they weren't really all that far away from the mountains, but it was still going to be three days before they arrived at Fort Highmarch in this weather. At least the road hadn't turned completely into mud, otherwise it would take them twice as long to slog their way through.

Aiden judged it to be midday, and felt it was a good time to stop for food. He spied a small rise with some pine trees growing on it that would provide at least a little shelter, as well as being above the waterline. He idly wondered just how much longer it could possibly rain for as he led the others to the relatively dry area and crouched down on the ground to rest.

"Well, I guess we won't be lighting a fire and cooking any food here," Pacian grumbled, leaning against a tree trunk to gain as much shelter as possible. "You'll be glad to hear I planned for this when purchasing our provisions."

"Let me guess," Nellise wondered, sounding like she already knew the answer. "Mouldy cheese and bread, and perhaps some dried beef."

"It's like you can read minds, or something," Aiden groaned as he pulled out exactly what Nellise had described from his pack. "I guess it'll keep us going, at least. If it helps, just imagine the proper meals we'll be able to buy once we reach the fort."

They each took a share of the meagre rations. Aiden tried to imagine he was eating freshly baked bread and sizzling roast beef, but his sense of taste insisted on telling him only the absolute truth about what was in his mouth. To take his mind off the ordinary food, he decided to engage Nellise in conversation.

"So, Nellise" he began to say between bites of food. Having something to do with his hands was helping to cover his nervousness about talking with the beautiful young woman. "So, I couldn't help but notice your unusual eyes, and I was wondering why they're like that?" The question sounded stupid even as he was saying it. Aiden wasn't normally one to ask such personal inquiries of lovely ladies, but one had to start sometime. Pacian started paying closer attention to the conversation, but he still kept food as his primary object of interest.

"Well, there's a little bit of a mystery about that actually," Nellise began. "Gold is not a normal colour for people of any race, and my mother certainly didn't have golden eyes."

"What of your father?"

"I never knew my father," she replied wistfully. "I asked my mother about him when I was younger, but she would suddenly become sad, and quiet. Yet... even as a tear ran down her cheek, she would smile, too. I didn't understand of course, but it confused me and I never asked her again."

"So you've no idea then?"

"I gathered from her reactions that he was... special," Nellise explained. "She spent the rest of her life in service to the Church, and we have never discussed it again. I'm sorry I can't provide you with more information," she apologised, apparently noting Aiden's crestfallen appearance.

"Not at all," he replied, smiling in spite of himself. Aiden's mother had said that she could always tell when he was lying because it was 'written all over his face'. With that to contend with, young Aiden had quickly learned that it was pointless trying to be deceitful or dishonest on purpose. His was an expressive face, as he had learned in more recent years.

As he sat there, chewing on his unremarkable repast, Aiden found himself looking at the acolyte's staff, and a thought occurred to him. This thought generated certain questions; questions that would require a diplomatic approach.

"So, how long have you been with the Church of Aielund?" he ventured, genuinely curious, as well as fishing for information.

"I have been an acolyte for a little over three years now," she replied, "though mother always had me doing chores and such down at the local chapterhouse since I was ten. She felt it would build character. If she knew the sordid details of this morning's encounter, she might have kept me from joining altogether."

"Interesting. At what point were you taught to use that staff?" Aiden continued, as Nellise glanced at the weapon that lay next to her on the sodden ground.

"I first held that staff a few months ago. Most of our training is defensive, of course."

"So your order isn't a militant one?" Aiden pressed. Nellise suddenly seemed to realise where his line of conversation was heading.

"Oh, not at all," she assured him. "In fact, Kingdom law prevents members of the clergy from having military or civilian rank, to avoid a conflict of interest as there was in times past. I am an acolyte of the Resolute Heralds, our local chapter of the Church of Aielund, dedicated to bettering civilisation. It was a different chapter that was responsible for certain... *unfortunate* acts, long ago."

Aiden knew what she was referring to, if only vaguely. The Church of Aielund had an uneven history, the legacy of which was still being felt even today. But he felt this was a good opportunity to gauge her reactions and understanding of that history.

"Times past?" he asked.

"Yes. Last century, the Church had great political power throughout the land, greater than the King himself, and it was used... poorly." Her voice was passionate - clearly this was important to her. "Many suffered needlessly from accusations of impurity, heresy and other such nonsense, as the more paranoid factions of the clergy took power. Specifically, the Divine Templars, a chapter whose ethos was more focused on maintaining order and strict adherence to the Codex Morium, our holy book and centuries-old treatise on proper conduct, than any other concern."

"The King was a weak man, so it fell to the people to rise up and stop the tyrant Archieros and restore authority to the throne. The Divine Templars were disbanded, and

only three chapters of the church remain. Since then, the training doctrine for the priesthood has been very strict, and places great emphasis on service, humility, and repentance above all else.”

“Damn right they do,” Colt grunted. He was leaning up against the tree, keeping an eye on their surroundings even as he ate. “They’re tripping over themselves trying to help people, and always taking the blame for things they didn’t do. It’s disgusting.” Nellise’s face revealed a long-suffering look, but Aiden wanted to know more.

“What do you mean exactly?” The big ranger didn’t even turn to look at him as he talked, choosing to gaze across the sodden landscape as he talked.

“They’ve been humble and repentant for a long time, and *that* has become their religion. They let just about anyone treat them like dirt. You people are pathetic. Don’t you have any pride in yourselves?”

“Pride is what led to our downfall,” Nellise reminded him quietly. “We seek now to make amends and reassure people that our ways differ greatly from those of our predecessors.”

“That much is obvious,” Colt grunted. “I just think you take it too far is all. There’s gotta be a happy medium. I can’t stand being around priests these days, they just ain’t men. Especially the women.”

“Are you even aware what words are coming out of your mouth? Because they’re very strange,” Aiden asked earnestly. Nellise smiled faintly at this and Pacian almost choked on his food as he started laughing. Colt turned to face them with a scowl on his unshaven face.

“You know what I mean. Look, all I’m saying is that they gotta start acting like real people again. Fawning and kissing everyone’s feet for stuff that happened a long time ago by other people isn’t helping. Get over it already.” This was said directly to Nellise, but the young cleric was unshaken.

“Thank you Colt, I’ll take that under advisement,” she replied coolly.

“I’m starting to think you’re not as stupid as I thought,” Aiden remarked wryly to the big ranger, which had the desired effect of making Nellise smile. Long moments passed with no sound other than the rain, before Colt stood up straight and futilely wrung some water out of his heavy cloak.

“Enough chit-chat,” he said gruffly. “We keep moving.”

“What’s the rush? I’m not done yet,” Pacian complained, still chewing on a large hunk of cheese.

“The sooner we get to the fort, the sooner I can get a drink. But if you’re looking for some incentive, once we get into the hills I’ll see if I can take down a deer. I think we could all use some real food for a change.” Pacian immediately brightened, and put away the rest of his food as they stood and prepared to continue the journey.

* * *

The rain continued without respite as they started to move into the hills, but the silence among the group had ended. Pacian took the time to inquire further about Nellise’s life in the Church, a subject he had little knowledge of. Aiden listened in to her stories from time to time, gleaning whatever useful information he could about the Church.

He'd spent years reading through all sorts of books in the time since his fall, but he never ventured into religious texts, figuring the information he was looking for was to be found in books of a more arcane nature. The young explorer was mildly amused that his old friend was still enamoured with the acolyte. Hopefully with time, Pace would realise that nothing was ever going to happen between them.

Colt said little, but his few comments about the land around them was an improvement, leading Aiden to assume his hangover was subsiding. The ranger had taken the lead after their brief rest, scanning their surroundings from underneath his hood. Regrettably, he had been unable to find any deer tracks, a fact that had disturbed him somewhat.

"Deer ain't exactly common this far south, but they're not rare either," he had commented absently while kneeling down to scrutinise the ground yet again. "We're practically in the wilds Aiden; there should be something around. It's damn strange."

An hour later, all Colt had found were days-old signs of passage from a man, heading south. The signs were subtle – no tracks could survive for long in the mud and rain, so the big ranger must have been detecting other indicators, such as displaced branches on the trees or some such. Or he was making it up. It was hard to tell, for Colt was the very definition of 'inscrutable'.

The days were short in winter, and dusk was quickly encroaching as they moved south. Aiden had hoped the rain would have ceased, or at least eased as they had moved from Bracksford, but to no avail. If anything, the colder temperatures in the hills was turning the rain into sleet, making a miserable journey even less comfortable. Aiden was about to advise Colt to find some shelter for the night, when in the gloom ahead, he locked eyes with someone crouching over the ground.

Aiden froze. The person he was looking directly at seemed to be a woman. Her long hair was bedraggled and matted against her mud-splattered face. Tattered animal skins and furs hung around her, but it was the look in her eyes that made Aiden's heart pound in his ears. It was like looking into the eyes of a wild animal, one that was prepared to rip his throat out if he moved too quickly.

The two of them stared at each other, motionless for a long moment before Aiden's companions noticed what was happening. Then, she bolted into the trees, running faster than he thought was possible given the conditions. Aiden suddenly gasped for air, only now aware that he had been holding his breath. His heart was racing as he recovered from his momentary shock, and he turned to look at his companions to comment on what he had just seen.

Aiden was surprised to see that Colt had his greatsword levelled at the receding figure, still rushing to find solace amongst the scattered trees. Pacian seemed to be just as surprised as Aiden was, but he still had the presence of mind to draw his dagger. Nellise merely looked at the others in confusion, apparently having missed the sudden encounter altogether. She was, however, the first to notice the still figure of a man lying on the road ahead and rushed in for a closer look.

"It's one of the town guards," she remarked upon a quick inspection. Aiden could see the body now too, and grimaced at the site of the muddy and torn form of what was once a man. The suit of chain mail he had been wearing was mostly intact, but his tabard was torn into shreds. He hadn't noticed the corpse, having been completely focused on the

savage that looked ready to pounce on him, but now that he was calming down, he could see the remains quite well. Colt suddenly felt the urge to curse loudly.

"What's your problem?" Aiden asked, in control of his faculties once more. The big ranger glared into the distance, in the direction they last saw 'her'.

"I was so busy looking for tracks I didn't see that bloody girl until we were right next to her," he grumbled. "If she'd have been a bandit or something, we'd be in real trouble by now."

"Did you see her eyes?" Aiden whispered, shuddering at the memory. "I'm not so sure we've avoided trouble."

"No kidding, she killed a bloody guardsman," Pacian exclaimed, almost as angry as Colt. "If we weren't here in a group, she probably would have slit your throat Aiden. Can you track her, Colt?"

"Of course I can track her, she was *right here a minute ago!*" the ranger roared. Before Pacian could respond to that, Nellise's clear voice interceded.

"Wait a moment. Colt, come here and look at this," she asked, gesturing at the body before her. Still fuming at himself, the big ranger swaggered over to see what she was pointing at and in an instant, his anger was replaced by dread. Kneeling down for a closer look, Colt carefully examined the body, while Aiden and Pacian took a few steps closer, morbidly curious to see what all the fuss was about.

Colt abruptly stood up a moment later, and set about intently searching the ground for something that Aiden assumed to be tracks of some sort. He was about to ask what was going on when the big man spoke.

"I don't know who that woman was, but she didn't kill this man," he grated ominously. Nellise nodded sagely, as if anticipating this answer. Aiden looked at her for further explanation.

"Unless that woman is sporting a set of massive canine teeth, this man was killed by wolves," she reiterated. Aiden's eyes involuntarily widened, and Pacian immediately began glance around nervously, as if a pack of wild animals was about to descend upon them. Wolves had an almost mystical reputation, and they had all heard enough stories about the beasts to be genuinely afraid at the prospect of facing them.

"Maybe she's a werewolf?" Pacian wondered. "That'd explain a lot, and she sure looked wild enough to me."

"Preposterous, they're just a legend," Nellise scoffed. "And if Colt doesn't find any human tracks, we can dismiss that simply based on the evidence."

"Yep, right here. Wolf tracks," Colt confirmed. "Could barely make them out with all this water, but it was definitely wolves. Maybe two or three of them, it's hard to tell. What I can't understand is, why they attacked him? There's just not enough evidence to show what happened here." Aiden gritted his teeth and looked closer at the badly decomposed body. Little flesh remained inside the chain armour, as if they had eaten around the metal, taking what meat they could safely reach without risking damage to their teeth.

"This body is clearly days old, and the water isn't exactly helping to preserve it," Nellise added. "Could wolves have been responsible for all the missing people that have come south from the town?"

"Wolves rarely attack men," Colt grunted, shaking his head. "Usually only when cornered or..." A horrible expression appeared on the big man's features, made even

more ominous by the fading light. “Of *course*. They've been driven to it by hunger. I couldn't find any sign of other game, right? Either they've eaten everything else around here or the game has been scared off, but for whatever reason, they're starving. And there are few things more dangerous than a pack of starving wolves.”

“So what do we do now?” Pacian asked no-one in particular. They all glanced at each other, hoping someone had an idea. Aiden had one, but it wasn't very good. In fact, he was quite sure they'd hate it.

“This changes nothing,” he stated. “We have to keep moving to Fort Highmarch.” His suggestion was met with silence that was broken a few moments later by Pacian's eloquent tongue.

“Are you mad?” he blurted. “There's an unknown number of starving wolves out here who'll probably want to eat us. It's at least two more days to the fort, and that's if we run like buggery and don't stop for rest.”

“The alternative is to go back to Bracksford and slowly starve,” Aiden observed grimly. He wasn't too keen on this idea; Bracksford was a dead end, and without work and proper supplies, it was pointless going back. The only other place nearby was Fenwick, in the southwest of the shire, but it was even further than the fort. They might as well head for the place with all the heavily armed soldiers.

The weak sun slowly sank below the horizon, and it was rapidly becoming too dark to see in the dim, dreary conditions. Then, as if on cue, the sound of a wolf's howl could be heard in the distance, off to the west. Aiden froze with terror at the sound, desperately wishing he could think of an alternate plan.

“That tears it,” Colt growled. “They've got our scent. Even if we turn back we'll still have to deal with them, and it's too wet to start a fire. We'll have to make it into the mountains and find a dry cave before we'll find rest. Damn this bloody weather!”

“We'd better start moving then,” Nellise advised, her voice reflecting grim determination. Aiden nodded, and glanced at Pacian to see what he thought.

“What? You think I'm going back to town by myself?” the blond rogue scoffed. “Just start walking, mate.”

“I shall provide light,” Nellise said, whispering a prayer. She held aloft her quarterstaff, which began to shine with a bright luminescence, illuminating the area out to roughly ten yards distant. It wasn't much, but it would suffice. Aiden voiced a small concern.

“You don't think this is going to bring the wolves down on us, do you?”

“It's either that or we trip over ourselves in the night,” Colt explained. “And they'll see us in the dark anyway, so yeah, the light is a good thing. Thanks Nel.” The gravity of their situation was not lost on any of them, so without another word, Colt started along the road again with grim purpose adding speed to his step. The others quickly fell in line behind him, staying within the sphere of light being cast by Nellise's staff.

The road was clearly heading uphill now, and within an hour, the rain had turned into sleet, chilling the already drenched travellers. Aiden huddled in his longcoat and pulled the hood down over his face as far as he could without sacrificing vision. He briefly lamented the circumstances which put him into this position, and how far from his original purpose he'd fallen. There were mysteries he had yet to solve; indeed the entire purpose of coming to Bracksford awaited him, but to even have a chance at figuring out

what had happened to him years ago in that cave Aiden and his companions had to survive the next few days.

Glancing around nervously, Aiden could see the others were all expecting an attack at any moment, but kept moving at a brisk speed along the muddy road in the slim hopes of finding shelter before any confrontation. The trees around them, initially growing at irregular intervals, had closed in as they'd travelled, and could almost be called a forest at this point. Signs of snow on the ground and in their branches could be seen, and amongst them all, Aiden spotted the shining yellow eyes of a wolf.

"Look out, in those trees!" he cried, startled at the sudden appearance of their unseen adversaries. His companions turned as one to look in the direction Aiden was pointing and spied the wolf gazing at them with hungry eyes, just outside the sphere of light.

"Back, you little bastard!" Colt roared at the wolf, which bared its teeth but remained just outside the circle of light. Everyone readied their weapons in anticipation, but it was a second, unseen wolf that came at them from behind. The sounds of its padded feet clawing at the ground caught Pacian's attention, and the blond rogue shouted an alarm at the last possible moment.

Colt whirled around at the oncoming beast and slammed the flat of his greatsword into its ribs, throwing it to one side where it limped away, whining in pain. More yellow eyes suddenly appeared in the darkness, but the wounded wolf proved to be a potent example to the others, who did not attack.

"That was a test," Colt growled quietly. "They're wary of us, and they know we can hurt them. This'll show us just how desperate they are." The standoff continued for a long moment, before the yellow eyes slowly vanished from sight. Aiden let out an explosive breath of relief, trying to slow the pounding of his heart.

"We got lucky, just now," Colt said, leaning on his sword.

"Why didn't you kill it?" Pacian hissed.

"If we all get through this without blood being shed, all the better," Colt explained. "I reckon we have about three hours before they come back in greater numbers. I aim to be holed up in a cave by then, preferably in front of a fire. Any objections?" There were none.

"Let's get to it then," he ordered. "I'll take the lead, but I'll need you to stay close Nel, so I can see where I'm going. Keep your weapons ready, I don't want to get caught like that again." Colt hefted his greatsword and turned to continue along the road, with the rest moving as fast as they could to keep up. Nellise flicked an uncertain glance in Aiden's direction, and he knew she was struggling to remain calm, so far outside of her normal world.

Though spurred on by the adrenaline from the encounter, their energies were being sapped by sleet that before long, became a fully fledged snowfall. The conditions underfoot were treacherous, and Nellise stumbled into the mud on more than one occasion.

"Thank you Aiden," the young cleric whispered as he helped her back on her feet, the weariness apparent in her voice. "My years in the clergy did not equip me for this sort of thing."

"Few people would be," Aiden offered sagely. "Colt's the only one trained for this, and look how he turned out." Despite the gravity of their situation, he at least got a smile out of her.

"I'm standing right here you know," Colt rumbled from two yards distant. "You two okay?"

"I think I hurt my ankle, but I'll live," Nellise replied, leaning against Aiden for support. For his part, Aiden tried not to think about that too much.

"How much further do we have to go?" Pacian inquired, rubbing his left shoulder absently. In the pale light cast by Nel's staff, the blonde rogue looked paler than usual.

"Not far," Colt answered. "We're above the snowline now, though you probably figured that out already. Pretty sure there's a cave within an hour's travel of here. It's kinda hard to get my bearings though, as I've never travelled this road in the dark before. So if you can hold yourselves together for a while longer, we'll have some shelter."

"What about a fire?" Pacian asked.

"You're full of questions for a kid who can hardly stand up," Colt growled at him. "Just get to the cave and I'll take care of the rest." Too tired to respond, Pace simply fell into step behind the big ranger as he continued along the road. Nellise put her arm around Aiden's shoulder, and leaned on her staff as they trailed after the others.

True to his estimate, Colt managed to locate the cave he'd mentioned roughly an hour later. It was off the road a little, and Aiden was impressed with the ranger's memory, given the appalling conditions, for it was unlikely they would have found it without him. There was a solid layer of snow covering the ground here, and the road itself was at a very noticeable angle. They were truly in the Highmarch Mountains now.

The entrance to the cave was roughly five feet high, and a similar distance across. Nellise held forth her staff, but its light was beginning to fade. From its dimming luminance they could see the tunnel was at least twenty feet long. Colt held a finger to his lips, to signal the rest of them to be quiet. He knelt down and carefully examined the fresh snow for tracks by the dying light.

"Seems clear," he whispered a minute later. "This fresh snow isn't helping, though." His hushed tones told Aiden he wasn't completely certain. His suspicions were confirmed a moment later, when the ranger took out his longbow from its oilcloth and strung it. He knocked an arrow, and then looked to Aiden.

"Grab that staff and come with me," he instructed. "You two can wait out here for a minute, while we make sure it's clear." Pacian and Nellise nodded, the weary young cleric handing over her staff without complaint. Aiden took it and held it in front of him, shining its dimming magical light aloft while he and Colt slowly moved inside the cave. The sound of water could be heard from up ahead, as if a large pool of water lay within the cave, and both men could see their misty breath in the still, cold air.

After a short tunnel section of a dozen yards, it appeared to open out into a larger cavern, its ceiling nearly twenty feet high and twice that across. Colt suddenly stopped walking, prompting Aiden to do likewise. He quickly looked around for signs of trouble, and saw the glowing yellow eyes of a wolf staring at them from less than thirty feet away, just outside the range of the light. Without hesitation, the big ranger loosed an arrow and it struck the wolf squarely between the eyes. It yelped and went silent almost instantly.

"Nice shot," Aiden whispered.

"Thanks, though I wish it didn't come to this," Colt replied at a normal volume, his posture relaxed. "Figured there might be a bitch in here, but at least it's too early in the year for breeding. Killing her pups would have been nasty work. Let's go get the others; it's probably a good idea to remove the corpse too."

Aiden waited a moment, holding the staff that was barely illuminating the place at all now, while Colt put his longbow over one shoulder and hefted the skinny wolf's body, then headed out of the cave. The other two were waiting for them when they walked out, leaning against the wall just inside the cave entrance, no doubt to get out of the weather. Colt strode outside and tossed the dead wolf into the nearby trees without ceremony. He was about to turn and speak to the rest of them when something caught his eye.

"Okay that's... strange," he said absently, stepping over to look closer at what appeared to be a pile of wood at the base of one of the trees.

He quickly pulled out his longbow again and looked around cautiously, but nothing else could be seen except for the dark trees and the white snow falling from the sky.

"That wood looks like it's been cut into kindling by someone," Aiden observed, equally unsettled by the discovery. "Did you two see anyone around here while you were waiting?"

"Not a thing," Pacian shrugged. "But we've only been here a few minutes. Maybe it's been there for a while?"

"Perhaps it was left there by another ranger," Nellise conjectured, huddled for warmth in the cave entrance. Colt, satisfied that nobody else was nearby, knelt down and had a closer look at the woodpile.

"If it had been here for more than thirty minutes, it'd be covered in snow by now. This is recent; someone has been here ahead of us."

"But who would know we were coming here..." Aiden's voice trailed off as he came to a realisation. "That wild woman? She was the only one that could have known we'd be coming this way."

"Right now, I don't particularly care if the wolves put that firewood there," Nellise stated. "Can we discuss this further tomorrow, perhaps over a nice, warm fire?"

"Of course," Aiden replied, feeling like an idiot for ignoring the plight of his companions. He stepped forward and picked up an armful of wood while holding onto the staff in his other hand. The light was barely providing any benefit at all now, and they would be hard pressed to start the fire in the pitch black of the cave. Colt scooped up the rest of the wood, and they all hurried back into the cave.

By the time Colt had stacked the wood in a clear space and was preparing to light it, the prayer of light Nellise had placed on her staff had finally given out. It was utterly dark in the cold cave, causing Aiden a moment of anxiety as he recalled the last time he had been in a dark cave, years ago. But a moment later sparks from the ranger's flint and steel started to strike the tinder he had placed underneath the kindling. A small flame caught hold, and slowly began to grow, providing not just a modicum of warmth, but a relief from the shadow of Aiden's memories.

The rest of them quickly gathered around, shivering, but with Colt's expert guidance, they had a decent sized fire going within minutes. Aiden took off his gloves and warmed his hands in front of the flame, grateful and relieved that they had finally found shelter for the night. Nellise started to wring out her sodden robe, which was beginning to steam from the growing intensity of the fire.

"I think I'll hang this near the fire to dry out," she said. "Excuse me while I change." She unstrapped her pack and sorted through it, pulling out a blanket a moment later.

"Is that water I hear?" Pacian wondered facetiously. "I think I'll look around the cave to uh, you know, make sure it's safe and such."

"I'm going to stand watch while the three of you get some rest," Aiden offered.

"Fantastic, wake me if there's trouble," Colt replied, his voice cracking from apparent exhaustion. Evidently the big ranger had indeed been covering how wounded and tired he was. He turned away from Nellise and began fumbling with his backpack to free up his bedroll, while the other two boys stood and vacated the area.

Aiden reluctantly walked away from the warmth of the fire and back out to the entrance of the cave. In the distance, a wolf could be heard howling, giving the young man a shiver that had nothing to do with the cold. He figured that if a wolf approached the cave, he would at least see the firelight from down the tunnel reflecting in the beasts' eyes - right before it leaped on him and tore his throat out.

Colt was right – they had been lucky that evening. Only the prospect of attacking four armed humans had kept the beasts at bay, and they had not returned as he'd feared. Aiden had to revise his opinion of the man. Despite his rough, uncouth nature, Colt was clearly very good at his job and they all owed their lives to him.

Aiden slumped down tiredly and leaned back against the cave wall, watching the snowflakes that he could see by the distant firelight swirl around on their journey to the ground. Looking out into the cold night, he wondered where that wild girl was right now, and if she had indeed provided them with the firewood that had saved them from literally freezing to death this night. Did she have her own place to stay? How did she survive up here by herself? And was she really a threat, if she had gone to the trouble of giving them the firewood?

"Thinking about someone special?" Pacian said, jolting Aiden out of his idle thoughts. "Sorry, guess you didn't hear me coming. Some watchman you are."

"I'm looking for wolves out *there*, not creeping up behind me," Aiden said. "I figure if there are still wolves in the cave someplace, I'd be alerted by you screaming like a little girl."

"Hey, I *bellow* like a little girl, thanks very much," Pacian bristled, though with a hint of humour in his tired voice. "Here, I brought you something to eat. I hope you like—"

"Mouldy cheese and bread, yeah I'm familiar with the menu," Aiden sighed. He took the food gratefully, hungry enough to not care about what it was. "How are you faring?" Pacian crouched down next to Aiden and shared a little of the bread.

"I don't think I've been this tired or scared before in my entire life. You?"

"I've felt worse," Aiden shrugged absently. His friend knew exactly what he was referring to. Neither of them would forget that day he fell into the cave, and they had yet to encounter anything that would compare with it. Not even a pack of hungry wolves could compete with Aiden's memories.

"Hell of a situation you've gotten me into here," Pacian chided. "Remind me again why I came with you in the first place?"

"You were sick of dealing with your drunken father, and needed to get out of town after stealing Jim Caston's coin pouch."

"Oh right," Pace replied in mock remembrance. "I'd forgotten all about them."

"How are the others?" Aiden inquired.

"Colt was snoring when I left, and Nellise was lying down next to the fire, wrapped in a blanket on her bedroll. It's a bloody crime that a girl with a body like that goes and joins the Church, I tell you."

"I know what you mean," Aiden smiled wanly. "But nevertheless, it is how it is. Just don't forget what she does for a living the next time you're feeling 'friendly', if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, yeah," Pacian grumbled.

"Why don't you go and get some rest, Pace," Aiden advised.

"I'm sure as hell not used to all this walking," the blond rogue complained, stretching his arms and yawning theatrically. "Colt mumbled something about waking him up in a few hours to take watch. 'Night Aiden."

"Night Pace," Aiden replied as his friend staggered off inside. He turned his gaze outward to keep watch through the next few hours, eagerly awaiting his chance to sleep next to the warm fire.

Chapter Four

Aiden awoke to the smell of roasting meat. This was a pleasant change from the past few weeks of being awoken at the crack of dawn by cold water dripping on his face. He rolled over and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes, noticing daylight streaming in through the cave entrance. The crackling campfire had been burning all night and was now being used to cook a brace of rabbits. Colt, looking somewhat rested, sat next to the fire keeping an eye on the meat as it cooked. The smell was tantalising.

"Morning," Colt said, noticing Aiden.

"Morning," he replied with a croaking voice. "You managed to find some game?"

"Yeah, I set a few traps during my watch and got lucky. There's not a lot of meat on these things, but it's better than more of that bloody cheese. When we get to Fort Highmarch, I swear I'm going to eat an entire horse. You may need to avert your eyes; it won't be pretty."

Aiden laughed aloud and slowly rose to his feet. With the light of day providing some illumination in the small cave, he was able to see that there was a large pool of water a little further in. It was probably only a few yards deep, but the plant life growing around it suggested it was at least fresh.

A rope was tied to one of the low hanging stalactites on the ceiling and stretched across to an outcrop of rock on the other side of the cave. Some of their clothes were draped over it, including Nellise's robe, all drying from the heat of the fire. They were probably absorbing a good deal of the smoke as well, but it was better than wearing wet clothing.

"Where are the others?" Aiden asked after noticing the other bedrolls were unoccupied.

"Cave entrance," the big man replied gruffly. "I told Pacian to keep watch while I cooked. Nellise woke up about half an hour ago and went to talk with him. I let her borrow my blanket as well, since hers was a little too short to use as a dress."

"You have an objection to looking at beautiful women?" Aiden asked, eyeing him shrewdly.

"Unlike you and your friend, I don't have trouble remembering that she's a priestess," he clarified. "Besides, I've only got eyes for one woman." Aiden raised an eyebrow, surprised that any woman would find this half-man, half-bear appealing, until he realised that he didn't say the woman in question actually had eyes for *him*. The young adventurer

briefly considered asking Colt more about this, but decided they had enough to deal with already.

He donned his chain shirt before grabbing his longcoat and making his way out through the tunnel to the cave entrance. The sounds of hushed conversation could be heard as Aiden approached. Pacian and Nellise were sitting on the rocky ground just inside the entrance, and appeared to be having a casual discussion about something.

Their voices weren't loud enough to make out what they were saying, probably to avoid attracting unwanted attention - whether it was from wolves or their companions, Aiden couldn't tell, but they stopped talking and turned as they sensed his approach. Nellise was wrapped in blankets, and Pacian had clearly been on watch since very early in the morning, judging by his red-rimmed eyes.

"Good morning Aiden," Nellise greeted him warmly. Despite the previous day's events, she seemed radiant. "Did you sleep well?"

"Quality, not quantity," Aiden murmured. "Just going to make use of the nearby trees, if you two wouldn't mind keeping a lookout for me?"

"That's what we're here for," Pacian quipped, cheery despite the cold, morning. Aiden crept out onto the snow-covered ground, squinting into the brightness in case there were wolves about. Seeing none, and trusting his companions to call out if trouble approached, he 'conducted his affairs', and then hurried back inside the cave.

The smell of the roasting rabbits lured the other two in and together they ate the first decent meal they'd had in days. They ate in silence, their attention focused on their food, although Aiden did notice that Colt kept a wary eye on the cave entrance. Despite the heady aroma of roasted meat, they were not disturbed by any of the local wildlife. Aiden silently hoped the wolves had decided they were too risky to hunt.

After they had finished eating, Nellise took down her robe from the rope and shyly asked the men to avert their gaze. They complied, turning their attention toward packing their gear for the next leg of the journey.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked of his friend.

"Aside from needing a few hours more sleep, pretty good actually," Pacian answered. "Nellise was able to heal us up when she awoke. You're kind of useful to have around, Nel."

"It's nice to be appreciated," she sighed from a few yards behind them, clearly amused by his offhand compliment. She stepped past them, fully clothed and ready to head out. "I offered thanks to God for our peaceful night, but I suspect if we wait around much longer we may have some uninvited guests. We have a mission to accomplish, I believe?"

"Damn right we do," Colt growled, tipping a small pot of water over the fire to extinguish it. "The sooner we get moving, the quicker this whole thing will be over and done with." He stowed the pot in his pack, picked up his sword and strode out the front door. Nellise picked up her staff and headed out after the big ranger, with the young explorer and his friend bringing up the rear.

A few snowflakes were just starting to cascade from the grey sky as they left their sanctuary of the previous night. The sun had been shining through the thick cloud briefly that morning, though Aiden had been too groggy to appreciate it. Colt stood out in the open, looking up at the sky. It seemed as though the constant inclement weather might finally be starting to abate as they moved into the mountains.

“We'll have a storm before evening,” Colt declared, dashing Aiden's brief hope. “But we made good time last night. The extra distance we came looking for that cave took us half a day closer to the fort. I estimate we can be there a few hours after nightfall, if we move quickly.”

Pacian groaned at the prospect of more running, but Aiden had a thought that would put things in perspective.

“There's no guarantee we'll be able to find another cave, so unless you want to sleep outside in the middle of a snowstorm, we should try to make it to the fort as soon as possible,” he advised. His words had little effect on Pacian's mood, unfortunately. Colt was in no mood to listen to any complaints, and made this absolutely clear.

“I'm in no mood to listen to any complaints,” he growled predictably. “We move fast and get this over with.” He didn't wait for a reply, striding off along the road with Nellise close behind him. Aiden gave Pace a friendly punch on the shoulder as a reminder that he wasn't suffering alone, and then followed the others.

* * *

The snow started falling again soon after, but it remained a light for the time being at least. What had fallen overnight was now hard-packed on the ground, and crunched underneath their boots as they jogged past. There had been no further signs of pursuit or danger, at least according to Colt. He seemed to know what he was talking about, and Aiden was beginning to understand him a little better. In a town or city, he was a dirty, loud-mouthed drunk with little use, but out in the wild, he was at home.

They ran at a brisk pace for over an hour before Colt spotted something ahead, and called for them to stop. Aiden's confidence was not bolstered when the ranger drew his bow and strung it. His eyes darting around nervously, the novice warrior drew his sword, while the other's readied their weapons, though it was not clear what the problem was. Aiden decided to ask Colt what he had seen, but as he walked forward to figure out what was going on, it became clear what had spooked him.

Not far ahead of them lay a wagon with one of its two wheels broken, leaning heavily against a thick pine that grew a few yards off the track. How it came to be in this position probably had something to do with the dead oxen that lay before it, still connected to the wagon. The ox had been savagely dismembered, and little of it remained save for bones and skin. Clearly, it had been eaten away by animals intimately familiar to Aiden and his companions.

“How long ago did it happen?” he asked flatly as he wrinkled his nose at the stench of the dead animal. Colt was already kneeling to check for tracks, and it didn't take long for him to draw a conclusion.

“More than two days,” he grunted. “The snow fall has been pretty consistent, and there's practically nothing left to see. But we both know what happened here.”

“Yes, but the wolves we saw last night clearly hadn't eaten in while.”

“You don't know much about wild animals do you,” Colt stated, rising to his feet and gripping his longbow tightly with his gloved hand. “It'll be a different pack, a more dominant one, probably larger than the first group. The good news is, at least they've eaten recently, so they'll be less likely to attack us. Just... keep your eyes open, I can't make any guarantees.”

Cautiously the group moved to the wagon. Aiden's senses were heightened to an incredible sharpness, complimenting the wild beating of his heart as he kept an eye out for trouble. Pacian stepped ahead of the others to take a closer look. The wagon had been filled with cargo of various sorts, mostly in boxes. Fort Highmarch did not produce any foodstuffs, only weapons for the guards of various towns in this part of the kingdom.

"No sign of the driver," Pacian reported, as the rest of them fell into a defensive position around the wreck. "If I had to guess, I'd say he ran off at the first opportunity after the attack started. Poor bastard probably got caught out in the woods somewhere." Aiden peered over his friend's shoulder for just a moment.

"What about the cargo?"

"Give me a moment," Pacian responded, sheathing his dagger and clambering into the back of the wagon for a closer look. A tense minute later, he had something to report.

"Two loaves of bread, and they're only a little stale too," he began. "There's a crate of crossbows in here, and it seems one of them is missing. The rest of this thing is filled with ingots of iron. Oh wait, didn't that huge blacksmith back at town?"

"Yeah it's probably his," Colt interrupted impatiently. "Anything else?"

"Just this," Pacian said as he jumped down from the back of the wagon, holding a pouch. His eyes lit up as he opened it and peered inside.

"I'm guessing it's money," Aiden remarked dryly.

"No, actually," the blond rogue replied, raising an eyebrow at the implication. "But there is a rather nice gemstone in here." He upended the pouch and a leather glove fell into his waiting palm. Pacian held it by one corner and a gemstone became visible, embedded onto the back, and surrounded by a band of metal. The glove itself had no fingers, and seemed to be quite aged, but was otherwise in good condition.

"I don't think our deceased mercantile friend will be in need of this," he quipped, "so I think I'll just hang on to it."

"Wait, let me have a look at that," Aiden said before he could pocket the glove. Pacian hesitated a moment, before throwing it over to his friend. Aiden managed to catch it with one hand, and then turned it over to examine the gem. The whole thing was very strange, as the back of a glove wasn't a conventional place for a valuable stone. And that metal band...

Looking closely, Aiden could see engraved writing in the metal, tarnished though it was. It was not written in modern Aielish, the common language of the Kingdom, but he did recognise many of the letters. During the years after his experience in the cave, he spent many nights reading anything he could find about the art of magic. Books were hard to come by, but the few he managed to get his hands on had large sections in this same writing.

"Aiden," Colt said, trying to get his attention. The man had an awful sense of timing.

"Just a moment," he replied absently. Concentrating, he could almost make out what some of the words said, if he just had a few minutes-

"Aiden! Heads up!" Colt bellowed, finally drawing the young man's attention back to his surroundings. Looking up, he instantly saw what had drawn Colt's attention. Four wolves were slowly approaching them from the other side of the road, teeth bared. They were lean, hungry, and apparently fearless enough – or hungry enough - to attack people in daylight. Suspecting more, Aiden frantically turned to look into the trees behind them, but didn't see any others.

“I'll keep an eye out for danger behind us, the three of you focus on those,” Nellise declared, holding her staff in one hand while she pulled out the small crystal from a pouch and began whispering a chant. Aiden nodded and quickly slipped the glove into one of the pockets in his longcoat, then readied his sword as the wolves approached. A sudden feeling washed over them from Nellise's prayers, like a warm breeze on a spring day. The air seemed energised, and the three men felt invigorated.

“I don't think these are going to be scared off so easily,” Colt growled at the boys. “You two guard my flanks and don't jump in front of me; I can take them at a distance.”

Without waiting for a response, in one swift move Colt levelled his bow at a prowling wolf and loosed an arrow, striking it in the flank. The clothyard shaft sank deep into its body, and the beast yelped and fell onto its side, twitching as it bled out into the snow. His attack had the effect of propelling the rest of the pack into action, snarling viciously and charging towards them. The ranger quickly drew another arrow from his quiver and sent it flying, but the arrow went short, hitting the ground in front of the lead wolf that simply bounded on past it.

Instead of drawing another arrow, Colt dropped the longbow behind him and drew his greatsword, widening his stance in preparation for the rapidly closing beasts. Aiden gripped the hilt of his sword tightly, hoping Colt knew what he was doing. The three remaining wolves appeared to be heading straight for the big man at full speed.

As if on cue, the sound of wolves approaching from behind could be heard, as Colt prepared to meet the first group. Turning quickly, Aiden could see two wolves had charged from behind the trees to try and take down Nellise. True to her word though, she held her ground. She swung her staff at the first wolf as soon as it was close enough, striking the beast in the jaw with a loud 'crack' of broken bone, followed by the pain-filled cries of the wounded creature.

His heart racing, Aiden turned just in time to see the first wolf leap towards Colt's throat, only to be cut in half with one swing of his massive blade. The spray of blood hit Aiden straight on, and he recoiled reflexively from the gruesome sight. That move cost him dearly, however. Before he could recover, Aiden was knocked down, and a searing pain tore along his right leg. He screamed and thrashed around, trying to dislodge his attacker, but to no avail.

Aiden struck out blindly with his sword again and again, but failed to hit anything other than the ground. Desperate, he kicked wildly with his leg and managed to hit the wolf, but not hard enough to loosen its grip. The wolf suddenly let go, howling in agony, but Aiden was in such pain himself he didn't look over to see what had happened. He dropped his sword and clutched at the wound with both hands, the warmth of his own blood flowing through his fingers.

The sound of his companions fighting could still be heard next to him, but less than a minute later Nellise was on her knees, by his side.

“Don't move Aiden, you've got a vicious leg wound and I need to have a look at it,” she advised. Aiden, trying to focus through the cloud of pain, managed to ask a question.

“Is everyone else... okay?”

“Everyone's fine,” she told him while examining the leg. “Okay, I have some small bandages, but we have to stop this bleeding before I can put them on. I really wish I had brought some larger ones...” her voice trailed off, and Aiden tilted his head over to see

what she was doing. Nellise reached down with her hands and tore away a long strip of her robe.

"It's ruined already, so why not," Nellise muttered absently, moving quickly to tie the strip around Aiden's leg, above the wound. He cried out briefly as she pulled the knot tight, and then moved his hands aside from the leg as she started bandaging the wound.

"Shouldn't you treat that first?" Colt asked, looming above Aiden.

"I'm going to heal him a little," Nellise answered as she worked. "It will cleanse the wound, but I doubt it will be enough to close it completely. It will get him on his feet, though."

"Good, because I don't want to stay here longer than we need to."

"Did you kill them?" Aiden asked Colt through clenched teeth. The big ranger shoved the tip of his sword into the ground next to him and leaned heavily on it.

"No, took three down, but the rest ran off. The one that got you was wounded by a crossbow bolt, which I guess is what saved you." Aiden gave him an inquiring look, but Colt simply nodded towards Nellise.

"I am not without talent," she offered modestly. "And crossbows are not tremendously difficult to use."

"Well, thanks, I-"

"Hush," Nellise ordered, focusing on the task at hand. "I shall attempt to heal you." It was hard to argue with that, so Aiden did what he was told. He lay there for several minutes, feeling the healing energies flow through his leg while Colt and Pacian stood guard. Eventually Nellise slumped down and removed her hands from the wounded area.

"I have done what I can," she apologised. "The bleeding has stopped, but it will take further healing to ensure that the leg is fully recovered. I would advise that you not exert yourself much for the next day or two, but I know that we don't have that option at present." Aiden sat up, gathering his strength a little before continuing to stand up very slowly.

Colt offered a hand, which the wounded young man gratefully took with his own. The big ranger hoisted him up with ease, making sure that Aiden wasn't about to fall over before letting go. He carefully put some weight onto the wounded leg, and was surprised how improved it was.

"I'll be fine," he assured the others, unsure if he spoke the truth. Nellise stood up and wearily walked over to the cart. She leaned over and picked up the crossbow she had used earlier, and slung it over her back. Given her chapter's reluctance to fight, seeing her take up the weapon was a move laden with hidden meaning.

"Do you still think we can make it to Highmarch this evening?" she asked while strapping a pouch of crossbow quarrels to her belt. Pacian was rifling through the wagon for anything he could carry in his pack.

"Only one way to find out," Colt answered, hefting his sword over one shoulder and recovering his longbow. For the first time, Aiden noticed the big man's left arm had been savaged, the leather sleeve having been torn through to the skin beneath. "It looks worse than it is," Colt mentioned, noticing Aiden's attention. "You look like you've been through a slaughterhouse. Just worry about your own injury."

"I didn't say I was worried about *you*," Aiden remarked, a sly smile on his lips. Pacian chuckled briefly, pleased to see his friend's sense of humour was still intact.

“And I didn't say we'd wait for you if you fell behind,” Colt growled, clearly not appreciating the joke. “So if you want to avoid being food for wolves, we'd best get moving, and quickly.”

Despite Colt's bluster, they travelled at a casual jog at first. Aiden was reluctant to put too much weight on his leg, for it soon became clear he wouldn't be able to move much faster than this without ripping open his wound once more. So he did the best he could, favouring his good leg and trying not to slow the group down.

Pacian and Colt took the lead, while Nellise hung back with a look on her face that Aiden would term as 'casual concern'. He gave her a reassuring wink, which he then regretted as it could be misconstrued as something else entirely, something... *suggestive*. Nel didn't seem to be inclined to misinterpret him, however, and gave him a quick nod in return. After another hour of travel the pain in Aiden's leg became more acute. He didn't mention it to the others, though he figured they'd notice him slowing down.

Colt called for a break around noon, though how he could determine the time with any degree of accuracy was anyone's guess. The sky was completely obscured with cloud, and the air had grown progressively colder as they had gained altitude. But Aiden was far too tired to care. By the time he slumped down against a nearby tree, he realised he probably wouldn't have been able to keep going for even another ten minutes. Nellise went over to talk to Colt, and Pacian sat next to Aiden at the tree and offered him half a loaf of the stale bread taken from the wagon.

“Sorry I can't put any cheese on that,” he apologised. “I'm afraid it didn't survive the last fight. I got a little creative against that wolf, doing a kind of sliding manoeuvre as it jumped and the cheese flew out the top of my pack.” Aiden chewed down on the bread, listening but too intent on his food to answer.

“Now, by itself, landing in the snow wouldn't have been so bad,” Pacian continued amiably, “but do you remember that dead ox on the ground near the wagon? Yeah... so... enjoy your cheese-less bread.” Aiden smiled wanly at him as he finished off the food. It was barely enough, but it would have to do. If their luck - and his leg - held, they would be eating a feast tonight at Fort Highmarch, and the prospect of that was enough to make his stomach growl. To take his mind off his hunger, Aiden pulled out the glove Pacian had found in the wagon, to give it a closer inspection.

“Oh you *do* have that,” Pacian exclaimed. “I thought it might have been left behind. That gem has to be worth a small fortune.”

“More than you know,” Aiden mumbled, inspecting the engraved words once again. He was silent for a long moment as he concentrated on the strange symbols, trying to recall their meaning. “You've seen that crystal Nellise uses? This one is kind of similar.”

“But isn't that thing she has some kind of holy object?”

“True, but it's still just a crystal, when you get right down to it,” Aiden informed him. “They just channel energy in different ways. I think this glove was made by a wizard. See these words?” He leaned over to let his friend take a closer look. “I've managed to translate a bit of it and if I'm right, this is a command word that will activate it.”

“Any idea what it does?” Pacian inquired with more than casual interest.

“No, but I figure it's either a weapon or some kind of protective device. At least I hope it is. Anything else is going to be pretty useless out here.”

“Unless it magically makes food appear of course,” Pacian corrected him.

“Now wouldn’t that be something,” Aiden deadpanned.

“You two enjoying yourselves?” Colt barked from nearby. “Sounds to me like you’re all full of energy and ready to head out, am I right?” Pacian groaned, until he saw Aiden stumble to his feet, then went quiet.

“Don’t listen to him,” Nellise rejoined, casting a disapproving glance at the big ranger. “If you need a little more time to rest, take it. God knows I could use it.”

“I think we’ll get all the rest we need at the fort,” Aiden replied, meaning every word of it. “If it’s alright with you, we should get this over with as soon as possible.” Nellise nodded in reluctant agreement, and Colt wordlessly picked up his bow once more and led them in the final run to the fort.

The snow started falling again shortly after they set out, and the wind picked up along with it. The bitter cold seemed to be seeping into their very bones as they trudged along, but Aiden’s leggings, torn from the wolf’s teeth, were at least partially patched up with the bandages.

Regardless, they had no choice but to keep moving and hope they had seen the last of the wolves. The beasts that had limped away from the last fight certainly wouldn’t be able to give them any further trouble, if indeed they hadn’t bled to death already. There had been no further signs of wildlife in the area either, deepening the mystery of what had happened in the area to disrupt the natural balance so.

Aiden’s mood grew as bleak as the weather, his leg aching more and more as time went on. The snow on the ground started to build up a lot more as the afternoon wore on, and the effort required to place one foot in front of the other continued to increase. Nellise stayed with him throughout it all, though, offering a hand whenever he needed it, and Aiden was not so prideful that he would refuse.

The sky was starting to dim as evening approached, when Colt signalled them to stop. Ahead of them was a creek, frozen solid for probably more than a week now. A dull rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance as the ranger stood still, scanning the nearby tree line. He slowly walked back towards Aiden and Nellise, with Pacian checking around as well, unsure of exactly what the problem was, but fearing the presence of wolves.

“What is it?” Nellise whispered tersely as Colt approached.

“Movement in the trees. They’ve been following us for a while now, but I thought we might outdistance them.”

“More wolves? Are you serious?” Aiden asked incredulously.

“Didn’t say wolves,” Colt shrugged. “Haven’t laid eyes on anything in particular, but considering our luck so far, I wouldn’t be at all surprised if they wanted one last chance to have a decent meal. That would be us, by the way.”

“Yes I figured that out,” Aiden replied dryly. He was really in no shape to be fighting, and the others were looking pretty weary too. Sparse food, cold weather, and extensive travel were not working in their favour. “So, what’s next?”

“We keep going. Just be prepared for...” Colt’s voice trailed off as he noticed Nellise’s eyes widen, looking behind him.

They turned to see a massive wolf standing in the middle of the road, its breath misting in the frigid air. Every wolf they had seen and fought so far had been on the edge of starvation. This one, however, was clearly well fed, and nearly twice the size of its cousins. Part of the fur along its face had been burned away, leaving its snout a hideous

arrangement of scars and charred flesh set in a permanent snarl. But the most striking feature was its eyes, which blazed with hatred.

“Pack leader,” Colt muttered under his breath, trying to not startle it with movement or sound. “He’s been getting the most food of any of them by the looks.”

“If he’s not starving,” Pacian wondered nervously, “then why is he even thinking of attacking us by himself?” Colt was starting to ready his bow, moving as slowly as he possible could.

“Look at his eyes,” he breathed. “He’s learned to hate humans, and whatever’s left of his pack will be here someplace too, in amongst the trees.” Colt levelled his bow at the wolf, now finally ready to shoot. “When I loose this arrow at him, you three run back the way we came, and don’t argue,” he added, sensing opposition to his ‘plan’. “I’ll take him down, you just keep any others off me.” Before anyone could protest, he loosed the arrow at the pack leader. The shot went wide, and at that instant, the big wolf bounded forward, growling viciously.

Despite paying attention to the scene before them, Nellise had been surreptitiously preparing her crossbow as well, and as soon as the wolf dashed forward, she brought it up, aimed, and loosed a bolt towards the fearsome beast. It grazed along the left flank of the wolf, doing little more than angering it.

In a surprise move, Colt tossed aside his longbow and bellowed out a loud roar, charging forward to meet it mid-way without even drawing a weapon. They crashed into each other and went down into the snow in a flurry of fists and claws. Nellise gasped in disbelief at the sight of the savage struggle, and Aiden drew his sword when he spied four other wolves bound out of the trees behind them, trying to close the distance as quickly as possible. It appeared their luck had run out at last.

Aiden felt it was a good a time as any to try out the glove. He raised his trembling left hand and pointed it at the lead wolf, hoping that it was going to blast the beast with arcane lightning or something. As calmly as he could manage, he spoke the command word, and was rewarded with a surge of energy in his hand. The gemstone glowed red, but instead of unleashing magical energy at the wolf, a shimmering, translucent disk three feet in diameter appeared on the back of his hand, with the gem at the centre.

Thinking quickly, Aiden turned the back of his hand to face the advancing wolf, as if the disk were a shield. Looking through it was like gazing at the horizon on a hot day, and it weighed nothing at all. Preparing for the impact, Aiden jumped forward to force them to attack him directly, sparing the others. The lead wolf hungrily ran toward him, and then leaped when it was close enough, aiming for Aiden’s outstretched arm. It yelped in shock as it slammed into the magical barrier, crashing back onto the ground. He didn’t hesitate, stepping forward and stabbing the prone beast in the chest.

Nellise and Pacian hadn’t fared so well. The other three wolves had avoided Aiden and tackled them directly. Pacian, like Colt, was wrestling with one on the ground, having had his dagger knocked out of his hand. He flailed around in the snow as best he could, trying to find the hilt, but he was barely able to hold back the snarling beast with only one hand.

Nellise had done better, anticipating that the first wolf would go for her exposed leg, and had cracked it on its head with her quarterstaff. Before she could recover from the swing, the second one had latched onto her right arm, tearing through the robe and

drawing blood. She screamed in pain and fell to the ground, trying to dislodge the iron grip of the wolf's jaws.

Seeing little option, Aiden rushed over and bashed the thrashing beast with his magical shield. The wolf let go of Nel's arm as it was slammed to the ground, surprised by the sudden attack. The first one that had attacked her was still on its feet, and snarled at Aiden before leaping for his legs. He managed to block it with the shield, but not with enough force to push the beast back.

Aiden stood over Nellise, trying to protect her from the two wolves that had moved apart and were trying to find a way past the shield. They had him flanked, and it was all he could do to keep them off her. With his heart racing, he no longer felt any pain in his leg, but as he twisted around to deflect a probing attack from one wolf, the leg gave out and Aiden went down on one knee. He managed to keep his shield up, but he was completely on the defensive.

Glancing around for assistance, he could see Pacian still had his hands full and Colt was not doing well in his fight. Looking around desperately for some sort of advantage, he spied a figure in amongst the trees. Aiden didn't have a clear view as he had to keep an eye on his attackers, but from the animal skins and wild red hair, he could easily guess who it was.

"Help! Help us!" he called out to the shadowy figure he hoped was the wild woman they had seen the night before. He wasn't certain it was her that had left out some wood for them near the cave, but if there was even a chance that she was willing to help, he had to take it.

The wolves were rapidly learning to avoid the near-invisible shield, lunging at him again and again, and Aiden wasn't going to be able to hold them off for much longer. He shot another quick look toward the trees, and saw that the young woman had stepped out of cover to take a closer look.

Aiden had only diverted his attention for a second, but it was enough for one of the wolves to dive past his defences and leap up on its haunches to gnash at his throat with its savage teeth, the spray from its spittle lashing his face. Aiden responded by frantically stabbing at it with his blade, but it glanced off a rib bone causing only a slight gash in its side. His chain shirt protected him from its claws but the weight of the beast pushed him onto his back. Things were starting to look bleak for him when an axe suddenly thudded into the wolf's head, splattering him with blood as it fell over, dead.

Turning his head in the direction the axe had come from, Aiden saw the wild young woman running towards them. The other wolf that had been attacking him turned to face this new threat, snarling menacingly. The redhead reached over her back and without slowing down, pulled out a rough wooden club. She moved across the snow at astonishing speed, leaping at the surprised wolf with a hoarse roar and bringing the club down as she descended upon the beast's side. The club was a simple weapon, but the force of the impact was enough to break several ribs and send it tumbling through the snow.

The wolf howled in pain and was unable to recover from the blow before she caught up to it and brought the club down on its head again and again until the club snapped in two. Aiden grimaced at the grisly scene, but tore his eyes away and struggled back on his feet so he could assist the others.

Pacian was in a deadlock with the wolf he had been fighting, but it was on top of the blond rogue and he was barely keeping the snarling beast at bay. Seizing his opportunity, Aiden rushed over and thrust with his sword, taking the wolf in the chest, this time sinking deep inside, dropping the wild beast instantly. He felt the quiver of its body through the steel of his weapon as its life ebbed away, and was momentarily repulsed by the sensation.

Pacian, breathing heavily from the struggle, quickly rolled over and retrieved his dagger, then crouched in the snow, eyeing the redhead carefully. Aiden was confident that she was an ally for at least the present moment, so he turned his attention to Colt. His fight had finished, however, and the big ranger lay in snow stained with blood, unmoving save for the ragged rise and fall of his chest. The pack leader hadn't killed him, but he was clearly gravely wounded.

The scarred wolf was slowly stalking the redhead, practically foaming at the mouth with insane rage. Colt's blood dripped from its jaw, and it looked ready to tear the girl apart. She cautiously pulled the hand axe out of the dead wolf next to her, and then stood defiantly as the pack leader approached.

"We meet again," the red-haired girl called to the wolf, which snarled at her in reply. She raised her free hand, and whispered some words. To the surprise of everyone, brilliant flames shot out from her hand at the wolf, engulfing the beast in fire. It yelped in pain and rolled in the snow, quickly putting the flames out but not before the damage was done. Half of its fur was scorched black, and it looked even more dangerous than before.

Before Aiden could wonder how this wild savage managed to conjure some sort of fire magic, the wolf had charged at her and she was fighting for her life. The wolf was a flurry of gnashing teeth and bloodied claws, pushing the redhead back on the defensive. She was clearly no stranger to a fight, but the size and ferocity of this beast could well prove too much for her. With a quick glance to make sure Nellise was okay, Aiden struggled back to his feet and carefully moved over to assist.

He stabbed at the beast cautiously, keeping his guard up since he was moving too slowly to properly dodge. As he expected, the wolf turned and savagely lashed out at him, but he managed to keep it at bay with his force shield. The redhead took advantage of the distraction though, slashing it along its rear flank with her axe. Aiden hoped that it would be enough to at least slow it down, but even after dealing with Colt and being severely burned, it was still putting up a fight.

It seemed to ignore the hit it had taken from the axe, and instead focused on Aiden. It couldn't get through the shield, but that didn't stop it from throwing its full weight against him, knocking Aiden over into the snow. He braced for the inevitable attack, but instead saw another jet of flame engulf the wolf, lighting up the fight with an eerie glow. It howled in agony and dropped to the snow, rolling around trying to put out the flame, but this time it wasn't so easy. Its suffering didn't last for long, however, as a crossbow bolt struck it in the chest ending its life once and for all.

Aiden turned and saw a bloodied Nellise, down on one knee with her crossbow levelled at the wolf's remains and a distraught look on her face. Seeing that it was finally dead, she dropped the crossbow and clutched at her arm, clearly in pain. Aiden took a moment to admire the young cleric's discipline, to fire so accurately while grievously injured.

He quickly snapped out of his brief reverie and stumbled through the snow to where Colt lay. The magical shield was proving cumbersome, so he spoke the command word again and it shimmered out of existence. The big ranger's leather armour had been torn in several places, and blood flowed freely from several nasty wounds. Aiden fell to his knees and frantically tried to find something to stop the bleeding with, but nothing useful presented itself.

"Nellise! We need you!" he cried, at a loss for what else to do. Colt could die from these wounds, that much was clear. The man was a fool to think he could *wrestle* that monster of a wolf with his bare hands.

"Move over, I need to have a look," Nellise ordered, kneeling in the snow next to him. Aiden complied, wiping away some of the blood on his hands on his ruined trousers. On a hunch, he glanced over his shoulder at Pacian, to make sure he was playing nice with their new friend. They were eyeing each other carefully, but Pace seemed to understand that his life had just been saved by this strange newcomer and he was not inclined to start a fight with her. Shooting fire out of her hands was also probably a factor in his thinking.

Turning his attention back to Colt, he noticed Nellise hadn't bothered trying to bandage his wounds. She had instead taken out her crystal and closed her eyes, her lips moving silently. The adrenaline rush was fading and Aiden was starting to feel the cold, not to mention the ache of his leg, but as he sat there in the snow, the warm glow of the acolyte's healing prayer suffused him.

They sat there for several minutes, during which time Aiden's leg felt considerably better, and Nellise's arm had stopped bleeding. Colt stirred, opening his eyes slowly. His wounds appeared to have mended somewhat, thanks to Nellise's efforts, but he still looked like he had been within a hair's breadth of death. Nellise slumped forward, drained, and pulled her white hood up to cover her head from the bitter wind that was picking up speed.

"How are you feeling?" Aiden asked, leaning forward so Colt could see him.

"Like I've been mauled by a bloody great wolf," he croaked. "Is everyone okay?"

"Yeah, we're alive," the young explorer replied, smiling with something resembling relief. "Can you move? You're going to get really cold lying there."

"Give me a minute. Who the hell is that?" Colt blurted. Aiden turned to see the wild girl standing next to him, looking down at the big man.

"She saved our lives just now, so show some respect," Aiden explained. "Thanks for that, by the way," he added for her benefit. She nodded, but remained oddly silent.

"Help me up would you?" Colt grunted, taking hold of Aiden's outstretched hand and with a combined effort, hauled himself to his feet. He stood there unsteadily for a few moments, taking in the scene around him. The big ranger towered over the wild girl, who stood there without flinching from his scrutiny.

"What's your name, girl?" he asked of her.

"Sayana Arai," she replied quietly.

"Sayana, I've got about a hundred questions for you," Aiden added wearily, "but we're in a bit of a situation here and we need to keep moving. But thanks for helping us out back there." She didn't react, but merely stood there with a strange expression on her face. Aiden thought for a moment that he might have somehow offended this strange young woman, and cast a worried glance at her. It was then he noticed that her eyes were

glazed over, and her cheekbones stood out alarmingly on her face, right before she collapsed onto the ground at his feet.

Aiden, bewildered, knelt down to see if she was okay. Sayana was as pale as a sheet, but not from loss of blood. He put two fingers on her neck to check her pulse, and was surprised to feel it racing.

"I don't know for certain what's wrong with her," Aiden said to the others. "But judging from her gaunt appearance I'd say she hasn't eaten anything in days. What should we do?" Nellise said nothing, and simply leaned heavily on Pacian. His old friend had something to say on the matter though.

"We can't leave her here, not after what she just did for us," the blond rogue stated. "Do you think you can carry her?"

"I guess I can try," Aiden replied dubiously. He glanced hopefully at Colt, who gave him a level stare in reply to his unasked question.

"Yes, I can definitely try," Aiden muttered to himself. He reached down and picked her up with both arms, and was shocked at how light the girl was. Even in his weakened state Aiden figured he could carry her for a while at least. Silently, the weary group trudged off along the path into the deepening darkness, leaving the bloody remains of their struggle behind them to be covered by the falling snow.

Chapter Five

They struggled on through the freezing conditions, illuminated only by the dim glow of Nellise's prayer of light. According to Colt, the fort was less than an hour away under normal conditions, but given their injuries and the terrible weather, it was probably going to take a good deal longer than that.

Roughly half an hour after the fight, Sayana stirred weakly in Aiden's arms. He called for the others to stop while he tried to determine if she was all right, and discovered a few moments later that she was indeed conscious when the wild girl punched him in the face. There was no strength behind the blow, but that wasn't the point.

"Hey, take it easy," Aiden protested, "my face may be numb from the cold, but it's still the only one I've got. How are you feeling?" The tenseness left her body as she slumped in his arms once more, trembling like a newborn calf.

"Sorry, I just reacted," she whispered. "I'm so hungry... have you any food?"

"Not really, but we're almost at the fort and we'll have all the food we can eat there." She didn't reply, but instead slowly reached a hand up towards his neck. Aiden flinched slightly, unsure what she was trying to do, but it became obvious she wasn't going to try to hit him again. Her hand touched him briefly, and then followed the thin chain around his neck and lifted it, revealing the piece of glass taken from the strange globe he had shattered years ago.

"What is this?" she asked.

"Just a keepsake from something that happened to me years ago," Aiden replied dismissively, noticing the curious glances of his companions around him. Sayana touched the glass with one finger, and to everyone's surprise, a faint glowing light could be seen along the skin on the back of her hand, tracing a line along her arm and disappearing underneath her animal hides.

Aiden was about to ask her about that when her hand slumped and she fell unconscious again. The light along her arm disappeared, leaving the group puzzled as to what they had just seen.

"I'd love to stand around in the freezing cold and talk about that," Pacian muttered sarcastically, "but Nel isn't getting any lighter. No offence."

"Answers will come in the morning, after a hot meal and a good night's sleep at an inn," Nellise whispered, drawing the silent agreement of everyone else there. The mystery of this strange girl would have to wait.

They continued along the path for another hour up an incline before Colt breathed a sigh of relief.

"Lights up ahead," he observed. "We've made it, I can see the walls of Fort Highmarch." They all felt a surge of renewed energy at the news that they had reached the end of their difficult journey. Just the thought of a roaring fire, a proper meal, and a comfortable bed spurred them on towards the walls ahead with an extra spring in their step. A return to civilisation would erase the hardships of not just the past two days, but the last few weeks of poor living conditions in Bracksford.

Within ten minutes, they were at the high stone walls of Fort Highmarch. They were massive constructions of grey stone, easily thirty feet high and Aiden was suitably intimidated. From what he'd read, the fort had been here for over a hundred and fifty years, in one form or another. Only once had it come under serious attack, from some kind of death cult that was quickly put down, after a vicious fight. At least, that's what was written in the history books, anyway.

Aiden recognised elements from the account of that battle from his vision in the cave, but the history books said nothing about a golden dragon, or metal warriors. Either his vision was some sort of hallucination, or someone had altered the histories. One day, he would find out which was which, but none of that mattered now, for Aiden's stomach politely reminded him of what was really important.

Torches flickering in the bitter wind illuminated their approach to the gate. A guard, dressed in a heavy winter cloak over the livery of the Kingdom guards, stood near a blazing fire set in a metal barrel, watching their approach impassively. A halberd, over ten feet in length and tipped with a broad axe, leaned against the wall just behind him.

"Who approaches?" he called, spying the approach of Aiden and his companions in the cold night.

"Travellers from the north," Colt grunted, stopping just inside the area lit by the fire. The snow swirled around him, melting as it hit the hot metal of the barrel.

"The north?" asked the guard. "Bracksford, or some other place?"

"Yes," Colt growled impatiently. "We're looking for a warm place for the night."

"I bet you are, it's a bad night to be standing around in the dark," the guard sympathised, somewhat glibly. "But I have orders to permit no-one entry to the fort. You'll have to head back north again." Aiden's heart sank. This was not what he had expected, and he couldn't think of anything to say, but Colt didn't have any trouble speaking his mind.

"Give me a bloody good reason why, or you and I are going to have a problem."

"No need to get bent out of shape sir," the guard replied, a little upset at having been threatened. "The King gave us direct orders to allow nobody in for the next few weeks."

"Is he in there?" Pacian asked, curious.

“No, he's off leading an army at war, haven't you heard?” the guard pointed out. “So there you have it. All you need to know is that there's a very important person still in the fort and His Majesty told us-”

“To keep everyone out, I get it already,” Colt finished. Aiden could sense that the big man was about to say something they'd all regret, so he quickly spoke up before he could.

“Look, I appreciate that you've got your orders, but we've had a hell of a time getting here. The Mayor of Bracksford sent us here with a request for assistance.”

“We're also tired, hungry, and low on supplies,” Nellise added weakly. “I am an acolyte with the Church of Aielund, and my large friend here is a member of the Royal Rangers. We're hardly likely to make trouble.” It was a good argument, in spite of the white lie concerning Colt, and gave the guardsman pause. He scratched his unshaven chin and gave each of them a shrewd look.

“Okay I'm gonna ask the captain,” he finally agreed. “If it were up to me, I'd let you through, no problem. But I don't get to make that decision, y'know?”

“Thank you,” Nellise offered, smiling tiredly. The guard couldn't help but smile back as he turned to approach the gate. Nellise could use that smile to devastating effect when she wanted to, but Aiden suspected she probably wasn't even aware of its power.

The guard slammed a balled fist onto the gate three times, generating a booming sound that could be heard deep inside the walls. A slot in the gate at face height opened up, and the guard peered inside. He spoke quietly, making it difficult to hear him over the sound of the wind, but he did gesture towards their group with his thumb.

A moment later, the sound of heavy bars being moved on the inside of the gate could be heard, and to the relief of Aiden and his companions the gate swung inwards, permitting them entry at last.

“Sorry for the delay, the Captain will see you now,” the guard explained. “Head on through to the bailey.”

“Thank you,” Aiden replied as he passed the guard heading into the gate. It wasn't the entire gate that had been opened, but rather a small door in the gate itself. He had expected it to lead directly into the keep, but could see another large gate up ahead. This part of the fort was open to the sky, but at least the winds were diminished. Torches arrayed along the walls provided light to the soldiers stationed within, five of whom stood before him, barring the way.

“I am Captain Erik Marshald,” said the closest guard. His armour, helmet and its adornments reflected his higher rank, though it was difficult to see in the flickering light. The man sported a thick brown beard with grey streaks, and spoke with calm authority. “Good Lord, what on earth happened to you?” The Captain was no doubt referring to the shabby, run-down, and above all blood-covered appearance of the group. Pacian had the answer for him.

“Wolves, Captain. Many, many wolves.”

“Son, I've been serving at this fort for twenty years, and I've never heard of the wolves in this mountain range attacking travelers,” the Captain replied gruffly. “But, having said that, you lot look as though you've been through a war, so I am inclined to offer what assistance I can.”

“Can we go through to the keep now?” Aiden asked, feeling very much like he was about to topple over. His confidence was not bolstered when the Captain glanced at the other soldiers standing around.

"I am in a difficult position here," he declared awkwardly. "I swore to my King that I would allow nobody to enter, yet I can clearly see you are no threat and in dire need of aid. I cannot let you into the keep, for that would mean that I am breaking my word. However, the bailey here is technically outside of the keep, and we have a guardhouse you could stay in for the night." He stroked his beard thoughtfully for a moment. "I believe this satisfies my word and my honour, wouldn't you agree Sergeant?"

"Oh absolutely Captain, couldn't agree more sir," said a shorter guard to the Captain's right. He was grinning, which suggested to Aiden they were a little flexible with following orders down here on the southern frontier of the Kingdom.

"Thank you Captain," Aiden breathed. "I don't mean to rush you or anything, but this young lady isn't as light as she looks."

"Sergeant Price," Marshald barked, "escort these people to the guardhouse, and see to their needs."

"Yessir," the Sergeant answered, saluting casually. "This way, ladies and gents."

"One last thing," the Captain asked as Aiden was about to follow the others. "You mentioned that Mayor Olaf had given you some instructions?"

"I have the note in my pocket, but my arms are a little busy at the moment," Aiden explained. "I'll give it to the Sergeant to give to *you* after we've settled in, fair enough?"

"Quite so," the Captain nodded. "Your safety is guaranteed within these walls, so you and your companions should have a restful night. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a castle to guard." Aiden nodded briefly then turned to follow his companions into the nearby guardhouse.

It was nothing fancy of course, but to the weary travellers, the guardhouse was everything they were looking for. Plain yet comfortable beds lined the walls, and a roaring fireplace kept the cold at bay. Aiden walked over to the nearest bed and lay Sayana down upon it. He noticed her eyes were open slightly and she was looking around at her strange new surroundings nervously.

"Relax, we're safe here," Aiden said quietly, trying to reassure her. "The guards should be getting us some food, soon." She seemed to calm down and let her head rest on the pillow. Aiden walked slowly over to the next empty bed, and eased his aching body onto it, yawning unconsciously as he did so. Glancing at the others, he saw that Pacian had collapsed face-down onto his bed and was already snoring.

"I'm waiting for food before I sleep, in case you were wondering," Nellise replied to Aiden's inquiring look. "I'm hungrier than I am sleepy. Um... that sounded very strange."

"Don't worry about it, we're all pretty tired. Oh, before I forget, I think we all owe you our lives after today. So, thanks." Aiden groaned inwardly. "Okay, that sounded pretty bad too. I think I'll try it again tomorrow after my mind is rested. "

"I understand what you're saying," she assured him.

From across the small stone room he could see three guardsmen bringing in a large pot of steaming hot food, a large tub of hot water, some bread, and other sundries. Aiden and Nellise both struggled to their feet and headed over to the nearby table where the guards deposited the supplies. He thanked them and took a moment to wash his hands in the bucket of warm water they provided. The pot turned out to have a thick beef stew bubbling in its depths, and along with the freshly baked bread, the smell was intoxicating. He hadn't eaten anything this elaborate in many days.

“Oh, before I forget, I've got that letter from the Mayor of Bracksford for your Captain.” Aiden reached into his longcoat and withdrew the note and handed it to the Sergeant.

“Mind if I take a look?” he asked, holding it up. Aiden shrugged, more interested in the food laid out before him.

The Sergeant opened up the letter and leaned over to a nearby candle to read the note, his lips moving slowly as he struggled through the letter, while the weary young adventurer ladled the hearty pork stew into a wooden bowl, then took it over to where Sayana lay.

The wild young girl sat up as soon as Aiden arrived at her side with the food, and handed the bowl to her. She looked quizzically at the spoon, ignored it, and simply drank from the bowl directly, chewing on the meat as it hit her mouth. Not surprisingly, her appetite was voracious, and before Aiden had returned to the table for his own food, she had finished her stew.

Somewhat astonished, Aiden grabbed a loaf of bread from a basket and threw it over to her, then tore into some bread himself. Colt and Nellise were sitting at a small table near to the fire, enjoying their food, and the young man went to sit with them and eat.

“Well, this seems to be in order,” the Sergeant said, wandering over to the table a minute later. “But it's addressed to the Baron, and he's busy caring for his sick wife at the moment. We'll let him know what's going on, but the Captain has the authority to handle something like this anyway.”

“What ails his wife?” Nellise asked out of concern.

“Not rightly sure, madam,” he replied. “She's always been a bit sickly, and the climate up here isn't exactly helping, what with the constant cold and such. They usually try to get away in the winter months but she's in no condition to travel this time, the poor thing.”

“Perhaps I could be of assistance? I am quite adept at the healing arts.”

“I've no doubt about it ma'am, no doubt at all,” the Sergeant replied. “But we have a man of God here tending her already. Bit of a full time job really, but that's what he's here for. You just look after yourself, you're all looking a bit worse for wear, I don't mind telling you. So I'll leave you to eat and rest up, and I'll get this note to the Captain right away. All these requests will have to wait 'til tomorrow of course; impossible to get the merchants out of bed at this hour, y'know. I'll see you in the morning.”

Aiden nodded as he turned and left the small guardhouse, unable to speak with a full mouth. He noticed Sayana had managed to rise from her bed and stagger over to the food table, where she used her bowl to scoop more stew out of the pot, to be drunk down a few moments later. She had slowed down to a more reasonable rate of consumption, but it was still remarkable to see how much she could wolf down.

They all ate their fill over the next hour, listening to the crackle of the fireplace and the mournful howl of the wind outside. Aiden had wondered if Pacian would be awakened by the smell of hot food, but he must have been exhausted for he remained fast asleep. Eventually, the others turned in and fell asleep almost immediately, fatigue finally overtaking them.

* * *

The sound of something heavy hitting the floor woke Aiden from his slumber with a start. He rolled over and peered bleary-eyed across the room to the source of the noise. Half a dozen soldiers had entered the guardhouse, and one of the clumsier men had dropped his sword.

"Sorry!" he whispered loudly, attempting to avoid waking the others. Seeing light streaming in through the small holes in the wall that passed for windows, Aiden decided that he might consider getting up. He sat up in the small bed and glanced around. The guardsmen had come in to warm themselves by the fire for a few hours while their replacements took to the walls, or so Aiden imagined. He hadn't actually seen the change of the guard, but felt it was a fairly safe assumption given the presence of these men.

A groan from the other end of the room indicated that Colt had awoken. This was clearly an event that he wasn't happy about, but Aiden chose to ignore him for the time being. One of the guards that had entered he recognised as Captain Marshald from the previous evening.

"Good morning, honoured guests," he quipped, clearly amused about something. "You'll have to excuse my lads, they're not used to creeping around in their armour. I may have to offer you a reimbursement of your hard-earned money. Oh wait, you didn't pay us anything." Colt glared at him with red-rimmed eyes.

"You can take your stupid jokes and shove--"

"Thank you, Captain," Aiden almost yelled in his haste to cut the big man off. Marshald gave Colt a suspicious glance but nodded.

"Unusual situations call for unusual responses, and I wasn't about to let you starve to death, regardless of what I told the King. But I'm not here to exchange pleasantries, as we've got business to discuss... your business, to be precise."

"As you may have noticed, the sun rose a while ago," the Captain continued, rubbing his hands together for warmth. "I took it upon myself to expedite the items on Olaf's requisition form to get you on your way as quickly as possible. Not that we aren't pleased to have guests here, but some of my lads do miss having a place to sleep between shifts."

"At this time I'd like to point out that we're a fort, not a town," the Captain went on. "The supplies we have are enough to get us through the winter, and we don't have a lot to spare. Given these extenuating circumstances, we're making sure you go back with something. But he's going to have to reopen the supply lines to Culdery, if he wants the town to return to normal."

"What about Fenwick?" Colt asked. It was closer to Fort Highmarch than Bracksford was, over to the west of the shire.

"That's where we've been getting *our* supplies from," the Captain informed him. "The Mayor there is under orders not to sell any supplies to anywhere else for the duration of the winter. Sorry, but we've got the security of the country to consider here, lads." Aiden felt it wasn't an unreasonable argument, but he was still disappointed. Captain Marshald leaned against the edge of the table and continued.

"So here's what we're going to do for you. And by 'you', I mean the good people of Bracksford. I've found an enterprising merchant willing to make the journey north. He'll have a wagon full of cheeses, flour, sausages, and an assortment of other supplies to keep the town going a little longer. Probably just for a few days though."

“Olaf also asked for more of our fine Kingdom Guard to help clear the area of bandits. This is a difficult request for me to refuse, but the Baron is adamant about maintaining a suitable defensive force at the fort.”

“Hang on, you can't even spare half a dozen soldiers to help keep the peace?” Colt barked. “You've got a fort full of soldiers here!” The big ranger realised he wasn't very intimidating lying down in bed, so he quickly got to his feet. He had apparently slept in his armour, and it was starting to develop its own unique aroma.

“I take it from that thoughtless statement that you're unaware that His Majesty swept through here a month ago on his way north, and took just about every able-bodied man with him,” Marshald explained evenly. “All we've got left are a few veterans and a few dozen blokes straight out of training, and they're a bunch of squealing little girls.” The guardsmen around him looked at the Captain uncomfortably, but said nothing.

“So, I'm afraid we have to send you back north with only your own selves to protect the merchant. He's in the keep, collecting supplies for the trip and you can meet up with him here at the gate when he's ready. Until then, rest up and have some more food. And you have my apologies for not being able to help more. I know you risked much to get here.”

“I knew times were tough, I just didn't realise how widespread it was,” Aiden replied soberly. “Again, thanks for all your help, we'll figure something out.”

“I wish you all good fortune. Farewell.” After he had left the guardhouse and closed the heavy door, Colt swore under his breath.

“I just figured out what happened to all the wildlife on the mountainside,” he muttered quietly. “That army needed to be fed, and as he said, they don't store huge amounts of food here. Hey, how big was that army?” Colt addressed this to one of the nearby guardsmen.

“Nearly two thousand men,” he replied promptly. “This place is like a ghost town now.”

“There you have it then. They would have sent hunters ahead to make sure they had something to eat. God I hate this country sometimes.” Colt was fuming, and Aiden expected an angry outburst, but instead the big man grabbed some food from the table and went outside to eat. The young adventurer shook his head in disbelief – all of the danger they had gone through over the past two days had been caused by that army passing through the region, leaving nothing for the predators to eat.

The guardsmen at the table were looking past Aiden with more than passing curiosity. Turning to see what they were looking at, he saw Nellise still lying in bed with her blanket pulled right up to her neck.

“I seem to be surrounded by burly men,” she remarked, slightly distressed. Aiden was confused as to the problem until he looked down beside the bed and saw her tattered robe sitting beside her chain shirt on the floor. Now he understood why she had remained quiet during their impromptu meeting. The guardsmen grinned unashamedly, obviously unused to a beautiful woman sleeping in their simple guardhouse.

“Alright lads, take it outside, give the lady some space,” Pacian said with surprising authority. Aiden hedged, wondering if the soldiers would listen to the brash young rogue but to his surprise, they took their meal outside.

Aiden decided to follow them so he could have a quick word with Colt. Grabbing half a loaf of bread, he stepped outside into the chilling cold, and looked about for the big

ranger. His camouflage leather wasn't hard to spot against the hard-packed snow of his surroundings.

"You okay?" Aiden asked as he approached, his breath misting into a cloud of vapour.

"Yeah," Colt grunted laconically. "The attitude of people sometimes just really gets to me. I bet the hunters in that army didn't even consider the effects of taking down so much game. We nearly died because of that, not to mention the others that Olaf sent before us. Really stupid." He chewed on some bread thoughtfully.

"Speaking of stupid and nearly dying," Aiden segued, "what possessed you to try and wrestle that big wolf at the frozen river? As I recall, you had a perfectly good sword on your back."

"You've obviously never tried to wield a greatsword with a wounded arm," Colt explained. "Hurt my left elbow in that fight at the wagon, the one you went down in. I'm sure you remember. Nellise was done in, so I didn't bother her with something so minor. By the time we fought that big wolf, I could barely lift the bow let alone draw my sword, so I figured I'd buy you some time. Also thought I could take it, too, but that's neither here nor there."

"And here I was thinking you had a death wish or something," Aiden remarked with newfound respect. "That was both selfless and brave of you. Thanks."

"Don't get used to it, I'll probably disappoint you in the future," Colt muttered deprecatingly.

"Can't imagine why," Aiden deadpanned. Colt flashed him a rare smile, and then went back to eating. The young man ate some of the bread he'd brought with him in silence for a few minutes, enjoying a rare moment of camaraderie with the grouchy ranger before heading back into the relative warmth of the guardhouse.

As soon as he stepped in and closed the door, Aiden suddenly remembered Sayana, and noticed her bed was empty. He had forgotten all about her, and didn't recall seeing her at all before he went outside. Startled, he looked around quickly but couldn't see her in the room. He moved in closer to check the bed and noticed a scrap of animal fur on the floor. Leaning down to pick it up, Aiden glanced under the bed itself and saw the wild girl staring back at him with gleaming eyes.

"Oh, there you are," Aiden remarked, mildly relieved. "You know you're safe in here, right?"

"The men scared me," she replied softly. "I was too weak to fight them all, so I hid."

"That wasn't really necessary," Aiden told her calmly. "They wouldn't have hurt you, because they're here to protect people like you and me."

"What is your name?"

"Aiden. I'm sorry I didn't have time to introduce myself earlier. Why don't you come out and have something to eat with us?" Sayana didn't move immediately, so Aiden gave her a reassuring smile.

"Do not think of me as a child, Aiden," she growled softly. "Nor am I stupid. I am hungry, however..." She rolled out the other side of the bed and rose to her feet slowly, heading over to the table to fetch something to eat. Aiden followed, examining her carefully as she went past. Her bright red hair was wild and unkempt, and her skin seemed to be very fair, but covered in thin layers of dirt and grime.

Underneath all that there was probably a beautiful young woman, and Aiden couldn't help but wonder what had happened in her life that would result in her living off the side of a mountain, fighting for survival in the harsh winter.

Nellise had come out from under the blanket and clothed herself, so they all sat around the small table to enjoy the hot soup and freshly baked bread. Aiden, Pacian and the young cleric used the supplied wooden cutlery, but Sayana did not. They did their best not to pay too much attention to that odd fact.

"How are you holding up after our recent... *experiences*?" Aiden asked of Nellise, who ate her meal in silence. She glanced knowingly at him before replying.

"Nothing I was taught in all my years at the Church prepared me for what I faced over the past two days," she answered eventually. "I have prayed for strength and wisdom to guide me through these trials, and I think I'm going to be okay. I must confess I am rather looking forward to returning to Culdery, where I intend to remain until the situation improves. I can't imagine what my superiors would say concerning our ordeal."

"You're not going to tell them everything, are you?" Pacian asked pointedly, most likely referring to the death of Merin Teas back in the town.

"I shall be discreet when explaining recent events," she assured him. "It isn't in my best interest to be as open and forthcoming as I'd like." Pacian seemed satisfied with this answer, and Aiden felt a sense of relief that their dark secret would remain so.

After eating, he felt a sense of comfort he hadn't felt for weeks. The others must have been experiencing it too, for they all spent the next hour tending to minor chores or relaxing. Before long, one of the guards caught their attention to report that the merchant had arrived at the gates. They gathered up their gear and stepped outside to meet the man.

Brilliant sunshine bathed them in a cold light as they stood in the outer bailey of Fort Highmarch, and even though it was still below freezing, the clear skies were a welcome relief from the unrelenting rain of the past weeks for Aiden and his companions.

Sitting before the gate was a large, four-wheeled wagon, with two massive draft horses hitched to the front, their breath misting in the frigid conditions. A lean, middle-aged man in heavy clothing and a sour disposition stood beside the wagon, having a discussion of some sort with Captain Marshald.

"Nothing has passed through that road in nearly a month, Captain," the merchant was saying, clearly unhappy. "You've kicked out all the caravan guards and mercenaries from the fort, so I demand that you provide three men for protection through to Bracksford. I will of course pay standard rates."

"You do not get to make demands of me, sir," Marshald replied crisply. "But fear not Mister Samuels, you will not make the journey without protection." He looked over to where Aiden and the others were approaching. "Here come your guards now, actually." The merchant looked over to see what he was referring to. The expression on his face was not encouraging.

"Good morning," Aiden greeted them. "Don't look so disappointed, we're actually highly experienced in travelling along this particular road." Samuels squinted at him shrewdly, and then examined the others with the same level of scrutiny. He frowned when he looked at Sayana, but he seemed to approve of Colt. That opinion would probably change as soon as the big ranger opened his mouth, something Aiden would take extra care to prevent from happening.

“So, can we expect any trouble along this road, of which you are *such* an expert?” Mister Samuels asked. Aiden pondered this for a moment, wondering if they had sufficiently thinned out the pack of hungry wolves out on the mountainside, but before he could formulate an answer, Pacian stepped forward.

“I’m afraid it’s terribly dangerous out there, sir,” he declared, “we barely made it here ourselves. It’s those damnable wolves you see, they’re everywhere! Monstrous beasts, able to tear a man to shreds in the blink of an eye.” With each declaration of canine might, Mister Samuels’s eyes bulged larger.

“How do I know you’re not exaggerating to try and weasel a little extra coin out of me, hmm?” he asked suspiciously. “I see no wounds on any of your people.” He was technically right, because Nellise was very good at her job, but that fact wasn’t going to stop Pacian from trying.

“We happen to have with us a master of the healing arts, without whose presence we would surely have perished,” he assured the merchant. “But pay close attention to her robe, and the leathers of my fellow ranger here. Note the teeth and claw marks.” Pacian seized upon the moment, oblivious to Colt’s menacing gaze. Clearly the blond rogue’s reference to being a ranger didn’t pass without notice.

“So I think the standard rate for caravan guards, plus an additional three silver nobles each, would be an appropriate price for our services,” Pacian finished.

“Thirteen silvers each?” Samuels blurted, “Damnable highway robbery, sir!”

“Consider the combined experience of myself, a ranger of two years, my large friend here, and of course the reassuring presence of a cleric of God in case - heaven forbid - the worst happens. These are perilous times, Mister Samuels. Do consider wisely.” Aiden suppressed a grin. The merchant appeared to think about it for a long moment before finally relenting.

“I expect the finest quality service for that price, sir,” he stated, pointing a finger directly at Pacian. “And if you can provide it, then we have an agreement.”

“We’ll keep you and your cargo safe, of that you can be certain,” Pacian finished.

“As you say,” Samuels muttered. “Climb aboard then, and we’ll leave immediately.”

“I’ll sit up front and keep an eye out for trouble,” Colt volunteered quickly. “And our ‘fearless leader’ can join me.” He put a meaty hand heavily on Pacian’s shoulder and steered him towards the front of the wagon. Nellise and Sayana walked in the opposite direction to the back of the wagon and prepared to climb aboard. Captain Marshald stopped Aiden just before he was about to follow them.

“I’ve written out a message that I want you to pass on to Olaf,” he said, passing the young man a folded piece of paper. “Once again, I’m very sorry I can’t offer Bracksford any further military assistance. He’ll have to make do with the local militia.”

“I’m not sure it’ll be enough, Captain,” Aiden replied soberly. “It seems that the King must have taken a lot of the experienced men from town as well, for I don’t recall seeing any guards older than I am. Why did he do that anyway? Who exactly are we at war with?”

“I really can’t tell a civilian anything specific,” Marshald said, “but rest assured that the security of the Kingdom is involved, and His Majesty knows what he’s doing.”

“I can’t really argue with that,” Aiden sighed. “Maybe we could just send Colt north of Bracksford. If there are any bandits out there, they’ll probably die from the smell.”

They both laughed quietly, making sure the big man wasn't in earshot. Marshald extended a gloved hand, and Aiden took it, shaking it firmly.

"Fortune favour you, Aiden," he said, then turned and strode off toward the inner gate. Aiden liked the man, despite failing to secure more than a few days worth of supplies for the town from him. They had come this far hoping to find the solution to the town's problems, only to find that the fort had problems of its own.

Resolving to find a way north, he pulled his longcoat around him to ward off the chill wind and moved towards the back of the wagon. Nellise and Sayana were already sitting in the back, and there was very little room left. Aiden gave them a quick smile as he managed to squeeze between the two young women, and while it wasn't the most comfortable position to sit in, he would somehow find the strength to endure.

Four stout men opened the large gates of the fort and the wagon moved forward, slowly at first but with increasing speed as it clattered down the road. The trip back to town would take considerably less time than their troubled journey to the fort, so Aiden tried to relax and keep an eye out for trouble.

The freezing wind had abated somewhat and made the start of the journey almost enjoyable. Their brief look at the clear sky ended as the heavy clouds hanging over the northern slopes and beyond gradually obscured the view. The wagon made good time along the road, its wheels kicking up a trail of snow in its wake. If they kept up this rate, they'd make Bracksford around nightfall. After a while Aiden began fidgeting with the enchanted glove they'd found along the way, to pass the time.

"A curious device," Nellise observed mildly. "It certainly came in useful yesterday. I wonder what that doomed merchant was doing with it."

"It was separate from the rest of his possessions, so I assume he was planning to sell it," Aiden conjectured. "There is a man in Bracksford that deals in such items, so it's possible it was going to him. I might make a discreet inquiry when we arrive."

"There is one thing I do not understand," the cleric mused. "Granted, my knowledge of such things is far from complete, but I recall that it takes a great deal of training to operate something like this. How did you, the son of a simple wagon builder, make it work?" Aiden gave her a sly smile, for she was a little more observant than he'd thought.

"I've studied a lot of books from strange places over the past few years," he shrugged, not intending to be evasive, yet hearing his words come out that way regardless. "What I mean is, during the course of studying various languages, I came across a lot of information about these sorts of devices. The writing around the gem on this glove is one of those languages, primarily used by wizards, though it's hardly one of the easiest to understand. Luckily I managed to decipher it well enough to make it do it's... thing."

"Show me," Sayana said, surprising Aiden. He positioned his gloved hand so that she could see the writing around the gem, and the wild girl peered at it intently for a long moment.

"Invoke it," she ordered. She peered directly into his inquiring eyes without blinking, making Aiden very uncomfortable. He had seen what she could do, however, and decided it wouldn't hurt to demonstrate the glove's power once more.

He spoke the command word, and the shimmering shield of force flickered into existence. Sayana gazed at it inquisitively, and moved her hands in quick, darting

gestures. Aiden watched her keep this up for nearly a minute, before he finally had to ask what on earth she was doing.

“What on earth are you doing?”

“Learning,” she replied absently. “The energy patterns from that gem are fairly simple to reproduce. I think I’ve almost...” a moment later she spoke the same command word that Aiden had, and a second shield appeared before them, hovering in mid-air outside the back of the wagon. Aiden gaped in astonishment, hardly believing what he just saw. With a simple flick of her wrist, Sayana was able to move the shield back and forth in front of her, then with another gesture the shield vanished. She slumped back against the side of the wagon, apparently depleted once again.

“A young woman, living in the wild, who is clearly some sort of sorceress?” Aiden blurted out loud, exasperated. “Who *are* you?” She didn’t answer immediately, choosing to look at Aiden with glinting green eyes for a long moment instead.

“I am of the Akoran mountain people,” she finally replied. “My tribe lives several days travel to the east.” Aiden recognised the tribal name, having lived close to the mountains where the native peoples of this region lived. The blacksmith at Bracksford was also from the same region, and might even be related to this girl.

“What brings you out into Aielund territory?” Nellise asked curiously.

“I struck out on my own when food became scarce,” Sayana responded, gazing out at the passing terrain.

“You’re young to be out here in the wilds by yourself,” the cleric observed. “How long have you lived around here?”

“Six months,” she said quietly. “There was a great deal more food around here last summer, then the soldiers came through and hunted the place bare.”

“And what of your abilities?” Aiden pressed.

“I’ve always been able to do that. I just... make it happen.”

“You didn’t have to study?”

“Study what?” Sayana asked, looking at him curiously. Aiden didn’t have a quick answer for that, instead exchanging a knowing look with Nellise. Wizards typically had to study for years to do what Sayana claimed to achieve naturally. He had read only small excerpts about natural magicians like this before, his knowledge being limited to the books he had been able to get his hands on. He was about to ask her about her interest in the glass shard hanging around his neck when the wagon clattered to a stop.

“Wait here a moment, I’m to see what’s going on,” Aiden advised, jumping down to the frozen ground.

“Do you think we need your protection?” Sayana said in a way that suggested she didn’t. Aiden glanced back to see Nellise smiling slightly as she readied her crossbow. The wild girl was right; they were both probably tougher than he was. He drew his shortsword to make himself feel a little better, and to also defend himself if attacked. That was pretty important too.

Striding up to the front of the wagon, he could see they had arrived at the wreck of the merchant’s wagon where Pacian had discovered the glove Aiden now wore. The blond rogue was over at the wagon sifting amongst the wreckage.

“What’s he doing?” Aiden asked Colt, who stood on the wagon with his longbow ready.

“He said there was something there he wanted to pick up.”

“He didn't mention what, exactly?” Aiden pressed.

“Why don't you go and ask him,” Colt shrugged. “I'm busy making sure he doesn't die when those wolves come back.”

“This is nonsense,” Samuels complained. “We are wasting time and asking for trouble, and we will run out of light before Bracksford if we delay any longer!” Aiden peered over to try and see what his blond friend was doing from a distance, but then gave up and walked over to have a closer look.

“I know what you're going to say Aiden, so just shut up and give me a hand with this stuff,” Pacian muttered as he approached.

“What 'stuff'?”

“The iron! We can sell it to the blacksmith in town and make some money. There's not all that much of it, I-” he stopped talking and staggered backward when he spotted something on the other side of the ruined wagon. Fearing wolves, Aiden stepped forward cautiously with his sword raised before him. And there, lying in snow stained with blood, was a grey wolf. A crossbow bolt gruesomely poked out of its side, yet it was still alive, its chest rising and falling with each ragged breath. He recognised it from the fight yesterday – this was the one that had mauled him badly before Nellise had shot it with her crossbow.

But Aiden's fear disappeared at the sight of the poor animal, replaced by pity. It was clearly suffering, and had been through the night. The only thing he could think of doing was giving it a swift death to end its misery, but it wasn't something he'd ever done before. Pacian had drawn his dagger, but Aiden held up his free hand to signal him to hold. Aiden took a step towards the wounded wolf with the intention of taking care of his adversary himself, until he noticed that Colt had come over to see what was taking so long.

“I know what you're thinking Aiden,” he said calmly, observing the scene, “and usually it'd be the right thing to do, but let me take care of this one for you.”

Aiden nodded, silently grateful that he was spared the grisly task. He scanned the nearby tree line while the big ranger moved in to deal with the wolf. There was no sign of any others about, but he remained vigilant. Colt emerged from the other side of the battered wagon carrying the body of the wolf in his arms, for some reason. Aiden was trying to figure out what he was doing when he noticed the animal's chest was still moving.

“What are you-” he began to say, but was cut off by the big man.

“I told you I'd take care of it, so shut up,” he growled as he strode past, being careful not to jostle the wolf too much. Aiden looked at Pacian, bewildered, but he had nothing to add. He merely shrugged, and gestured for his friend to give him a hand with the iron. There wasn't a great deal of it there, but the iron ingots were heavy, and it would take the two of them several trips to move it all into the wagon.

Aiden picked up two ingots, one in each hand, and headed around to the back of the wagon in an effort to avoid the piercing glare of Mister Samuels. He found that Nellise had joined Colt with the wolf just outside the back of the wagon. Although he could hardly believe it, Colt seemed to have enlisted Nellise's aid in *healing* the wolf.

“Hold it still,” she was telling Colt. “The quarrel doesn't appear to have struck anything vital, but he'll bleed out if I don't do this right.”

“Just do what you can, I'm not expecting any miracles,” Colt replied evenly, his eyes on the patient.

“That’s an odd thing to say, since miracles are sort of what I do,” Nellise mumbled absently, focused upon her work. They were clearly very busy, so Aiden held his questions in check. Pacian gave him a quick nudge as he went past, prompting him to get back to work making his blond friend richer.

“There was barely enough room in the back for us to sit as it was,” Aiden said after a quick calculation. “Where are you going to put all of this?”

“Yeah I know, I'll think of something,” Pacian shrugged, leaving Aiden to wonder what his solution would involve. Knowing his friend, it would probably involve Colt running alongside the wagon all the way back to town.

After they had finished loading the iron, the two young men peered curiously over Colt's shoulder to see what was happening. The crossbow bolt, bloodied and bent, lay in the snow by his side. A bandage, stained already with the blood of the wolf, was wrapped around its midriff. Nellise had her eyes closed in prayer, one hand delicately placed near the wounded area. The wolf lay still, surprisingly calm given the close proximity of humans.

“Why are you helping it?” Aiden whispered. “It did try to kill me, you know.”

“How could I let such a smart animal die?” Colt replied, *probably* being sarcastic. “Humanity has done enough damage to this region. This one lives.” Aiden hadn't heard him so serious before. This was clearly an issue close to his heart.

“Yes, he will live,” Nellise agreed, “but he's lost a lot of blood. I'm afraid he won't be able to fend for himself for some time.” Colt nodded, deep in thought for a long moment. Finally, he looked at the crowded back of the wagon, then at Pacian.

“So, how do you feel about running?” the blond rogue asked with an impish grin.

Chapter Six

It was well after sunset by the time the wagon rolled to a stop in the sodden ground outside the gates of Bracksford. Aiden sat at the front of the wagon, huddled underneath his hood in a futile effort to stay dry, sitting next to the driver and Sayana. He had hoped, in the back of his mind that it might have stopped raining by now, but was disappointed with the continuing downpour. They had been gone for three days, and yet nothing had changed.

Pacian leaned against the side of the wagon, struggling to catch his breath after jogging alongside the wagon for miles. As Aiden had learned years ago, his friend lacked the stamina for running and could only imagine how sore and tired he was now. The only reason the blond rogue had agreed to give up his seat in the wagon was because Colt had also offered to run, since they both had 'special cargo' to haul. But even on a bad day, the rugged outdoorsman was in much better shape than Pacian. There were two guards standing at the gate, one of which stepped forward to address them.

“Hell of a time to be showing up at our gates, sir,” he called to Mister Samuels, the crumpled little man wearing a perpetual scowl at the journey he had to endure. “But it sure is good to see you. I hope you're hauling food; with all this damn rain we've had, most of our supplies have been ruined.”

"We've a few days worth of supplies for the town, and a few passengers, as it happens," Samuels replied. "I ask that you expedite our passage into the town, young man."

"Just let me check your cargo and I'll wave you through," the guard replied, walking towards the back of the wagon with a sputtering torch held aloft. Aiden cast a concerned glance at Samuels, who shrugged back at him. They had no idea how the guard would react to finding a wolf in the back. Colt had indicated that if it was a problem, he'd set it loose back in the hills, but the tone of his voice suggested he would have been reluctant to do so.

A minute or so passed and Aiden could only hear the sounds of muffled talking and wooden boxes being moved from the back of the wagon. He didn't hear any blood-curdling screams, which was a positive sign. Finally, the guard walked back up towards the gate, motioning for it to be opened as he did so.

"All well and good, sir. Sorry to see that your hound was wounded."

"... Yes, he means a lot to me," Samuels answered awkwardly, trying to cover his surprise.

"Glad to hear the road is cleared now sir, it was a cause of some concern for us. Head on through, and get yourselves to the inn."

"Thank you," Samuels replied, flicking the reins and urging the tired horses forward. "A risky business, bringing a wild animal like that into town," the merchant confided to Aiden after they were out of earshot of the guards. "As soon as it's back on its feet, it'll be looking to escape, or eat, and your fool ranger friend won't find it so pitiful then."

"I'll have a word with him about it, but it's in no condition to do harm to anyone at this point, so don't be too concerned." Aiden didn't think for a moment he'd be able to convince Colt of anything, but the merchant was starting to grate on his nerves.

"It is of little concern to me," Samuels shrugged. "I won't be staying in this miserable little town past tomorrow morning, so pray that you are right." Aiden could tell he was grumpier than normal, and chose not to answer. There was no point.

The wagon soon pulled up outside the Bracksfordshire Arms Inn, a welcome sight to the weary travellers. Aiden jumped to the ground and helped Sayana down from the high ledge of the wagon's seat, for the wild girl was still a little weak, despite all the food she had consumed during the journey. Aiden had never seen anyone so small consume so much.

"So, this is Bracksford," he told her, his breath misting in the chilly night air. "Have you been here before?" The young man could see by the light of a nearby torch, sheltered from the incessant rain by a veranda, that Sayana was clearly uncomfortable.

"I have never been out of the mountains before," she whispered. "People... react badly to me sometimes."

"I can't imagine why," Aiden remarked with a straight face. "I doubt anyone would give you any trouble around here if you're with us. Still, if you want to return to the mountains, feel free to do so."

"There is nothing left to eat back there, so I will stay with you for now," she shrugged after a moment of thought.

"You don't want to go back to your homelands?" Aiden inquired.

"I... no," she hedged. Though he didn't let on, he could tell that she hadn't been entirely truthful in her response, but he didn't press the issue.

“Okay, we've enough money to keep you fed for a while,” he said. “The only question is where we are getting the food *from*.”

“Money? What's that?” she asked. Aiden gave her his best 'are you kidding me?' look, but it appeared the wild girl was serious.

“I'll have to explain it later. Right now I just want to get some food and then sleep for a week.” He noticed Colt walking carefully to the stables carrying a heavy coat in his arms, big enough to cover a large, dog-shaped animal. All of the decent horses had been taken earlier in the month, probably when the King swept through and bought up everything of value to his army. With the town closed to general travel, there were no other horses for the wolf to disturb.

Pacian, trudging slowly through the downpour, finally caught up with the others at the wagon. Nellise hopped down from the back and, without feeling the need to say anything further, they opened the door to the inn and stepped inside.

The dry warmth of the common room washed over them, accompanied by the surprising aroma of hot food. Just about every seat and table was taken, which meant the place was busier than usual. A few of the nearest patrons looked up at their entrance, and the looks on their faces made Aiden feel a little self-conscious. Despite the rain, his coat was still stained with blood, as was Nellise's robe and Sayana's furs. They must have looked like they'd just come from a war.

“What in God's name happened to you?” asked the innkeeper, peering around the corner from the bar to see what the fuss was about.

“We made it to Fort Highmarch and back,” Nellise explained. “I apologise for our appearance, for it was an eventful journey.” A cheer went up from the crowd after she finished talking, and several patrons came over to shake their hands and pat them on the back. Sayana looked bewildered and eyed the door longingly, but Aiden gave her a reassuring look that kept her from bolting.

“There's a wagon outside with some supplies,” he called out after the greetings were over with. “The merchant could probably use a hand unloading. There's flour, sausages and a pile of other-” he didn't even get to finish before most of the people hurried outside. “Okay I guess that's that taken care of,” he finished, mostly to himself. He noticed the Mayor approaching from the other side of the common room to speak with them.

“Stirring work indeed young man,” he congratulated him. “I'm thrilled you succeeded in making it to the Fort. Tell me, did the reinforcements come with you, or are they arriving in the morning?” Aiden gave Nellise a worried glance.

“I'm afraid there won't be any reinforcements, sir,” he confided slowly. “I spoke with the Captain of the Guard, and he wrote this letter for you.” He fished out the folded note from his pocket and handed it to Olaf, who looked at it like Aiden was handing him a snake. Eventually he took the note and unfolded it, walking over to a nearby candelabrum to read it.

“He's not going to like it,” Aiden murmured.

“I can't say I liked it much either,” Nellise whispered, “but we'll deal with it tomorrow. I think I'll buy a bowl of whatever they're eating tonight and retire to my room to meditate.”

“Perfectly understandable,” Aiden murmured. “Head on upstairs, I'll deal with Olaf.” Nellise gave him an appreciative nod then moved over to order some food. It smelt like

they had been serving beef, which was curious as they hadn't been doing that for the past couple of weeks.

"I wish to eat and sleep also," Sayana said, interrupting his line of thought. "Shall I follow her?"

"That's probably a good idea, I don't think you can go wrong sticking with Nellise," he replied. She gave him a perplexed look, which Aiden promptly ignored and headed over to speak with Olaf, expecting the impending conversation to be less than pleasant.

"This is an outrage," the Mayor whispered fiercely as soon as Aiden was close enough to allow a quiet conversation. "How do they expect us to open up the road to Culdeny without any soldiers?"

"I don't have any answers beyond what is already written there," Aiden replied evenly, attempting to be diplomatic. "I wish I had better news for you, but I simply don't. I'll leave it in your hands, sir, as I'm really tired from the *dangerous journey*."

"Oh, of course, forgive my brusqueness Aiden," Olaf replied hastily. "Come see me tomorrow afternoon so we can discuss this matter further. I bid you goodnight, sir." Olaf folded the note and shoved it into a pocket in his vest, then turned and exited the inn via the front door. Surprised at how easy it was to deal with the corrupt man, Aiden shrugged at his behaviour and headed over to get some food.

Aiden had planned to eat and then get some sleep, but the cooped-up townsfolk were eager to hear about their journey to the south. For the next two hours, he regaled the small crowd with details from the past few days on the road, and even provided a demonstration of the magical glove they had found.

He made sure to heap praise upon his companions for their various parts in the success of the journey, and cautioned the crowd to treat Sayana gently. Not that he thought she'd attack anyone, but she was uncomfortable in crowds and likely to act unpredictably.

By the time the crowd dispersed, Aiden was feeling very tired indeed. He mumbled something about wishing the others a good night, and then staggered up to his room. Pacian was already snoring in his bed and didn't stir, even when Aiden dropped his chain shirt on the wooden floor by accident. Moments after he climbed in under the blankets, he fell asleep to the sounds of rain pattering onto the roof.

* * *

Aiden jolted awake, sweat beading on his brow, for the nightmare had come to him again, as intense as ever. He sat up in bed, taking a few minutes to catch his breath. Though he was shaken, it wouldn't take long to shrug off the effects of the dream - he'd had a lot of practice. But it was a not-so-subtle reminder of why he'd come to Bracksford in the first place. Information regarding the strange device he'd shattered in that cave years ago was hard to come by, but in this town lived a man who may have what Aiden was looking for.

He looked across at the other bed and noticed that Pacian was no longer there, but his bed had clearly been slept in, judging by the mess. A pair of ladies' undergarments sat at the foot of his bed, indicating that some local girl had given Pacian a 'heroes reward' the previous night. Dim light was streaming in through cracks in the shuttered window to his right, indicating it was well after sunrise.

The rain continued coming down, drumming softly on the roof, but Aiden hardly noticed it. Filled with a sense of purpose, he clambered out of bed, dressed, then headed down to the common room, making sure that he had his coin pouch with him. Today was the day he was going to get some answers.

The young explorer had apparently slept much longer than he thought, for the common room of the Bracksfordshire Arms was nearly devoid of patrons. Only those with nothing better to do remained, gathered around the fireplace while sipping on steaming hot broth.

Aiden was greeted cheerfully by the innkeeper's daughter, who recognised him on sight as the brave man who brought them food. As such, the breakfast he was given was complimentary – the bread was fresh, as well as a plate of sausages and some of the leftover stew from last night. It was a hearty meal, and he ate until he couldn't fit anything more in.

After finishing his feast, Aiden headed outside. The merchant's wagon still sat just outside the door, only partially covered by the veranda. Movement from around the back caught Aiden's eye so he went in for a closer look. Pacian, his regular clothes soaking wet from spending time out in the weather, was wrestling with the iron ingots they had salvaged on the journey back. It was astonishing to see him engaged in manual labor, especially the day after jogging for miles in the rain.

"About time you woke up," Pacian chastised him as soon as he came within sight. "I could really use a hand here. Our merchant friend wants to leave as soon as possible, so he roused me out of a nice warm bed to carry heavy objects in the rain." Aiden peered inside and did a quick count of the ingots.

"Yeah, good morning to you too," Aiden replied absently. "So, you're trying to move all twelve of these down the street by hand? Why don't you get Samuels to move the wagon down there for you?"

"Because the wily bastard wants to charge me for delivering it," Pacian growled. "It's only a hundred yards or so, and he wanted to charge me a silver noble for his time!"

"He'd also have to hitch that wagon," Aiden remarked, "so I don't think he's being *completely* unreasonable. That, and he's probably guessed how lazy you really are."

"Hey, I practically *ran* here from the mountains," Pacian protested. "Honestly, you have no idea how sore I am right now, but I'm not willing to let all of our money go to waste, so stop talking and start helping."

"I like your use of the term 'our money' there, it's filled with such hope," Aiden deadpanned, noticing Nellise appear from around the corner of the wagon.

"Good morning Aiden," she said, smiling brightly at him. The cleric had replaced her robe, and had apparently bathed and cleaned herself up, for she made quite an impact.

"I like the new robe, it looks great on you," Aiden blurted. "I mean, it's a proper, undamaged robe, and that's why it looks great. Not that you don't look great or anything. I'm going to stop talking now." Nellise had the good grace to ignore his insane babbling, but her smile remained.

"Yes, the old robe was a lost cause," she replied smoothly. "And while I was purchasing this one, I took the time to buy a few extra things as well." Aiden gave her a blank look of incomprehension that quickly cleared when Nellise stepped to one side and revealed a young woman, standing behind her. She was dressed in plain but practical

clothing; a simple tunic, brown leather pants and knee-high leather boots. Her red hair was wet, and clung to her face and clothing on its way down to her waist.

"Sayana? You're... clean," he exclaimed, suddenly realising how stupid he sounded. The sound of Pacian scoffing reinforced his opinion. "I'm sorry, that was a strange comment to make. You just look so different, that's all."

"Nellise thought I would blend into these surroundings better in these clothes," the wild sorcerer explained. "I think of them as camouflage, which allows me to tolerate the terrible itching and uncomfortable shoes."

"Nice to see you're making an effort to fit in," Aiden offered sagely, with absolutely no smile on his face whatsoever.

"And it is nice to see the people here are not trying to kill me."

"Yes, they're funny like that," Aiden deadpanned. "It's terribly rude, you see."

"You are mocking me," Sayana accused him mildly, looking at him askance. Aiden cracked a grin and nodded guiltily.

"I'm sorry, but the notion of these townsfolk attacking you is rather odd," he explained. "You've done nothing to warrant such behaviour, so long as you don't go around setting people on fire. Oh, when I get the chance I want to talk to you a bit further about your 'abilities', if you don't mind." Sayana nodded cautiously in response, not knowing what to expect.

"While I'm glad you two are bonding," Pacian interrupted, "there's still the unresolved matter of moving this bloody iron. And I just know my old friend Aiden will be there for me, if he wants to get paid."

"Why don't you ask your lady friend from last night?" Nellise suggested with a raised eyebrow.

"Wait, she's not here is she?" Pace exclaimed, looking around with consternation.

"I can help," Sayana interrupted.

"While I'm sure your heart is in the right place – along with many other more interesting parts," Pacian remarked dubiously, "these iron bars are heavy and you're not really strong enough to carry them." Sayana glared at him, unnerving him enough so that he moved aside a little. The wild girl extended one hand towards the iron ingots and one of them suddenly began hovering above the rest, giving Aiden and the others quite a start.

"Where to?" Sayana asked. She seemed to be sincere, but Aiden thought he detected a note of smug pride in her voice.

"Well, looks like I won't be needed after all," Aiden observed. "So if you'll excuse me, I really have to go and see someone." Pacian started to protest, but Aiden quickly started walking away, leaving him to his chore.

Free at last to pursue his own tasks for the day, Aiden pulled the hood of his longcoat over his head to provide a modicum of shelter from the weather, and walked through the sparsely crowded streets. With hope renewed amongst the small population, the people went about their tasks oblivious to the persistent rains.

Aiden continued on to his destination, an ordinary house a mere few minutes walk from the inn. Bracksford wasn't a large town by any stretch of the imagination, but it was the central hub for the many farms and hamlets in the shire, and as such maintained a population of permanent residents to serve the outlying communities. Only a few people within the town had little to do with farming, and it was at the door of one of these individuals that Aiden arrived.

It was a large house by the standards of Bracksford, standing two storeys high and featuring an elegantly carved wooden entrance that retained a great deal of its original elegance, despite the apparent age of the place. Aiden stepped underneath the veranda and knocked on the door. He was patient, understanding that the advanced age of the man who lived here could mean a less than rapid response.

"Good morning, who is it?" came a familiar voice as the door opened and an old man peered around the edge. He was wearing gold-rimmed spectacles and sported a neatly trimmed white beard.

"Good morning Dale, it's just me, Aiden. Again." he responded. A look of recognition passed over the old man's features as he focused on the young man before him.

"Ah! You've returned. Nice to see you again my boy, do come in." The door was pulled open further and Aiden stepped inside, shaking off his longcoat and draping it on the nearby coat hanger. Dale frowned upon wet coats being brought into his house on Aiden's first visit and requested he take extra care, for the old man was the owner of the largest collection of books, arcane knowledge and related paraphernalia in this part of the country.

"Dreadful weather," Dale observed, closing the door. "Damnedest thing I've ever seen, all this rain. Makes me wonder if some sort of magic's involved."

"Is that right?" Aiden replied, suddenly interested. Dale was the closest thing to a practitioner of magic in this area, and he might actually know what he was talking about. It was also possible he was just a cranky old man, railing at the heavens.

"My word yes," Dale continued, "I don't think it's possible for an unrelenting torrent of rain like this to continue for so many weeks without some sort of supernatural influence. I mean, where's it all coming from, wot?"

"You might be on to something there," Aiden conceded, not really having the knowledge to refute or confirm mysterious wizards making it rain in a boring farming community in the middle of nowhere. "So, you're no doubt wondering why I'm here."

"Ah, yes, well I imagine you're still after that book, hmm?"

"That's right sir, if you still have it," Aiden confirmed. The old man nodded and headed back in to the dining room, or as he called it, the library.

"Yes, I believe I do," Dale said, chuckling at some joke Aiden wasn't privy to. Not that he was paying him much attention anyway. Upon entering the library, he was taken aback by the sheer volume of books and other curios lying on every available surface, the largest of which was a clear glass cylinder, two yards high and adorned with metal plates sitting next to Dale's large desk.

A clear pathway along the floor was the only way through to the desk where Dale sat and went about his work, and then through to the fireplace, and the kitchen, both of which were understandably devoid of flammable - and valuable - materials.

"I see you've tidied up the place since I was last here," Aiden observed with deadpan humour.

"Oh you noticed? You're a sharp one!" Dale replied with no trace of sarcasm, turning from his task of sorting through a small mountain of books briefly to smile at the young adventurer. Aiden gave him an odd look, which was completely wasted on the old chap. "Ah, here it is. I knew it would be near the surface somewhere. Now, there is the small matter of the price. I trust you've managed to accrue the money I've asked for?"

Aiden nodded and reached into a pocket to produce the money pouch. He opened it and shook out nine silver nobles into his hand, a small fortune by any measure, and just about Aiden's entire share of the money they had acquired in recent days.

"Splendid! I knew you wouldn't have any trouble finding good, honest work to pay your way. Wasn't so hard now was it?" Aiden gave him a level stare but the old man remained oblivious to the hidden meaning behind the look. "There we are then. I do hope you find that one interesting. The material can be a little... *dense* for some people."

"I'm sure I'll manage," Aiden assured the old fellow as he took the old tome, then recalled that he wanted to ask about the enchanted glove he now wore. "Something I wanted to mention before I forget is this item I found while travelling along the southern highway. Would you know anything about this?" Dale looked down at the glove Aiden presented on his left hand, and gave it a cursory examination.

"I can't say that this particular glove looks familiar to me, though the style is typical of the enchanters at the University of the Arcane, in Fairloch. An unremarkable item, to be sure," he finished, peering over his spectacles. "Is there any particular reason why you mentioned this?"

"Not really, I just wanted to see if it was anything more than it appeared." Aiden was actually testing to see if Dale had been expecting it as a delivery from the merchant that had perished in the mountains. But apparently the man had just been carrying it as a piece of regular cargo. "Anyway, enough of that. Say, would you mind very much if I stayed here for a while to read this book? I really need to study it, and the inn has nothing but distractions--"

"Oh by all means, stay as long as you wish," Dale chortled, picking up an elegant smoking pipe from his desk and taking a few puffs. "Head in to the kitchen and find yourself a chair." Aiden grasped the large tome eagerly, barely able to wait these last few moments until he could open it and find the answers he had waited so long for.

The kitchen was not unlike the rest of the house. There was clutter, but of a different variety. He had heard it said that a messy house was the sign of a creative mind, and if so, Dale was very creative indeed. Aiden quickly cleared a pile of unwashed plates and pulled up a chair, opening the book as he did so and beginning to read before he even sat down.

Alcott's Treatise on Artefacts Most Ancient was the title, and it was written in Olde Aielish, a form of writing that fell into disuse long ago. Upon inspecting the pages closely it was clear they were quite brittle, so he turned the pages with great care to avoid unnecessary strain. Although not fluent, he had learned to pick the important words in the language, as he'd encountered it many times before in his pursuit of knowledge.

The first few chapters seemed to deal with Alcott's travels, and the things he had discovered along the way. He had a knack for finding ancient sites of civilisations that had long since vanished and offered varying degrees of analysis of the devices he'd found, from the vague to the excruciatingly detailed. But so far, none of the listed relics had any of the information Aiden was looking for. The glass sphere he'd ruined had strange symbols etched in various places, but he had yet to encounter what he assumed was a language anywhere else in his long hours of research.

Aiden lost track of time as he continued flipping through the delicate pages. The assortment of discoveries the man had made was astonishing, but few of them would be considered 'magical'. The ones that were listed as 'sorcerous in origine', or 'crafted of

artifice most dark', did not exhibit the obscure script he had seen on the sphere. Seventeen relics, recorded in six different languages, and not one of them was helpful in his task.

When he finally reached the last chapter, it was like he had suddenly started reading a different book. The language was entirely new, and it was one Aiden was unfamiliar with. Bewildered, he flipped back a page and carefully read the ancient writing to find out what he had missed. He chastised himself for skimming the often meandering writings of Alcott, for he had obviously passed something rather important.

The best he could make of it, Alcott had been conferring with a colleague named Cylferth concerning a relic that had been recovered from an excavation or a mine of some sort. There was no point trying to read it, so Aiden went back to skimming through for anything interesting.

It seemed like the rest of the book was done in this strange language, but there were diagrams now and then that piqued his interest. One of them was a curious looking object that had a full page dedicated to a diagram. The ink had faded terribly over the years, but enough of it was still legible to give an idea of its true shape. Sort of like a small box with tiny compartment lids that opened up. It was eye-catching, but not enough to hold his interest for more than a minute.

He was about to flip the page when he thought he saw something familiar in the corner. The diagram indicated that on one side of the box were engraved symbols, and to Aiden's shock, he recognised them as being similar to the ones from the glass sphere he had shattered years ago.

Excited, he peered closely at it, but couldn't make out more than a few letters. There were some notes in Cylferth's handwriting that seemed to be related, but Aiden, of course, could not read those either. Resisting the urge to scream in frustration, he leaned back in his chair and rubbed his eyes.

"Dale, do you have a moment?" he called into the other room where the old man had been examining the cylinder.

"Yes, did you need something? I'm afraid I don't have much food here, in case you were hungry..."

"No, I need your professional opinion on something," Aiden explained. "Take a look at this." Dale put down a magnifying glass and walked over to where Aiden was studying, and then peered down at the pages through his small spectacles.

"What seems to be the trouble? If you're concerned about the faded writing I'm sorry, but that's just how the book came. No refunds."

"No no, not that. Do you recognise this language?" Aiden gestured at the strange script before him. Dale took a few moments to gaze at the writing.

"Oh yes, I do believe it is the language of the Dwarves," he answered. "Not the most common language, but you'd be surprised how often it's used in the relics and whatnot I deal with."

"So, you can read this?" Aiden asked, his heart leaping at the prospect.

"After a fashion," Dale confirmed. "Is this the page here you're having trouble with?" Aiden nodded. "Let me see... 'The object was dormant when first recovered, but during my first examination I accidentally pressed one of the nodules inwards, causing glowing writing to appear on one side of the device. The writing appeared to change every thirteen seconds, and then vanished after a minute - sixty five seconds to be precise.' How remarkable."

“Does he mention anything else about the device, such as what happened to it?”

Dale continued reading, flipping the page a couple of times as he went. “I’m afraid he changes topic after a while. He did mention that the device required further study, and he would write more about it eventually. Is this of particular interest to you, young man?”

“It certainly is,” Aiden confirmed. “I’ve been searching for something like this for years.”

“Can’t have been searching for that long, unless you were interested in ancient discoveries as a small child!” Dale seemed to find that thought highly amusing.

“Long enough,” Aiden shrugged. “Is there *anything* else at all that you can tell me?”

“I’m afraid not. I can’t see any further reference to this discovery. I imagine you’ll need to start looking for his next book if you want to find out more.” Aiden was crestfallen, but attempted to hide it.

“Well... who was this person writing in Dwarvish anyway. Where did he live?”

“A dwarf, I imagine,” the old sage chuckled. “They were always digging around, uncovering God knows what. As for where he lived... this book is probably over two hundred years old. He most likely lived in the old underground Dwarven city of Ferrumgaard.” The name didn’t seem familiar to Aiden, but if he could find out more information about this object, he was going there sooner or later.

“Where is this place?” Aiden inquired. “I need to pay them a visit.” He wasn’t prepared for Dale’s reaction, which bordered on surprise.

“The city used to be in what we now call the Calespur Mountains, northwest of here. I say ‘used to be’ because, I’m sorry my boy, but Ferrumgaard was destroyed nearly a century ago,” Dale said almost apologetically. Aiden was dumbstruck.

“Yes, from the histories I’ve read,” the sage went on, “the place was flooded when the clan struck an underground lake. Most of the population was drowned, and only a small percentage managed to escape in time. A terrible shame really, for they were such amazing artificers and engineers.” Aiden leaned back in his chair to digest this information while Dale shuffled back to his desk. The young explorer wasn’t about to give up, but he had no idea how he was going to gain entry to a fallen underground city, let alone find a two hundred year old book in that city.

“Thanks for your help Dale,” he sighed, “You were invaluable.”

“Quite alright, Aiden,” the old man said. “If there’s any other way I can be of assistance don’t hesitate to stop by.” Aiden nodded, closed the book and stuffed it into his pack then headed towards the door, his head bowed in thought.

He barely noticed the rain as he walked through the flooded streets, meandering around the small town as he tried to think. His choices were quite clear – he could give up and never find out what really happened on that fateful day when he fell into that strange cave, or he could risk his life and quite possibly the lives of others looking for the answer.

His train of thought was interrupted by Olaf, who seemed to appear out of thin air in front of him.

“Ah, there you are,” he said with an accusing tone of voice. “I was beginning to wonder if you’d ever show up. Come in then, I don’t have all day.” Aiden blinked, suddenly noticing he was out the front of the Mayor’s office. He’d forgotten all about the meeting they had planned earlier. More than that, Aiden had no idea what the time was.

Shrugging to himself, he stepped into the office and took off his longcoat, not really interested in what the man had to say. The office was empty, except for the two of them.

"Would you care for a hot cup of soup?" Olaf offered.

"No thank you," Aiden refused, rather coldly. He was still upset over the incident with Merin, and did not trust the man as far as he could throw him.

"As you wish. Aiden, I believe you are a practical young man, unburdened by the, shall we say, less *productive* attitudes of your companions," Olaf continued. "And so I hope you'll accept my apologies for the unfortunate situation with my former associate. I will say only that I regret ever becoming involved with those people, and don't think for a moment that Merin, or her friend, were innocent."

"I'm not going to forgive you, if forgiveness is what you're fishing for," Aiden replied warily. "I don't like being blackmailed into doing your bidding anymore than you, but I'm prepared to help the town. I trust you are satisfied with the supplies we secured from the fort?"

"The food and other sundries were most welcome, but with no military support to assist us, we are left to deal with matters on our own, and quickly," the Mayor explained, sitting in a chair near the fire and crossing his legs. "We must break through the bandit forces to our north and open the highway to Culdeny if we are to restore trade."

"What about Coldstream?" Aiden asked. "They're closer, and could probably provide us with some more food, if not a few extra guards."

"I'm afraid I can't open the east gates," Olaf replied, shaking his head. "I recently received word from a ranger who was assigned to keep an eye on the Akoran tribesmen to the southeast. Apparently, they are amassing at the northern edge of their territory for raiding into Kingdom lands. I can't allow travel to the east until we have some means to provide protection for travellers."

"My family live in Coldstream," Aiden breathed, his voice tight with anxiety.

"I am very sorry young man," Olaf sympathised, "but there's nothing we can do for them. Like us, they will have to fend for themselves a while longer. This is why it is imperative that we reach Culdeny and seek further aid. That's where you come in."

"Me? I'm no soldier," Aiden protested. "Colt is probably the closest thing to a proper soldier in our group, even with his attitude."

"You all survived the trip to Forth Highmarch against difficult odds," Olaf reminded him, "I'm afraid that if I send more of our militia guards out to try and make it to Culdeny, they will not survive, and I will have further weakened the town for no gain. They're little more than farmboys in chain mail, I'm afraid, but we still need them patrolling our walls."

"What would we be facing?" Aiden asked hesitantly. "Assuming, of course, that I agree to this."

"The last information that I received indicated there were over two dozen individuals working along the highway," the Mayor replied delicately.

"Two *dozen*?" Aiden exclaimed, practically leaping out of his chair. "And you want the five of us to fight that many? No way, not a chance."

"Who said anything about fighting?" Olaf said, frowning. "All you'd be required to do is neutralise their leader, and the rest would most likely disperse."

"And on what are you basing this very flimsy theory of yours?" Aiden asked, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"The document you retrieved for me from Merin's house," Olaf replied after a moment of thought. "How far through it did you read?" Aiden stared at the ascetic Mayor, wondering what he was hinting at. He recalled the incriminating document in his mind, and although he didn't remember the exact figures from all of the transactions, Aiden did recall that other names were on that list. Other *criminal* associates.

"Are you trying to tell me that you personally *know* who's heading the bandits out there?" he asked with measured words.

"They are not so much bandits, as disgruntled employees looking to get paid," Olaf finished, turning a paler shade as he did so. Aiden was speechless for a moment, and then roughly a thousand questions spun through his mind, simultaneously.

"They are *your* thugs, the ones that were hired to extort businesses in Culdeny," he shouted accusingly. "This entire situation is your fault!"

"Not really," Olaf disagreed. "It wouldn't have been a problem if Culdeny's military strength was sufficient to clear them out. So in a way-"

"No Olaf," Aiden interrupted, "it's *your* fault. You're not blaming the King for this one." Olaf went silent, then nodded, wringing his hands together anxiously.

"This brings us back to you and your companions. I want you to head north, find their leader and remove him. You can bring him in alive or dead, it doesn't matter to me."

"I would have thought you'd want him dead," Aiden cut in sarcastically. "You know, to keep him silent. About your *crimes*."

"I don't want any more innocent deaths on my conscience if I can help it," Olaf protested. "I know you think very little of me at the moment, but I never meant to harm anyone. The whole affair has been blown out of all proportion, and I need your help once more."

"You mean you need the help of the others as well as myself," Aiden corrected. "And I'm guessing you didn't bring them in to hear this, because Pacian would blackmail you, Nellise would probably turn you in, and Colt would just punch you in the face. Or kill you, depending on how hungover he was. And you expect us to take on that many men? Trained killers? Preposterous."

"I think you underestimate yourselves," Olaf pressed, "I hear that girl you found in the mountains is a sorceress."

"So? Olaf, she's a *girl*, literally, not some sort of secret weapon. And I'll tell you something else; we only made it through to Highmarch because of Nellise's faith and dedication. Without her, we would have all bled to death and been eaten by hungry wolves. I may carry a sword, but I would hardly qualify as a warrior, and Pacian only really does well if his opponent is looking the other way. It's suicide, plain and simple. You'll have to come up with some other way."

Olaf sighed and leaned back in his comfortable chair, tugging his grey moustache thoughtfully. Aiden also settled back into his seat, trusting that he'd made his point clearly.

"It was a terrible thing to see Merin murdered like that," Olaf said, his voice set in an overly calm tone. "If the Kingdom guard ever found out you and your friends had something to do with her death, things would go badly for you." Aiden glared at Olaf, seeing where this was leading to.

"If you inform the authorities, we'll let them know of your involvement as well," Aiden assured the Mayor. "You'll be heading to the gallows, just as surely as us."

“Either you get us some help from Culdeny, or we're dead anyway,” Olaf shot back. “Fletcher and his cronies will see to that. Aiden, this *has to happen*.” The two men glared at each other for a long moment, but the young man didn't have any counter. Deep down, he knew Olaf was right, even if his methods were highly questionable.

He didn't like being manipulated like this, but if they didn't get through to Culdeny they wouldn't get any support for the town, and that would leave Coldstream at the mercy of any potential raid by the savage folk from the mountains. Despite the estrangement he felt with his parents, Aiden didn't want to see them or anyone else back home killed over this.

“All right,” he grudgingly agreed. “I'll convince the others it's the best course of action, though I'll probably have to omit the numbers we'll be facing.” Olaf seemed to relax with relief, standing up to button his vest.

“Excellent, I knew you'd see reason eventually,” he said with satisfaction. “Come now, Aiden, there's no need for this enmity between us. I regret having to hold the incident with Merin over you like that, but it's for the benefit of everyone.”

“Aside from getting out of this town, I don't see a whole lot of benefit for myself or my companions,” Aiden muttered. He despised dealing with the man, corrupt as he was.

“Then I shall give you proof of my good intentions,” Olaf declared. “Bring me Fletcher - or a recognisable part of him - and I'll give each of you a gold sovereign. That should garner your friend Pacian's interest, at the very least.” Aiden nodded, but didn't trust himself to reply. He stood, looked down at the hand that was offered but declined to shake it, instead grabbing his longcoat and heading out the door in disgust.

Aiden strode purposefully across to the inn, looking around for any sign of his companions. As he suspected, they were gathered around the fireplace, warming themselves while drinking some soup. Pacian noticed him first, and waved him over.

“About time you showed up, I was wondering where you'd disappeared to,” he called. Aiden approached but didn't take a seat when Nellise offered it. She frowned slightly, sensing something was wrong.

“I've been busy,” the young man replied shortly, misdirecting his anger. “I've got a new job for us, if you're interested, and it pays well too.” Pacian's eyes lit up as expected, but Nellise remained cautious.

“Not that I'm averse to earning good money, but what exactly does this job entail?” she inquired.

“Bringing in a bandit to justice, dead or alive,” Aiden replied simply. “Pack your bags, we're going to Culdeny.”

Chapter Seven

“I don't see that this is an appropriate use of our time,” Nellise complained as they passed by hard-working people on the flooded streets of Bracksford. “I can make do with the supplies we have.”

“A few minutes ago you said you were low on herbs and bandages,” Aiden pointed out. “And word on the street is this druid Harlin is the man to see for that sort of thing.” He started counting out coins in his pouch from his share of the iron ore sale. Pacian had managed to secure a very reasonable sum of money, plus the eternal gratitude of the smith.

"I don't think you realise how the church views people like him," Nellise continued in hushed tones. "It's a pagan religion, and I really shouldn't be having anything to do with him." Aiden rolled his eyes, hardly believing what the normally unshakeable acolyte was saying.

"We're buying herbs, and small pieces of rolled-up cloth, that's hardly blasphemous," he pointed out. "If you're that uncomfortable though, let me do the talking. Just point out what you want me to buy, okay?"

By now, they had left the sodden roads and were squelching through a field over towards the eastern wall of the town, where Harlin the druid made his home. They were heading towards a large tree stump, probably from some massive oak that had been cut down years ago. A door had been carved into the side of the stump, and a small spout poked out from the top with smoke emerging from it. Despite its odd appearance, the house seemed quite warm and inviting.

Aiden knocked on the door, and within moments, a weathered-looking middle-aged man with an unshaven jaw and piercing green eyes emerged. He wore a simple brown robe with the hood pulled up.

"Hello there," he greeted them with a wide smile. "Nice weather we're having lately, yes?" Water dripped off Aiden's nose as he looked blankly at the man.

"You do realise it's been raining almost non-stop for weeks now, right?"

"Bah, nature is merely restoring the balance after a long drought," Harlin said, waving his hand dismissively. "All is as it should be. Was there something you wanted? I'm a little busy at the moment."

"Yes, I heard that you sell medicinal herbs? My friend and I need to purchase some." The robed man peered around the edge of his door a bit further so he could see who Aiden was referring to. His smile faded almost imperceptibly as he laid eyes on Nellise, who returned the look with a similar lack of enthusiasm. Clearly Harlin recognised her as a cleric of the Church of Aielund, and his opinion of her religion probably reflected what she felt about his.

"You must be soaking wet, come in, come in," Harlin said, expertly covering any discomfort he felt. Aiden stepped in after him, making a point to go in first to stay between the two of them.

The inside of the tree stump was surprisingly well appointed - a small table, bed, and a large desk were arranged around a small stove. Lying in front of the stove was a huge tawny coloured cat, with a white underbelly. It growled deeply as soon as it sensed Aiden, startling the young man for it wasn't a giant house cat as he had first thought, but a cougar.

"Oh don't mind Sebastian, he's just an oversized kitten really," advised Harlin, giving the great cat a scratch behind the ears as he went past. "Just ignore him, the heat from the fire is making him sleepy. Now, which herbs did you require?" Aiden didn't take his eyes off the cat, despite Harlin's assurances. Sebastian gave him an appraising sniff then lay his head back down on the wooden floor, content to bask in the stove's warmth.

"Ah yes, the items in question," Aiden replied, glancing at Nellise. Unexpectedly, she leaned forward to speak.

"Wormwood, Astragalus, and Heathmend," she said rather quickly. "And some bandages if you have them, I think four yards should suffice." Harlin nodded and fetched

some bundles off the desk. Nellise flicked Aiden a telling glance – she obviously wanted to be gone quickly, but he just had to know more.

“So Harlin,” he began, drawing a 'what are you doing?' look from Nellise. “I don't recall hearing of many druids living in these parts, and yet here you are, residing in a small town.”

“Not the place where you'd normally find one of my order, I'll admit,” the druid replied, handing Nellise the small package and taking her offered coins in return. “But it's peaceful enough here.”

“You'd prefer to be living in a forest or something similar, I imagine,” Aiden continued.

“I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name,” Harlin inquired politely.

“Aiden Wainwright. I apologise if this conversation is making you uncomfortable, I was merely curious.” A flicker of recognition registered on the druid's face.

“Ah yes, Aiden. I've heard that you're one of the people that managed to make it through to the south and return alive. Well done,” He sat against the large desk, crossing his arms as he spoke. “But as to your observation, yes, I would prefer to be living amongst the forest, but I felt that I was needed here for a time, despite some local... resistance.”

“I had nothing to do with that,” Nellise blurted, catching Aiden off guard. “You know how the Church feels about your order. I am but a simple acolyte, and I had little influence with the clergy.” Harlin moved his hands in a placating manner to calm her down.

“It doesn't matter my dear, I don't blame you.”

“If the Church didn't want you here, then how did you end up staying?” Aiden asked.

“I am quite adept at veterinary medicine and I take good care of the local farming community, and their prize animals. They've a lot of sway with the Mayor, you see.”

“Yes, quite. I just have one more question,” Aiden continued. “I've read that some of the more learned members of your order are capable of controlling the weather. Is that true?”

“That's quite an exaggeration, I'm sure,” Harlin chuckled. “Certainly a short rain shower or storm could be enacted, but nothing major, I assure you.”

“I see, well, thanks for humouring my little inquisition,” Aiden said with a fake smile. “I think we've bothered you enough for one day.”

“Not at all, I've enjoyed our little chat,” Harlin replied with an equally fake smile. “Fare ye well.” Aiden prompted Nellise to head out the door, closing it after they were back outside in the rain once more.

“I hope your curiosity is satisfied,” Nellise commented, hurrying along next to him, determined to have her say. “That was a little more uncomfortable than it needed to be.”

“I'm sorry, I just wanted to see how he'd react, that's all,” Aiden shrugged.

“Do you think I haven't considered that possibility already?” Nellise complained. “After the first week of incessant rain, he was the first person I went and spoke to. But there is no way he could have been responsible for such an extensive downpour, and I don't think any druid who has ever lived had this kind of power.”

“You're right of course, but I can't help but think that his presence here has something to do with it,” Aiden rejoined. “It's just such an odd coincidence, you know?”

But I'll admit, he seems harmless enough, I guess. So, do you have everything you need now?" Nellise peeked inside one of the bundles to check its contents.

"Yes, I'm prepared, though I still don't understand why we have to get going so quickly. Can't we rest up for another day or two?"

"From what I've heard, we don't have a lot of time to waste," Aiden replied grimly, wondering how they were going to survive the next few days, let alone a raid from an army of savages.

* * *

At Colt's insistence, they set out at sunset instead of waiting for dawn, despite protests from Pacian. The ranger's reasons behind this choice were sound.

"There's probably going to be more of them than there are of us, so prowling around in the dark helps even the odds," he'd said. Aiden didn't mention that there were *definitely* going to be more of them – how he knew that information would start a line of questioning that would lead to trouble.

They met at the stables around the back of the inn, fully equipped. Nellise had educated Sayana on the wonders of currency, and had purchased for her a weapon of her choosing. A battleaxe was slung over her back, giving the rather petite girl a menacing look.

Pacian was a bigger concern. He was grumbling constantly about not having had enough time to recover from the run through the mountains the previous night, and the blond rogue had been hobbling about as he gathered his equipment. Aiden had impressed upon them the urgency of breaking through to Culdeny, thus ending any discussion about waiting another day to recuperate.

So there they stood, as the grey light faded from the sky, ready to embark. Aiden had wondered what had become of the wolf Colt had been caring for, and received his answer as the big ranger showed them the beast, very much alive, and apparently not at all interested in trying to kill him. Although still scrawny, the wolf was sitting on its haunches observing the small group curiously, which Aiden found fascinating.

"Why is it so docile?" he quietly asked Colt. "I would have expected it to be trying to get away from so many people."

"Wolves aren't stupid you know," Colt admonished him. "*He* knows we're no threat. Well, *I'm* not a threat anyway, since I'm the one feeding and caring for him. And as long as I'm here, he should be quiet enough. Not that it'll matter for much longer, 'cause I'm setting him loose outside the gates as soon as we leave."

"Well then, no sense in waiting any longer," Aiden suggested. "Let's head out. The sooner we get this over with, the better." He stepped out of the shelter provided by the stables and moved towards the north gate, a short walk since the Bracksfordshire Arms Inn was very close to that entrance, barely fifty yards away. The others fell in to step behind him, with Colt bringing up the rear, coaxing the wolf to follow. Despite his assurances, it was clear the animal was very wary around people who were *not* Colt.

The companions were saluted by the two guards on the north gate, one a boy younger than Aiden, the other a young woman in ill-fitting chain mail. Olaf must be short of guards indeed if he was calling women into service; not that Aiden felt they were less capable, but he was sure the old-fashioned Mayor certainly did.

"I've received word to allow you all through the gate," the young woman said. "May God be with you." She nodded to the other guard who lifted the heavy latch and swung the gate open.

"You might want to stand back a bit," Aiden advised. "And don't be alarmed at what you're about to see." The guard gave him an inquiring look that was answered a moment later as Colt walked through the gate, the wolf trotting alongside with the others following a respectable distance behind.

"Good Lord is that a genuine wolf? What's it doing within the town limits?"

"It's been... under the care of a professional animal handler, the big man you see over there," Aiden replied, thinking quickly. "It's quite tame, I assure you, but just to be on the safe side, don't try to pat it. It's still a wolf at heart, you know."

"Oh I see," she replied, somewhat relieved. "Carry on."

The sounds of the Stormflow river could be heard just ahead as Aiden joined the others. A modest river with a gentle flow for most of the year, it was renowned for flooding during the winter. Fortunately, the sturdy bridge that crossed it was still intact, and mostly above the waterline. The group walked over it and continued along what would normally be the road, now under nearly a foot of water. They travelled for around ten minutes before Colt called for them to halt.

The land had been sloping upwards at a subtle grade as they'd travelled, and they had reached the end of the flooded area. Colt knelt down on the ground and looked the wolf directly in the eye. The animal looked right back at him, quiet and content to see what happened next. Either this wolf was easier to tame than most, or the big ranger was far better with animals than he was with people.

Colt said nothing, but after nearly a minute of looking at each other, he made a quick gesture towards the tree line, and the wolf immediately trotted off in that direction. The group stood and watched as the wolf neared the tree line, then stopped, turning to look back at Colt with its large eyes, glowing yellow in the dimming light.

The ranger gestured towards the trees again, and the wolf reluctantly turned and disappeared into the trees. Aiden found the entire scene enchanting, a rare thing from the normally standoffish man. Colt stood up and looked at the others, a dark scowl on his face.

"He's better off on his own, so don't start getting emotional on me. Just keep walking."

"Colt, remind me to buy you a dog when we get to town," Pacian quipped, drawing a quiet laugh from Nellise and Aiden.

"He is naturally gifted with animals, you should not mock that," Sayana scolded them. "I envy his talents."

"I'm sorry Sayana, but it's just so rare to see this side of our big friend," Nellise explained. "So you'll forgive me if I take some small pleasure in seeing him be something other than a loud-"

"Don't finish that sentence," Colt interrupted. "You may not survive."

"If you're quite finished," Aiden spoke up, hiding his irritation. "We have an important objective here, so I think we should try and focus."

"Of course Aiden, I'm sorry," Nellise said. "By the way, how are we going to travel safely at night? I can't see in the dark and I'm pretty sure no-one else here can."

"I can," Sayana said very quietly.

“That light thing you do is just going to draw attention to us,” Pacian mentioned to the cleric.

“You’ll be following me,” Colt answered, stepping ahead to get them all moving. “There’s a full moon tonight, even if it is overcast, so your eyes will adjust enough to look around. Pay attention to all your senses; smell the wind, hear the trees move and the rain fall.”

“Should we taste the mud too?” Pacian asked. He sounded serious, which probably meant he wasn’t.

“If the mood strikes you, yeah,” Colt shot back derisively. “And stop looking at me like that. Nel, you’re going to stick out like a sore thumb in that white robe, so stay at the back. Take my cloak as well; it’ll make you harder to spot. Try to keep as quiet as possible, as if we do run into any bandits they’re likely to be hiding. They won’t want to fight us face-to-face, like real men.”

The entire group was following along behind Colt, who had automatically assumed the lead. Despite his attitude issues, the big man was still more experienced in this sort of situation and nobody was going to question him when it came to surviving in the wilds.

The light continued to fade, but Aiden had no difficulty following the road. The overcast sky glowed a little from the full moon trying to break through, and it was just enough to see by. They continued to move along the road as quietly as they could. The softly falling rain helped to mask the sound of their movement, but which would also help any bandits hiding nearby too.

Aiden’s senses became heightened as the night wore on, and he found himself jumping at the slight crack of a nearby branch or the subtle movement of trees in the darkness. The silhouettes of large pines crowded in around them more and more as they moved, and it was fairly clear they had now entered the Calespur Ranges, a large forest that was a source of wood for nearby communities, and home to the King’s game reserve.

They stopped for a quick break at what must have been close to midnight. There had been no sign of any highwaymen thus far, a fact which made Colt a little nervous.

“I figure any group of men looking to snatch passing merchants would set up a bit closer to Bracksford,” he mused. “Culdeny is probably short-handed on soldiers as well, but they’re far from defenceless. If they got wind of any unlawful activity to the south, they’d have sent out a squad to investigate.”

“Maybe there aren’t any bandits,” Pacian wondered between heavy breaths, leaning against a tree.

“If that’s true, then it’ll be an uneventful trip, for which we should be thankful,” Nellise mentioned.

“We shouldn’t get complacent,” Aiden added. “If Colt’s right, we could encounter them sometime before dawn.”

“How does a professional drunk know so much about highwaymen anyway?” Pacian said wryly. In the near blackness, they couldn’t see Colt’s expression, so Aiden used his imagination. It wasn’t pretty.

“This ‘drunk’ has killed or apprehended more bandits than you’ve seen, kid,” he growled in reply. “This is my territory – there’s a ranger outpost in the Calespur Ranges, about two days northwest of here where I used to be based. We’ve had plenty of action up there in the past couple of years, make no mistake. And I agree with Aiden, if we’re going

to see any trouble, it'll happen before dawn. So get some food into you and then we'll keep going."

Sayana was already eating, a large drumstick in her hand and her mouth full. As she ate, she strolled around the perimeter, watching the surrounding area for signs of movement. The rest of them went through their packs and took out some of the provisions that had been provided for them by the innkeeper in town, at no charge.

The rain had eased further to merely a light sprinkle as they sat underneath the large pine trees for shelter. No-one felt the need to speak as they ate, but Aiden couldn't tell if it was nerves or something else. Personally, it was the prospect of fighting a group of thugs that had the novice warrior on edge. He only hoped the group of people around him was up to the challenge they were soon to face.

Nellise came over to sit next to Aiden. She leaned in fairly close, and spoke to him very quietly.

"I feel I should tell you something about our new friend," she said, her voice little more than a whisper. The gentle rainfall around them was muffling the sound quite effectively, yet she still spoke with caution. "I believe she isn't being entirely truthful about the reasons for her being out in the mountains by herself." Aiden had already come to that conclusion, but was curious as to what Nellise had observed.

"How so?"

"I don't know what the truth is; I just know she's not being honest with us." Aiden casually looked directly at Sayana as she walked around the nearby trees, scrutinising her as he wondered what she wasn't telling them, and why.

"I don't know why she's still with us either," Nellise added. "Maybe it's connected with her reasons for being out in the wild, maybe not."

"It is a little odd, volunteering to come along with us, even though we hardly know her," Aiden replied thoughtfully. "I'll have to find the time for a proper chat with her sometime."

After a short rest, they quietly set out again, but this time with even more caution. They travelled like this for another hour, expecting to run into trouble at any moment, and it wasn't until much later when their vigilance paid off.

Aiden was near the back of the line, with Nellise bringing up the rear when they suddenly caught up with the others. Sayana was in front of them, her hand raised and her eyes looking off into the night. She was frozen in mid-stride, and it was clear to everyone else that she'd spotted something... or *someone*. Aiden drew his sword as quietly as possible and leaned against the side of a tree, his heart racing and his ears pricked for the slightest sound. Only the sounds of water dripping off the trees around them could be heard, and try as he might, there just wasn't enough light to see more than a few yards.

The wild girl suddenly pointed ahead of them, and Colt responded by levelling his bow in the same direction, holding it steady for a few seconds, then releasing it. The sound of the shaft flying through the air was cut off abruptly as it struck something - something that let out a strangled sound and then collapsed to the ground.

Pacian rushed forward in the direction of the noise, closely followed by the rest of them. The dark shape of a man lay at the base of a nearby tree, rolling around in agony and making choking sounds. Colt's arrow had struck true, taking the man in the side of his chest, leaving only the question of who he was.

Nellise knelt down for a closer examination, but Pacian pushed her aside at the last moment as the injured man swung at her with a shortsword. It glanced off her chain mail shirt as she fell back onto her hands. Pace didn't hesitate, dropping down and stabbing the man in the chest with his dagger, finishing him off.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he said to Nellise as loudly as he dare.

"He wasn't dead, I couldn't just leave him like that," she protested, clearly upset. "Besides, how do we know he's even a bandit? Colt might have just shot an innocent man." Pacian didn't seem impressed with her argument, as he quickly started frisking the body for valuables.

"We're in the middle of nowhere. What did you think he was doing, catching up on his knitting? They're not going to be carrying a sign labelling them as bandits, now are they?"

"Enough," Colt grunted, making an effort to keep his volume low. "This one was obviously a lookout, so he probably has friends nearby. Stay sharp. Sayana, keep close to me and point them out as you see them. While it's still dark, we have the advantage. Nel, just... try to stay out of trouble." He retrieved the arrow from its current resting place and strode purposely forward, Sayana by his side.

"Some people in this group are a little too comfortable with killing," Nellise remarked grimly, hefting her crossbow and following along with the rest.

From his place at the back, Aiden could see little of what Colt and Sayana were up to, though he did hear the occasional arrow being loosed from the ranger's longbow, striking true time and again. Pacian was quick to move in and keep the fallen bandits quiet in their last moments, but so far Aiden felt they had been lucky. If these men were the kinds of people Olaf had hinted at, sooner or later, they would be fighting back.

He glanced down at the body of one of the highwaymen, and saw that his clothing was thick and warm but tattered, devoid of any gear that would help one survive in the wilderness. As ruffians, they were obviously better suited to the city.

They continued on through the forest, moving parallel to the road for another half an hour, encountering another three bandits along the way, all of them taken down before they knew what hit them. Colt was taking full advantage of the benefits afforded by Sayana's night vision, an advantage that would disappear as soon as the sun started to rise. Already the pre-dawn sky was beginning to lighten, and they had only dealt with a few of the scouts positioned along the road.

Aiden suddenly noticed that it had stopped raining - with the building tension of their situation the weather hadn't been a major concern. Heavy drops still fell from the trees around him, giving the illusion of light rain, but the background noise had died down. Aside from the morning calls of birds starting to echo through the forest, there was little to mask the sound of their movement for much longer.

Colt waved them over to his position near a small copse of young trees. He was crouched down, peering at the ground at his feet as the others gathered around. A thin fog was beginning to form around them in the brisk morning air.

"Alright, we've made a good start here," the ranger said with a low voice. "Those men were obviously scouts looking for anyone trying to break through from Bracksford, but I think they were expecting a bunch of neophyte guardsmen, or a desperate caravan heading along the road, not a stealthy assault like this. Oh, and we checked to make sure

they weren't trying to rescue kittens out of trees, in case you were wondering," he added dryly, drawing a sour look from Nellise.

"If any of you have been paying attention to the smells around you like I told you to," Colt continued, "you'll have noticed the faint hint of wood smoke in the air. That tells me we're nearing a camp, probably with most of them in one place. One of us should go take a look and get an idea of the numbers we're dealing with. Hard to make plans based on guesswork."

"I suppose you're looking at me," Pacian grumbled, looking haggard in the ever increasing morning light.

"Well I *could* go," Colt mused, scratching his unshaven chin, "but I have just spent most of the morning killing their spotters, and I think I've earned a break. So yeah, just go look at them. Don't try anything else on your own kid, or you'll bring down all sorts of hell on us." Pacian took a deep breath and heaved himself back to his feet. Using his surroundings to conceal his approach, he started moving upwind towards the smell of the smoke. With his camouflage leathers, the shady rogue quickly disappeared into the misty forest.

Aiden took a moment to rub his eyes. Missing a night of sleep was undesirable under the best of conditions, but having to put up with it just before a potential fight just made things worse all around. Tense minutes passed as the sun started to peak over the horizon.

"I have been wondering," Nellise said after a little while, "should we try talking to these people?"

"Are you seriously considering this?" Colt scoffed. "After what happened to you a few hours ago?"

"Colt, that man swung at me after you'd shot an arrow into his chest," Nellise reminded him. "I can't say I would have done anything different under the circumstances. I am merely saying that we might be able to talk them down, perhaps even try to find out why they're doing it." Before Colt could answer, Aiden decided to put a stop to this right away. He alone of the group knew the kind of men they were dealing with, and that they would probably only disperse if they were given Olaf's head on a pile of money.

"I don't think they're starving farmers looking to put food on their family's table," he said. "if you take a closer look at some of the ones Colt's managed to take down so far, you can see what kind of men they are from their faces. If I had to describe them in two words it would be 'drunken louts'. No, these aren't the kind of men you can reason with. We need to show them force before we can make them surrender."

"That's the smartest thing I've heard anyone say, ever," Colt grunted. "If you think I'm a blood-thirsty killer, these people would make me seem like a puppy by comparison. I can see it in their eyes Nel, they're no good. And if we went in there to talk with them, that'd just give away our only advantage; surprise."

"All of that is based on their looks, a spurious argument if ever I have heard one," Nellise mused. "I offer no apologies for making an effort to find a peaceful solution. I only hope we are able to deal with being outnumbered, should you choose to fight."

"You've got that right," Pacian said, appearing next to them and giving the young acolyte a start.

"Do you mind?" she exclaimed. "You almost gave me a heart attack." Pacian shrugged, his expression grim.

“Sorry, but you should know what we're facing here. I counted eighteen men around their camp, and that's not including any that are hiding out there in the forest.” Nobody spoke as the enormity of the task before them lay bare. Aiden knew this was going to happen sooner or later, but the fact of their situation still hit him almost as hard as the others.

“Shit,” Colt said eloquently, and then went on to spit out many other colourful words that had Nellise blushing furiously.

“Alright, just calm down,” Aiden advised. “We still have the element of surprise, yes? Pace, what are they armed with?”

“Some short bows, short swords, lots of knives, that sort of thing. Oh and one guy had a big sword, just like Colt's.”

“That might be their leader then,” Aiden mused. “What if we could remove him first? Sneak in, maybe create a diversion?”

“Even if we could get close enough – and by 'we' I mean 'me' – I'd have to kill him in one shot,” Colt said. “It's one thing to kill a man while he's standing perfectly still in the forest, and another to do the same to someone walking around a camp.”

“We don't have a lot of time before they start moving around,” Pacian warned. “If we're not going to fight them, we should hide someplace.”

“They're going to be moving around?” Sayana asked.

“It looked like they were getting ready to move, yeah.”

“Would they be spreading around the area to attack travellers?”

“That's the general idea of bandits yes,” Pacian confirmed, a little exasperated.

“Then when they are isolated from each other, we strike at each group separately,” Sayana instructed. “We bring enough force to face each group and defeat them before assistance can arrive.” Aiden was surprised by her apparent understanding of strategy.

“That'll probably work, provided we're careful,” Colt agreed. “I sure as hell can't think of anything better.”

“We should take cover here, pick off any that come past, and move on from there,” Aiden said, pointing at the dense foliage they were crouched next to. “Pace, keep watch and point them out for Colt and Nellise. They'll hit them with their bows, while the three of us stay on guard. Any questions?” There weren't any, so with a gesture, they all stepped into the brush to wait for signs of movement.

It wasn't cramped in amongst the copse, but the tension of the moment certainly made it seem that way. Aiden could see about twenty yards clearly through the fog, before the terrain became too obscured to make anything out. Colt and Nellise were covering two other approaches, their weapons at the ready.

The tension increased as they lay there for what must have been ten minutes, but felt much longer. Aiden's heart pounded as he spotted first one, then two hooded men moving silently amongst the trees. He tapped Colt on his leg next to him to get his attention, nodding towards the prospective targets.

The big ranger slowly turned to face them on one knee, with his longbow set and ready. Nellise was lying down next to him in the damp leaves, aiming down the length of the crossbow towards their unsuspecting prey.

“You take left, I take right,” Colt whispered. He slowly drew the bow and took aim, exhaling softly as he held the string back.

The two men had stopped moving, taking up positions near trees close to the road. It couldn't have been any better if they'd asked the men to stand still for them.

"Now," Colt whispered finally, loosing his arrow.

"God forgive me," Nellise breathed as she unleashed her crossbow bolt. Both weapons struck true, taking down the men in quick succession. Aiden breathed a sigh of relief, despite knowing that there was still at least sixteen more to go. Suddenly, he heard a cry from the other side of the road – someone had witnessed the two bandits fall and raised an alarm. The forest came alive with the sounds of movement and shouted orders, and Colt silently cursed at the noise.

"We are in for it now, people," he growled. "Just stay hidden, as they probably don't know where we are, yet." Aiden drew his sword and brought his gloved hand up in preparation – they may not know where they are, but if anyone came to investigate closely, it wouldn't take long to spot them. He was proven right only moments later, as a man in a heavy green cloak crept right past their position, heading towards his fallen comrades. He was close enough to reach out and touch, and Aiden froze in terror.

A shadow moved past the young adventurer a heartbeat later, and he was surprised to see Pacian silently creep out of the copse as soon as the bandit had moved past. Aiden didn't dare call out the many, many expletives that crossed his mind at that moment, for fear of blowing their cover. The blond rogue, dagger at the ready, matched the bandit step for step, slowly closing in behind him until he was within reach, and then brought his dagger across the man's throat.

He dropped like a rock, with Pacian catching him on the way down and dragging him back towards the brush Aiden and the others were hiding in before anyone would notice he was missing. A few moments later, three other men strode into view through the fog, short bows held at the ready. This time there were too many to take down at once, so Aiden and his companions had to sit there and watch as the men approached the two bodies that lay twitching near the trees.

"We can take them," Colt whispered, inching a hand towards his quiver ever so slowly. Nellise had already pulled back the lever on the crossbow and put another bolt into place, but there was no way they were going to bring down three of them at once without their position being compromised.

"Wait," Aiden whispered back, wanting to see what the bandits did before they acted. Two of them were looking around warily, hoping to spot the archers that brought down the others. One of the bandits was kneeling down to look closer at the arrow and bolt that were sticking up gruesomely, and as Aiden feared, it was obvious to the man what direction they had come from.

An arrow shot through the air at that moment, let loose by Colt as it became clear they were going to be found. He struck one man in the back, piercing all the way through to the other side of his chest and dropping him to the ground. Nellise let loose a moment later but only managed to clip the other man's leg, who cried out in pain as he raised an arm to point at where the attack had come from.

Colt was already drawing his next arrow to take out the third bandit, but it was too late. He ducked for cover behind the tree, leaving the wounded man to lie at the base of it, screaming in pain as he clutched at the arrow in his body. Frustrated, the big ranger decided to finish off Nellise's target, silencing him with a clothyard shaft to the side of his throat.

Pacian swore and rushed out of the copse, sprinting towards the tree that the other bandit had moved behind while Aiden spoke the word of command to bring his force shield into existence, and then heaved himself out of the trees to follow his friend. The plan had failed, so now they would have to improvise as the situation developed.

Pacian had disappeared around the back of the tree and the sounds of a struggle could be heard. As soon as Aiden arrived he could see that Pace had crashed straight into the bandit, and the two of them had fallen in a vicious brawl. His dagger was lying on the ground a few feet away, but he had no way of getting there with the bandit keeping him occupied as both men threw punches and in the struggle for the upper hand. Fortunately, Pacian was underneath at the moment, and while not good for him, it *was* good for Aiden.

He stepped in and thrust his short sword into the back of the bandit, who was reaching for his own dagger to finish Pacian off. He screamed in pain as the sword pierced the hardened leather breastplate he was wearing, falling to one side and allowing Pacian to scramble free. He grabbed his dagger from the ground and thrust it into the bandit's chest, finishing him off.

They barely had time to recover from the brief but fierce engagement before an arrow shot past Aiden's ear, and embedded itself into the tree they were standing next to. Turning to see who was coming, the two young men saw two more bandits approaching rapidly, armed with short bows that were pointed straight at them. Aiden brought his magic shield up in time to stop the arrow from the second archer, which bounced off as if it were made of steel.

Colt, his longbow held ready, appeared from the other side of the tree at that moment with an arrow ready to fly. He took only a second to aim before he let it go, striking one of the archers in the arm and forcing him to drop his weapon. Two more arrows flew towards them from the north, one of them bouncing off Aiden's shield, the other one lodging into Colt's left arm. He snarled in pain but did not cry out. He did, however, drop his longbow and clutch at the arrow shaft sticking awkwardly out of his arm.

Nellise, following Colt, whispered a prayer as she carefully aimed her weapon at one of the oncoming men. She held steady for a long moment, and then pulled the trigger on the crossbow, sending a bolt through the air to strike one of the new archers soundly in the chest.

"Things aren't going well here," Aiden observed dryly as Nellise pulled back the lever to reload it as fast as she could. "Colt, can you still fight?"

"One way to find out," the big ranger replied, snapping off the arrow at the shaft so he could use his arm, flinching from the pain. Pacian sprinted off towards the other archer that was still coming at them from the south, snatching up his dagger on the way past and wielding it with his left hand. Sensing the archer was about to send another arrow his way, the Pace dove forward and tumbled over the soft, muddy ground, the expected arrow flying over the top of him in mid-tumble.

He came out of the roll on his feet, showing remarkable agility as he slashed with both daggers, one after the other at the surprised archer. Both strikes hit home, drawing blood and surprising the archer with the speed of his attack.

Aiden sensed his friend had the situation under control so he turned his attention to the north, stepping past Nellise to provide her with some protection. He saw four bandits rushing towards him, past the single remaining archer whose aim was foiled by his comrades getting in the way. Nellise let loose one more bolt before they reached her

position, forcing him to slow down. The rest met Aiden head-on, pushing him back on the defensive. He was hard-pressed right from the start, but he had an advantage – they didn't see his shield.

Trying a simple tactic, Aiden stepped in and attempted to bash one of the men with the magical shield. But to them, it probably looked like he was trying to slap them with the back of his gloved hand. As such, his target, a short, balding man with piercing brown eyes didn't see much of a threat, so he took the full force of the shield on his face. The sound was odd – the shield was not made of any mundane material like wood or iron, and so it didn't really make a noise as it struck. But the man's skull still rang, smashing his nose on the force shield and tumbling him back on to the ground.

This left Aiden vulnerable for a split second though, and the sharp-witted opponents he faced were quick to take advantage. A dagger slashed at him, partially deflected by his chain shirt but bruising him nonetheless. The other man cut Aiden with his shortsword, forcing the novice warrior back or risk taking further hits. He got his shield back in place as soon as he could, and slashed back and forth with his own weapon, connecting with the blades of his opponents more than anything else.

Help came in the form of a red-headed girl with a very big axe. Sayana leaped up from behind the men with her weapon held high above her head and slammed the axe down into the back of one unlucky bandit. He fell to the ground at Aiden's feet from the force of the attack, with Sayana riding him to the ground and hitting him again to finish him off, showering them both in blood.

Taking advantage of the startled look from the last remaining man, Aiden stabbed forward with his sword, cutting deep into his flesh. Sayana rose from the ground and swung the axe at him as he staggered back, smashing into his back and severing his spine as he fell to the ground. Aiden struggled for breath after the brief struggle as Sayana looked around at the scene.

"Nice timing," he gasped. "Everyone else okay?"

"Still standing," Colt replied from nearby, holding his greatsword in one hand but clearly having trouble trying to lift it. With the pressure off, Nellise had put her crossbow aside and was taking a closer look at Colt's wounded arm.

"Good, because I think we're only just getting started here," Aiden added.

"What makes you say that?" Nellise asked while fetching her healing crystal.

"The other eight or so men moving through the fog to surround us," Aiden observed, surprisingly calm given the situation.

"Do you have a plan?" Colt asked. "I'm fresh out of ideas." Aiden thought about it for a moment.

"I think the time for subtlety is over," he declared. "How do you feel about a last, desperate charge into certain death?" Colt's grin was very wolf-like.

"Now you're talking my language."

Chapter Eight

Aiden took a moment to briefly check his wounds while Nellise tended Colt's injured arm. Usually her healing took at least a few minutes to work, so there wasn't much chance of her having the ranger fixed up before the fight continued. His own wounds appeared to be relatively minor, thankfully, so he was still in the fight.

“Why don't you grab one of those shortswords,” Aiden advised, pointing down at one of the rusty blades carried by the fallen bandits. “You'll never be able to use that behemoth on your back now.” Colt reached down and hefted one of the smaller blades, feeling the weight and balance of it.

“This thing is garbage,” he declared. He was probably going to comment further, but an arrow flew past his ear. “It'll work fine,” the big man muttered as he ducked for cover, resigned to using the inferior weapon.

“I can't work while we're under attack,” Nellise complained, pulling back the lever on her crossbow and preparing to shoot.

“Nel, take cover and shoot if you're still able,” Aiden advised. “Sayana, you're with me. Colt, it's up to you if you're going to help out here or not, but I'm not standing around to get picked off like this.” Without waiting to hear his response, Aiden ran off into the fog, Sayana right on his heels. The sorceress brought her force shield into existence with a quick gesture as she moved, in preparation for the coming fight.

Within a few moments Aiden could see the archers standing ahead in the dense fog; three of them, their weapons drawn and ready to shoot. It took but a moment for them to recognise Aiden as one of their enemies, and another split second for them to aim at him and shoot. Putting all his faith in the shield, Aiden lifted his arm and felt the impact of all three arrows.

Summoning his courage, the novice warrior closed the remaining distance in seconds and slammed his shortsword into the startled archer's gut with all the force he had built up with his charge. The bandit went down hard, writhing on the ground with his hands over the bloody wound and was joined a moment later by one of the other archers as Sayana's axe split his skull with surprising force.

The remaining archer's eyes were wide as he stepped back, frantically trying to notch an arrow to take another shot at them. Aiden was about to step in and engage the man when he felt a sharp pain in his back. He whirled around, slashing down with his short blade in the hope of hitting whoever had just attacked him. The sword connected with a cloaked bandit who had been hiding in the brush next to the archers, practically invisible. The bandit screamed as Aiden's sword took him in the chest, and Sayana was quick to follow through with her axe, finishing him off.

Aiden took a moment to check his back for blood, but thankfully the dagger hadn't pierced his chain shirt. During this brief time, the other archer had readied another arrow and loosed a shot at Sayana. Prepared for the attack, she positioned her magical shield between herself and her assailant with a quick gesture, successfully deflecting the arrow. Cursing loudly, the bandit dropped his bow and went for his dagger, but not before Aiden took a swipe at him. The man was too quick though, dodging to one side and avoiding the blade's edge.

While the initial charge had been successful, the remaining bandits had moved in to take advantage of their open position. There was no sign of Colt, and Aiden had lost track of Pacian several minutes ago. Four bandits, armed with a variety of knives and swords, slowly moved in to surround Aiden and Sayana, feeling more confident with their greater numbers. Another pair of bandits was moving in the fog behind them, one of them with a bow trained on Aiden but unlikely to get a clear shot with his comrades in the way.

Aiden went back-to-back with Sayana, keeping them in in sight as the ring of steel slowly closed in. The archer looked about ready to loose an arrow when the cloaked

bandit next to him drew out a pair of daggers and suddenly stabbed him twice in the back, then dashed off into the brush. This startled the other highwaymen and gave Aiden the advantage he had been waiting for.

He stabbed the closest man in the side, running him through the heart and dropping him to the ground, dead before he stopped moving. The young adventurer stepped over the body and prepared to strike at the next bandit, who was now facing him and ready to defend, a shortsword in his hand. Aiden could see Sayana out of the corner of his eye, and wondered for a brief moment if he should rush back over to support her. But he needn't have worried. She raised her hand, pointing at the approaching men, and flames shot out, engulfing both of them.

Their screams echoed through the forest and they dropped to the ground and rolled, trying to put out the flames before they were consumed. But before Sayana could finish them off, four others came rushing towards her, trying to take her down before she could recover. A crossbow bolt shot out of the fog at that moment, distracting them enough for Sayana to ready herself. Nellise was still in the fight.

Aiden took a hit on his shield from his opponent and returned the blow with his own sword, cutting him but not getting through the cured leather armour he wore. In a surprise move, the bandit suddenly kicked Aiden in the knee, knocking his leg out from underneath him and following through by smashing the hilt from his sword into the young man's forehead. Aiden reeled back, momentarily stunned by the pain echoing through his skull as he tried to bring his shield up to protect himself from further attacks.

But it was no good; he was disoriented and off-guard, and completely open to the impending attack. A sickening 'thud' sound filled Aiden's ears, and he thought for a moment that it was his own life ending. Through vision rapidly filling with blood, he saw the bandit drop to the ground, Sayana's axe embedded in his back from a near-perfect throw. Aiden, still on his knees, turned his head slightly to see what was going on, and was dismayed to see that Sayana had thrown away her only weapon, leaving her vulnerable to attack. She wasn't done yet though.

Reaching towards the axe with both hands, it seemed like a strangely comical attempt to grab the axe from over twenty feet away. But the axe shuddered and leapt out of the body of the bandit, flying through the air to be caught by the wild girl in her right hand. In one swift movement, she turned and heaved the axe with all her strength at the bandits who were now right upon her, taking the closest one in the chest. Blood splattered over the others, but it didn't slow them down this time.

The first one slashed at her with a dagger, cutting across her stomach and drawing blood, while his companion gashed her arm with his shortsword. She had been totally focused on retrieving her axe and hadn't positioned her magical shield effectively, and the wild girl stumbled backwards trying to regain her footing, blood flowing freely from the wounds.

His head still ringing from the blow, Aiden struggled to get back onto his feet to assist, but it was all he could do to avoid toppling over. Another bandit was creeping up on Sayana from behind, and looked about ready to strike at her when he flipped both of his daggers at one of the other highwaymen, both weapons hitting him in the head, grievously wounding him.

Aiden stared at the bandit and caught a glimpse of his face from underneath the hood. It was Pacian! He had taken the cloak from one of the fallen highwaymen and used

it to sneak around in the melee in relative safety, but his cover was blown now, and he had thrown away both of his weapons. The cunning rogue didn't wait around to see what was going to happen, though, instead dashing off into the fog once more before any of the bandits could attack him.

Sayana, holding one of her arms tightly against the bloody wounds in her side, had her axe ready once more in her free hand, and positioned her shield to protect her from further attacks. Taking the initiative, she swung at the wounded man before her, a dagger still sticking out of his face, and cut him down with one strike to the chest. The wild girl struggled to keep control of the large weapon after the swing, though, and staggered to one side, pulled by its weight. She was in trouble, and wasn't going to be able to keep this up.

The last bandit before her backed off, however, as another man came into the battle through the fog. He was bigger than the rest, and carried a greatsword that would have made Colt proud. His face was set in an uncompromising sneer, and his unshaven stubble and dark eyes gave him an unsettling appearance. Fletcher had finally entered the fray.

The big man ran straight at Sayana, who took an involuntary step backwards at the ominous figure rushing towards her. Fletcher swung the greatsword as he charged, the full impact of which was aimed straight at the small, blood-covered girl. She had the presence of mind to move her shield to block the attack, but the force upon it was enough to disintegrate the magical construct in a shower of blue sparks.

The greatsword continued through the space where the shield had been a split second before to slash Sayana across the top of her chest. It was a terrible wound that cut her to the ground, but if it hadn't been for that shield, the blow would surely have killed her.

Fletcher stepped in, hefting his greatsword above his head to deliver the killing blow to the barely conscious girl, when a challenge came from his right, from the copse of trees.

"Hey, pick on someone your own size," Colt called, "unless you prefer beating up little girls."

"Ranger, you need to learn when to keep your mouth shut," Fletcher growled, irritated at the insult. "You've killed a lot of my lads today you ugly bastard, and I'll make you pay for what you've done." He turned to face the ranger and didn't hesitate to close the distance. Colt was only wielding the shortsword he'd picked up, but he faced Fletcher fearlessly. He was going to need help, though, for this wasn't just some maimed wolf he was fighting; this man was a killer.

Aiden wiped some of the blood out of his eyes and staggered to his feet, struggling to ignore his injuries. Fletcher attacked Colt with savage fury, swinging his fearsome greatsword back and forth, trying to hew the big ranger down like a tree. For his size, Colt could move pretty quickly when he had to. When he couldn't dodge or duck, he managed to deflect the attack with his sword, changing the arc of the massive weapon enough to avoid it.

Aiden slowly moved in from behind, trying to keep a low profile so that he wouldn't be noticed. Glancing down at his shield, he thought he saw it flickering momentarily, but his vision was blurry and he couldn't be sure if it was real. Ignoring it, he kept moving forward, for if Colt could keep Fletcher distracted, he had a good chance to take a stab at him. He needn't have worried, though, for all his aggressive manoeuvres, he had yet to

land a hit on Colt. Having closed the distance, Aiden spied his chance and was just about to attack Fletcher when he spun around and swung mightily at Aiden's head.

He brought his shield up at the last moment to deflect the blade, but the weapon shattered the transparent disk in a shower of blue sparks and continued through, maintaining enough force to break his arm.

Aiden heard himself scream as he hit the ground, and felt like he was about to black out for a moment, but he gritted his teeth and clung to consciousness. Colt had taken advantage of his momentary distraction and stabbed at Fletcher while his back was turned, scoring a solid hit and drawing blood. The bandit was still standing though, and returned the favour with a quick strike of the sword's hilt to his face, breaking Colt's nose, spattering blood over his face. Somehow the stubborn ranger kept his footing, but he wasn't going to last much longer at this rate.

Aiden wanted to lie there as still as possible, but he knew if they didn't take this bastard down that none of them were going to live. Before he could do anything else though, a grey form dashed past his head and dove at Fletcher's exposed legs. The grey wolf Colt had nursed back to health sank its vicious teeth into the bandit's hamstring and brought him to his knees. The wolf was thrashing about so much that Fletcher couldn't bring his weapon to bear, much less regain his footing.

Colt was barely coherent at this point, the blow to his face having knocked him senseless, but the wolf kept Fletcher occupied enough for the big ranger to back away. Pacian appeared through the fog behind Colt at that moment with Nellise by his side. The blond rogue had acquired new daggers while he had been out of sight, and he came at Fletcher with an uncharacteristic lack of subtlety, a look of cold menace on his face.

The bandit had managed to kick away the wolf when Pacian hit him from behind with both daggers. Fletcher yelled in pain but still managed to swing a gauntleted fist around to take Pace in the head, sending him staggering backwards. The wolf, undaunted, launched itself once more at Fletcher's neck as Pacian clambered back to his feet, keeping the bandit occupied enough for Nellise to step in with her quarterstaff and smash it into his head with all the force she could muster. Fletcher went down without a sound, knocked unconscious at last. Aiden, bloodied and in tremendous pain, felt his grip on consciousness slipping and followed the bandit into oblivion.

* * *

A dull ache in his extremities greeted Aiden as he awoke, and he slowly opened his eyes to take in the scene around him, his head throbbing with pain. Someone was crouched over him, but it took a few moments for his vision to clear.

"Ah good, you're awake," Pacian said, leaning in closer to inspect Aiden's wounds. "Just hold still, you're in pretty bad shape."

"No kidding," Aiden whispered. His broken arm had been set back into place but hadn't been splinted. Although his head was still spinning, the effect was gradually diminishing. "How long have I been out?"

"Not long, just a few minutes," Pacian replied with an edge to his voice. "Nellise is doing her thing with the crystal over there, and everyone nearby should be healed. Just lay back and wait your turn." Aiden complied, relaxing back onto the muddy ground.

“Where's Flet- I mean, the bandit leader?” Aiden inquired, covering his mistake quickly. He didn't want to let on that he knew the man, as that would raise further questions.

“I tied him up pretty good,” Pacian explained. “Dragged him a few yards over in that direction so he wouldn't get any healing, 'cause I don't want him waking up. Yet.” Pacian's voice had an uncharacteristic hardness to it.

“Just keep your cool Pace,” Aiden advised. “We took him alive, so we'll get him back to Bracksford and let Olaf deal with him, and get paid. You like money right?”

“Don't try and distract me, that bastard nearly killed Sayana,” Pacian growled. “Nellise is literally stitching her back together with her prayers, and she'll be lucky to live at all. Just lay there for a while and you'll be fine.” With that, Pacian stood and stalked off, circling the unconscious bandit with a dark look marring his features.

Aiden didn't feel like lying there, useless, when he needed to get back on his feet and sort all this out, but he wouldn't accomplish much if his wounds didn't mend. He was silently thankful that Nellise was with them once again, to speed the mending of their injuries, which they seemed to be accruing with disturbing regularity of late.

A few minutes later, the pain in his arm had all but disappeared, and his head had stopped swimming. Tentatively, he lifted himself into a sitting position and scanned the area. The bodies of the fallen bandits lay around them, as horrid a sight as he'd ever seen, but he was still emotionally numb from the fight and found that it didn't bother him as much as he would have thought. The young man hadn't known if he was the kind of person that would stand and fight other men on a field of battle, but the events of the morning had show him what he was made of.

Nellise was kneeling comfortably next to Sayana a few yards away, holding a crystal and whispering her healing prayers, eyes closed. Her shoulder was covered in dried blood, but she seemed radiant and content. Sayana was motionless, aside from the gentle rise and fall of her chest.

Her tunic was completely torn across the top from where the greatsword had cut her, and what was left of the garment was covered in blood. It was a terrible injury, and Aiden felt the same anger rise in his chest that Pacian had at the sight of their fallen companion. Without her talents, they would surely have perished in the fight. Again he wondered what motivated her to risk her life for people she hardly knew. Near the wound, he could make out the marks of what appeared to be elaborate tattoos on her chest and shoulders. It was interesting, but hardly relevant at the moment.

Colt was sitting on the ground, his back against a nearby pine tree. He'd cleaned the blood away from his nose and pulled the arrowhead out of his arm. A few yards behind him, the wolf was crouched down on the ground, its golden eyes following Aiden's every move. The beast still gave Aiden a chill up his spine, despite witnessing its help in the fight.

“Any idea why he's acting like your pet?” he quietly asked Colt.

“I'm just a lovable guy,” the ranger replied dryly. “Also, killing his pack leader probably has something to do with it, so you might want to appear to be intimidated by me now and then or he might try to rip your throat out.”

“I'll keep that in mind,” Aiden replied with a shudder. Noticing that Colt seemed to be distracted, he turned to see what he was looking at. The prone form of Fletcher seemed to be the focus of his attention, and it was difficult to judge what the ranger was thinking.

Pacian had taken the time to bind his arms and legs, but hadn't touched his wounds. Nellise slumped forward as she finished her prayers, practically wilting before their eyes.

"Are you done?" Colt asked. She nodded in silent reply. "Good." He stood and walked over to Fletcher's prone form, giving him a solid kick to the chest. The bandit didn't stir. Colt offered him further encouragement, finally drawing a groan from the injured man.

"Go easy on him," Nellise warned, taking out her medicine pouch to do some further work on Sayana. "He's in bad shape, and doesn't need to be beaten up again."

"I'm not going to beat him," Colt grunted, "but there's an awful lot of trees to run into around here, and he looks kinda clumsy to me." Nellise scowled at him, but focused on dressing Sayana's wounds. Aiden stood up slowly, easing his left arm back and forth to see if it still hurt. There was a dull ache, but the bone seemed to have knitted.

He slowly hobbled over to where Colt was propping Fletcher up against a tree. He was awake now and looked like he was trying to kill the big ranger with his menacing stare. Pacian was walking in circles around the tree, glaring at the bandit while toying with one of his daggers. It looked a little theatrical, but Aiden knew he was being deadly serious. He'd seen that look before.

"What are you doing?" Aiden asked of Colt.

"Getting some answers."

"He's a bandit, a highwayman," Aiden pointed out. "What else do you need to know?" Colt didn't look at Aiden as he answered, keeping his gaze on their captive.

"For one thing, his men didn't have a clue how to fight in a forest," the ranger said. "They didn't have proper equipment or training, so I'm thinking they were either the worst bandits I've ever seen, or something else is going on. What do you say there mate, want to answer any of that?"

"What's in it for me?" Fletcher croaked slyly, spitting blood out of his mouth. "The way I figure it, you're gonna kill me anyway, right? I can see it in the blond one's eyes; he wants to shove that butterknife through my ribs."

"Oh you'll be going to gaol, don't get me wrong," Colt continued, "but you'll be intact, with all your blood still in your veins. Who knows, maybe a crafty bugger like you can figure out how to escape, or something. If you're still alive, you have all sorts of options. But if you're not feeling co-operative, well, my friend here does like to wash his knives in blood sometimes. It's a problem he has, but he's getting help for it. You understand."

"You make a good argument," Fletcher shrugged. "Certainly didn't think I was fighting the Rangers, or I would have done things a bit differently." Colt's eyes flinched a little; technically there weren't any members of the Royal Rangers present, but with two of them in the uniform it was easy to make that mistake. "And that little witch of yours... didn't see that coming."

"Don't you dare call her a witch," Pacian growled. "Just answer his questions or I'll have your tongue."

"You're not bad kid," Fletcher smirked. "I could have used someone like you a couple of months back. But I see through your act like glass. Leave interrogation to the big boys." Pace immediately ran in and smashed the hilt of his dagger across Fletcher's face. Blood exploded from the side of his mouth and Colt quickly interceded, shoving

Pacian backwards. The bandit slowly looked back up at Colt, blood dripping from his mouth.

"Too easy," Fletcher chuckled macabrely.

"See, told you he was a hothead," Colt admonished him. "Why don't you just tell us why you and a bunch of thugs set up shop outside this quaint little town?"

"Fine. I used to work for the Mayor and he ripped me off. Happy?" Fletcher grunted. Colt glanced over at Aiden, who returned his curious look.

"Olaf?" the ranger asked of Fletcher. "What the hell did you do for him?"

"Oh him and me had a whole business going, you know," Fletcher explained. "He's in on this whole thing, getting a cut of the takings." Aiden felt a tight feeling across his chest. He hadn't even considered that Olaf might actually still be working with Fletcher. But it seemed crazy – Olaf's fear of the bandits had been real.

"You're lying," Pacian said coldly, stepping and punching Fletcher in the gut.

"Hey, ease up! He's no good to us dead," Colt ordered, grabbing Pace by the shoulders and pulling him back. "He knows more and we'll get it out of him, but you gotta get control of yourself."

"You can't trust a single thing that comes out of his mouth," Pacian shouted. "Except blood. You can always trust blood, especially when it's gushing out of someone. Permit me to demonstrate."

"Back off!" Colt yelled, shoving him back further. Pacian didn't look happy about it, but he took the hint and didn't approach Fletcher again.

"Oh he's a bloodthirsty one, no doubt," the bandit observed. "Tell you what; you let me go, and I'll tell you everything I know about Olaf and all his sordid operations."

"How do we know you're telling the truth?" Aiden asked.

"You'll just have to take my word for it," Fletcher replied.

"We're not letting him go," Pacian stated. "I don't care what he says, that bastard is not going free."

"Well well, looks like someone's got a thing for Olaf," Fletcher teased, grinning his bloody smile. "You and him are 'good friends' eh? Don't want to hear about all his little secrets? That's okay, I had a few of you nancy boys working for me, they made great killers. But you and Olaf, that'll just be our little secret okay?" Pacian stared at Fletcher for a moment, then calmly walked over to him and with one quick flick of his wrist, slashed him across the throat with his dagger.

Aiden heard Nellise gasp, and the rest of them were stunned for a moment by the suddenness of what had just happened. Fletcher also had a surprised look on his face that quickly turned to horror as he started choking on his own blood. Nellise was the first to act, dashing past Aiden and trying to stem the flow of blood from the dying man's devastated throat.

"Nel, can you save him?" Colt cried.

"I'm exhausted," she moaned, quickly becoming covered in Fletcher's blood. "And this wound is too deep to staunch with bandages."

"He had nothing useful to tell us," Pacian argued. "He was just going to lie to our faces and wait for the right time to make a break for it!" Colt grabbed Pacian by the wrists and slammed him bodily against the tree, just to the right of where Fletcher's last moments were taking place. His fury was immense.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he roared. "You've just killed a helpless man! You stupid bastard, I should take you back to town and have you thrown in irons!"

"That was *justice*!" Pace retorted. "How many people has he tortured and killed? We both know it's a lot. So now he's dead, and he can't hurt anyone else ever again." Colt held the shifty rogue against the tree for a few moments longer, breathing heavily, before he finally let Pacian go and stalked away to cool off. The wolf growled at Pacian and then turned to follow the ranger.

Nellise was a sorry sight; her robe was covered in blood and dirt, and exhaustion marred her lovely face. But more than that was the disappointment that crossed her features when she looked at Pacian.

"It doesn't matter what reasons you had Pace," she said quietly. "Even if you had good intentions, that decision is going to stay with you for the rest of your life."

"Good, so I can look back on this day and feel proud that I killed an evil man," he countered, unrepentant. "Relax, I don't have a problem with this."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Nellise murmured, turning to go check on Sayana. Pacian looked to Aiden, probably looking for some moral support from his old friend.

"I don't think you needed to kill him Pace," he said grimly. "Or rather, if you wanted him dead, you should have done it in the fight. Killing a man while he's helpless is pretty low."

"Considering the things he's probably done, I don't really care," Pacian said coldly. "He's dead, we're alive, and that's all there is to it."

"I suppose so. But if he was still alive, it'd be easier to get him back to town, wouldn't it?" Aiden pointed out. Pacian seemed to consider this for a moment, then walked over and picked up Sayana's axe.

"You may not want to watch this," he warned. "I know how squeamish you are." Aiden winced as he realized what his friend was about to do and turned away, rubbing his forehead with his hand. The sound of the axe connecting with the body a few moments later made him flinch, and he had no desire to turn around to verify what just happened. Colt came walking back in just after the deed had been done, but had something else on his mind.

"Okay tough guy, I know you think you did right, killing that man, but I disagree. I'm not going to put you in irons and drag you back to town--"

"Because you're no longer a ranger and you have no authority," Pacian interrupted cheekily. Colt scowled at him but kept talking.

"I'm not going to do that, but I *am* going to make you dig a bloody big hole and throw all these bodies into it."

"You want me to bury twenty-something bodies?" Pacian's complained, his eyes widened in outrage. "After that big fight, and not sleeping last night and--"

"Yeah after all that," Colt growled. "Call it my style of frontier justice. So, grab something to dig with, and get to it."

"And you're going to sit there and watch?"

"Sure am," Colt grunted, sitting back against a tree. He unsheathed his greatsword and proceeded to run a whetstone along the edge, glancing up at him ominously. Pacian got the message, but before he started digging, he handed Aiden a sack. There was a large, heavy object inside, but he tried not to think about that.

"You better take this back to town then," Pacian said, dejectedly. Aiden didn't disagree with Colt's punishment, but he did feel a twinge of regret for his friend. Pacian had left their home town with him to *avoid* hard work.

"Right, well, I'm sure this will be very convincing," Aiden said, gingerly holding the sack. "I'll go back to Bracksford and meet you back here tomorrow evening... because I plan on sleeping in a bed tonight."

"We'll come with you," Nellise added from nearby while gathering her things. "I... need another robe, and I want to keep an eye on Sayana's wounds, and perhaps even heal her some more tomorrow." Aiden nodded, checking his gear briefly as well. His chain shirt was looking rather battered in places, but at least it had managed to keep him in one piece.

When the equally battered looking Sayana and Nellise were ready, they bid a cheerless farewell to the other two and slowly moved off to the south along the road. The air was still cold as they travelled, as one would expect in winter, but they tried to enjoy the brief respite from the rain while it lasted. After a few hours of walking in the light, the familiar wet weather set in again, dampening their spirits as well as their attire.

The combination of the fight, the poor weather, and the lack of sleep put Aiden in a foul mood. Pacian's actions at the end, though shocking to the others, merely left the young man feeling disappointed in his friend. None of them spoke during the whole journey back to town, and by the time they passed through the northern gate it was fast approaching nightfall.

"I'm going to eat a meal at the inn and retire straight away," Nellise mumbled, her normally lyrical voice hoarse from fatigue. "I imagine you'll want to dispose of that thing as quickly as possible," she added, pointing at the sack of horrors hanging over his shoulder.

"I will rest also," Sayana added, looking bedraggled in her tattered shirt. Faint outlines of the tattoos Aiden had seen earlier could be seen over her shoulders, right next to the large scar.

"I'm going to deliver this thing and join you in a few minutes," Aiden said, wishing he could just collapse unconscious in the street at that moment. Too tired to speak, Nellise nodded and the two young women shambled into the front door of the Bracksfordshire Arms leaving Aiden to complete the task at hand.

He headed for the Mayor's office and went straight inside. The secretary looked up as he entered and her eyes went wide, but he didn't acknowledge her as he strode past. Olaf was in his chambers as usual, appearing as though he was about to put aside his work and leave in the next few minutes. He turned to see who had entered and seemed just as shocked as the secretary had been.

"Good lord man, what on earth happened to you?" he gasped, no doubt referring to his roughshod appearance. A mixture of water, mud and blood dripped onto the Mayor's fine carpets, but Aiden couldn't bring himself to care.

"We've reopened the road," he grated, having no patience for the usual wordplay. "We've taken care of your little problem too, as we discussed. Here, I brought you a gift," he added, hefting the sack and swinging it over to the Mayor. He caught it, puzzled, and had a look inside.

"Dear God," he exclaimed, turning his head aside and holding the sack at arm's length. "Is that Fletcher's head? It is, isn't it! Take it back, man, I don't want it in here!"

“This is what you wanted, right?” Aiden spat. “This is the result of ‘eliminating’ your problems, you old fool, so I hope you’re happy, because I’m bloody pissed off and frankly, I’m sick of cleaning up your mess. Hand over the five gold sovereigns you promised us, right now, if you please.”

“Yes yes, of course,” Olaf assured him, scrambling to find the coins. He seemed highly motivated. Olaf tossed a coin pouch over to Aiden, who proceeded to count the coins within.

“Thank you,” he said, pocketing the pouch into one of his other, larger pouches. “So yes, tell everyone in town that the north road is free and clear, and you’ll be the most popular man in town. But don’t forget, I know all your little secrets, so don’t cross me or I’ll end your career.”

“I understand, and for what it’s worth, thank you,” Olaf replied, humbled. “I know it must have been a difficult fight for you all, but you’ve done the town a great service. I would ask for one small favour, however?” Aiden glared at the man without responding. “Take this message to the Mayor of Culdeny requesting military assistance, and recommend that he send a runner to Coldstream to assess their situation as well.”

“I suppose I should be grateful that you’re thinking of someone other than yourself for a change,” Aiden mused. “I’ll do it, but for them, not for you. Oh, and any word on the Akoran raiders you spoke of?”

“I’m expecting some news from Highmarch about the situation within a week,” Olaf replied hastily, looking fearfully at Aiden.

“Keep an eye on that situation,” Aiden advised, his fatigue washing away his anger with every passing moment. “I’ll leave Fletcher with you, since you’ve had experience dealing with the dead of late. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to get some rest.”

“Of course Aiden, and thank you again,” Olaf gushed obsequiously, staring with disdain at the sack in his hands. Tired of looking at the man, Aiden trudged out of the office, ignoring the secretary as he went past and headed towards the inn.

Along with the ladies, Aiden had eaten briefly from their supplies on the journey back to town, so he was quite content with skipping an evening meal altogether. He managed to slip through the crowded common room of the inn and make his way to the stairs without being waylaid by the patrons. The comfort of the inn bed greeted him as he fell flat upon it, not even bothering to remove his coat.

* * *

Aiden awoke the next day, bleary-eyed and sore. Light, grey as it was, streamed in through the cracks in the curtains, beckoning to the young explorer of another day of challenges. Sighing in resignation, he slowly heaved himself upright, and nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw Sayana sitting on the other bed, watching him.

“What are you doing in here?” Aiden exclaimed.

“I awoke early, and came in to here to think,” she explained. The wild girl was still wearing her torn shirt, which didn’t leave much to the imagination. Her tattoos were clearly visible, snaking over the exposed parts of her skin. Her red hair was curly and vibrant, and cascaded down her back.

“Oh,” Aiden replied, not having anything meaningful to add to that revelation. “How long have you been here?”

"A few hours. It is quickly approaching noon, and I was contemplating whether or not to awaken you."

"It's that late huh," Aiden grumbled. "Okay, I'm getting up. At least I don't have to get dressed." He could smell his own heady aroma, from a combination of blood, dirt and sweat. The young man considered getting cleaned up before hitting the road again, but decided it could wait until they reached Culdeny.

"You could have gone downstairs and sat next to the fireplace you know," Aiden said, thinking it a little eerie that she had been watching him sleep through the morning.

"There were people there, and I needed to think, as I said."

"About what?" Aiden asked. She was being evasive, that much was clear.

"A lot of different things," Sayana replied cryptically. "It isn't important right now." As Aiden's mind slowly started to wake up, he remembered something he had planned to ask her, and this seemed as good a time as any.

"Sayana, you nearly died yesterday, and for the life of me I can't figure out why you risked your life for us," he began. The wild girl sat there mutely, waiting for Aiden to continue. "Because, you hardly know us... and we don't really know you either." More silence. "Not that I'm complaining mind you. Feel free to save my life anytime." The hint of a smile drifted across her lips.

"I did it to save you, not them," she admitted. Aiden, in the middle of standing up, froze in place to look straight into her large green eyes.

"I don't suppose you want to tell me why?"

"I'm not really sure," she hedged, seeming to be confused. "I feel strange around you. Not a bad sort of strange, but more of a... memory of something I've lost." Aiden blushed a little, not quite sure what she was saying, but drawing some fanciful conclusions. "I travel with you to explore these feelings."

"Umm..." said Aiden, tongue tied at the sudden honesty of the girl. "Look, you're very pretty and all, but we hardly know each other, so..." Sayana looked embarrassed and squirmed on the bed.

"Not *those* sort of feelings," she clarified. "Understand that the power I work with, the control I have over it, is instinctive. I need to be in tune with my feelings because each emotion is a different state of energy that affects my abilities. I must be disciplined."

"What does this have to do with me?" Aiden asked, having second thoughts about this conversation.

"You see, I don't know where my powers come from," she continued. "But what I feel when I'm around you reminds me of something from when I was very young, and somehow... that's connected to what I am," she said, searching for the right words. "I seek to discover more, so I travel with you to learn." Aiden recalled what had happened just before they arrived at Fort Highmarch, and lifted the shard of glass that was hanging around his neck up so she could see it.

"When you touched this back when we were at the fort, it glowed. Does this have something to do with the feeling you describe?" Sayana considered it for a moment, and then held out her hand.

"May I have a closer look?" Aiden nodded and placed it in her hand. She held it up to her eyes, looking closely at the remains of the glass sphere. Seeing nothing of interest, she hung it around her neck. Her eyes went wide and she gasped, staring off into the distance as her tattoos started to glow with a white light, dimly at first but brighter as the

seconds past. The shard itself was glowing in the same manner. She was quite a sight at that moment, lit up like an angel.

The door to Aiden's room opened and Nellise poked her head in, a curious look on her face. She seemed taken aback by Sayana's appearance, then quickly recovered and stepped inside, closing the door behind her.

"What in heaven's name is going on here?" she asked. Sayana had been oblivious to her entrance, but upon hearing her voice the glow from her body diminished, then disappeared completely. She quickly took the shard off from around her neck and handed it back to Aiden, looking slightly guilty.

"I was just talking with Aiden," she stammered.

"There's nothing wrong with that Sayana, you don't need my permission to do anything," Nellise assured her. "But what was that light all about?"

"She was testing a possession of mine to see if it had some intrinsic power," Aiden volunteered. "I wasn't expecting the light show, but I assume that means something significant?"

"You are correct, that glass shard is what I am sensing," she confirmed. "But I don't know why! Is there anything else you can tell me about it? Perhaps, where you found it?"

"Not a great deal I'm afraid," Aiden sighed. "It was a glass sphere about as large as your head, and it was glowing softly. I picked it up and... I felt very strange for a few moments. Then I received a mild shock, which prompted me to drop the sphere, which shattered on the ground." He no longer told people the whole truth about what had happened, as he'd been ridiculed too many times in the months afterward. "I've been spending years trying to find out more about its origins. This shard was taken out of my hand afterward, and I wear it as a reminder."

"Nothing else?"

"Just that the sphere had some odd symbols around it, markings not unlike writing," Aiden added. "I figured they have some relevance, so I spent much of the last few years trying to learn more about these sorts of things. Just before we left for Culdeny the other night, I finally obtained a book that has more information. Not much to go on, but I plan on pursuing it when I have the time."

"I would very much like to know more about this," Sayana said, her voice reflecting the kind of eagerness that Aiden himself felt, pushing him to learn what had happened to him on that day in the cave, years ago.

"We can talk more about it on the trip north," he assured her. "I should go and have some breakfast before we set out. Uh, was there something you wanted Nel?"

"Oh, I was in the hallway and saw that strange light coming from underneath the door to your room, so I thought I'd see what was going on."

"That's quite alright. Were you just sitting out in the hallway?" Aiden asked. The night's rest had done her good, and there was no sign of injury. She had even purchased yet another white robe to replace the bloodied and torn one. But there was clearly an issue weighing on her mind.

"Yes I wanted to speak with you as soon as you arose. I'm afraid I won't be coming with you when you venture north to Culdeny," she said with finality. "I will be staying here."

Chapter Nine

In the time it took Aiden to respond to Nellise's statement, several possible reasons flashed through his mind, none of them good.

"I'm sure you have a good reason for staying," he began slowly. "It hasn't exactly been an easy journey for us. Now that the road to Culdeny is open again, I suppose your task is complete."

"It's not that," she assured him. "When I first offered to go with you and Pacian, I thought you were nice young men looking to help out the town. I didn't realise Pace was capable of such a brutal act. What he did to that man... I just don't associate with thugs, Aiden. You seem to be a genuinely good man, but him..."

"Pacian is... complex," Aiden told her patiently. "I'm not saying what he did wasn't wrong. It was, but he has his reasons." Nellise shook her head steadfastly.

"Nothing can justify that sort of behaviour, the reasons are irrelevant."

"Would you like to hear them before you judge him?" Aiden pressed. She looked at the young man for a moment, seeming to consider what he was saying. "Indulge me," he added a moment later.

"I suppose it wouldn't hurt," she acquiesced, "but don't expect me to be sympathetic."

"Good enough." Aiden had hoped to go and get something to eat, but he felt this was more important.

"I've known Pace since I was seven years old. He and his parents moved to Coldstream from Amalis, on the east coast, after their fortunes took a turn for the worse. They had a bakery, but it burned down in an accident and they lost just about everything. Coldstream is a nice cheap place to live, but one can't really make a fortune there either, so their new bakery barely made enough to keep them fed and clothed. Still, they survived."

"One day, around three years ago, some people came into town looking for Bryce Savidge, Pacian's father. It turned out that he owed them a substantial amount of money from gambling debts, and that he'd burned down their business to fake their deaths, thus freeing him of obligation. But it seemed Bryce underestimated his debtors, as they'd managed to track him down in Coldstream."

"I can guess that this isn't going to end well," Nellise observed. Aiden nodded.

"When Pacian went home that evening, he stumbled into the middle of a bad situation. Four thugs were there, destroying what few possessions they owned, looking for the money that was owed to them. When Pace walked in, one of the men grabbed his mother, Keelin, and held a knife to her throat, demanding his money on the spot."

"Pace was roughly the same cocksure lad he is now, and quite skilled at throwing knives. He thought he could kill the thug before he cut his mother's throat. He was wrong. As soon as he threw, the man cut Keelin's throat wide open. I'm not sure if Pacian's knife hit him or not, but the ensuing fight was chaotic to say the least. They made enough noise that the neighbours came over to see what was happening, but by then, all four men were dead and Bryce was severely injured. Pacian managed to make it through with only a few bruises, but his mother was dead." Nellise covered her open mouth with a hand, gasping in astonishment.

"I would have burned them all," Sayana offered, a note of savagery in her voice.

“Pace had to live with the guilt of causing his mother's death, for which his father never forgave him.”

“Even though it was his gambling problems that brought those men to town in the first place,” Nellise finished. “The poor young man, he must be carrying around the burden of guilt for that act.”

“I'm sure he is,” Aiden agreed. “Not to mention having to live with his father afterward, and deal with the constant loathing the man had for him after that day. Bryce used to get drunk in the evenings and beat Pace until he ran off, only to return after his father had passed out. Things only became harder for them after that. When I decided to leave town and head off on my own, Pacian came along.”

The two young women were quiet. Nellise was clearly deep in thought, while Sayana was more difficult to get a read on.

“I see now why he killed that bandit,” Nel said slowly. “He sees in his enemies the men that killed his mother.” Aiden hadn't thought of it like that, but it made sense.

“You should have seen the remains of the men from that fight. He'd stabbed them a dozen or more times each *after* they'd fallen. He was never the same since. So there you have it, a reason for his actions, but not an excuse. What you do with this information is up to you. If either of you want to go your own way, I'll understand perfectly. But he's not a bad person, as such, just very, very angry.”

“I never said I would not come with you,” Sayana corrected him. “I understand Pacian's anger, and approve of the way he channels it. That man was vile, I have no problem with his death.”

“Fair enough. What about you, Nellise?” The young acolyte pondered the question for a minute, biting her lip occasionally in thought.

“I will travel with you to Culdeny,” she eventually declared. “I want to speak with Pacian a little more before I make any decision, but he might be open to some help. My help, that is.”

“I don't think he wants to talk about it,” he replied doubtfully. “When you talk to him, just... be tactful.” Nellise smiled warmly, and Aiden went a little giddy inside.

“Fear not, I won't scare him away,” she assured him. “And thank you for providing some perspective.”

“Nice of you to listen,” Aiden said, heaving himself out of bed. “Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to have a nice big breakfast before we head back north.”

“I am going to the local store to 'buy' a new 'shirt',” Sayana stated, fishing out one of the gold coins she now possessed. “Is this enough?” Aiden's eyes bulged a little.

“Um, that's enough for several hundred shirts. Here, use one of these instead,” he said, fetching out a silver noble and handing it to the wild girl. “Nellise, go with her and make sure she doesn't get taken advantage of.”

“I had already planned to do so,” she answered, standing and leading Sayana to the door. Aiden followed, hobbling a little from his sore limbs. One night of decent sleep was barely enough to recover from their recent trials.

The common room of the Bracksfordshire Arms was full as he walked towards the counter. It seemed that a general celebration was going on, so it was fairly safe to assume that Olaf had informed them that the road north was now clear. Most of the crowd was standing around the Mayor, clapping him on the back and toasting his health, which confirmed Aiden's assumptions.

The young adventurer managed to squeeze through the crowd without being noticed, so he was able to order his breakfast without being accosted. Not that he would mind being recognised as one of the real heroes of course, but he imagined it would be hard to eat while being slammed on the back by fifty people. The little red-haired girl was behind the counter, positively beaming at him.

“Hi! Did you hear? The north road is open again!”

“Yes, I was there,” Aiden confirmed.

“I have to get my father, he wanted to thank whoever did it!” she said, practically squealing with delight. Aiden smiled as she dashed off into the crowd, her small stature allowing her to duck through with ease. When she emerged a moment later, she had the burly innkeeper in tow.

“Aiden! You've done a fine job, lad,” he boomed, walking up to him and shaking his hand. “Couldn't have done a better job myself, even when I was a young man.”

“Oh you used to be a fighting man?”

“Aye, I was a caravan guard and mercenary for ten years before I finally had jack of it, and set up this inn,” he replied. “Carrying a bit too much weight and age to be of use on the battlefield now, but I could hold my own, back in the day.”

“I'll wager you could at that, Mister...”

“Tom Ballard,” the innkeeper said, shaking Aiden's hand again. “And this is my daughter Aislin. Be a dear and fetch this man whatever he wants, sweetie.” Aislin smiled and awaited Aiden's request. Over the course of eating his meal, he spoke with several other patrons and learned that just about everyone was expecting merchants from Culdeny any time now.

After his late breakfast, Aiden gathered some more food and other supplies for the return trip to the north, and then met up with Sayana and Nellise outside, both women wearing fresh clothing. All three of them were weary from their travails, but buoyed by the knowledge they had accomplished what they'd set out to do. Now that she had discovered the source of her interest, Sayana stuck with Aiden like glue as they set out through the north gate to rejoin the others out on the highway.

At first, her questions were very straight-forward, such as where the cave he had fallen into was, how he'd managed to get out again and the like. It was only when she began inquiring further about the device itself that he had to become more evasive. Perhaps when the time was right, he would tell the sorceress of the vision he had experienced. He didn't have much hope of her providing him with any further answers though; it would most likely just give her a better idea of her own issues with the shard hanging around his neck.

Towards the evening, the rain began to thin out and then stop altogether, much as it had the previous morning. Sure enough, they soon reached the area of their battle with the highwaymen. There were few signs of the fight remaining – no bodies on the muddy ground, no weapons left to rust in the damp conditions.

The smell of wood smoke wafting through the cold evening air drew them towards a small camp. As they approached, a large mound of dirt could be seen rising above the ground in the dim light, along with a smaller pile of dirt next to it with blond hair sticking out. Looking closer, Aiden saw that it was, in fact Pacian, covered in mud, and sprawled on the ground, fast asleep.

“It seems Colt kept his word,” Nellise observed coolly, looking down on the rogue.

"I don't think Pace is going to be a problem for the next couple of days," Aiden remarked. "Let's leave him to get his rest. It looks like he earned it." Nellise looked at the mass grave, and with an unreadable expression took out her crystal and what appeared to be a vial of water.

"You two go on ahead, I am going to sanctify the area," she informed them crisply. The young explorer spared a thought for the dead out of respect for Nellise, and then continued on towards the sounds and smell of the campfire, not far beyond the battlefield.

"Welcome back," Colt greeted them from his position by the campfire.

"I like what you've done with the place," Aiden deadpanned.

"Well, I know how much the ladies like a neat house," he replied dryly, busily skinning a surprisingly fat hare. "Pull up a log and make yourself comfortable, in an hour or so we'll have a nice stew to eat."

"Where's your furry little friend?" Aiden asked as he located a reasonably dry area to sit down. There were no nearby logs, despite Colt's suggestion.

"Pacian's resting over there; didn't you see him on the way past?"

"No, I mean your wolf," Aiden replied with a rueful grin.

"He's not mine, I've told you that already," Colt replied gruffly. "And he's off hunting probably. I don't really know. Just keep your eyes peeled though, he's already tasted your blood and might come back for seconds."

"Speaking of Pacian, did he give you any trouble?"

"He talked back to me quite a bit, but wasn't game to try and get physical with me," the ranger said as he threw a few more pieces of wood onto the fire. "After a while I ended up giving him a hand."

"That was decent of you," Aiden remarked.

"Not really," Colt shrugged. "He fell in a heap after an hour and I had to do the rest. Don't let him tell you otherwise though. That kid isn't the most useful person to have around, and I can see why he took to scumbaggery."

A sombre Nellise arrived shortly afterward and they spent a quiet evening enjoying Colt's stew and the warm fire. It was the first time Aiden had slept under the open sky for a long time, but he managed to sleep peacefully until Colt awoke him long before dawn to take his shift keeping watch.

As the day dawned, Aiden shuffled around sleepily for more dry wood to throw on the smouldering embers of the fire. The sun was rising in the east, bathing the forest with its light but providing little warmth at this time of the year. Something caught Aiden's eye just off in the distance, through the trees. It was a reflective shine from the morning sun, as if a metallic item was sitting in the open. Curious, the young man moved in for a closer look.

He pushed through some low-hanging branches and came upon a stack of wooden crates, chests and other assorted equipment. Several wagons were sitting here as well - empty, but in good condition. One of the chests moved suddenly, as if bumped by an unseen figure, and Aiden was instantly fully alert. He drew his short sword and crept in cautiously, glancing to either side to make sure nothing else was moving.

A familiar figure rose up from behind the crates. Pacian, still covered in mud and dirt from his short stint as a gravedigger, was carrying a small chest. It was opened, and inside gleamed something that appeared to be coins.

“Sorry Aiden, didn't see you there,” he said, jumping a little. Aiden breathed out slowly, relieved that it was just his old friend.

“Nice to see you too,” he replied sarcastically. “What is all this?” The blond rogue’s green eyes gleamed as bright as the coins in the chest he held.

“The bandit’s loot, of course. Looks like a dozen or so wagons must have tried to make it to Bracksford from Culdeny before they figured out nothing was getting through. I haven't seen any bodies around – other than the ones we already know about – so I'm not sure what happened to the merchants and wagon drivers. Maybe they got back to town to warn the others? Who knows?”

“Ah, well, I did wonder what could get you back on your feet so quickly,” Aiden said, sheathing his sword. “I should have known there was money involved. Oh, speaking of such...” Aiden opened his coin pouch and flipped a gold sovereign into the chest Pacian held. Upon closer inspection, most of the coins in that chest were copper jacks, with one or two silvers, so it wasn't the huge bounty Aiden first thought it was.

“Thanks, I earned that,” Pacian winked, closing the chest and carrying it back towards their camp.

“Uh, what about all those crates and boxes?” Aiden asked, pointing around.

“Mostly perishables, unfortunately,” Pace shrugged. “This was the only really valuable thing in there. The others were starting to rise and move around the camp, preparing their breakfast as the two young men arrived. Nellise and Pacian exchanged odd looks before settling in to eat. Their supplies were more than adequate now, for which Aiden would be eternally grateful. Day old bread was a big step up from the mouldy food they were eating on the trip south a few days ago.

He had no idea if any of the others would be interested in helping him out with his plan to investigate the ruins of Ferrumgaard, as it was more personal in nature, and no less dangerous - possibly *more* dangerous, actually. Aiden would think about how to ask them during the remainder of the trip north.

After eating, they quickly packed and continued along the highway. The weather continued to stay fine as they travelled, and the rest of the journey was uneventful. The road began sloping down noticeably as they walked, beginning its slow decent to the shoreline. Nellise walked alongside Pacian for most of the way, talking quietly between themselves. Aiden decided to give them some space, despite his curiosity. Sayana eased up on her questioning too, content to walk along with the rest of them in peaceful contemplation.

Two days later, a couple of hours before sunset, they broke free of the forest canopy and walked passed clear fields as they approached of the town of Culdeny. An ancient stone wall five feet high ran along the entire edge of the town, with a solid looking gate providing entrance to travellers. They had encountered nobody on the road during the past few days, but that was about to change – their arrival would show that the way was safe for travel once again.

There were five guardsmen stationed at the gate, clad in breastplates and carrying pikes and shortwords. Their polished and rust-free steel gleamed in the cloudy conditions, a stark contrast to the armoured farmhands of Bracksford. The guards were surprised to hear of the bandit troubles on the highway, and impressed that Aiden and his friends had dealt with it. When asked if they could supply reinforcements to the south, their answer was predictable.

“Every settlement and town in the area has had their garrisons depleted by his Majesty, and they're all screaming to us for help,” the corporal explained. “Apparently there's been trouble brewing all over the place, with your less reputable types taking advantage of the situation. And we're stretched too thin – it's hard enough keeping the highway to Fairloch open without trying to cover the entire southern half of the Kingdom. Hell, we couldn't even keep the Bracksfordshire highway open, what do you think we can do against a bunch of barbarian raids?”

“Great, another dead end,” Pacian muttered.

“Why don't you take that note to the Mayor and let him know you cleared the road,” the corporal advised, signalling to one of his men to open the gate. “Welcome to Culdenny ladies and gents. We're a bit short-handed at the moment, so try to stay out of trouble. I can't guarantee we'll be able to deal with any fights that break out in a prompt fashion, so stay sharp.” Aiden glanced at the others, not quite sure what he was referring to. He was going to inquire further but the apparently the conversation was over. They passed through the open gate and stepped into the town proper.

The cobblestone streets were bustling with heavily clothed men and women conducting their daily business. Although it never really snowed here, Culdenny was still a cold place, but at least it was dry. Quaint, thatched cottages lined the broad streets, and the sounds of the sea could be heard echoing off the stone pier. The air had the tinge of saltiness and seaweed to it one only encountered this close to the sea, and it was refreshing and bitter at the same time. Aiden had been here once before in his life, many years ago when he was a child. But he never forgot that smell.

“Ah, it's nice to be home,” said Nellise wistfully. “And it's also nice to be walking along streets that aren't up to my calves in water. I don't know about the rest of you, but my boots are completely ruined.”

“Buy more then,” Colt advised absently. “Speaking of something to drink, I think I'll catch up with the rest of you at the inn.”

“Uh, which inn?” Aiden called out as Colt hurried away.

“The Seaspray Inn, just down the road towards the docks. Can't miss it.”

“We should probably stop by the Mayor's office before we head there and finish up for the day,” Aiden said thoughtfully. Nellise looked at him in astonishment.

“Looking like that, you wouldn't even be allowed past the front door. You and Pacian both need to clean yourselves up, if you want anyone of high station to pay attention to you.” Aiden glanced down at his apparel. He wasn't as covered in dirt and blood as Pacian, but he was far from presentable. He could probably do with some new clothes as well, for Nellise was right about the condition of their boots.

“I suppose it can wait until the morning,” Aiden muttered. “He'll probably want confirmation of the clear road from his own people anyway. Can you take us to that inn?”

“Yes it isn't far,” Nellise nodded, leading them along the cobblestone path. “I should warn you though, it can be a little rough. The guard hinted at it back at the gate, but it's not as bad as he suggested. It all depends on how many ships are docked, really.”

“Sailors I'm guessing,” Pacian said. “Probably rowdy after spending months at sea, perfectly understandable.”

“What is a sailor?” Sayana asked. Aiden hadn't really been paying attention to her, but now that he was, he could see she was very nervous. She walked in close step with Aiden, glancing around at all the people walking about.

“A man who works aboard a ship. You know what one of those is, right?”

“No. Aiden, I do not like it here,” Sayana advised cautiously. “There are too many people to fight.”

“You don't have to fight these people either, Sayana,” Aiden replied, ignoring Pacian's smirk. “It's just like Bracksford, only with more nice, friendly people walking around. Notice how we don't have swords sticking out of our torsos? That's because they're not trying to kill us.” The sorceress gave him a blank look.

“You're mocking me, aren't you.”

“A little,” Aiden said, suppressing a smile. “It's just a bit paranoid to constantly assume everyone is out to get you.”

“Hey, just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're *not* out to get you,” Pacian corrected. “Stay sharp and yell out if there's any trouble Sayana, I'll come help you if you need it.” She remained silent, still appearing nervous but Aiden think he saw her relax a little bit.

“Just don't set anyone on fire and I'm sure we'll be fine,” Aiden added. They continued on for a little way down the road until they arrived at the Seaspray Inn, a huge wooden building that had clearly been added to more and more over the years. From this position, they could also see the bustling docks, less than a hundred yards away. The crashing of the waves against the shore was quite loud here, and was yet another thing that spooked Sayana.

Stepping through the front door of the inn, the smell of pipe smoke and rum permeated the air. Dozens of patrons milled around in the common room, some seated at tables with large tankards in front of them, others sat at the bar, but all of them were laughing and talking away with each other. Aiden led his little group in towards one of the bartenders, pushing through the crowd a little when required, but gently.

Through the din, he managed to negotiate two rooms for them to stay in, one for the ladies and one for the gentlemen, if Colt or Pacian could be called such. The blond rogue grabbed the key for their room as soon as the bartender produced it, and headed on up the stairs near the front door that lead to the rooms. Aiden shook his head but said nothing, giving the surly barkeep a long suffering look.

Aiden handed over the coins and then the three of them eventually followed Pacian's path up the stairs, albeit in a more relaxed fashion. On the way, Aiden spied an opportunity to speak with Nellise for a moment.

“How did your talk with Pacian go?” he began. “You're still with us, so I take it things went well?”

“He was resistant at first, but I believe with time and perseverance he can be redeemed. He's my new personal project, if you will.”

“If you say so,” Aiden shrugged. “Just don't go giving him the wrong idea, he might mistake your interest for something else.”

“Let me worry about that,” she replied with a knowing smile. “Mine is a subtle art, Aiden. He won't even know what's happening.” Aiden grinned back at her, appreciating her company and her wit. A thought occurred to him when they reached their rooms.

“Hey if this is your home town, don't you have some place to stay?”

“Yes, but my mother's house is out of town; this will be more convenient. I could also stay at the church, but I'd rather have some time to rest before I report to the

Archioness. These rooms may be small, but compared to the chapterhouse, they're practically palatial."

Indeed, their rooms were small but simple and clean with comfortable beds, enticing Aiden to lie down and rest his weary body immediately. Pacian was certainly doing so already – he had a knack for being able to sleep whenever he wanted under all sorts of conditions. But for now he was content to lie face down in his dirty leathers.

Aiden lay on the bed and heaved a sigh of contentment, taking a moment to enjoy the simple comfort. He had pressing matters that would need attending to soon, but considering the week he'd had, one night of rest was not too much to ask. It wasn't long before the weary young man drifted off to sleep, still fully clothed.

* * *

Aiden started awake, the nightmare from the cave haunting his dreams once more than night. He held his eyes tightly shut for a moment as he slowly calmed down, and remembered where he was. A chill and bitter gale was rattling the shutters on the window, and the sounds of the bustling community outside were a constant background noise. The young man felt like he hadn't slept at all, but Pacian was still sound asleep, snoring loudly, so Aiden slowly arose from the bed, and moved quietly out the door.

The polished wooden halls of the inn were freezing cold, so he headed straight for the common room and its huge fireplace. When he entered, Aiden was somewhat startled to see the scattered remains of several chairs and last night's patrons sprawled haphazardly around the room, in what looked like the aftermath of a massive brawl.

This did not seem to be an unusual occurrence, as a few people were enjoying their breakfast in amongst the destruction as if nothing were amiss. Seeking to fit into this strange new culture, Aiden moved towards the bar, picking his way carefully through the comatose patrons so as not to step on any delicate areas. The bartender this morning was a plump young woman in a frilly red dress, with a rosy-cheeked smile.

"Morning young master," she greeted Aiden as he sat down on an unoccupied and still intact stool. "Can I get you something?"

"A plate of whatever you have for breakfast," he replied. "So... is this a regular occurrence?"

"Breakfast?" she asked, seeming confused. "Happens around about this time every morning, last time I checked!"

"Ha, yes, actually I was referring to the carnage," Aiden clarified.

"Oh that," she nodded, as if she hadn't noticed current contents of the common room. "Maybe once a week, depending on how long some crews have been at sea." A reflective look crossed her cherubic features. "Not sure what started this fight though. They all seemed to be enjoying themselves for most of the evening."

"I note that they are still lying on your floor, and haven't been arrested," Aiden observed.

"The guards have got better things to be doing than throwing these lads into gaol," she smiled knowingly in reply. "They gave up trying to keep the peace in this place a few weeks ago. But that's fine, the boys are only hurtin' themselves. Anyway, let me get you something to eat, handsome."

Aiden turned to lean back against the bar while he looked with amusement at a few of the locals slowly rising like the dead from the grave, groaning and clutching their heads. In amongst the wreckage of a table, a familiar figure slowly tried to stand. Aiden cracked a grin when he saw it was Colt, beaten and bloodied but still in one piece. The big ranger clutched the side of his chest with one arm, and looked around with something akin to satisfaction at the sight before him.

"That'll show the bastards," he croaked, shambling towards the stairs and completely oblivious to Aiden's presence. Focusing on his meal, he thought briefly about the frustration of not being able to send help down to his home town, let alone Bracksford.

He had no idea what possessed the King to strip the garrisons bare and invade another country, except that history was replete with sovereigns doing exactly that. Aiden didn't know a great deal about King Seamus Roebec, the ruler of Aielund, but he was apparently subject to the same whims as other Kings, leaving his countrymen to fend for themselves in the wake of his passing.

In addition to this, however, Aiden was also tempted by the close proximity of the old dwarven city of Ferrumgaard, only two days travel to the west from Culdery. The place must have been looted many times in the last century, especially being so near to a major human settlement as it was. But part of him still hoped the strange artefact he sought was buried somewhere in its depths. For that to be possible, he figured Ferrumgaard was deserted and the item had been overlooked, or possibly hidden.

The alternative was that the place was so dangerous that nobody had gone near it since the fall. If that was the case, then it would be a grave risk to even attempt to find what he sought. Aiden needed to learn more before he could decide on a course of action.

"I'm looking for some information," he quietly asked of the cherubic girl, pushing a silver noble towards her on the counter. "I'm looking for someone who knows a lot about the old city of Ferrumgaard. Would you happen to know anyone I could speak with?" The woman took the silver piece and appeared thoughtful. Before she could answer, a short, bearded man sitting a little further along the bar spoke up.

"Sorry but I couldn't help but overhear. Yer wantin' to know more about Ferrumgaard? I can help ya out with that."

"Yes, that man right there," the bartender pointed, quickly pocketing the coin, and looking as innocent as she could manage in a moments notice. "Glad to help you out, I'll be out the back cleaning if you need me. You two have a nice chat!" Before Aiden could protest, she was already scurrying through the door to the kitchens. The short man laughed.

"Typical, takes a man's money, then runs off," he chortled. "But ya didn't want to hear about women now did ya lad. Nay, it's Ferrumgaard that's on yer mind, and I'll tell ya what you want to know. The name's Clavis MacAliese."

"Aiden Wainwright, good to meet you," Aiden said, hopping off his stool and moving over to shake the man's hand firmly.

"So Aiden, what's yer interest in the fallen city of Ferrumgaard?" Clavis continued, sipping ale from a large tankard. "Nobody goes there and returns the same y'know. Changes a man; makes him see his own mortality."

"I have an interest in the historical aspects of the place," Aiden said carefully. "Specifically, some research that was being done before the... unfortunate events took place. Tell me, how familiar are you with the layout of the old city?"

"I'm intimately acquainted with the design of the city," Clavis assured him, "having been there as a lad. Also, I visited there not two years ago on me own little expedition. Didn't make it past the third level, afore I ran into some difficulties, but ya won't find anyone more qualified to guide ya through the depths of ol' Ferrumgaard than I." Aiden gave him a doubtful look.

"Wait a moment, you said you were there as a 'lad'? That was a century ago!"

"That surprises you?" Clavis chuckled and wiped the foam from his beard. "I'm a hundred and twenty three years old, I'll have you know! Us clansmen are long lived compared to you longshanks."

"Oh you're dwarven," Aiden exclaimed, suddenly making the connection. He glanced down at Clavis's feet, and noticed they were much higher off the ground than his own, the young man just hadn't noticed it while they were sitting on bar stools. "Sorry about that sir, I haven't met one of your kind before. I was expecting something... shorter."

"This must be a real thrill for you then," Clavis joked, drawing a short laugh from Aiden.

"So you mentioned running into some difficulty," the young adventurer pressed, keeping the conversation on topic. "What exactly does that mean?"

"Well, ya know, an ancient underground city and all. Not exactly in the best condition. Ran into a few collapsed sections that slowed down the expedition. We were just about done cutting through the rock, when we ran out of supplies, so had to turn back. It won't be a problem lad, if that's what yer thinking. So long as we've got enough provisions, that rockfall won't be an issue this time."

"Interesting," Aiden replied thoughtfully. "If I might ask, what's your interest in the old city?"

"I'm looking for a family heirloom that was lost during the fall," he explained. "Much was left behind on that fateful day over a century ago, most of it in the lower sections of the city. It'd be good to bring it back and return it to Stonegaard, where it should be." Aiden recognised the name as the city carved into a mountain where the dwarven people currently resided, nearly a week's travel to the east.

"I think our goals might be compatible," he finally replied after giving it some thought. "I'll have to talk it over with my companions, who may or may not wish to join in."

"Oh ye've got some friends? That's even better. I thought it was just gonna be you and me, lad."

"Well, as I said, I haven't asked them yet so I'll have to get back to you a bit later," Aiden reiterated. "Are you in a rush to set out?"

"Well, I'd like to get movin' in the next few days," Clavis replied, tugging his beard thoughtfully. "But truth be told, I haven't been able to find anyone else interested in my little underground expedition besides yerself, so I'm thinkin' I'll be available for the next month, if nobody else comes along. Still, I'd like an answer in the next few days if ya could lad, just out o' politeness."

"I am nothing if not polite," Aiden assured him. "I'll probably get back to you by tomorrow if all goes well, as I have a few things to attend to. Also, I can be very lazy." Clavis roared with laughter.

“Yer all right longshanks, I'll be here, as I have been for the past week, when yer ready to talk some more.”

“Wait, were you here through last night's brawl?” Aiden asked as he was about to leave.

“Of course,” Clavis replied, quaffing his drink. “I would'na miss a good brawl.”

“How is it you're not injured in any way? Everyone else here looks like they've been through a war.”

“A good bar fight takes practice lad, and I've had a few extra decades to learn a trick or two,” Clavis explained with a wink. “Not that I go around starting fights mind you, I just tend to be the one that finishes 'em.”

“Did you finish this one?”

“Surely did,” the dwarf assured him. “Laid out some oversized drunkard in camouflage leathers who started questioning the lineage of some of these rowdy seafaring folk. Why?”

“Oh, no reason,” Aiden replied, struggling to keep a straight face.

Chapter Ten

Aiden was heading towards the front door of the Seaspray Inn when Nellise and Pacian appeared, walking down the stairs. Her expression was cool as she spoke with the blond rogue, though Aiden couldn't tell what they were talking about. He raised a hand to catch their attention.

“Good morning, I'm going to head over to speak with the Mayor briefly. You two get some breakfast and I'll meet up with you later. I have something I want to talk to you about.” Nellise scrutinised the young man carefully before replying.

“Not before you clean yourself up you're not,” she declared. “Go. Bathe. Now. You too Pacian, you're worse than he is.”

“But I was going to get something to eat first!”

“Why is it so hard to make men take a bath?” Nellise asked, looking up at the ceiling. “Pace, you're absolutely filthy. You're going to make yourself sick if you eat any food you touch with those hands. Go and clean yourself up, you can eat later.” Pacian looked like he was about to protest, but the charming young lady gently laid a hand on his shoulder, and his resistance faltered.

“Okay, but only a quick bath. I've got money to spend.” He cheerfully trotted down the stairs and headed out the door. Aiden followed, casting a glance at a smiling Nellise before the door closed behind him.

“I hate baths,” Pacian confided to Aiden for the hundredth time since they'd known each other, as they walked across the street to the bathhouse.

“Casual bathing, sure, but let's face it, we're way overdue. You can only put it off for so long before you start turning into a walking natural disaster.” Pacian chuckled, and didn't contest the point.

After his bath, Aiden did feel a lot better, as if he'd washed away much of the turmoil he had experienced over the past week. Pacian had finished up much quicker than he did, leaving early to shop around for anything shiny that caught his eye. The novice warrior decided to follow Nellise's advice and buy some new clothes to spruce up his appearance. Fifty copper jacks later, and he had himself some sturdy new boots, a new longcoat and

new trousers. With his hair brushed, Aiden thought he looked good enough to speak with royalty, should the occasion warrant it.

On his way toward the Mayor's office, he came across Nellise and Sayana strolling along the cobblestone road, the wild girl looking much more relaxed in her urban surroundings.

"Good morning ladies," Aiden greeted them with a rakish grin and a quick bow. "I trust my attire meets your stringent requirements?" Nellise smiled and nodded.

"You are looking quite splendid, if I may say so Aiden," she offered. "I suppose we should head over and speak with the Mayor, though I suspect it won't be a very productive meeting."

"Possibly, but we should try anyway. He can't be any worse to deal with than Olaf, right?" Nellise shrugged ambiguously.

"We can only hope. Come on then, I was going to show Sayana a little more of the town anyway." Aiden fell into step with the two young women as they headed in what he assumed was the direction of the mayoral offices.

Nellise led them toward a huge and elegant building in the crowded market area of the town. It looked like an old mansion that had been converted into an office for the most prominent member of the community. It dominated the town square, and was easily the most expensive building Aiden had ever seen. There were signs of recent work on the house, and it positively gleamed in a town full of plain, grimy accommodation.

"I guess someone has money to throw around," Aiden observed dryly, a little disgusted at the garish display of riches, almost as if the owner was flouting it to the world.

"Were you expecting a nobleman to be modest with his wealth?" Nellise asked of him. "He is no better or worse than the rest, though I find all dealings with such men to be distasteful." The elegant double doors at the entrance were opened inwards, with two burly yet finely attired guards standing just inside.

The background noise of the bustling town made it difficult to hear inside, but as the three of them entered the offices, the sharp sounds of an argument could be heard ahead. A long hallway lined with paintings and plush chairs opened into what appeared to be a large room with lavish double doors. One of them was open, allowing people out in the hallway to hear what was going on within. Judging by what was being said, the Mayor probably wasn't aware that he could be overheard.

There were several people in the hallway awaiting their time to speak with the head of the town, some of them ranking members of the town guard who appeared to be unshaven and tired. Aiden was surprised to also see Colt sitting in one of the chairs as well, right up next to the doorway. Feeling self-conscious, Aiden quickly led his two companions past other waiting people before they could protest.

The big ranger was slumped in his comfortable chair, still looking seedy from last night's brawl. He glanced up briefly as Aiden stopped in front of him, and then continued looking down at the floor, shielding his eyes with the raised hood on his cloak.

"You tryin' to cut line?" he said, voice grating. Aiden was sure he didn't intend to sound mean and dangerous, the words were simply coming out that way.

"That depends on what you're doing here," he replied. "Truth be told, I was rather expecting you to be asleep right now."

"I got sleep last night," Colt corrected him.

"On the floor of the common room?"

"You'd be how surprised how comfortable a pile of fat drunks can be. And to answer your question, I'm here to speak with his Mayorship, probably same as you're doing."

"Looking like that?" Nellise asked, amused and shocked at the same time.

"I'm a ranger, we're expected to be covered in muck."

"I was referring to your bruised and bloodied face actually." Colt shrugged.

"I figure it'll help back up my claim that it's getting rough out there. Assuming he doesn't faint at the sight of blood, of course."

"Well, we're coming in with you then. We're with him," Aiden added for the benefit of a scowling farmer sitting next in line from the ranger. There were no spare seats for them to sit on, so they stood in the middle of the hallway and awaited their turn. The argument in the office adjacent to them showed no signs of ending anytime soon.

"That voice sounds familiar," Colt said, scratching his unshaved chin. "Hard to tell with the echoing though." They stood around for another minute before Colt heaved himself out of his chair.

"Bugger this," he grunted and stepped into the Mayor's office. Shrugging, Aiden followed along cautiously, wondering when the guards were going to be called. An officious little man was standing close to the door, and he quickly moved to block their entrance.

"You must wait your turn, sir!" he complained. "The Mayor is a terribly busy man, and it would be unseemly of you to barge in out of turn. I demand you withdraw at once." Colt didn't reply, instead focusing his attention on the two men arguing behind the little man. One of them was large, balding, and elegantly dressed with a gold-embroidered blue longcoat, which had a large collar jutting upwards. The other man was dressed in a similar fashion to Colt, in camouflage leathers.

"Duncan, is that you?" Colt asked of him. The leather-clad man stopped talking and turned to see who had addressed him.

"What the hell do you want?" he snapped. "Oh, Colt? Sorry, didn't mean to take your head off there. How've you been?"

"Can't complain. What's going on here?"

"You two know each other?" Sayana chimed in.

"Yeah, Duncan's a ranger like me," Colt answered her blandly, "in case you couldn't figure that out from the uniform." Sayana didn't seem too impressed with his attitude.

"And you wonder why I don't talk much," she commented dryly.

"I'm sorry sir," the official apologised to the Mayor. "They just barged in, I couldn't stop them. Shall I call the guards?" The Mayor gave them all an irritated look.

"No, I *enjoy* hoards of unwashed peasantry tramping through my office. The four of you had better offer up a good reason for this intrusion."

"My apologies, your honour," Nellise spoke just as Colt was opening his mouth.

"This is an important matter regarding security on the highway to the south." The Mayor looked at her for a few moments, and then nodded.

"You may speak, madam, if only to give me a brief respite from this ill-tempered woodsman." The small official bowed quickly.

"Mister Colt and er... party, the Mayor will see you now," he declared lamely. He struck Aiden as the sort of person who took his unremarkable job very seriously.

“Mister Colt?” Nellise remarked quietly. “I thought ‘Colt’ was your first name.” The big ranger gave her a sour look.

“What kind of a first name is ‘Colt’?”

“That’s what I said to myself when I first met you,” she responded lightly.

“I do apologise if I am interrupting your conversation but will you *kindly get to the point*,” the Mayor practically shouted.

“Why don’t you two catch me up first,” Colt replied. “Our thing can wait.” The large Mayor blinked in disbelief, giving Duncan the opportunity to take over the conversation.

“As I was explaining to his honour, there’s a group of us down in the Calespur ranges. When I say ‘group’, I mean it literally. We’re the finest archers in the King’s army, so naturally he took most of us with him on his journey west. There just aren’t enough of us left to perform our peacetime duty – protecting the King’s hunting reserve from poachers.”

“So what exactly is the problem,” Aiden prompted, having already made an educated guess as to what was going on.

“The problem, as you put it, is that we’ve got some rich bastard from the city who thought that he’d take a bunch of his friends to go on a hunting expedition into protected crown lands, and Mayor Buchanan won’t send any reinforcements down to help us.”

“Bureaucrats,” Colt growled. “Don’t get me started on bureaucrats. We can lend a hand, I reckon. Seems we’ve got no end of trouble in this area at the moment.”

“Tremendous, it’s nice to see a civic-minded individual step forward, even if you do appear as if you’ve been run over by a wagon carrying horse manure,” the Mayor remarked caustically.

“Thanks?” Colt replied, frowning. Duncan stepped closer and shook the ranger’s hand.

“It’s not exactly what I wanted, but I’ll take what I can get. I’m not sure how you’re going to be received at the outpost mate, but for what it’s worth, I thought the commander was wrong to expel you. God knows we need as many good men and women as we can get right now.”

“If Armin is that short-handed, I doubt he’ll complain if I show up.”

“I hope you’re right. Look, I’m heading back down right away, but you look like you could use a day to get yourself back in shape. I’ll meet you at the outpost.”

“No worries, take care.” Duncan moved past them and strode down the hallway to the exit.

“Unbearable man,” Buchanan muttered, mopping his shining forehead with a handkerchief. “Now, was that all you people had to say, or do other matters beg my indulgence?” Considering what he had just witnessed, Aiden was not inclined to believe the Mayor would actually send any soldiers south, regardless of the situation.

“A small matter, your honour,” Aiden began, his tone carefully deferential. “Mayor Olaf of Bracksford requests a few additional soldiers for his garrison. There is an imminent threat of Akoran raiders moving up from the south, and he feels they do not have the-”

“No, he cannot have any troops,” Buchanan interrupted impatiently. Then he leaned over and shouted down the corridor. “Neither can any of you! I can spare no further men-at-arms for outlying villages, so you *parasites* can scuttle back to where you came from!”

A collective groan went up from more than half of the assembled men and women, as they tiredly rose from their seats and shuffled out of the door. Nellise wasn't impressed.

"That was rather cruel don't you think? Those people came here expecting help from you, sir!"

Buchanan straightened his expensive coat and stood tall. "You may think of me as you wish madam, but my first duty is to this town and the people within her walls. Better that a few suffer, so the greater number remain safe. Olaf will have to make do with what he has. If he feels the quantity of his garrison is inadequate, he can easily draft local civilians into the militia to augment his defences. Now, there is nothing further I can do for you, so if you are quite finished..." He gestured expansively toward the exit. Aiden looked to Nellise for anything she might want to add, but she responded with an exasperated shrug.

"No, I think we're done here," Aiden said evenly, turning and walking out the doors. The others followed closely behind, remaining silent until they were some distance from the mayoral building.

"Arrogant ass," Colt spat. "No band of outlaws or Akoran raiders is going to attack a town the size of Culdery. He could easily have sent a dozen men south."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," Nellise countered. "He is the one responsible if anything goes wrong, so if he sent reinforcements elsewhere and Culdery did come under attack, the Mayor is the one who will be blamed."

"The same holds true if he doesn't send soldiers to help Bracksford and they *do* come under attack," Aiden added. "The poor bastard probably doesn't know what to do, no matter what happens, he's going to get blamed."

"That would probably explain his disposition," Nellise mused. "Tell me Sayana, you are of the Akoran people are you not? Would they really attack an entire town?" The wild girl didn't answer right away, but Aiden couldn't tell if she was thinking or merely uncomfortable with the question.

"I can't really answer that accurately," she replied eventually. "But I can tell you there are many cruel men amongst the population who would eagerly start a war in the name of glory and plunder. So yes, I believe they are a grave threat."

"Wonderful," Aiden grumbled. "As if we didn't have enough to deal with at the moment. Oh, and thanks for volunteering us for that thing down in the Calespur ranges, Colt. You couldn't have asked first?"

"I figured you were all such damn heroes that you'd jump at the chance to help out with a real problem," Colt replied. "But if you're not up for it, I'll go it alone. Damn this sun is bright, not used to such clear skies," he added, pulling his hood up to cover his eyes.

"I think it's probably more the hangover, than the sun," Nellise chided. "I had considered remaining here in Culdery and returning to my clerical duties, but I suppose I am available to assist in such an endeavour. Illegal poaching will harm our food stocks in the long term. I'll just need to confer with the Archioness at the church to make sure she does not require my services in town."

"Fair enough," Aiden said, "but I have something else I want to talk to you all about as soon as we get back to the inn. I have a job that needs doing, and I'd really like your help, if you're willing."

"What is it?" Sayana asked.

“It's a long story, I'll tell you about it over lunch.”

“As you wish,” Nellise agreed. “Can we stop by the church first? It's not too far out of our way. We can probably pick up a few supplies while we're there.”

“Certainly, lead the way,” Aiden replied, gesturing for her to do just that.

The small group moved along the cobblestone streets, passing merchants hawking their wares and the local citizenry that moved from place to place conducting their daily affairs. The smell of the sea air was sharp, and laden with the scent of seaweed being washed ashore, and the rare sunny day brightened their spirits. It was still quite cold, in spite of the cloud-free sky, but it was nevertheless a welcome respite from the unrelenting rain in the south. Without warning, Pacian materialised from the crowd just to Aiden's right, giving him quite a start.

“Hey, give me a little notice before you just appear like that would you?” he complained, drawing a roguish grin from the blond man.

“Where's the fun in that? I have to stay in practice you know.” Aiden shook his head, but then noticed that Pacian had cleaned himself up a good deal. In fact, he looked extremely well groomed – his hair had been trimmed and brushed, his skin was completely clean, and he'd even shaved his scraggly beard down to a stylish, if sparse, goatee. Even his camouflaged leather armour had been cleaned and polished.

“What's with the neatness? You look like you're going to ask the Princess of Fairloch out for dinner.” Pacian's eyes gleamed, and his eyes darted around to make sure the others in their group weren't listening. As far as Aiden could tell, they hadn't even noticed the rogue's reappearance, since the two of them were walking at the back of the group.

“I think Nel has a thing for me,” Pacian confided. “She seems interested, so I thought I'd put on a bit of a show. She suggested I clean myself up, so I wanted to knock her socks off.” Aiden concealed a grin. He wasn't sure who was playing whom at the moment, but Nellise might not have made her 'subtle arts' clear enough to the oblivious young rogue.

“Great, I'm sure she'll be impressed. But try and be subtle, you know? Don't just come right out with it.”

“Oh of course not,” Pacian winked. “I know how to ply the ladies Aiden, trust me, I'll be so subtle she won't even know what's happening.” Aiden gave him a wry look as the impulsive young man strode forward to show off his appearance to the ladies. He couldn't hear from where he was, but she did seem both surprised and appreciative of his efforts.

Presently, they arrived at the church of Culdeny, a squat, stone-walled structure that featured the symbol of a sword, point down, with a halo around the hilt, displayed above the front doors - the symbol of the Church of Aielund. Some beautifully crafted, stained-glass windows added colour to the almost universally grey stone of buildings in Culdeny, and a small group of people were just leaving, as Aiden and the others stepped inside.

The interior of the church was lined with stone, with only very small windows at irregular intervals allowing the natural light in. Torches placed in sconces along the walls provided additional illumination, giving the nave the feeling of perpetual twilight. It was far more elaborate than the small chapel Aiden had seen in his home town, but still lacked the feeling of grandeur one would associate with a place of worship. He made his thoughts known to their resident expert on churches.

“Oh, this is a very simple structure,” Nellise replied, almost gushing at Aiden's interest in the church. “It was converted from a stable nearly a century ago to accommodate the growing needs of the community. The cathedral at Fairloch is far more impressive. I hope you have a chance to see it some day, it really is quite marvellous.”

“Uh, yes I'll have to do that sometime,” Aiden replied, reluctant to mention to her that he wasn't all *that* interested in architecture. She didn't seem to pick up on that, and continued relating trivia about the church to the rest of them for the next few minutes. By the time she was done, Aiden knew everything he never wanted to know about Church of Aielund property development.

Eventually, an older woman of small stature and bright grey eyes caught her attention, and she excused herself from the group. The two priestesses walked off through a doorway at the rear of the room, and Aiden sat back on one of the pews to rest up a little. Colt pulled his hood low over his eyes and appeared to doze off, while Pacian casually walked around the church examining the architecture.

It was nearly half an hour later that Sayana, gazing out of the window, noticed something unusual.

“Is that supposed to be happening?” she remarked, standing on the tips of her toes to see properly. Curious, Aiden wandered over to the window and noticed what she was referring to. There was a large cemetery to the left that ran all the way to the wall of the town, roughly fifty yards away. The ground directly between the church and the wall consisted mostly of tall grass, but appeared as if it had been deeply gouged somehow, and even as he looked the soil fell away in clumps, vanishing into the increasingly large hole beneath.

“That can't be right,” Aiden muttered in disbelief as he saw the distant wall shudder and tilt as the ground beneath it gave way. The progress of the subsidence had been slow and steady, when it suddenly gave way altogether and a great jet of soil shot upwards through the rift. A dull rumble could be felt through the floor, a true indication of the scale of the collapse.

“The bloody ground is collapsing?” Pacian said incredulously. Aiden had no answer for him, having never seen the like before. He found it all quite fascinating until he saw somebody's hand poking up through the large scar that ran along the ground.

“Good God there's someone in there,” Aiden breathed and immediately ran for the door. He rushed around the corner of the church itself and didn't stop until he was at the lip of the rift, where he skidded to a halt. Scanning around carefully, he finally located the hand that emerged macabrely from the earth, and satisfied that the collapse had finished, carefully made his way down the side of the exposed earth towards it.

By the time he was within reach of the hand, his companions had caught up with him and looked on in consternation. When Aiden grasped onto the hand, he noticed that fresh blood was running down one side of it. He heaved mightily on the arm, expecting to pull out the poor soul who had fallen in the collapse, but instead found himself holding onto a severed arm, the image of which had him reeling in shock.

“I think it's too late for that one,” Pacian said darkly. “What was he even doing around here anyway?”

“He wasn't here,” Sayana protested. “I was looking outside for a long time and didn't see anyone walking around.”

“It might be a freshly buried body from the cemetery,” Colt suggested, causing Aiden to drop the arm in revulsion.

“No, it can’t be,” he responded after a moment’s thought. “The hand was warm, and the blood was still fresh.” He looked back up at the others as the answer came to him. “I think he was already underground.”

“One way to find out,” Colt muttered, sliding down the incline to land next to Aiden. Using his hands, he began to dig away at the loose soil, attempting to uncover what lay beneath. Aiden and the others joined in, until a vast amount of dirt was being shoveled away.

The digging stopped when they ran into a freshly-cut beam of wood, a pick-axe, and yet another body amongst the detritus. By now, a small crowd of locals had gathered above them, peering down at the odd scene curiously.

“Is this a collapsed mine?” Aiden asked aloud, unsure what to make of the odd discovery.

“In the middle of a town? Not likely,” Colt snorted. “I can think of only one reason they’d be here. They’re called Sappers, men trained to undermine the walls of a town in order to bring them down, or bypass them completely. I’ve no idea what they’re doing here, but I’d wager a gold sovereign that’s what these poor bastards are.”

“Who would want to break into Culdeny like this,” Aiden mused quietly, while Pacian took a more personal approach. Half-buried in soil, the blond rogue scoured the bodies, searching their pockets and meager possessions for any sign of who or what they were. After a minute or so, he retrieved a folded sheaf of paper from one of the bodies and pocketed it, along with a few minor coins.

“Hey, you lot down there!” called a guardsman from above. “Get away from that, it’s a bloody crime scene, don’t you know!”

“Sorry, sir, but we were trying to help,” Aiden called back, signaling to the others that their time here was done. Climbing out of the hold proved to be more challenging than entering it, but with some help from above the four of them were soon standing upon solid ground once more.

Nearly fifty people were standing around nearby, talking amongst themselves as several members of the local guard regiment kept them at bay. The guard who had ordered them out of the hole asked a series of questions regarding their involvement, but after a few minutes allowed them to leave. During the questioning, Aiden noticed that Pace didn’t mention the note he’d found, and once they were clear of the crowds, he pressed the blond rogue on this point.

“What was he going to do with it, file it away or something?” Pacian protested. “Bugger that; I want to know what was so important that sapper took it to his grave.” He led them to the doorway of the church and, making sure they weren’t being watched, produced the note and carefully unfolded it. There was more dirt than words on the page, which consisted of little more than a sentence. But the lettering was crisp and Aiden guessed that whoever wrote it was likely an educated person.

“What does it say?” Sayana asked.

“Find a way into Culdeny. I don’t care how you do it, but my forces must have access by the end of the month,” Aiden read aloud as he peered over Pacian’s shoulder. “Signed, ‘R.B.’”

“Thought so,” Colt grunted in triumph. “Someone with the initials ‘R.B.’ ordered those men to dig their way in, for what, I can’t say. But that’s practically an act of war.” As they pondered the importance of the document Pacian had recovered, Nellise and the matronly priestess appeared at the entrance.

“What on earth just happened?” Nel exclaimed. Aiden let her know what they’d discovered, and then showed her the note.

“You should take this to the Sergeant of the Guard immediately,” she advised breathlessly. “I don’t know what threats are facing my beloved Culdery, but we must thank God that you discovered this when you did.”

“I agree, this is a matter for the town guards to deal with,” Aiden assured her. “Are you finished with your church matters?”

“We were just about to discuss that when I noticed the commotion outside,” Nellise answered. “I was wondering if you still required my services here, Archioness. I am ready to return to the church and resume my former duties, if you so desire.”

“I had planned for you to do just that prior to your discovery of that tunnel, Nellise,” the Archioness explained with a smooth voice, “But from what you’ve described, you have been an invaluable aid to your companions, and I believe you should remain with them a while longer. While they talk with the guard sergeant, however, I would ask that you relate you aid me with a few minor tasks for a couple of hours.”

“Certainly, Mother,” Nellise replied, then turned to Aiden. “Please talk with the Sergeant about our recent discovery; I’ll catch up with the rest of you at the inn this evening.”

“Alright, we’ll leave you two to catch up. It was nice meeting you, Archioness,” Aiden replied, giving her a polite bow. The priestess quickly scrutinized the men with a curious expression as the two ladies of the cloth disappeared inside once more.

“We should get right on this,” Colt advised. “There’s no guarantee that all of those sappers were killed in the collapse. All it would take is for one of those bastards to get away and tell whoever that ‘R.B.’ person is what happened and we might never find out who was behind this.”

“We should probably hurry then,” Aiden agreed readily.

It wasn’t difficult locating the guardhouse – even hungover and injured, Colt was able to point them in the right direction. The building was basically a small fort inside the town, near the front gate. Heavy stone walls two storeys high gave it a bulky, squat appearance that would have been more intimidating if the rail on the top floor wasn’t being used to air out ladies’ undergarments.

“Interesting decoration,” Pacian quipped. “Maybe there’s a brothel upstairs?”

“What’s a brothel?” Sayana asked, puzzled. Aiden and Pacian exchanged a hesitant glance.

“You tell her,” they both said at once. Colt laughed, the first time Aiden could recall him doing so.

“I’ll tell you some other time,” Aiden said to Sayana, who glared at Colt, probably assuming she was the butt of some joke. Putting that aside, Aiden opened the heavy wooden door before him and stepped inside.

Before him was a small room with a stairwell against the far wall and a doorway on the left, presumably leading to the rest of the barracks. This seemed to be some sort of office, judging by the large wooden desk covered in paperwork in the middle of the

room. At the desk sat a woman, her dark hair tied back in a ponytail and her head bowed down over the desk, busily writing on some papers with a quill.

Aiden walked forward and stood in front of the desk, making sure his boots made enough noise on the wooden floor to attract her attention. She had a swarthy skin, large, brown eyes, and wore a guard's uniform.

"Is there something I can do for you?" she asked, looking up to see who had entered.

"I was wondering if I could speak with whoever is in charge here," Aiden replied.

"Concerning...?"

"An important matter of town security," Aiden added, somewhat impatiently.

"I'm afraid the Captain is two hundred miles away fighting for his country," she explained delicately. "But you can tell me your little problem and I'll let him know when he gets back." Aiden blinked, caught off guard by the unexpected answer and feeling stupid as a result.

"I'm sorry, I guess I should have known he'd be away fighting in the war."

"We can't all be brilliant," she replied tiredly. "I'm Sergeant Ariel, temporary in command of the Kingdom Guard of Culdeny."

"Aiden Wainwright and associates," the young man replied, ignoring an indignant look from Pacian. "We just recovered a document from a group of deceased men digging their way under your walls." Ariel gave him a sharp look, perhaps not believing him, then stood up and stared some more.

"One of my men just told me about the collapse, but I didn't hear anything about bodies turning up. Tell me everything, right now," she ordered. Aiden proceeded to do so, ably supported by Pacian and the occasional remark from Colt as they filled in details he overlooked. When they were done, Ariel slumped back down in her chair again.

"Is there anything else?"

"Only this," Aiden added, handing her the note he had taken from what he assumed was their leader. The Sergeant took the offered paper and read it several times, possibly trying to glean more information from the brief message than was actually there. After a minute, Ariel leaned back in her chair with a calculating expression on her face.

Now that he had a better look at her, Aiden could see she was very fit, and clearly not a secretary or desk Sergeant as he had briefly thought earlier. This woman was trained to fight, which wasn't exactly common these days. Much like the rest of the country, the town was obviously hard-pressed to find enough people to fill important posts during this time of war. The young man noticed a wedding band on one of her fingers.

"I wonder who this 'R.B.' is," she mused.

"We've been thinking the same thing ourselves," Pacian said, surreptitiously examining the Sergeant with an expert eye. "What's your take on it, Sarge?"

"Well, someone wants a tunnel large enough for 'forces' to move through, and that suggests an army. The only force in the region with anywhere near the numbers required to take a town of this size are the Steel Tigers, a mercenary company."

"There's a company of mercs near Culdeny?" Colt asked ominously. "What idiot hired 'em?"

"Probably one of the local merchants," Ariel suggested, "they've been concerned about bandit raids on their caravans along the mountains between here and Fairloch. I

guess they didn't care about the road south though. I wonder if 'R.B.' could be Ronald Bartlett?"

"Who's that?" Aiden inquired.

"A nobleman who operates the North Shore Trading Company out of Culdery, along with a few other wealthy individuals," she explained. "They have a lot of financial backing, and could probably afford a mercenary company."

"Sounds like you should pay him a visit and ask him a few pointed questions," Pacian suggested. Ariel shook her head and shifted in her chair.

"Easier said than done I'm afraid, he's quite elusive. Doesn't mingle with the commoners a lot, as you'd expect. But he does frequent a local bar called the Gentlemen's club, a *very* exclusive gathering of movers and shakers."

"Ok, so you *do* know where to find him," Colt said impatiently. "Go do your job."

"I would very much like to do that, but they don't tolerate women in their *gentlemen's* club," she replied evenly. "In fact, only ten people in town are wealthy and powerful enough to qualify for entry."

"How can they refuse entry to a commander of the guard?" Aiden asked in disbelief.

"It's not so much that they'd refuse entry," Ariel explained, "it's that they would refuse co-operation, because I'm a woman and also merely a *temporary* commander. And they've enough power and influence to remove me from office, if it came to it. I'm sorry to say this, but there's not much I can do with the evidence you've given me. This is only a hunch we're going on here, and it's going to take more than a scrawled note to figure out who's behind the attack."

"Do you think the Mayor would be rich and powerful enough to be a member of this club you mentioned?" Aiden asked.

"Without a doubt," Ariel concurred. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that if he understands the gravity of the situation, we're going to be the newest members of the Gentlemen's club, even if only for a few hours."

"I like the way you think, Mister Wainwright," Ariel said, grinning slyly. "If you manage to get some information of merit, bring it to me, and I'll figure out the best option to make use of it. In the meantime, I'm going to investigate this collapsed tunnel you found, and see if we can find out more."

"I think I'll sit this one out," Sayana said quietly. "I should go and eat anyway."

"No, I want you with us," Aiden disagreed. "I have an idea." Sayana frowned and gave Aiden a strange look, but she nodded anyway.

"You want me along too?" Colt asked. "You probably know I'm not going to be any good talkin' with nobles." Aiden considered this for a moment.

"I guess it wouldn't hurt to have you looming in the background," he finally decided. "Just don't say anything."

"I can loom with the best of them," Colt grunted.

"Alright, let's go pay the Mayor another visit," Aiden said. "We'll get in touch with you later, Sergeant, and thanks for your help."

"That's what I'm here for," Ariel replied, then noticed Pacian scrutinising her.

"What are you looking at me like that for?"

"I'm just wondering," he replied smoothly, "if you are the owner of all that underwear hanging off the top rail upstairs? And if so, does that chain mail suit chafe without it?"

“Why don't you ask my husband, the *Captain of the Kingdom Guard*, when he gets back from fighting a war,” Ariel grated, narrowing her sight on the blond rogue. “I'm sure he'll be happy to answer any questions you might have regarding my unmentionables.”

“No thanks,” Pacian laughed. “I like my teeth right where they are.”

* * *

They headed back over to the Mayoral office to find the queue to see the man had reformed during their eventful day, and Aiden was in no mood to wait in line. An altogether different group of local residents glared indignantly as the young adventurer led his companions through to the inner door of the office once again, and knocked loudly.

“You again,” Mayor Buchanan sighed. “What on earth could you possibly want from me now?” Aiden decided on a diplomatic approach, despite his impatience.

“I understand you are a member of the Gentlemen's Club?”

“Indeed I am. It is a place I go to unwind from the hassles of my office, such as yourselves. What business is it of yours?”

“I have need to speak with Ronald Bartlett, co-owner of the North Shore Trading Company, and I have been informed I will not be permitted into the club.”

“Quite so,” Buchanan replied haughtily. “Try not to take offence, as the club exists primarily to keep people like *you*, away from people like *us*.” Aiden stared at the overweight man blandly for a few moments before he could compose his next thoughts in the form of a question, and not a fist to the arrogant man's face.

“We've just come from the barracks, where I spoke with Sergeant Ariel. An incident occurred this morning concerning the security of the town, and she wants Ronald Bartlett to answer some questions. Being the discreet and thoughtful individual she is, the Sergeant thought it would be better if the questions came from a man. So, if you could see your way clear to allow us entry for a few minutes, we could get this whole matter resolved promptly.”

“You can't expect me to...” Buchanan stammered, looking at the rough looking group with incredulous eyes. “I mean, my reputation would be ruined if the lot of you were to show up in the Club!” Sensing Aiden's failure at diplomacy, Pacian stepped forward.

“It's in your best interest to help us out here,” he said, keeping his voice low and casting his gaze around, as if to check for who might be listening. “Some information we recently received implicates you and the Mayor of Bracksford in some, shall we say, *highly illegal* activities with the North Shore Trading Company. Does the name ‘Merin Teas’ ring a bell? Help us out here, and that information will almost certainly be tragically lost somehow. Otherwise, well, these things have a way of getting out, if you know what I mean.”

“You wouldn't,” Buchanan said under his breath, turning bright red and breaking out in a sweat. “I have a reputation to protect in this town!”

“What goes around, comes around,” Colt growled, playing along. “You should be thankful we haven't turned your fat arse in to the authorities already.” Buchanan glanced over at his assistant, whose head was practically buried in a pile of papers on the desk, working feverishly so that he didn't have to face his boss.

“As it happens, I would be more than willing to assist your efforts in assisting my extremely competent woman-I mean *Sergeant* of the guard,” Buchanan relented. “Here, take this key,” he added, fishing a small silver chain out of his waistcoat and handing it to Aiden. “That will allow you access to the Club. I expect that returned promptly, sir!”

“Your dedication to the safety of this town has been noted, Mayor,” Aiden replied dryly, taking the key and placing it in the pocket of his new longcoat. “I’ll have this back to you within the hour if all goes well. Good day to you sir.”

Buchanan nodded and mopped his forehead with a handkerchief, as Aiden led the others back out through the hallway again, ignoring all the black looks that the people within cast towards them.

“I don’t recall seeing Buchanan’s name on that document we took from Merin,” Aiden asked Pacian when they were safely outside of the echoing hallway. “How did you know the Mayor was in on it?”

“I didn’t,” Pacian shrugged, trying to keep his face free of a smug smile that threatened to take it over. “It was a gamble, but it paid off better than I could have hoped. I didn’t even have to work for that result, the man just burst out in a nervous sweat straight away. If you ask me, I reckon their whole shady deal has gone belly-up, and *that’s* what has him so worried.”

“You just got lucky,” Colt grunted.

“What was the worst thing that could happen?” Pacian asked the big ranger. “He’d kick us out of his office maybe?”

“It might have been grounds to have us locked up,” Aiden mused. “Making an accusation like that, straight to the face of a powerful man like Buchanan rarely ends well. Colt’s right, you just got lucky.”

“Told ya,” Colt growled. Pacian merely shrugged.

“Our luck has been pretty good lately, so I figured we’d get away with it. Any complaints?” Nobody answered.

“I don’t understand any of this,” Sayana muttered, sounding lost.

“Don’t worry, sweetness,” Pacian consoled her. “The men have things under control, you just stand there and look pretty.” Sayana gave him a solid punch to his left arm without even turning to look, drawing a pained look from the blond rogue. Aiden grinned, seeing yet again a demonstration of how dangerous speaking before one thinks can be.

Chapter Eleven

Aiden and the others stopped by the inn for a bite to eat, and a chance to catch their breath before heading over to the Gentlemen’s Club to continue their investigation. As he finished off his bowl of hearty mutton stew, Aiden looked around the common room of the Seaspray Inn, idly wondering if Clavis was present.

The dwarf must have been taking care of his business elsewhere though, for there was no sign of his bulky form. Perhaps tonight, he would gather everyone together and discuss whether or not they would accompany him on what was sure to be a dangerous journey, for what amounted to his own personal gain. Nellise had yet to make an appearance over the course of their meal, so Aiden assumed she decided to have lunch with the other church-folk.

Their appetites satiated at last, the four of them left the Inn and headed in the direction of the Gentleman's Club, apparently situated in the north-east of the town in one of the larger houses, above the North Shore Trading Company's offices. The close proximity of the two was not lost on the young man, though he wasn't sure what it could mean. Ronald Bartlett was apparently the richest man in town, and it wasn't much of a stretch to assume he set up the club for his rich friends to... compliment each other on being rich, perhaps?

It was only a ten minute stroll through the frigid seaside air to the location, a very elegant manor house with a well-tended garden and an imposing metal fence. Despite this, the gates were open, and a sign declared this the offices of the North Shore Trading Company, open for business. Three expensively dressed men were just leaving the house, talking amongst themselves as they walked.

Although far from appearing as refined and 'moneyed' as those gentlemen, Aiden was without doubt the most presentable member of their group. Pacian, although neatly groomed, still wore the camouflage leathers of the rangers, and the twin daggers on his hips were not to be found on civilised men of high society.

Colt hardly cared about his appearance, as usual, his leathers showing wear and tear from the recent fighting, and the big ranger definitely had something against bathing in winter. Aiden would have to remind him to stay at the back of the group during any talks that went on inside, for if he came too close his... *unique aroma* would work against them.

Sayana tagged along as was now her custom, the culture shock of going from subsistence living on a mountainside, to the bustle of big-town life forcing her to learn as fast as she could. It would be months before she was truly at home in a place like this, but Aiden thought she was at least managing to stay out of trouble. She had refrained from bringing her axe along, though it had taken some effort to convince her that it would be unnecessary.

"Well, let's head inside and see what we can learn shall we?" Aiden said, looking up at the building before them.

"About that," Pacian voiced hesitantly. "I'm wondering how you're going to go about this."

"I was going to head in and ask Mister Bartlett a few questions about any deals he's done with any mercenary companies lately," Aiden explained slowly.

"You mean... be honest?"

"Mostly, yes," Aiden replied dubiously. "I have a little diversion in mind though. What are you getting at?"

"If I may be so bold as to make a suggestion?" Pacian asked delicately. "Lie. A lot. If this bloke is indeed involved somehow, then he's not going to be very forthcoming with information. Confronting him directly isn't going to get us the answers we need, so yeah... lie."

"I wasn't exactly planning to stride in there and point my finger at the man, accusing him of treason," Aiden replied with a raised eyebrow. "But I'll take your advice into consideration." Pacian seemed happy with that, and went back to tidying up his hair.

Aiden led the others along the short path that ran through the front gate, and past a water fountain with a fish carved from stone on top of a small column. The fresh water gave Aiden an idea. He reached into his belt pouch and pulled out a piece of cloth, then

leaned over and dipped it into the water. Then he reached over and started dabbing the wet cloth on Sayana's face, attempting to remove the smudges of dirt that seemed to be ever-present on the wild girl's features. She pulled back against him reflexively, not sure what he was doing.

"Hold still," Aiden muttered, "I'm just going to make you a little more presentable."

"Why?"

"Women of society don't walk around with smudges of dirt on their..." He was caught off guard by something odd. While wiping her right cheek he'd brushed her hair back past her ear, and saw that the top of it was pointed. Her eyes met his and he could practically see that she was begging him to keep quiet about this discovery.

"There, that's much better," Aiden murmured, putting away the cloth and nodding approvingly, trying to ignore what he'd just seen.

"I still don't understand why you need her in there," Pacian drawled. "Unless you *want* to irritate them of course, then it makes perfect sense."

"Hey, you wanted me to lie," Aiden winked back at him, drawing a smile from the blond rogue. Behind his calm features, his mind whirled around at the implications of Sayana's ears. Pointed ears were a hallmark of the elven people, rare in Aielund, as their homeland was a long way to the west and they weren't known for travelling.

Although her green eyes were large and slightly almond-shaped, she didn't have the sharp, angular features, or the height more common amongst elves, however, which led Aiden to believe she was half-elf, born from a parent of each race, which was even rarer. He wanted to spend some time speaking with her about this, but like every other mystery about the young woman, it would have to wait until later.

They continued along the short pathway until they reached the large oaken door. A small sign in elegant script hung from the door handle – 'open'. Following this sage advice, Aiden turned the handle and pushed the door inward, stepping into a magnificent entryway that surpassed even the Mayor's opulent office. Paintings of stuffy-looking gentlemen hung on every wall, as well as a few smaller pictures of sailing vessels.

An elaborate chandelier hung from the ceiling, casting subtle illumination around the room from its myriad candles. A roaring fireplace kept the chill winter air at bay, and the warmth was more than welcome to the travellers. Finally, a small desk sat near the front of the room with a slim, well-dressed young woman sitting behind it, scribbling some notes on a piece of paper.

"Good afternoon," she called to them, smiling. "Can I help you?"

"Indeed you can," Aiden replied, returning the smile as he strode forward to the desk. "If you could direct me to the entrance to the Gentleman's Club, I would be grateful." The smile disappeared from the young woman's face, and she quickly scanned them all with her sharp eyes.

"I'm sorry, but that's for members only," she replied. "If you wish to see Mister Bartlett about a business arrangement, perhaps I can make an appointment for you?"

"I do need to speak with him, but it's quite an urgent matter and cannot wait for an appointment," Aiden continued urbanely, drawing upon his few years of experience dealing with stuffy merchants at his father's business. "But don't worry, I have a key so I can gain access on my own. If you would just point the way to the door..." Aiden noticed Pacian was casually strolling around the room, ostensibly to take in the pretentious

artwork adorning the walls. He spied something of interest on the other side of an archway, however, and gave Aiden a quick nod.

"I don't recall seeing you here before," she said cautiously. "How did you manage to obtain a key?"

"My dear I would *love* to explain everything, but my associates and I simply do not have the time. Now if you'll excuse me, we have to speak with Mister Bartlett at once. Good day." He took the silver keychain out of his pocket and walked over to where Pacian had indicated. The secretary appeared to be at a loss for words after the appearance of the key, so she said nothing, though her face could carry a conversation on its own at the moment.

Stepping through the arch with Colt and Sayana in tow, Aiden saw the unassuming wooden door that Pacian gestured to. The door had a silver lock on it, the only indication that it could be something other than a storage closet. Aiden slotted the key in and turned it, noting with satisfaction the 'click' sound it produced as the door unlocked. Upon opening, he could see a narrow staircase winding upwards to the first floor.

"Alright," Aiden said quietly, "Sayana, try not to look too... dangerous. I'll handle the talking, the rest of you keep an eye out for anything strange." They nodded in reply, and then followed the young adventurer as he made his way up the staircase.

The sounds of hushed voices grew in volume as they ascended, along with the distinct aroma of pipe smoke. By the time they had reached the next floor, the air was noticeably warmer and heavily laden with a smoky haze, dimly illuminated by a few small windows that allowed the natural light in, as well as a few strategically placed candles to permit reading.

Eight middle-aged men were in the room, most of them sitting in plush, oversized chairs, puffing their pipes and reading books. An older man in expensive clothes and sporting a well-groomed grey beard noticed the newcomers, and made his way over to greet them. His features were lined with age, but still fair. Aiden could tell a working man by the rough texture of his skin, and this individual's smooth hands indicated he was clearly used to having others do his work.

"I'm sorry, but this area is restricted to members only," he said in cultured voice. "You will have to leave at once, or I shall have you removed."

"Well, as it happens, I *am* a member," Aiden responded. "Behold, my key." He produced the silver key, and quietly enjoyed the look of confusion on the man's face.

"Oh, I see. Strange, I do not recall admitting any new members lately." He gave Aiden an appraising look, and did not appear impressed by what he saw.

"I didn't join through you, sir," Aiden attempted to explain, making it up as he went along. "The Mayor is an old family friend of mine, and thought I might like to rest my heels in a more appropriate setting on my time away from Fairloch, instead of the local ale house."

"Is that so? Then you are welcome, sir, to our little home away from home, such as it is. I am Ronald Bartlett, founder of the North Shore Trading Company. May I know your names?"

"Certainly sir," Aiden replied with a slight bow, secretly pleased they had found their man. "Aiden Wainwright, at your service. These are my local contacts, and I hope I was not out of line bringing them along." He gestured at Pacian and the others.

“Ah, local members of the Royal Rangers I see,” Bartlett observed, the faintest hint of a disapproving frown evident on his brow. “Not the sort of people we usually have as guests here at the Club. And what's this, a woman? Aiden, you should know we do not permit women in here, why in God's name have you brought her?” He had raised his voice while speaking, silencing the rest of the conversation in the room and drawing the attention of everyone to them. A few murmurs of disapproval could be heard from the stuffy old men peering at Sayana in shock.

“Come along now, don't be rude,” Aiden admonished them. “I had thought that a gentleman's club would be a club of *gentlemen*, not a bunch of prudish louts! This lady is my cousin, newly arrived to this part of the world and I wanted to introduce her to some of the local gentlemen of influence. Had I known you would be so unabashedly rude in her presence, I would have taken her to the local tavern rather than subject her to this uncouth display. I had thought the men of this town to be better than the dregs who populate that degenerate hovel, but perhaps I was mistaken?”

The effect of Aiden's speech was immediate – the men in the club appeared to be suitably chastened, lowering their eyes and returning to their quiet conversations. Bartlett had turned a bright red colour, and he cleared his throat several times before speaking.

“My apologies, madam,” he finally managed to say. “Although it is our custom to forbid women in this austere room, the rule was never intended to impugn upstanding members of society, such as yourself. Generally, we use this place to get away from our wives and the stresses of our work for a time, and so I once more offer my sincere apologies for lumping you in with them in our exclusionary policy.”

“I understand, and it's quite alright,” Sayana said, surprising Aiden, who was about to speak for her. “I'll just hang here at the back to avoid disturbing you all further during our visit.”

“We won't stay long, Mister Bartlett,” Aiden assured him, appearing displeased by his conduct. “I have other matters that need attending. But just before we relax and enjoy some liquid refreshment, might I enquire about something?”

“By all means,” Bartlett replied, evidently eager to make amends for his treatment of a noble lady. Aiden fetched the note from his left coat pocket.

“An acquaintance of mine found this note recently, and she was puzzled as to whom this was written by. Perhaps you can make something of it?” He handed the note to Bartlett, who accepted it and quickly read its message. “Rather mysterious, don't you agree?” Aiden added, keenly observing his face for any sign of a reaction. “There, at the bottom, you can see the initials 'R.B.’” Bartlett's eyes narrowed slightly as he finished the note.

“A mystery indeed, Mister Wainwright. Tell me, *why* did you wish me to see this? I certainly don't have any answers for you.”

“You're a man of great renown,” Aiden offered respectfully. “If anyone could shed some light on this problem, it's you.” Bartlett didn't react to the obvious compliment for a few moments as he looked at Aiden with what could only be described as suspicion.

“Let me make one thing clear, Aiden,” he said shortly. “I can't abide toadies, or 'yes-men'. Can't stand them.”

“Of course, sir,” Aiden apologised, knowing he'd pushed his lie a little too far. “My behaviour has been deplorable, please forgive me.” Bartlett puffed on his pipe,

considering this for several long moments, interrupted only by Sayana coughing briefly in the smoky environment.

"You're quick to admit your mistakes," he finally answered. "I like that in a man. I'm sorry I can't help you out further with this note, but why don't you speak with my head of security? He may be able to offer some suggestions."

"That sounds like a prudent suggestion, sir. Where is this fellow?" Bartlett pointed to a man standing on the other side of the room, near the fireplace who was stoically observing the conversation from a distance.

"Right over there, the rugged looking chap with the cigar," Bartlett explained.

"Excellent, I'll see what he can make of it," Aiden said, offering his hand. "I wish to thank you for your time, Mister Bartlett. It's been an honour meeting you, despite our rocky start."

"The honour is mine sir, and again, my apologies," Bartlett replied, shaking the proffered hand firmly. Aiden stepped past and gestured for the others to follow him, hiding his disappointment that Bartlett didn't seem to know anything about the note.

The gentlemen of the club seemed to have found other, more important things to be looking at, as Aiden and the others walked past them, smoking their pipes furiously or engaged in deep conversations with their contemporaries. However, the man they were walking towards didn't seem embarrassed at all.

He leaned casually against the mantelpiece, watching their approach with an intensity that belied his relaxed demeanour. He was smoking a cigar, not a pipe, and his heavy build suggested he was used to physical labour, unlike the rest of the men present.

"Watch out for this one," Colt whispered to Aiden as they moved closer. "He's trouble." Aiden didn't have time to reply before he stood in front of the man, but he understood what Colt was trying to say.

"Hell of an entrance you made there, friend," the head of Bartlett's security said in a voice made husky from smoking, his sharp blue eyes evaluating the small group. "And a clever way to distract them from asking how you really ended up with that key." Aiden smiled rapidly at him and hesitated. Colt was right to counsel caution; this one was sharp.

"I don't know what you mean, it's all quite legitimate," he replied lightly, trying not to show his worry that this man seemed to have him all figured out.

"Sure it is," the man replied, "and if that girl is from a noble house, then I'm the King of Aielund. Relax, I'm not going to say anything," he added with a puff of his cigar. "If I thought you were any kind of danger I'd have thrown you out of here the minute you came in. Frankly I think these gentlemen needed a little nudge to remind them that not all women are like their horrible wives, especially you, madam," he said, giving Sayana a sly smile. To Aiden's surprise, she blushed bright red, and retreated behind Colt, who crossed his arms and did his best to loom as large as possible.

"You seem to have a firm grasp on what's going on around here," Aiden said cautiously, dropping any pretence of being a visitor from Fairloch. "What's your name?"

"Robert Black," he replied. "And yes, I do. Now, Ronald asked you to speak with me about something. What is it?" Aiden was almost caught off guard by the sudden realisation that Robert's initials were 'R.B.' as well. He handed the note over and watched Robert's face for any hint of recognition. His facial expression didn't change at all as he read the message, but then he hardly moved at all, even after he'd finished it.

"Where did you get this?" he asked bluntly a few moments later.

"From a group of men digging their way under the crypt outside of the church," Aiden supplied, seeing no reason to withhold the information. "They met an unfortunate end, undoubtedly due to their incompetent excavation techniques," he added, and saw with satisfaction that Robert flinched slightly at the news. He had found out who 'R.B.' was.

"Looks like you've stumbled onto a grave security situation here," Robert advised, without a hint as to his true feelings on the matter. "This might have ramifications to my duties here, so I'd better go speak with my people, and then the Sergeant of the Guard, just to see if I can be of assistance."

"That might be a good idea," Aiden agreed, wondering if he actually intended to do so. Aside from that flinch, Aiden had nothing else to go on, and he began to second-guess himself. Robert stubbed out his cigar on an ashtray, and then extended his right hand, which Aiden took.

"You've done a fine service, bringing this information to me," Robert said. "I'm going to look into it, and then I'll make sure you get what you deserve. Goodbye." Without further word, he stepped forward briskly and moved past them towards the door. Colt gave him a shove with his shoulder as Robert went past, drawing a dispassionate glare from the man as he continued on.

"That's got to be our man," Aiden said to the others quietly. "Did you see the way he reacted at the news?"

"That was the look of someone who just had his diabolical plans thwarted," Pacian muttered. "Do you think it was his men down in that tunnel?"

"No doubt," Colt grunted. "But here's an important question; Bartlett just followed him down the stairs, are we going to grab him or what?"

"Bartlett left too?" Aiden asked nobody in particular, peering over to see that the man had indeed vacated the room. "He might be in on it after all; we better grab them and take them to Sergeant Ariel."

Without discussing it further, they quickly moved through the smoky room and hurried down the stairs. But by the time they had reached the ground floor, there was no sign of either of them. The front door was slightly ajar, however, and the secretary had an astonished look on her face.

"Goodness me, that *was* strange," she exclaimed before noticing Aiden and the others peering around the corner. "What on earth did you say to them?"

"So Mister Bartlett followed the other man out that door," Aiden queried, knowing the answer but wanting confirmation.

"Yes, practically running out of here," the secretary breathed. "The other one was that Robert fellow who talks with Mister Bartlett all the time."

"They talk often do they?" Aiden pressed. "Do you know what about?"

"Here now, what's all this about anyway?" she asked imperiously. "If you've done something to upset him, I should warn you that Mister Bartlett is a powerful man in this town, and he can make things very difficult for you." Pacian stepped forward to answer this one. Aiden had good reason to believe he wasn't going to be entirely truthful to the lady.

"Madam, the Royal Rangers have important, legal business with your employer, and you would do well to co-operate with us," he bluffed. Aiden wasn't sure about the

secretary, but if he didn't know better, *he* would have been convinced. While Pacian continued talking, the young adventurer glanced around outside to see if there was any sign of the two men, but as he suspected, they had disappeared into the crowd.

"He's not in trouble is he?" the secretary asked anxiously. "I'm sorry but I really need the income from this job right now, and I can't afford to lose it."

"Don't worry," Pacian assured her. "I won't tell anyone the information came from you." That seemed to satisfy the woman, who relaxed a little.

"I don't know what they talk about exactly," she explained, "But I do know from the company ledger that he's paying Mister Black a considerable some of money. For what, I couldn't tell you."

"Interesting. Thank you for your time, Madam," Pacian said. "You may hear from the Sergeant of the Guard in the near future, please co-operate with her in any way she asks."

"Certainly, Ranger," she replied obediently. "Will that be all?"

"Yes, thank you for your co-operation, it is appreciated," Pacian finished, smiling and leading the others out through the door into the cold outside air once more. He looked like he was about to say something, but Aiden shook his head and pointed down the street. Pace nodded, and let Aiden take the lead.

"I can see why people join up with the guards," Pacian mused, his breath misting in the cold air. "I could get used to having a little authority like that." Colt, who had been crouched down looking for any obvious tracks their two suspects might have left on the ground, stood up and towered over the blond rogue threateningly.

"If you ever impersonate a ranger again," he growled, "I'm going to shove that uniform down your throat."

"But isn't that what you're doing right now?" Pacian replied sarcastically. "There you are, wearing ranger armour after they kicked you out. Am I wrong?"

"Hey, settle down," Aiden ordered. "We have more important matters to discuss. Colt, just cool down, Pace did well to get us the information we did. It's not like he murdered a box of kittens to do it."

"This time," Colt muttered, easing back his posture but continuing to scowl at Pacian.

"I'm not sure I understand everything that just happened," Sayana admitted, rubbing her hands together to keep warm.

"I'm amazed you could follow what was going on, with all that flirting you were doing," Pacian teased, grinning slyly.

"I was not!" she protested, blushing profusely.

"Look, their conduct was fairly incriminating," Aiden interjected, "And if nothing else, they need to have a long talk with Ariel about their possible involvement."

"What do you think that could be though," Sayana pressed. "I do not understand why a man like Robert would do such a thing."

"Oh God, you really are smitten," Pacian remarked incredulously. "He's a scumbag, plain and simple. Doesn't matter how nice he looked in those fine clothes, he's probably laughing at your naivety right now. Trust me, I know people like that." Sayana didn't reply, but looked sullen after being on the receiving end of Pacian's philosophical views.

"I'm not going to speak as to Robert's character," Aiden said, "but I do suggest we get this information to the guardhouse at once. Agreed?" There was no dissent, so

without further delay they headed back to report their interesting encounter to Ariel, who was probably not going to like what they had to say.

The Sergeant was still dealing with paperwork when they arrived back at the barracks, and Aiden thought he detected relief on her face when they showed up.

"I swear this pile is getting bigger, no matter how fast I work," she muttered, casually gesturing at the mound of papers awaiting her attention. "So, how did it go with Bartlett? Did you manage to even speak with him?"

"Oh yes, getting in to see him wasn't an insurmountable problem," Aiden assured her. "I don't think he's the one that wrote the note. He has a mercenary working for him by the name of Robert Black; same initials, and I got a bit of a reaction out of him when I mentioned the diggers under the crypt had perished. I think he's our man."

"That doesn't come as a huge surprise, actually," Ariel replied, her full attention on the matter at hand. "Black is the commander of the Steel Tigers mercenary company, so for whatever reason, he wants to circumvent Culdeny's wall for some future operation. I think I better go and bring them in to custody for questioning at once."

"Both of them ran off as soon as they knew that *we* knew what they were up to," Pacian advised. Ariel cursed loudly with a choice of words that one doesn't normally hear from the mouth of a lady.

"I'll have my people keep an eye out for them," she said after calming down a bit. "And I'll set up some wanted signs to post around the town. I imagine they'd be out the gate by now, but hopefully we'll get lucky. That's about all I can do with the resources at my disposal. Next time you go and interrogate a suspect, try sitting on them."

"If we see either of them in our travels, I'll be sure to bring them back here for you to talk to," Colt offered.

"I appreciate all the help I can get," Ariel said tiredly. "But I think it's likely they went to rejoin the rest of the Steel Tigers – that's over a hundred heavily armed men. If you do run into them again, I'd suggest running."

"That's sound advice," Pacian nodded sagely. "Now, it occurs to me that we did some investigating on behalf of the town. I'd say that'd be worth something, wouldn't you?" Ariel rubbed her chin thoughtfully.

"Actually yes, that does sound fair. I've got more money than manpower at the moment anyway, so let me give you something for your troubles." She opened a drawer on her desk, and produced a small yet sturdy metal chest. From this, she withdrew a small pouch of coins. "Here's forty silver nobles," she said, handing Pacian the coins. "Ten apiece. Should keep you out of trouble for a while."

"Thanks Sergeant," Aiden replied, "That'll come in handy. Good luck with the rest of your investigation, we'll stop in the next time we're in town to see if there have been any developments."

"As you wish. Oh, Aiden, one more thing," Ariel added as they were heading out the door. "The Mayor came by a little while ago and asked if I had any spare soldiers to send down to Coldstream and Bracksford. Don't look so shocked, he may appear to be a selfish fop, but he really does the best he can, given the situation." Aiden held his breath, hoping for good news but expecting the worst.

"I'm sorry, I really wish we had more people, but if I send anyone down there, I have to leave something up north here unprotected," Ariel said hesitantly. "It doesn't matter what I do, one way or another, a part of the region is going to be vulnerable. My first duty

is to this town, Aiden. Maybe if my husband was here he'd have a better answer for you. To be honest, I'm not even a real Sergeant; I just handled the day-to-day operations of the guards for the Captain, whom I eventually married. With him and his Lieutenant gone, I'm the closest thing to an officer left, so it all falls to me."

"For what it's worth, I think you're up to the challenge," Aiden assured her. "Thanks again for your help, Sarge." Ariel smiled wanly at the reassuring compliment.

"Why has your King taken away so many warriors?" Sayana said, unexpectedly. "What could be so important that he would risk the lives of your people like this?" Ariel looked at her impassively for a long moment, and Aiden wasn't sure she was even going to reply. Their previous attempts at discovering the nature of the war the country was in had been rebuffed, but that had not diminished their curiosity.

"Ordinarily I would not even consider telling civilians," the Sergeant replied eventually. "As wife of the Captain of the town guard, I am privy to a lot of information that shouldn't be disseminated amongst the public. But in this instance, your exceptional service to myself and this community compels me to be more forthcoming than I otherwise would be." Colt leaned over and closed the door, while the others took an unconscious step towards the desk where Ariel sat.

"The King has declared war on Tulsone, our neighbouring country to the west. He didn't mention his reasons why to any of us here in Culdeny, so I can't really tell you much more than that, except that there was a great deal of negotiation between our two countries for several months prior to the declaration, and this is the first time Aielund has declared war on *anyone* in its history."

"We've fought wars before," Colt reminded her.

"They were defensive actions, like the Battle of Fort Highmarch," Ariel disputed. "This is the first time we've gone on the offensive, and I can't tell you why. I can only hope it's for the right reasons."

"What reasons could there be, aside from conquest?" Aiden said bleakly. "Maybe His Majesty decided his country wasn't big enough any more, just like every other conqueror in history."

"I don't have any more answers for you Aiden," Ariel offered sympathetically. "But keep what I've told you amongst yourselves. Wild public speculation isn't going to help the situation." They all agreed to keep silent on the issue, even though the young explorer didn't feel there was all that much information to talk about.

Aiden and the others started walking back to the inn for a break, before deciding on their next move. The lack of military assistance from Culdeny for his home town left him in a bleak mood. He pondered the remaining options as he brought up the rear on their way up the street.

By the time they arrived at the inn, no brilliant ideas had appeared in Aiden's mind, aside from personally heading back home to try and protect the village himself. Despite his recent successes in battle, the novice warrior was under no illusions about his prowess – for the most part, he considered himself lucky, not skilled, in the art of war. He continued pondering these weighty issues as he sat at a table in the common room.

"You look a bit down," Colt observed with rare clarity. "Your folks live in Coldstream right? I can see why that'd be a source of concern. Fortunately for you, I've got something that'll cure that right quick. I'll be back in a minute."

"I bet it's beer," Pacian remarked after Colt had disappeared amongst the crowd of sailors, and other local people populating the common room at this time.

"And just when he was starting to sober up, too," Aiden added. "I hope he doesn't go overboard."

"Hey, who said you could sit there?" a tall man barked at them, suddenly appearing out of the throng to stand imposingly over their table. "This place is for men; I think you three are looking for the children's table." Three of his drinking companions next to him laughed uproariously at this witty remark, clearly the height of tavern humour. Their casual attire and deep tans seemed to hint that they were sailors, quite possibly spoiling for a fight. Pacian looked blandly at Aiden, his hands slowly moving towards the daggers positioned on his belt.

Sayana looked up at the men dangerously, and Aiden thought he could see a glow coming from underneath her tunic. The young man shook his head slightly, indicating she should keep cool, and Pacian should avoid creating a bloodbath over this minor incident.

"I'm in no mood for games, so I'll say this plainly," Aiden said to the lead man. "You want this table? *You can't have it.* So unless you want to see what the inside of your own arse looks like, you'll go find someone else to bother." The wide grin from the big sailor told Aiden that was exactly what he wanted to hear. He seemed ready to start a fight, but was shoved aside a moment later by a short, broad-chested fellow with a beard that was familiar to Aiden.

"I'm sorry to bust in on yer group like this," Clavis MacAliese said with seeming innocence. "But I think we have some unfinished business to discuss, isn't that correct, Mister Wainwright?" Despite his diminutive stature, the appearance of the dwarf startled the surrounding men. A look of unpleasant recognition appeared on the lead man's face,

"Say, don't I know you? Yer faces are awful familiar to me," Clavis said to the sailors.

"I don't think so, dwarf," their lead man replied doubtfully. "And we were just leaving. C'mon lads, let's go get some more rum." Without another word, all four of them hustled off into the crowd in search of somewhere else to be. Clavis sat himself down on an empty chair and grinned at the three companions.

"Yer welcome," he chuckled and took a large swig of his drink.

"They looked like they knew you from somewhere," Aiden observed, breathing a sigh of relief. "Somewhere... *painful.*"

"I may have schooled them on the art of pugilism," Clavis shrugged. "It's hard to remember; last night is still a bit of a blur to me."

"He didn't look like he'd been beaten into unconsciousness just last night," Aiden remarked.

"My friend, all his bruises are below the waist," Clavis winked and sipped his mug of ale. Colt had the good grace to show up at the table carrying two mugs of ale at that moment. All four chairs were taken, so he looked down at Clavis with an ominous expression.

"Table seats four, and you're number five," he growled. "Move it, short ass." Clavis looked up at the towering ranger with a thoughtful expression, then swivelled around and grabbed another chair from a neighbouring table and dragged it over.

"Have a seat, mate," he offered. Colt stood there a moment longer, then shrugged and sat in the chair.

"Might want to grab another one while you're at it," the ranger mentioned. "Nel is coming over in a minute too."

"Oh she's here?" Aiden exclaimed. "Excellent, I was hoping we'd all be together for this meeting."

"Are ye going to introduce me to yer mates, Aiden?" the dwarf inquired.

"In a moment, I'm just waiting for the final member of our group to arrive. No sense repeating myself if I don't have to." Colt pushed one of the ale mugs over to Aiden.

"Drink up," he instructed. "It'll put hairs on your chest. Not as many as mine, but we can't expect miracles here." Aiden sighed and took a sip. It was a bitter brew, and the young man wasn't much of a drinker, but a rare mug or two wouldn't hurt.

"Thanks for your intervention," he said to Clavis. "I don't think there's much I could have said to those men that wouldn't have ended up in fight."

"Och, ye did just fine lad," Clavis assured him. "But I'm pressed for time and didn't want to waste it on yet another fight."

"Did I miss something?" Colt asked.

"Large men making insults," Sayana replied blandly. Colt merely grunted in reply, apparently unsurprised by the news. Clavis leaned forward to speak directly to Aiden.

"I have to ask ye, do ya have an answer for me yet?"

"That's what we're here to discuss," Aiden assured him, spying Nellise appearing out of the crowd in front of the table, carrying a sack of... something. "Nice to see you again Nellise," he said to the young cleric. "Pull up a seat if you can, I have a proposal to make."

"Thank you Aiden, although I trust you aren't about to propose marriage," she replied with fake shock. Pacian quickly stood, acquired a chair from a nearby table, and held it, gentleman-like, for her to sit at.

"A *business* proposal," Aiden clarified, not in the mood for light banter. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is Clavis MacAliese, adventurer and entrepreneur. Clavis, may I present Pacian Savidge, Nellise Sannemann, Sayana Arai, and... Colt."

"It's a pleasure to make yer acquaintance," Clavis said, grinning at everyone. "I don't know if Aiden here has told ya, but I've a proposition to put to ye that'll be of benefit to us all, should we be successful."

"What kind of proposition?" Nellise asked, smiling at Pacian's manners. Clavis spent some time detailing his plans to visit Ferrumgaard, and his desire to return ancient dwarven artefacts to their new homeland. When he was done, he leaned back in his chair and enjoyed the last of his ale, patiently waiting to hear what they all thought. Pacian was the first to speak.

"Is there likely to be lost treasures in this place?"

"Depends how deep ya want to go," Clavis shrugged. "The upper floors have long been picked clean by casual visitors, but the lower levels, aye the lower levels be the best place to scavenge. I won't promise ya anything lad, but ye never know what ye'll find in the halls o' Ferrumgaard."

"Good enough, I'm in," Pacian said, slapping his hand on the table.

"What is your interest in this, Aiden?" Nellise asked curiously. "Clavis has been quite forthcoming about his reasons, and though they are interesting, I don't understand why that concerns you." The young explorer shifted uncomfortably, having known this was coming but still not ready to tell them all about his motivations.

"If there's treasure to be found down there, I could use them to hire mercenaries to defend Bracksfordshire," he said, walking a fine line with the truth. "We're certainly not going to find help for them any other way."

"That makes sense. Well... I can't say I'm terribly interested in finding lost treasures, but I could always donate my share to the church. Frankly, after the events of the last week, I was hoping for something more sedate, but I suppose in these troubled times it's hard to avoid the dangers that abound. Besides, what would you do without me, hmm?"

"Die horribly," Aiden replied, smiling half-heartedly. Nellise looked uncomfortable, probably finding the black humour distasteful, so he probably shouldn't have bothered saying anything.

"I will go also," Sayana said, looking directly into Aiden's eyes. He knew that *she* knew the real reasons he was going there, and although she must have been confused as to why he was keeping them secret from the others, the wild girl was at least willing to play along. "I would like to see this great fallen city of which you speak, though I care little for any riches that lie within."

"You say that now," Pacian scoffed, "but as soon as you lay your eyes on a diamond, you'll suddenly find you're *really* interested in riches." Sayana gave him a confused look, which just made Pacian laugh out loud.

"Before you even ask me," Colt interrupted, "I want to point out that place is cursed, and a lot of people who go in there don't come out again. I think you're all fools for even considering it, especially you," he said, looking at Clavis.

"I did'na twist yer arms, lad," he replied, chuckling. "If ya don't want to come, ya don't have to."

"Except," Aiden added, "that we're going to help you and your ranger friends in the Calespurs tomorrow. Not that I wouldn't offer to help for free, but you might consider returning the favour by coming along."

"Fine," Colt grunted after a long moment of thought. "But if the ghosts of ten thousand dead dwarves suck the life from our bones, you've only got yourself to blame."

"Good, then it's settled," Pacian declared, taking a swig of his drink. Nellise stood up and placed a heavy sack on the table.

"I had a long talk with the Archioness today," she explained wearily. "I won't bore you with the details, but suffice it to say she said that by helping you, I'm serving the country and God, so I don't have to go back to doing menial chores around the church. Part of me was hoping she would prevent me from joining you, I must confess, for this life you all seem so comfortable with does not sit so well with me."

"None of us asked for this, Nel," Aiden reminded her. "I certainly don't go around looking for people to fight, but I hope you realize how valuable your assistance has been to us. We *are* helping the Kingdom, in our own small way, even if it is a little outside your field of expertise."

"It's nice to hear my efforts have been appreciated," Nellise replied with a warm smile. "I'll continue working with you for now, especially since I've gained the support of the Church."

"What's in the sack?" Pacian asked curiously, poking it with one finger.

"Medicines, tinctures, unguents and potions," she explained in grand fashion. "Courtesy of the Church of Aielund. Should we run into any difficulty - and our track record suggests we will - these will help keep us healthy, free of disease and able to

perform to our potential. I'll take this upstairs, and then I have a few errands to run before we head out."

"There's no rush," Aiden said, ignoring the look he received from Clavis. "It's too late to leave now anyway, so I was thinking we could start out early tomorrow morning."

"That's all well and good," Nellise replied, trying to squeeze past the back of Colt's chair, "but if we're going to be heading into harms way down in the ranges, I want to buy some better equipment first. Unless Colt can say for certain that we won't be in peril..." They all turned to look at the big ranger, who looked uncomfortable under such scrutiny.

"There may be peril," he finally admitted. "I can't guarantee it will be peril-free."

"Straight from the horse's mouth," Nellise sighed, shaking her head. "Remember how reluctant I was to wear heavier armour when we first started out in Bracksford?"

"Yes, you were afraid you'd topple over," Aiden recalled.

"After spending 'quality' time with you all over the past week or so, I can honestly say I've changed my mind."

Chapter Twelve

The prospect of sitting around the table, watching Colt drinking himself into oblivion wasn't very appealing to Aiden, so he decided to accompany Nellise to the local smithy. Sayana also saw the wisdom of being somewhere else at the present moment and tagged along silently as was her custom. Aiden really wanted to discuss a few things with her, and thought perhaps Nellise might be discreet enough to keep them to herself, but felt this wasn't the right time.

The streets of Culdery were becoming obscured by a thin veil of fog as the short winter's day began to wane. It was unlikely they would be overheard talking, so the young adventurer brought Nellise up to speed on their investigation into the mysterious circumstances behind the incursion under the church, earlier. The acolyte offered some interesting insights into the background of Ronald Bartlett.

"Bartlett has been a fixture in Culdery affairs for over a decade," she informed them as they walked along the cobblestone streets, hauling the despised chain shirt over her shoulder. "I would characterise him as a man more invested in his own fortune than the prosperity of those around him. But to somehow be connected to an invasion of the town? I certainly never would have guessed it, based on my knowledge of the man."

"His public image could well be very different from his real character," Aiden remarked. "You never know what someone is capable of, especially a man like Bartlett. In any case, the guard Sergeant seemed like a pretty sharp woman, so I'm sure she can make a determination as to his involvement."

"Yes I've heard good things about Ariel," Nellise agreed. "Rumours abound that the Captain is a simple man, and that she was the brains of the city guard ever since they were married. You didn't hear that from me, though," she added with a surreptitious glance at Aiden.

They stopped outside a large building with a sign hanging above the door that read 'Master Chaplain's Smithy'. The sounds of someone hammering away at the forge could be dimly heard through the closed door, and smoke drifted lazily up into the misty sky from the chimney.

Aiden held the door open for the ladies, and then followed them in. A wave of hot, dry air washed over him as he stepped inside, carrying with it the smell of molten iron and sweat. The walls were dark with ingrained soot from the fires of the forge, and various weapons and suits of armour were on display on elaborate stands. A middle-aged man, with neatly combed white hair and arms like tree trunks stood watching a younger man of similar proportions hammer away at what appeared to be the makings of a fine blade.

While Nellise began talking with the older smith about acquiring some armour, Aiden set about looking at the weapons on display. A fine-looking arming sword caught his eye, so he took it down from the wall rack and gave it a closer inspection. It was a well-balanced blade, longer and heavier than his short sword but still useable with one hand.

He caught the attention of the apprentice and haggled out a good deal for both weapons, and he even threw in a pouch of crossbow bolts for free. Regrettably, the total cost was still enough to take all but one of his remaining silver coins. Still, it would all be worthwhile if it helped him stay alive.

“And will there be anything for the young lady here?” the young smith added, smiling at Sayana, who was gazing back at the shirtless young man working at the forge.

“Oh, I'm just looking,” she replied, a phrase she had no doubt heard on her travels around the town with Nellise.

“I'm sure you are, but he's not for sale,” Aiden deadpanned, causing both of them to blush furiously and suddenly find the swords on the wall of great interest. Satisfied that he had embarrassed them sufficiently, he sauntered over to see how Nellise was doing. Seeing that she was in the midst of being fitted for a shining breastplate, he left her to deal with the smith and head for the door.

“You're leaving?” Sayana blurted as he strolled past. The young, shirtless smith was still talking with her, but the wild girl had a look on her face that was not dissimilar to that of a frightened rabbit. “I have to go now,” she told him. “It's been nice talking and the like.”

“Yes, I'd better get back to work myself,” he replied, unaware of her apparent discomfort. “Fare ye well, Sayana Arai.” She gave him a nervous smile and then quickly scurried over to follow Aiden out the door.

“Did we enjoy ourselves?” he grinned at her. Sayana smiled shyly, but said nothing. “Yes, we did, didn't we,” he laughed as they made their way back to the inn.

* * *

The evening meal was pleasant enough at the Seaspray inn, and for once, nobody bothered them at the table. The presence of Clavis and Colt probably had a lot to do with that, and the two seemed to be getting along very well indeed. Aiden surmised that the dwarf hadn't mentioned how Colt had been knocked down the previous night, but then again, one never knew how the big ranger would react to such news. He might even respect the tough dwarf for taking him down a notch.

In any case, the evening passed quietly, and one by one, Aiden and the others turned in for the night. The young man had wanted to speak with Pacian in private, but found

himself overcome with weariness shortly after he laid eyes on his bed, and turned in for the night instead.

Light streamed in through the window shutters the next morning, and the sounds of the bustling town outside indicated it was well after sunrise. Pacian was still asleep in the bed across the small room, so if they were late, at least they were *both* going to be late. Aiden untangled himself and sluggishly arose, making use of the provided bedpan before attempting to figure out how to dress himself.

"Pace, wake up," he said to the somnolent rogue, who groaned into his pillows in response. Aiden rolled his eyes and decided to leave his friend to rest up, considering the trials they had gone through of late.

His new arming sword felt heavier on his belt, but it was a reassuring weight. He would have to take some practice swings with it once they were out of town, as it wouldn't do to accidentally stab himself when it came time to fight.

His gear checked and ready for travel, Aiden threw his pillow at Pacian on his way out the door, which drew a satisfying groan from underneath the blankets. He wasn't sure if they'd leave the blond rogue behind, but if he didn't get up soon, they would certainly have a discussion about it. When he reached the common room, it became clear that it was closer to noon than he'd thought, as Nellise and Sayana were sitting at a table with Clavis, enjoying various drinks, with all their gear present and ready to go.

"I'm sorry about being late," Aiden apologised as he approached the table. "I didn't sleep too well and I guess I... hey, where's Colt?" Nellise, sipping on some hot broth, glanced meaningfully to her right. Aiden followed her gaze and saw the big ranger once again sprawled on the floor with a bunch of other unkempt men, sporting many bruises. Aiden shook his head in astonishment as he joined his companions at the table.

They talked quietly amongst themselves for a while as Aiden ate a simple breakfast of kippers and crusty bread. Pacian appeared shortly after he'd finished eating, carrying all his gear and appearing to be ready to go.

Upon seeing Colt slowly starting to regain consciousness, he sighed and took the time to buy himself a quick breakfast. Nellise, who was always the patient one, was showing signs of exasperation, so she excused herself from the table and left the inn, mentioning she had to pick up some equipment anyway. By the time Colt was finally moving about and ready to go, it was the middle of the day.

A light but steady rain had settled in over Culdeny as they left the inn and followed Aiden over to the smithy. He figured they would meet Nellise there when she was done, and weren't disappointed. She was emerging from the door to the smithy as they approached, clad in her new breastplate and sporting metal shoulder plates, forearm bracers, and gauntlets. Her new armour gleamed, even in the dull grey light of the overcast day, and she looked very pleased with her purchase.

"For the first time since we met, I actually feel adequately protected," she smiled.

"You look like you're ready for anything," Aiden said quickly, sensing Pacian was about to say something inappropriate. "Ready to head out?" Nellise nodded in reply. "Okay Colt, do you feel up to taking the lead?"

"Spouse," he replied, from deep inside the cowl on his cloak.

"Are you sure you're up to it?" Aiden asked cautiously. "I wouldn't want you to slam into any trees or slow-moving deer on your way."

"I'll walk it off," he growled back, not amused. Without further discussion, the group followed the bruised and hungover ranger through the town towards the south gate. They passed by the guard barracks on the way, and Aiden pondered if he should check in to see if Ariel had made any progress on locating Robert Black or Ronald Bartlett.

"Do you really think those two are going to be anywhere near Culdery at this point?" Pacian said, reading his expression accurately.

"I suppose not," Aiden admitted.

"Then leave her to do her job. Besides, I think we've got a better chance of running into them in the next few days than she does."

"If they have the entire mercenary company with them, I'd rather we didn't," Aiden said, drawing a cynical laugh from his friend.

When they reached the south gate, Aiden could see that security had been stepped-up. Sergeant Ariel was obviously keeping the reasons to herself, for the people passing through were asking questions about the presence of extra security, and receiving few answers. Nevertheless, Aiden and the others managed to exit the city without too many questions regarding the weaponry they were carrying, and why they were heading south.

Their main concern was Colt's greatsword, but Clavis was also carrying an elaborate looking heavy crossbow, the likes of which Aiden had never seen before. Once they were through the gate and on their way south, he took a moment to ask about the deadly weapon.

"It's a repeater," Clavis explained, hefting the crossbow so Aiden could inspect it. "This case holds five bolts, which drop into place when I pull back the lever. Speeds up the loading process considerably."

"By how much exactly?"

"Depends on how strong ya are," he winked. "And the pull on this one is a lot more than on that dainty little girl's crossbow yer pretty friend has, so one can't expect to be shooting bolts off every couple of seconds. I'm sure I'll get to demonstrate it for ya in the next couple of days, if Colt is right about the situation down there in the forest."

"I look forward to an effective demonstration," Aiden said, drawing a grin from the dwarf that one might interpret as slightly homicidal.

They walked along the road at a casual pace, set by their hungover ranger. Every half an hour or so, they would stop so that Colt could go and throw up in the bushes, which slowed their progress even further. He probably would have preferred to be sleeping it off back at the inn, but seemed perfectly willing to keep going despite his condition. They had all learned not to try talking to him while he was like this, though Aiden did give Clavis a warning about Colt's attitude just in case.

The weather remained fair for the first half of the day, but shortly after they turned off the main highway and started heading west, a light dusting of snow began to cascade down from the heavens, bringing with it a strong, cold wind from the south. Aiden drew his longcoat closer to his body to ward off the chill, and lamented that their stay at the Seaspray Inn was probably the last time he would feel truly warm for some time. Just before midday, a few hours out from Culdery, Aiden spied movement in amongst the trees, shadowing their course.

"We're not alone," he said loud enough to warn Colt.

"I see it," he replied, unperturbed. "Don't worry your pretty little head about it, just go back to doing your nails."

The caustic response could only mean that he'd known about it for some time, which was surprising considering how he must have been feeling right then. Looking closer, Aiden could see the glowing yellow eyes of a wolf – Colt's wolf – that was following them. The previously scrawny beast was looking well-fed and in good health, no doubt due to the abundant hunting to be found in this region.

He seemed to be content with loping along parallel to the route they were travelling, around fifty yards away. Although Colt appeared to be unaffected by the presence of the wolf he'd saved from a slow death, Aiden thought he saw a faint smile crease his features at the animal's reappearance.

After a brief stop for a cold lunch of bread and cheese, they continued on through the thickening forest until evening. The snow had formed a thin layer over the cold ground by then, but Colt was easily able to find dry wood to light a fire.

It wasn't long before the five of them were sitting around the campfire, warming themselves against the cold. Nellise had the presence of mind to stock up on supplies before they left town, so they didn't have to hunt for their food. Instead, she cooked up a hearty pork stew and toasted some bread over the fire. They conversed idly while enjoying the hot meal, until Colt brought up an important topic.

"Before tomorrow evening, we'll be at the western ranger outpost," he grunted, eating slowly to make sure his stomach wasn't about to violently reject the heavy meal. "But until then, we should consider this place to be potentially dangerous."

"Are you expecting problems from, say, wolves?" Aiden inquired with exaggerated innocence.

"Like I've said before, you don't have to worry about him," Colt growled back. "But there may be others around, not to mention the possibility of running into poachers. They're not likely to attack us, but we can't rule out the possibility. Are you sure you still want to help out on this one Clavis? I don't think it's going to be a picnic."

"As I said to ya Colt," he replied between puffs on his pipe. "Yer all doing me a big favour, coming along on my expedition as ye've promised. The least I can do is help you out with yer little problem here in the Big Green."

"Big Green', I like that," Pacian chuckled.

"Glad to have a professional on board with us," Colt nodded to the dwarf, ignoring Pacian. "My point is, whoever is on guard during their shift should stay alert, got it? Okay, I'll take the last shift, 'cause I can't keep my eyes open any more. I'm sure you can figure out the rest yourselves, just wake me when it's my turn." Without anything further, Colt put down his bowl and lay down on his bedroll, pulling a thick blanket up over his head.

"I'll go first," Sayana said quietly as Clavis set up his bedroll close to the fire. "I'm not very tired anyway."

"Fair enough," Nellise said. "Perhaps I should take second watch then?" Aiden shook his head.

"You do so much for us already Nel. I'll take the second shift, you just get some rest." Nellise smiled in appreciation, then threw another chunk of wood on the fire in preparation for the cold night ahead.

A few hours later, Aiden was wrapped in a thick blanket and lying atop his bedroll, still awake. A cold breeze blew through the pine trees of the forest around them, creating a gentle sound that should have helped him rest, and yet sleep still eluded him. After a lot

of tossing and turning, he gave up altogether and decided to relieve Sayana early. If he was going to be awake most of the night, he might as well make the best of it.

Huddling within his longcoat, Aiden looked around for signs of the wild sorceress, whose location was not immediately apparent. Although the light snowfall earlier that evening had stopped a while ago, the ground underfoot still crunched as Aiden walked. A spark of light in the gloom ahead caught his eye. It wasn't bright enough to be torchlight, nor was it the light of the campfire being reflected in the eyes of a wolf. Curious yet cautious, Aiden moved away from the camp to find out what it was.

He moved in through the trees until he was close enough to make out what appeared to be a picture composed of light, hanging in the air. A glowing fingertip moved up and down the curious image, filling in colours on what appeared to be trees and hillsides. The dim light emitted by the vision illuminated Sayana, sitting with her back to a pine tree.

It wasn't a detailed picture like the ones he saw Mayor Buchanan's office, depicting people and places with remarkable beauty. This was more like something a child would create with coloured chalks – primitive trees, large blocks of green for the land, and odd looking buildings with triangle roofs.

"I didn't know you were so creative," Aiden whispered as he moved in for a closer look, startling the wild girl. "I'd feel better about this if you were actually paying attention to the forest, since you're the one on watch."

"I'm sorry, my mind wandered," she apologised, casting a hand across the image hovering in the air before her, causing it to vanish. They were plunged into darkness for a moment, until a tiny candle of flame appeared above Sayana's upturned palm, enough to provide them with light but not enough to attract attention. "I was only doing that for a few minutes, I swear."

"Don't worry about it," Aiden said dismissively. "Despite what Colt said earlier, we appear to be fairly safe for the time being. What you were doing just now was quite astonishing actually, I'm rather impressed."

"It's a simple illusion," she shrugged, standing up and dusting snow off of her leather trousers. "I used to do it all the time when I was little, but in the past few years I didn't really have the strength to waste on something so useless." Aiden nodded in understanding, remembering the condition she was in when they first encountered her. This seemed like a good opportunity to find out a little more about her past, though he wasn't sure she was going to share anything with him.

"I was wondering if I could ask you something personal," he began hesitantly. "I noticed your ears yesterday, and..."

"You were wondering about my heritage," she finished for him. "I think the answer is obvious, and I would ask you not to mention it to anyone else, Aiden. There are people who find the idea of interracial couples... abhorrent."

"Rest assured, I will tell no-one," he replied earnestly. "Just tell me, was it your mother or father who was elven?"

"My mother," she answered softly. "My father is one of the Akora, the tribal people living in the southern mountains of this land."

"I had guessed one of your parents was," Aiden confirmed softly. "But I have no idea how two such diverse people could have met."

"Nor do I," she whispered. "I have few memories of my parents, but I do know that it was my mother who had the talent for sorcery. I believe that is where I inherited my powers, though it is just that, a belief."

"I understand the Akorans do not tolerate sorcery amongst their people," Aiden said uncomfortably. "I find it fascinating that they accepted her into their society." Sayana didn't reply immediately. When she did, her voice was shaky.

"They didn't. My shift is at an end, Aiden, and I am tired. I must go and rest, please take over." Before he could apologise, Sayana rushed past him and headed for the camp. Aiden silently cursed himself for touching upon a subject she was clearly very emotional about. In the morning, he would apologise for poking his nose into business that didn't concern him, but for now, he figured that he'd better leave her to rest up.

Aiden settled into his shift easily, taking the time to wander around the camp perimeter as he looked for any threats. But as he suggested to Sayana earlier, it was a quiet night and he saw nothing except the occasional glimpse of a pair of wolf's eyes, moving through the dark. Having time on his hands to think about such things, Aiden concluded after some thought that the wolf might have accepted all of them as its new pack, with Colt as its leader.

When the time came for Aiden to get some rest, he quietly roused Nellise from her sleep before lying down on his bedroll once more. This time, he had no trouble drifting off, with the soothing sounds of the wind blowing through the trees.

* * *

A sudden blow on his chin stunned Aiden as he crashed down the hole in the forest in Cairnwood. Bewildered and smarting from half a dozen scrapes and bruises, Aiden struggled to clear his head, trying to figure out what had just happened. The daylight had disappeared, except for a small shaft that came from above to pierce the darkness around him.

"Aiden! Aiden are you okay?" Pacian called from above. Slowly, Aiden lifted himself onto his shaky legs, pleased to find that he hadn't broken any bones in his fall.

"Yeah I think so," he called back to his friend, whose face he could see hovering over the hole above. Tentatively, he touched the walls with his hands but was met with nothing but loose dirt and rocks for hand holds on the wall. "I don't think I can climb back out Pace. Go and get help!"

"Are you sure?" Pacian answered hesitantly.

"Yes! Go get help!"

Again his friend hesitated. "How about I go and get some rope?"

"Okay, go and get some rope then, but hurry!" Aiden called, resigned to spending a considerable amount of time down in the hole. Aside from the light streaming in from above, there was only blackness before him. Now that he was thinking a little more clearly, he could feel his back was leaning up against one side of the hole, but suspected that the opposite side was empty.

In the deepening gloom before him, he thought he saw something blue shining in the dark. Curiosity getting the better of him, he crept forward to try and see the faint light more clearly.

Avoiding the worst of the sharp rocks, Aiden reached the source of the dim blue light. Slowly, he moved his right hand close to the light, and felt around to try and figure out what the object was. It was round, cold and hard, which did very little to enlighten him. But the instant all ten of his fingers closed upon it, his world changed.

The darkness of the cave was replaced with the near-blinding light of midday, dazing Aiden as he squinted against the sudden brightness. Gaping in astonishment, the young man found himself crouched upon a snowy plateau with majestic peaks looming around him.

He stood amidst a great battle, surrounded by armoured men wearing the gold dragon tabard of the Kingdom clashing against hooded and robed warriors, with signs of steel armour hidden underneath their garb. The fallen from both sides of the battle littered the landscape, and the ringing of steel and the cries of the combatants threatened to overwhelm Aiden's shocked senses.

His mind struggled to comprehend what had happened to him when one of the Kingdom soldiers suddenly ran through him, appearing out of his chest as though he were a ghost. Sayana stood to his left, looking just as shocked as he was, garbed in a tattered shirt and leather trousers. Her right hand was touching the glowing sphere in Aiden's hands, but she was too stunned by the vision to move. She must have been just as insubstantial as he was, for nobody noticed her presence either.

The black-robed assailants, as if hearing some sort of order, disengaged from the fight and pulled back down the road to Aiden's left. They quickly disappeared below the horizon, prompting some of the defenders to cheer, but most of them appeared to be steeling themselves for something else - something... *worse*.

Sayana tugged at Aiden's sleeve with her free hand, drawing his attention. He looked at her, unsure of what she wanted. Her mouth was moving, but he couldn't hear what she was saying. The wind was blowing and the sounds of the army before them were generating some noise, but not enough to prevent him from hearing the wild girl. He couldn't understand why she was silent, and presumed she had lost her voice somehow. She pulled hard on his left arm, trying to drag him backwards, but his feet were stuck fast.

Aiden's attention was caught by one man who stood on the wall of the fort, dressed in shining, gold-trimmed armour, and appeared to be in command of the Kingdom forces. He pointed across the field in warning, and as if on queue, the ground started to shake from what seemed to be a minor earthquake. Aiden felt all this as if he were standing right there amongst it all, but the soldiers around him paid him no heed. Sayana watched the scene unfold, glancing back and forth in growing consternation. She had at least given up trying to move him, and instead clutched onto his forearm with her left hand.

The shaking of the ground grew more intense until the head of some armoured creature appeared, revealing more of its body as it closed the distance. It was easily over twelve feet in height, with shoulders eight feet across and completely encased in ornate armour. It gleamed with the appearance of burnished steel, and the face etched onto the front of the helmet was forged into an expression of haughty superiority.

It was joined by another, and another of the massive creatures, and a cry of despair arose from the defending soldiers. Sayana grabbed Aiden's attention once more, turning him toward her and practically shouting in his face. As before, no sounds came from her

mouth, and a look of frustration appeared on her fine features. Aiden shrugged at her, and turned to watch the scene unfolding before them.

The defenders held their swords and pikes nervously, and it appeared that their morale was about to break when a rallying cry came from one of their number - a huge man nearly seven feet tall, dressed in black armour topped with a great horned helm leaped to the front, bellowing out a challenge to the monsters that approached. He brandished his massive greataxe that seemed to glow of its own accord, and his challenge was met by the first of the lumbering behemoths.

Glancing over at Sayana, Aiden could see she was trying to pry her right hand off of the glowing sphere he held, but it refused to budge. She looked around desperately for something to help, but there was nothing. She resigned herself to watching the battle before them, slumped against Aiden's side.

After long minutes of untold bloodshed, only the black warrior remained to defend the castle, and he faced off against the last of the armoured creatures alone. This one was different to the others though – shorter by several feet and wielding a huge sword in one of its hands, the edge of the blade rippling with light. They came together in a devastating dance of savagery, sparks flying from their weapons and armour as each combatant sought an advantage over the other.

A shadow grew over the battlefield as something immense obscured the sun. Aiden squinted against the light to see what was happening, and was staggered by the appearance of a creature straight from legend. An immense gold dragon was descending onto the battlefield, its wingspan easily over a hundred feet across.

Talons the size of a man dug into the ground as it crashed to the surface behind the black warrior and its tail swept over the battlements of the fort. Its fine scales gleamed in the cold light, the majestic creature both immensely beautiful and terrifying beyond measure. Sayana gaped at the sight of the great creature, and moved back behind Aiden as far as she could, trembling like a leaf.

Then, unexpectedly, the dragon turned its great head to look directly at her, eyes narrowed and steam issuing from its nostrils. Sayana's mouth opened wide in a silent scream, her left hand held up before her to create a translucent shield that seemed familiar to Aiden somehow. The dragon bellowed a mighty roar towards them and a flash of white light engulfed the battlefield as a blast of wind sucked Aiden and Sayana off their feet. Reflexively, he reached out his hands to stop the fall and dropped the glowing orb, shattering it upon the ground of the cave.

* * *

Aiden sat bolt upright, throwing off his blanket and gasping for breath. The forest of the Calespur ranges surrounded their camp, and the grey light of pre-dawn tinged the sky. The others were sleeping around the camp site's smouldering fire, but Sayana was sitting next to him, her right hand touching the shard hanging around his neck and a look of horror stamped on her face. Snapping out of the trance she appeared to be in, she let go of the shard as her body went limp and collapsed to the ground.

Aiden shook his head to try and clear out the dream from his mind as he tried futilely to understand what had just happened. Sayana gestured weakly with her left hand for him

to lean closer. Still shaking from the dream, he complied, getting close enough to hear her whisper something in his ear before she passed out.

"Aiden, that was no dream."

Chapter Thirteen

It was well past noon before Aiden managed to shake the horrible feeling the dream had left with him throughout the night. Sayana's presence had not seemed odd while in the midst of it, but now, fully awake, he was astonished that she had somehow managed to enter his dreams. Or *vision*, or whatever he should call it now. The young man was no expert on matters of the mind, so he was inclined to take her word for it.

'That was no dream' she had said – the words haunted him, and he wanted nothing more than to talk with her and get some answers. Unfortunately, her remarkable feat had left the sorceress severely weakened, to the point that he had to wait an hour before she regained consciousness.

The others remained unaware of what had transpired during the night. Even though she had been trying to shout and scream within the vision, evidently Sayana had been silent in the real world. Aiden was relieved by this, for he didn't want to discuss whatever the experience had been with anyone else except the wild girl.

She had said nothing at all upon waking however, and remained silent throughout the morning, taking the time to slowly eat a large breakfast before they broke camp and continued on. Nellise had expressed concern that Sayana was looking very tired, and surmised that the late night on watch had been harder on her than she had thought. The young cleric forbade her to take any watches for the next few nights, which did not meet any protest from the sorceress. Colt figured she was still just a weak little girl and paid her no further heed, but Pacian poked Aiden relentlessly, assuming something was going on between him and Sayana.

"She was lying right next to you, what am I supposed to think?" he chided, keeping his voice low as the two young men kept to the rear of the group. "And she's so tired, I mean, you've got to go easy on the poor girl, she's skin and bone."

"Enough already," Aiden replied, exasperated. "Look, if I tell you, will you shut up?" It took Pacian a few moments to decide.

"Probably. There's one way to find out, though."

"Do you remember where I found this?" Aiden asked, lifting the shard on its chain from around his neck just enough for Pacian to see it. His mocking smile faded.

"You know I do," he whispered. "What of it?"

"What I never told you is that every few nights since then, I've had a dream about that day. A really vivid dream, and it's always the same."

"How come you've never told me about it?"

"I just thought I was a little traumatised, or something," Aiden replied, fighting feelings of embarrassment. "Besides, you remember how everyone treated me when I told them what happened. I wasn't about to go through that all over again."

"Fair enough," the blond rogue conceded. "What's this got to do with Flame Girl?" Aiden glanced around to make sure nobody else was within earshot.

“Last night, she appeared in that dream. Specifically, right when I was watching the battle.” Pacian seemed sceptical. “I’m serious; she was standing right next to me, shouting at me, but with no voice. She wasn’t wearing much either, for some reason.”

“Oh, well, that explains a lot,” Pacian said with a wink.

“No, no, it wasn’t like that at all,” Aiden insisted, trying to keep Pacian on track. “The dragon looked right at her, and she screamed like it was about to attack her or something. That dream has been identical every time except for last night, and when I awoke, she was holding on to this shard thing, and then she collapsed.” Pacian took a deep breath and appeared to think about it a little.

“She is a strange one, I’ll give you that,” he mused. “Who knows what sort of abilities she has? Maybe it was real enough for her to jump into your head like that, I don’t know. Perhaps you should go and talk to her.”

“I don’t want the others finding out about this just yet,” Aiden muttered. “Maybe when I get a chance to speak with her alone, I’ll see what she knows. But you know what she’s like – just about everything she does is instinctive, and she doesn’t really understand how she does any of it. Somehow, I don’t think I’m going to get much from her.”

“Worth a try, though,” Pacian replied, both of the young men noticing Colt signalling them to gather around from up ahead. “Oh look, perhaps our intrepid ranger scout has located another distillery from which to sup the sweet nectar of life.” Aiden smiled in spite of himself as they moved forward to investigate.

“This is as good a place to rest as any,” Colt declared when they had gathered around him. “We’ll be at the outpost in a few hours. Get something to eat and catch your breath, I don’t want you to embarrass me when we arrive.” Aiden raised an eyebrow at this statement, but deduced it was probably bluster.

The six of them found moderately comfortable fallen logs to sit upon while they ate a cold meal of cheese, sausage and bread. When nobody thought he was looking, Colt threw a piece of sausage over his shoulder that landed in amongst the trees, only to be snatched up moments later by the wolf, who quickly disappeared into the scrub with his prize.

Pacian and Nellise sat together away from the others, talking quietly. Aiden wondered who was trying to change whom, and which one of them would give in to the other’s point of view first. As he chewed his meal, the young adventurer glanced over at Sayana every few moments. His desire to ask her more about the dream last night was almost overwhelming, tempered only by his desire to keep this strangeness a secret from some of the others.

It was possible they might be able to understand what was going on, but they might also dismiss it as nonsense, which seemed the most likely result. Aiden wasn’t even sure if he really believed it, despite having borne witness to the vision.

He finished his meal faster than the others, gulping down his food as quickly as he could without choking, and then sauntered casually over to the tree Sayana leaned against, the wild girl eating her cheese and bread slowly.

“Can we talk for a moment?” Aiden asked quietly. “There’s something we need to discuss.” She nodded silently, picked up her bread and followed him a little distance from the others where they could talk amongst the cold forest without being overheard. He gestured to a tree with moss-covered roots that seemed to be the least uncomfortable thing for her to sit on, and then crouched down next to her.

"First of all, I want to apologise for saying something that offended you last night," he began. "I obviously touched upon a delicate subject, and I should have chosen my words more carefully."

"Don't feel bad, you couldn't have known," she whispered in reply, pulling her warm cloak tightly around her to keep the chill at bay. "It isn't something I have talked about with anyone before, ever. It's hard to open up..."

"I know how you feel," Aiden said reassuringly. "Well, I hope you're feeling better anyway. You do seem to topple over quite a lot." She shrugged and took a moment between mouthfuls of food to answer.

"My... talents... require a lot of energy, and I simply cannot eat enough food to keep me going sometimes, especially during an event like last night."

"Is that why you eat so much and never gain weight?" Aiden inquired. She stared at him with penetrating green eyes.

"Why did you think I was eating so much?"

"... A love of food?" he replied weakly. "Honestly I didn't know what to think. But we're getting sidetracked here; you know why I wanted to speak with you." She nodded, and stuffed her mouth full of bread. "I'll accept that you somehow managed to appear in my dream... or whatever it was. I've seen you do some pretty amazing things, so I can believe you're capable of entering a person's mind. But if it wasn't a dream, then what was it?"

"My mind would not let me rest," Sayana began to explain. "I laid there for several hours, thinking about the glass you wear around your neck and where it might have come from. Like you, I want answers. I went to take a closer look, and since you were sleeping, I didn't think you'd object. When I touched it, I was instantly in some *other* place - you were standing next to me, and yet you were younger than you are now."

"Aiden, the reason I said it wasn't a dream is the detail I saw - the misting breath from the fort's warriors, the fluttering of the flags, the crunch of snow beneath their feet. No dream has that much detail. It was like I was actually there." She paused to take another bite of bread, conserving her strength. Aiden said nothing, awaiting her next words with as much patience as he could muster.

"There was something else though, a feeling that you and I were just visitors in that place. It was as though we were walking in someone else's dream. I tried to pull you out of it, but I was stuck, just as you were. I didn't know what else I could do about it, and then... the dragon flew in. It was the only other thing in that vision that seemed real."

"As I recall," Aiden said slowly, trying to remember the details, "you screamed when the dragon appeared."

"No, I screamed when it looked at me," she corrected with a shudder. "Have you ever had that feeling, like you were somewhere you weren't supposed to be, and then you are caught?"

"I may have experienced that sensation a few times," Aiden replied flatly. It was actually Pacian whom he had been caught in places he shouldn't have been, but Aiden had the misfortune of being there at the time.

"It was like that. I could feel its anger, and it was... terrible. I wanted to run, but I couldn't get away." A thought suddenly occurred to Aiden.

"Wait a moment, in the dream, the dragon always looks at *me*. And although I feel awe, I've never felt terrified of it, at least, not until I wake up. And you said that it was

the only other thing that felt 'real' to you? Are you saying it's *alive*?" Sayana nodded meekly. "I should tell you that the subject of that vision I had the first time in that cave, was of a battle that happened over a hundred years ago. I did the research – the equipment that was used, the pennants, the setting; it was all at the Battle of Fort Highmarch, even if the metal warriors and the dragon are absent from the histories. How can the dragon in my dream be alive?"

"I do not know how, but I tell you, it's real. I *know* it." Aiden slumped back, struggling to comprehend what this strange turn of events could mean.

He had thought that the sphere was a kind of magical device that could record events, and those events had been imprinted on his mind. But if Sayana was right, it was a living vision, not a stale recording. The implications were beyond his understanding.

"This doesn't really change much," he finally declared, having arrived at a simple conclusion. "I still need to know what that sphere did to me, and the only possible information I've found on it is in Ferrumgaard. If we can retrieve it, we might just have the answers to both your mystery and my own."

"Well, we should probably get back to the others before they start to wonder what we're doing out here," Sayana said. "I hope we don't have too much further to travel, I really could use some more rest."

"Colt said it's not much further to go from here," Aiden said. "As for what they're thinking about us, you can be assured that Pacian has already explored *that* line of thought quite thoroughly. Don't worry about it though; nobody really pays attention to his more outrageous comments."

"I should have another word with him," Sayana muttered. "And by 'word', I mean 'punch'." Aiden smiled briefly but said nothing further as the two of them rejoined the main group. His conversation with the sorceress had given Aiden much to think about over the next few hours, and despite Colt's earlier warnings, he was far too preoccupied to pay attention to their surroundings, until they were almost at the ranger outpost the big man had spoken of.

They continued on through the forest, closing in on the outpost that gradually loomed over the surrounding terrain. It was a two storey structure, and quite elaborately designed. If anything, it was more like a fort built out of logs than a large cabin, for it had crenulations around the second floor that would be an excellent place to shoot from. Indeed, two rangers could be seen standing guard from that position, watching Aiden's group approaching through the brush.

As they approached the fort, the door opened before they could reach it. A man appeared from inside, the ranger they had met a few days ago in Culdery.

"Glad you could all make it," said the ranger called Duncan, shaking hands firmly with Colt and gesturing for them to step inside. "I thought I told you to get some rest and fix yourself up a bit, you look like hell, man," he exclaimed after a cursory examination of Colt's appearance.

"Nice to see you too," Colt growled in reply. "Yeah, we had some trouble to deal with in town, kind of got in the way of my sleeping plans."

"And yet, he still managed to get drunk and knocked unconscious every night," Pacian mentioned casually, stepping into the fort. "He's nothing if not dedicated."

"Still into the booze?" Duncan asked, frowning. "I hope you've had a chance to clear your head, we've got a serious situation to deal with down here, you know."

"Don't you start too," Colt growled, "I get enough mothering from this bunch of girls."

"Perhaps we should speak with your commander and get a handle on exactly what it is you need us to do down here," Nellise segued with aplomb.

"Right you are ma'am," Duncan replied with a grim look. "The commander is in the mess, I'll take you through." They walked down a short hallway adorned with several coats of arms towards a large central area, lit by a large crackling fireplace, and furnished with a few tables and chairs. It was warm, dry, and decorated with ancient weapons and shields hanging on the walls.

There was a sense of discipline to the place, a feeling the Lodge had stood here for many decades, and that the people working and living here were part of long-standing tradition of service to the Crown. The building was large enough to house at least thirty rangers, and yet the halls and common room were quiet from the absence of most of their people.

A large, robust looking man of middle age sat in one of the chairs, finishing up his midday meal. His hair was red, and sported a beard that would make Clavis envious. It was styled into two plaits, with grey streaks near his chin and secured with metal rings around the length. Despite this, his face looked vaguely familiar to Aiden. He couldn't quite place him, however, though he was certain he'd have remembered that beard if he'd met the man before. The Commander turned to look at the newcomers as they entered, standing up as he did so.

"Greetings strangers, I... Colt? What the hell are you doing back here?"

"Hello chief," the big ranger muttered, scratching his head and fidgeting. "I ran into Duncan up in Culdeny and he told me how badly you needed help down here, so... here I am. I'm actually with Aiden," he added hastily, "helping him and the others out where I can. Beats getting drunk, I figured. How's the mouth, by the way?" Aiden could hardly believe it; they had actually found someone Colt was being respectful to. His entire demeanour had changed, almost like a boy seeking approval from his father.

"The swelling has gone down," he replied evenly, his brown eyes sharp, like knives aimed at Colt's throat. "And our local druid assures me that he can replace my missing teeth with wooden ones, but thanks for asking. Just watch your step around here Colt, or I'll have you permanently fired and brought up on charges."

"Perhaps we should leave you two alone," Aiden interjected dryly, for everyone's sake. It was getting a little uncomfortable watching this conversation slowly turn into something less civilised.

"Nah it's okay," Colt replied, still looking ashamedly at his Commander. "I'll just shut my mouth before I get in *real* trouble."

"A smart move. So, I take it you are Aiden?"

"Yes sir, Wainwright. And this is Pacian, Nellise, Sayana and Clavis. And you are?"

"Ah, forgive my manners. Commander Armin Wise, head of the Royal Rangers western detachment. What's left of it anyway." Armin reached out and shook Aiden's hand. He took note of the man's last name, and deduced that he probably wasn't related to Colt, at least not directly. That made the big ranger's reaction to Armin all the more intriguing.

"Your man Duncan mentioned to us that you needed assistance down here," Aiden continued, "And as you've probably heard by now, nothing else is going to be

forthcoming from Culdeny.” Armin slumped back a little, leaning against the table behind him.

“Yes, and I can understand Buchanan's position,” he sighed grimly. “He has a city to keep safe, with a bare minimum of troops necessary to do it. The lives of deer and other animals just aren't important compared to that, and I support his position. Still, I am charged with protecting this reserve, and by God, I shall see it done, even if I have to kill every last poacher out there myself.”

“So how bad is this poaching problem you mention,” Aiden inquired, getting down to business. “I saw on the way in that you've got several men guarding this compound, and I take it that isn't enough to move in and clear the place out?”

“You don't seem to comprehend the size of this forest, young man,” Armin remarked. “Even at full strength – forty rangers – we don't have enough to adequately patrol the entire region. Now I'm down to eight, including myself. The best we can manage is to keep the Lodge secure, and send out a scout every day to check the area. If it was just the usual rabble making trouble, we could probably take care of it. But this is different.”

“How does the current situation differ from 'the usual rabble', as you put it?” Nellise inquired. Armin did a double-take when he looked at her, then focused on answering the question.

“Our scout reported a dozen men entered the region a week ago, armed with longbows and swords,” Armin replied. “They're based out of the southern part of the forest and they're out hunting at dawn every morning. A few of them are armed with expensive, high-quality longbows, and they're killing the King's game with impunity. They even sent a couple of arrows at our scout, one of which took him in the arm. He barely made it back here before passing out from loss of blood. I was awaiting word from Culdeny as to the possibility of reinforcements before moving on them, but to be honest with you my lady, I would be a fool to take on a force like that with the numbers I have.”

“Quality longbows as you described aren't cheap,” Pacian mused. “Whoever these people are, they've got access to a lot of money. Do you know what this sounds like to me? A hunting expedition by city nobles.”

“Correct,” Armin agreed. “They decided to come down here not long after the King stripped the place of protection, the opportunistic bastards.”

“So what's the plan?” Clavis asked. “Roll in there and shoot them all in the head?”

“The King wouldn't approve of me saying this master dwarf, but yes, something like that.”

“You are the authority in this forest, and you're advocating murder?” Nellise protested. “That seems rather extreme. Can't you at least *try* to bring them in alive?”

“Not after they've made it clear they will shoot at us on sight,” Armin said grimly. “We don't have the resources to arrest these men and see them to trial, and if they are indeed nobles, it becomes doubly hard to see them face justice. My instincts tell me to make an example of these men, so that others will think twice about coming down here, even with our reduced numbers. When they think of the Royal Rangers, I want them to wet their pants, begging your pardon madam.”

“Colourful,” Nellise remarked dryly.

“He's right though Nel,” Pacian added. “They're no doubt aware of the Ranger's reduced numbers, and they've probably got enough money to buy themselves out of any

legal trouble. Killing them's the next best option, other than letting them get away with whatever they want, of course."

"And you are no doubt pleased by this turn of events," she accused the blond rogue. "You don't have to resort to killing with quite so much enthusiasm."

"As I've told you before Nel, I have no problem killing scumbags like this," Pacian shrugged.

"I'm glad to hear you're prepared to do what it takes," Armin said approvingly. Nellise scowled, but kept silent. "I do apologise madam, but I have made up my mind. If you are uncomfortable with taking life, you are welcome to stay here tomorrow when we leave.

"I am no stranger to battle, I'm sorry to say," Nellise stated, "but I will never let it be my first option. I am coming with you tomorrow morning, and if an opportunity presents itself, I will call for their surrender."

"And I would like nothing better than for them to capitulate at our request," Armin said. "But I fear that I must plan for the worst and hope for the best. I'll provide all the details at tomorrow's briefing, so make sure you don't sleep in and miss it. Until then, please make yourselves comfortable. The kitchen has some reasonably fresh food in stock, and Duncan can help you with anything else you require. Colt, I trust we can stay professional on this operation?"

"You can count on it, sir," he replied, sounding genuine.

"Maybe there's hope for you yet. You're all dismissed." With that, he turned and walked into a side chamber and closed the door.

"That went well," Duncan said, his face splitting into a grin. "I think the old man hasn't given up on you completely, much to my surprise."

"How could he not love this face," Colt agreed. "You could launch ships with this face."

"It looks like someone's been doing that for years," Nellise remarked casually.

"You *wish* you were as pretty as me," Colt retorted, an uncharacteristic grin on his face. They all had a laugh over the absurdity of that statement before Duncan took charge.

"Alright, the kitchens are through the north door, so if you feel like a bite to eat, help yourselves. Quarters are up those stairs you can see over in that corner. When you want to sleep, just head up and take any room past the first two – they're still being used, but the rest are empty."

"I think we should stop by the armoury first," Colt advised. "I could use some replacement leathers."

"Yeah I was going to mention that," Duncan said with an appraising look. "You've clearly been in some pretty serious fights lately, and these suits weren't designed for front-line combat. Why don't you go and talk to Sarah, I'm sure she can help you out with some new equipment."

"I think we'll do just that."

"If you need me I'll be in the kitchens," Duncan said.

"What, he's got you peeling potatoes?" Colt chided.

"Someone's gotta do it," Duncan shrugged. "We're so short-handed at the moment, even the commander is taking shifts in the kitchen."

“Okay, well try not to poison us to death, if you can help it,” Colt grunted. “We’ll check in with you later.” He gestured for the others to follow him out of the mess hall. After heading down a short hallway, they arrived at a heavy, metal-reinforced oaken door. Colt knocked twice, and a few moments later the sound of a heavy bar being removed from the other side could be heard. The door swung inward, and a tall, fit looking woman with dark hair stood in the doorway.

“What, they let you back in already?” she exclaimed, glaring at Colt. The man really did have an uncanny knack for annoying people.

“I’m not officially back in yet, no,” he grated. “But me and a few friends are here to help out with your little poaching problem.”

“Liar,” she retorted. “You don’t have any friends. And you stink to high heaven.”

“Just help us out or I’ll feed you your own fist,” Colt growled. The woman glanced around at the rest of the group.

“If you *are* actually friends with this cleverly shaved bear, I’ll have to nominate you for sainthood.” Despite this statement, she stepped aside and allowed them to pass through. The armoury was a simple room, with bows and swords on racks along the walls, as well as large wardrobes that probably contained suits of armour, and camouflaged cloaks.

“The more we suffer in this life, the greater our reward in the next,” Nellise offered with a wink as she passed by the woman.

“I think you’re heading for a castle made of gold then,” she replied with a smirk, “But enough of that. I’m Sarah, the quartermaster. What can I do for you?”

“We’re going hunting for those poachers tomorrow morning,” Aiden said, “and I could use something to shoot at the bad men. No, not a longbow,” he added, seeing Sarah instantly reach for a nearby bow on the wall. “I’ve never used one and I don’t think tomorrow morning is the time to start learning.”

“A fair point,” she replied. “They’re mighty weapons but they do require a lot of training. A short bow isn’t really much better, if you’ve never used one. How in God’s name do you live in this country and *not* know how to shoot a bow?”

“He always had his nose buried in books,” Pacian answered, shaking his head in mock lament. “I did what I could to drag him out into the world but alas, it was too late.”

“I have other talents, I assure you,” Aiden corrected him, giving his friend a withering look. “Your commander mentioned you might have a crossbow in here somewhere?” Sarah appeared to think on this for a moment before moving over to a number of wooden crates on the other side of the room. Within moments she had produced a heavy crossbow, nearly twice the size of the one Nellise carried, and a few pouches of bolts to go with it.

In the meantime, Colt had found a suit of heavier leathers with metal plates stitched in strategic places. The quality of the armour was so good it attracted Pacians’ attention.

“I don’t suppose there’s another one in there?” he asked casually. Colt looked around inside the wardrobe and shook his head.

“Sorry, first in, best dressed it seems. If any of you have a problem with the human body, I suggest you avert your eyes while I change.” It was sound advice that Aiden took to heart. He and the others quietly removed themselves from the armoury and returned to the mess hall to have themselves an early dinner before retiring upstairs for the night.

The sleeping quarters for the rangers were somewhat cramped, with two bunks in each room. As Armin had said earlier, most of the rooms were empty, so they didn't feel the need to share. Aiden chose a room at random and bid the others a good night, then lit several candles and took out *Alcott's Treatise on Artefacts Most Ancient*, and read through some of the later sections again, just to see if there was anything else to be gleaned from the text. Nothing else presented itself, however, and Aiden was left to wonder about the relic he sought, and if it was lying beneath the ground only a few days journey to the west. So close, yet so far.

He had difficulty getting to sleep that night, as the thought of tomorrow's impending battle kept him from relaxing. But more than that, he was afraid of the dream - now that he knew there was more to it than a recurring memory, he was scared that the dragon he saw in his mind was also looking back out at him.

It was well past midnight when Aiden gave up, throwing off his covers and putting on his boots and longcoat so that he could creep downstairs to get a drink of water. The Lodge was freezing cold, so he moved as quickly as possible so he could return to the warmth of his bed. The water was drawn from a well outside the Lodge, but they kept a full barrel in the main hall near the front door. He drank his fill of the icy water, and shivering, made his way back down the corridor towards the stairs.

A noise to his right caused Aiden to freeze in place. It sounded like something hitting one of the wooden tables in the mess hall, the entrance to which he was standing in. The young man looked around the room, lit only by the moonlight streaming in through the windows. He noticed the shadowy figure of a man sitting at a table, a large wooden mug in hand and a bottle before him. Aiden was unsure if he should announce his presence, but the man hadn't noticed him yet. As the unknown man took another swig of his drink, Aiden crept around to the stairs and carefully moved unnoticed up to the next floor.

As he was pondering the identity of the late night drinker, Aiden saw that the door to Colt's room was open, and by the light of the moon he could see the beds were empty. A sense of foreboding came over the young man as he went back into his room, grateful for the fact that as bad as his problems were, some people had it worse.

Chapter Fourteen

It was still dark when Aiden was awakened a few hours later. Someone – probably Duncan – came in, kicked the bedpost, and barked something about having 'ten minutes to get downstairs'. Although he had tossed and turned for hours, the sleep he had gotten was the most restful he'd had in some time.

Moving sluggishly at first, Aiden was compelled to clothe himself faster than he wanted to by the bitter cold inside the Lodge. He quickly donned his normal winter attire, and then added the layer of armour over the top of his tunic. As they had experienced, a chain shirt wasn't much protection against arrows, something that was of no small concern in the impending confrontation.

Securing his arming sword in its sheath on his hip, he picked up the heavy crossbow he had acquired and headed out the door and down the stairs. He noted that all the other doors were open, and the quarters empty as he passed by, causing him to wonder just how long he had taken to get ready.

The sounds of quiet conversation could be heard as he reached the mess hall, and by the light of several small lanterns, he could see his companions eating breakfast with the assembled rangers. He placed his crossbow down in a pile where the rest of their gear was stacked, and sat down next to Pacian at a nearby table.

"Morning," he said, his voice rasping slightly with the early hour. Pacian grunted incoherently in reply, providing Aiden with some early morning amusement. Sarah strode over and delivered a bowl of hot stew and some reheated bread for him to eat. He nodded his thanks and ate his fill, knowing he'd need all the energy he could get before the day was done. Just before he finished the bowl, Commander Armin stood up, his chair scraping loudly on the wooden floor.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I understand it's earlier than some of the civilians are used to rising, but it's important we get moving on this as soon as possible. I'm not one for public speaking, so this briefing will be as succinct as my people have come to expect. Sarah, could you set up the map? Let me just move this chair..." With a little wrangling, Armin and Sarah set up a stand with a map on it, lit by a nearby lantern.

"The Lodge is here, at the top right of the map. The large circle you see surrounding that area is our safe zone, so called because we doubt the hunters would strike at us so close to our stronghold. For the past few mornings, our scouts have sighted the bodies of fallen deer in the south and south west area of the ranges. They're skinning the animals and keeping the racks of any bucks they kill, but leaving most of the rest. This is attracting wolves and other predators, so keep your eyes out for any such beasts and steer clear."

"We haven't sighted any campfires in the area down south, but the smell of wood smoke can be detected on the wind, so they've got themselves a cabin or other enclosure to keep anyone from seeing the light of their fire. From what we've learned, they tend to hunt in the mornings, so we're hoping to be in position to lay eyes on them just after dawn, over two hours from now. Hence the early start."

"These bastards better have bags of money on them," Pacian growled. "I didn't get up before dawn just to pocket a few coppers and a bag of deer antlers." There was subdued laughter to the blond rogue's remark that subsided quickly. The situation was too serious for prolonged frivolity.

"We'll find out one way or the other, friend," Armin assured him. "Now, we'll be splitting into two groups. I will lead three of our rangers to the west, where we will hook up with our scout, and then come in from the north aiming for this location here." He pointed to a cross on the lower left side of the map. "Mister Wainwright and his associates, accompanied by Duncan, will head due south from here, then turn west once you have reached this clearing." Again he pointed to this feature on the map.

"From there, we will move in slowly, pushing them back towards this location in the south west, where we speculate their camp is. They've shot at us already, so don't expect them to hesitate if you're spotted. Any questions?"

"How many of them can we expect to be facing?" asked a young ranger across the room.

"Probably a dozen at the most, all proficient archers," Armin replied. "If we find out that we're severely outnumbered, withdraw back to the Lodge, and we'll come up with some other plan. Anything else?"

"You are certain these men are wealthy nobles, yes?" Nellise asked pointedly.

“I’m quite certain of that,” Armin replied firmly.

“I find it difficult to believe that they would fight to the death. These are educated men, with families, wealth and holdings. They will not fight to the death unless you force them to.”

“I’ve already made my position clear, madam,” Armin warned, but Pacian came to her aid.

“No, she’s right. A rich man doesn’t fight to the death, because he has too much to lose. He’d pay someone else to die for him.”

“Given that such people usually have servants with them, it is likely that we will be forced to engage them before we even reach the noblemen,” Armin rejoined. “My decision stands.” Nellise exchanged a concerned glance with Pacian, who, for once, seemed to share her position. Armin clearly considered the matter closed, however, and dismissed the meeting at once. The rangers around them stood and moved with purpose to collect their equipment, so Aiden and the others followed suit. Armin headed in their direction, holding his pack under one arm.

“A moment of your time,” he requested, looking at Sayana. “I’m not sure what you bring to this team of yours, but unless I see something to prove you can take care of yourself, I cannot permit you to go with them.” She nodded, then held out her palm and produced a tongue of flame. Armin did not seem impressed.

“I see you’ve got some magical talent. That’s a rare thing this far from civilisation, but all that little trick is going to do is draw the wrong sort of attention from our adversaries.” Sayana narrowed her eyes a little, but held her anger in check.

“I won’t waste my power on a demonstration,” she replied calmly. “And in any case, there’s little else I could show you that wouldn’t destroy this building. I would ask you to trust that I can protect myself, and provide a valuable contribution.”

“You’re plain spoken, I like that in a woman,” Armin said, smiling slightly. Colt flicked him a dark look that passed almost as quickly as it appeared. But Aiden caught it, as well as the slight whiff of alcohol emanating from the big man. “Alright, you can go, but I hope for your sake you are not exaggerating your capabilities. I wish you all good hunting, and we’ll meet you at the agreed location.” Aiden reached out and shook his hand, then picked up his crossbow.

“Just a moment, you’ll be needing these,” Sarah said, handing him a cloak. “The commander was concerned about your visibility, so you can borrow these camouflaged cloaks for the operation. Especially you, ma’am,” she added, looking at Nellise. “I understand a white robe is symbolic of the church, but it’s going to make you a target, even in the dimmest of light. And don’t get me started on that shiny breastplate.”

“Yes, well, traipsing around the woods at night wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I bought this,” Nellise lamented, taking the offered cloak and draping it around her shoulders. She pulled up the hood and fixed the clasp on the front, hiding just about all of her white robe, except for a little down near her boots. “I hope this is sufficient?” Sarah nodded and set the cloaks down on the table. Sayana and Pacian took one each, but Clavis declined.

“They’re for tallfellows like yerselves,” he pointed out with a wink. “If I put that thing on, I’ll be tripping over it all day long. Don’t worry, I know how to keep a *low profile*.” Aiden smiled at his comment as he led the rest outside when they were ready.

The air was calm and frigid that morning, and their breath misted in the dim light of the exterior lanterns as they stood there, rubbing their gloved hands together for warmth. Nobody spoke, but whether it was the early hour or the stress of the impending fight, Aiden couldn't tell. A minute later, Armin led his rangers around the north side of the Lodge, where they quickly disappeared into the dark woods surrounding the building.

"Okay, we're used to moving around here in the dark," Duncan began, his voice low. "But some of you are obviously going to run into a few branches now and then. We'll start out slowly until you get a feel for the place. I'll scout ahead about fifty feet, and Colt shouldn't have any trouble leading you after me, unless he's forgotten how to track in the past two months."

"A blind grandmother could follow your lumbering footsteps," Colt blustered.

"Then you've got no bloody excuses," Duncan retorted. "Let's head out, we've got about two hours of travel ahead of us." They waited a few moments while the ranger moved ahead, then Colt gave the signal and they moved off into the night.

Travel was difficult at first, for the forest was full of low-hanging branches that always seemed to swat Aiden in the face with a load of ice-cold slush. After a while, his eyes began to adjust to the near darkness of pre-dawn, with the crescent moon occasionally showing through the clouds to provide moments of dim illumination. Only Colt, and maybe Sayana, were used to travelling this way, the rest of them had to take extra care to avoid rocks, roots, holes, and other obstructions that wouldn't ordinarily be impeding their progress under the light of day.

Roughly an hour after they'd left the Lodge, Aiden noticed the terrain had become a lot more treacherous, to the point that he'd tripped twice in the last two minutes and their progress was starting to suffer. Annoyed, Aiden moved ahead as quickly as he could to catch up with Colt.

"Do you think Duncan could have led us along a more difficult path?" he complained in a low voice as they kept moving along. "I'm sure there's probably a family of angry bears he could run in to."

"Didn't think he was up to it," Colt whispered in agreement, his voice coarse. "The fool should have let me scout ahead." As he spoke, Aiden once again caught the distinctive whiff of alcohol.

"Wait a minute, are you *drunk*?"

"Not a chance, I could get far drunker," Colt slurred. Aiden put his hand on the big ranger's shoulder and spun him around so they could talk face-to-face. Although the light was very dim, Aiden could see that Colt was swaying unsteadily after the unexpected change in direction.

"Good God man," Aiden exclaimed, "how many did you have before you went to sleep?"

"I didn't," Colt assured him. "It's brilliant, I just drank real slow, and before I knew it, 'twas time to get up already." Aiden was disgusted. Although he'd known Colt was downstairs drinking, he thought the man was just going to have a couple before bed. It was the height of stupidity to try and lead them into a fight, having downed what Aiden presumed was half a bottle of strong spirits. And of course, he hadn't told anyone. A horrible thought occurred to the young adventurer just then, and he put a steadying hand on Colt's shoulder.

"You have no idea where Duncan is, do you," he asked with some trepidation.

“Not as such, no,” Colt admitted with almost comical indifference. “He really is the best man we’ve got. So good, he bloody well lost me about half an hour ago. But I figure we’ll catch up to him sooner or later.”

“Unless we’re completely off course,” Aiden muttered in exasperation.

“There is that,” Colt shrugged. Frustrated and annoyed, Aiden gave the drunken man a shove, dropping him onto the ground.

“What’s going on here?” Nellise whispered, arriving on the scene to witness the shove.

“Colt’s drunk, and we’re lost,” Aiden said, condensing the last minute of deduction into one convenient sentence.

“Oh no, you didn’t did you?” Nellise groaned at Colt.

“You’re damn right I did,” Colt announced boisterously, “and hang those who say different!” Moments later, Pacian and the rest arrived to witness the scene before them in the cold darkness.

“This is ridiculous,” Pacian declared after Aiden gave them the condensed version of events. “This whole plan is going to fall apart because of this idiot. What possessed you to think you could drink that much, and expect to be able to function this morning?”

“Never you mind,” Colt growled, his mood quickly turning black.

“So what do we do now?” Sayana asked quickly. “I could probably find Duncan’s tracks if it was light, but we’ve got no hope of catching up to him before dawn.”

“What if we keep heading the way we were going?” Nellise wondered. “Wouldn’t we eventually come to the right area anyway?”

“Only if we were heading west o’ Duncan’s path,” Clavis calculated. “If we were headin’ easterly, continuing in the same direction will only take us further from the combat zone.”

“So we head southwest then,” Aiden said. “Regardless of what direction we were going until now, that’s pretty much guaranteed to take us closer to where we need to be.”

“Which way is southwest?” Sayana asked. “If the stars or the sun were visible I could figure it out, but again, until dawn, there’s no way to know exactly what way we’re moving.”

“That’s easy,” Aiden answered. “We can assume we were heading more or less south. So we just change our course to the right. Sayana, you seem to have better night vision than the rest of us and have more experience in the wild, could you take the lead?” The sorceress hesitated a moment, giving Clavis a chance to speak up.

“With all due respect to yer human eyes lass,” he began, “Me and my kin have been finding our way around beneath the ground for centuries. Why don’t I lead ya through?” This time it was Aiden’s turn to hesitate. They hadn’t known the dwarf for very long, and although he didn’t see why they shouldn’t trust him, Aiden nevertheless wasn’t sure. Ultimately, the deciding factor was Clavis’ sight, which was most certainly better than anyone else’s.

“Clavis, take the lead,” he instructed, finally settling the issue in his mind. “Everyone else, stay close to him. If we run into trouble, it’d be better to fight as a group.”

“What do we do about him?” Pacian wondered, looking down at the drunken form of Colt.

“I’ll take care of him,” Aiden muttered. “If we fall behind though, don’t wait up. Armin is counting on at least a few of us being there to provide support on the eastern

flank, and he'll be in trouble if we're not there. Come on, you vagabond," Aiden growled at Colt, heaving the big man to his feet. "You're going to walk, or by God I'm going to leave you here."

"Yeah yeah, I'm moving," Colt groaned, staggering alongside Aiden as they brought up the rear of the group. They had only travelled for a few minutes when the big ranger had to stop.

"Wait a moment, I think I dropped something," he mumbled. He bent down to look at the ground and promptly vomited. Aiden rolled his eyes and found something else to look at. After a few minutes of retching, Colt took a swig of water from his water skin, spat it out on the ground then slowly got back on his feet. "Okay found it, let's go." Aiden shook his head and said nothing.

They'd fallen behind the rest of the group, but it was going to be difficult to make up for lost time with Colt slowing him down. The quick stop had helped him clear his head a little, but it was still like dragging a lead weight through the forest. He wasn't sure how stealthy they were being either, since the big man wasn't making any effort to soften his footfalls.

It was nearly half an hour later when the sky began to lighten to the dull grey of pre-dawn. The ground underneath was beginning to rise the further they travelled, the beginning of the hills that led towards the nearby mountains. Aiden still had no clear idea where they were, except that he was fairly certain that Clavis and the others weren't far ahead. Colt, in a brief moment of lucidity, confirmed this by looking at the broken branches they passed. Hoping to catch up with them, he started moving through the thinning forest faster, and with each passing moment, the increasing light made navigating the often treacherous footing easier. He was startled a minute later by a sudden noise to his left.

"Psst!" a tree whispered at him. Looking closer, he saw the vague outline of Pacian leaning up against the trunk, almost invisible in the dull grey light while draped in his camouflaged cloak. "Get under cover, Clavis has found something." Staying silent, he ducked behind the same tree Pacian was hiding behind, while Colt crept over to a nearby bush.

"What's he found?" Aiden whispered, craning his neck around in a futile effort to see what was going on. He could just make out the stout figure of the dwarf, lying flat on the ground with his crossbow pointing straight ahead. It was still too dark to make out anything beyond that, so he hoped Pacian had some answers for him.

"He spotted something moving around in the trees ahead," the blond rogue supplied.

"Men? Or something else?"

"He reckons it was someone trying to remain unobserved, creeping from tree to tree."

"I suppose it could be Duncan, or one of the other rangers," Aiden mused.

"We never saw that clearing we were supposed to head west from, either," Pacian added in hushed tones. "If we went too far west, maybe we've stumbled into the area that those hunter's claim."

"Only one way to find out," Aiden suggested, creeping forward for a closer look. The sounds of birds greeting the new day with their songs began to blanket the forest in sound, making quiet movement through the forest that much easier. A thick fog was settling in over the landscape, reducing vision in the morning light down to little more

than twenty yards. It was perfect conditions for Aiden and the others to approach undetected, but it was also ideal for concealing their enemies.

“What have you found?” Aiden whispered to Clavis as he crouched down alongside the prone dwarf. Before he could answer though, a large form walked past them no more than fifteen yards away, appearing silently like a ghost moving through the forest. Aiden's breath caught in his chest for a moment before he realised it was only a deer. A buck, to be precise, as it was sporting an impressive rack of antlers.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered, exhaling explosively with his heart racing from the brief excitement. The buck strolled past, unaware of their presence. Just before it disappeared from view, it suddenly lurched to the right and let out a bellow before crashing to the ground. Aiden fell flat on the ground next to Clavis, not sure what had just happened.

“See there,” the dwarven marksman whispered, pointing to the fallen buck that lay twitching not twenty yards from their position. “A clothyard shaft sticking out of its head. An expert shot, if I e'er saw one.” Aiden could only barely make out the arrow in the poor conditions, but he took the dwarf's word for it. It seemed they had encountered one of their hidden targets, who had proven more than capable of dropping any one of them in a single shot.

Aiden scanned the small visible area around them, as he prepared his heavy crossbow to shoot. He wished he'd had the chance to practice with it a little before his life depended on it, but he understood the mechanisms of the weapon well enough. He started cranking the windlass back to ready the string for the bolt he would slide into place, but something caught his eye in the middle of preparing the crossbow – the grey figure of a man, holding a longbow, was moving through the forest towards the fallen buck. He was absolutely silent, and was dangerously close to spotting the two of them lying on the ground.

He held his breath and watched in tense silence as the hunter walked over to the fallen buck, whereupon he looked down on his kill with what Aiden assumed was satisfaction. So it came as a surprise when a pair of arms reached out of a tree that stood behind the hunter and grabbed him – one hand across his mouth, the other making a slicing motion across his throat.

The hunter never knew what hit him, being grappled from behind and pulled to the ground as he thrashed about silently. His assailant stood over the twitching body for a moment, then crouched down to search through his possessions. Aiden, incredulous, quickly moved in for a closer look and saw that it was Pacian who had killed the hunter, and now crouched over his lifeless body, wiping the man's blood from his blade on his own clothes.

“One down, eleven to go,” he whispered grimly as Aiden crouched next to him.

“How did you get over here so fast?”

“As soon as the buck went down, I figured someone would come in to claim the kill,” the he explained in a low voice. “The others won't be aware of their missing friend for a while, thanks to this fog, so we've got time to move in closer and take a few more out before they're on to us.”

“We still have no idea where the other rangers are though,” Aiden warned. “So we need to be careful about who we attack, okay?”

“Don't worry,” Pacian assured him, “By the time I've gotten close enough to cut into the man, I've seen his face. Just make sure everyone else knows what they're doing,

especially Nel – she's not exactly a marksman.” Deigning not to answer that, Aiden turned and crept back over to the others, who had gathered around the area Clavis had staked out. Nellise had her crossbow out as well, and Colt had strung his longbow. How useful he was going to be with it was another question.

“We're in deep now, so the plan is to keep moving in, slow and quiet,” Aiden instructed quietly. “These men are clearly masters with their weapons, and we can't let them get a clear shot at us, or they'll hit us so hard there won't be enough left of us for Nellise to heal. At some point we'll run into the other rangers, so check your targets carefully. Let's move.”

The group set off again, staying low amongst the trees, and keeping a sharp eye out for any movement in the forest. The morning light continued to increase, and the sun was probably going to rise at any minute. The fog should stay around for a while after that, at least, affording them extra cover to move about in. But once it lifted, hell was going to break loose.

Several tense minutes went past as they slowly advanced through the fog. With the growing light of day, Clavis whispered that his sight was no better than theirs now, taking away one of their few advantages, but it was Sayana that first noticed something out of the ordinary. Travelling close to Aiden, she put a hand on his forearm to gain his attention, pointing to her right ear, and then gesturing ahead, clearly indicating that she heard something. Aiden signalled everyone to stop, then crouched down and listened carefully. He couldn't hear anything over the sounds of the wildlife in the forest, but he had learned to trust Sayana's senses.

“Wait for my signal,” Aiden whispered, hoping that nobody would shoot beforehand and give away their position. Sure enough, less than half a minute later, a heavy-set man with a longbow could be seen advancing slowly through the trees. He was still a silhouette of grey against the lighter shade of the fog, and he could easily have been a ranger, so they had to wait a little longer just to be sure. Aiden's heart pounded in his chest and he yearned to pull the trigger and be done with it.

The figure moved closer still, and more features were revealed, enough to show he certainly wasn't wearing the camouflaged leathers of a ranger. He had his confirmation.

“Wait,” Nellise hissed just as Aiden was about to signal for the attack. He turned to look at her, uncertain why she had spoken, and could plainly see her dropping her weapons and discarding the camouflaged cloak the rangers had provided.

“Nel, What are you *doing*?” Aiden whispered harshly as she strode forward.

“I cannot allow this to turn into another massacre, not without at least trying to speak with them,” she declared firmly at normal volume. The hunter immediately turned to her and leveled his bow, drawing the arrow back, ready to shoot.

“I am unarmed, sir,” she called the man, stepping towards him slowly but surely. “I am a cleric of the Church of Aielund, come to speak with whoever you consider to be in charge of your contingent.”

“You are brave, my lady, to be walking through the forest at this particular time,” the hunter replied with an educated voice. “Dare I ask if you were accompanied, perhaps by a number of rangers?”

“The Royal Rangers are coming for you, yes,” Nellise confirmed, causing Aiden to groan inwardly and lower his face to the ground. In attempting to find a peaceful solution, she had just disclosed the impending attack. “Their leader believes that you are

criminals that need to be eradicated, but I suspect you have a modicum of good sense within you. Allow me to speak with your master, so that we can avert any further loss of life.”

“You shall have your chance to speak, madam,” came a voice drifting through the forest ahead. The fog had all but lifted completely now, allowing Aiden to see who was moving in on their position. Through the trees came four men in expensive attire, with two large hunting dogs attached on heavy leashes. None of these men had noticed Aiden and the others just yet, so he indicated they should stay low. Clavis shifted his weight around a little and settled in for a long wait, keeping the approaching men in clear view of his deadly weapon should Nellise’s gambit fail.

One of the hunters was an older gentleman with grey hair, a thick moustache, and a neatly trimmed beard. He was dressed in high quality armour and clothing, more so than the others around him, and held a magnificent longbow in one hand. Beside him was a rugged, unshaven chap holding the two dogs on leashes. They began to bark incessantly at the sight of Nellise, who stood there unafraid, a figure of white amidst the natural hues of her surroundings. The other two men were nondescript, their features hidden beneath deep hoods.

“What is your name, madam?” asked the gentleman, who came to a halt ten yards from where she stood. His companions spread out and kept a close watch on their surroundings, their longbows ready to shoot at a moment’s notice.

“Nellise Sannemann,” she replied easily. “You are in command here, I take it?”

“I am Lord Thomas Fairchild, Baron of Calespur,” the man answered with authority. “You are trespassing on my lands, child, as are the rangers who come to dispute my claim.”

“I had hoped you would be a man of honour,” Nellise continued. “I am pleased to see my hope confirmed. Yes, I am working with the Rangers, but I assure you, I am not speaking to you now as some sort of distraction. My motivations are genuine, and you would do well to heed my words.”

“You are well spoken, Miss Sannemann,” Lord Thomas remarked. “Aside from my companions, I have only spoken to uncouth frontiersmen out here in the woods, and am the worse for it. I assume that Commander Armin is somewhere out in the forest, yes?” Nellise nodded in confirmation. “He would not have risked someone such as yourself in a simple diversion, so I can also assume that he was not privy to your plans to open a dialog with me.”

“I have no doubt that he will have strong words for me when this is all over,” Nellise said.

“Though you may not think of yourself as a distraction, I assure you that the good commander is, even now, encircling this position to use you as such. Tell me, child, what is it you hope to achieve?”

“A peaceful settlement,” she answered. “I have seen too much bloodshed of late to want more of it, and regardless of who would win this fight, lives would be lost. You are clearly an educated man of means, my Lord, far moreso than the rabble I was forced to deal with only days ago, on the highway. Do not force this into a bloody confrontation, as that was.”

“You were involved with dealing with those brigands?” Lord Thomas inquired, sounding impressed with this revelation.

“Regretably, yes,” Nellise conceded. “They were uninterested in anything but slaughter and pillage, sir. You do not have to take the same path as they, for you are clearly no ruffian seeking to pilfer the region.”

“I wish only to reclaim what is rightfully mine,” the lord stated defiantly. “As I told your commander a week prior, these are my family's hereditary lands, and in the absence of the King, *I* decide who has the right to hunt here. Instead of recognising my legitimate claim, the Rangers have instead sought to hound my associates and I like common criminals. I have no choice but to treat them in kind.”

“A little full of himself isn't he,” Pacian whispered. Aiden had a different reaction to the speech, suddenly having gained a better understanding of why this was happening in the first place. It would seem Armin hadn't told them all the facts of this matter.

“If you had a legitimate claim to these lands, you would not have waited for the King to leave the country before moving here,” she chastised the hunters. “When word reaches his ears about what you've done, you will have no chance of keeping them.”

“That is precisely the point, my lovely friend,” the lord shouted back. “He *isn't* here, and if you think he's coming back alive from Tulsone, you are sorely mistaken. You have shown courage, coming here to stand before me and state your position, and I respect you for it, Miss Sannemann, so I shall allow you to leave unaccosted before the fighting starts.”

The sounds of men crying out in pain could be heard echoing through the forest at that point, each of whom was quickly silenced. The sound set everyone on edge, especially Lord Thomas and his associates, who had undoubtedly just heard some of their companions being taken out by the rangers as they approached through the green. The hounds began barking, eager to be unleashed.

“Don't be a fool,” Nellise implored the men, who had taken up position behind trees in anticipation of a fight. “You are sorely outmatched, and defiance will only result in more deaths. If you truly have a claim to these lands, seek legitimate methods to stake your claim instead of this borderline treason.”

An arrow came in from his right at that moment out of the forest, and was quickly followed by three more, all aiming for the lord's position. Startled, he turned to see the source of the attack and was suddenly struck by an arrow in his leg, sending him tumbling backwards onto the ground. The two other hunters loosed arrows back in the direction of the attack, and at this point Aiden knew the time had come to act.

“Drop your weapons!” He yelled, sitting upright and bringing his crossbow to bear on the hunters. Clavis and Colt appeared in the open as well, their weapons held straight and level at their opponents, who froze in place at the sudden appearance of the armed men.

“There are better ways to deal with this, especially for men of means such as yourselves,” Nellise suggested firmly. “Give up this pointless fight before you are all killed.” Seeing their lord fall, and faced with the prospect of fighting overwhelming numbers, the two remaining hunters threw down their weapons and surrendered, just as Commander Armin and his team of rangers appeared on the scene, threading their way through the trees with their bows at the ready.

“Shackle those men,” Armin ordered one of his rangers, coming to stand over Lord Thomas, who gripped the arrow shaft in his leg and glared back up at his enemy. “You're lucky to be alive right now, My Lord. If it wasn't for the intervention of this courageous

yet *stubborn* lady, you'd have a half dozen shafts sticking out of you instead of just the one."

"You haven't heard the last of this," Thomas growled through the pain as the rangers dealt with his men, including the master of hounds.

"Of course not, we'll hear all about this at your trial in the near future," Armin replied succinctly. He then refocused his attention to the rest of them as Aiden and his companions moved in. "Miss Sannemann, it would appear your convictions have borne fruit."

"I'm sorry I disobeyed your orders, Commander," Nellise offered as the hunters were taken away by the assembled rangers, "but my conscience wouldn't allow another pointless slaughter to take place while I sat and watched."

"The simple fact that you were willing to stake your life on the possibility you'd be listened to astounds me. I'd watch out for this one, Aiden. She's going to be a real handful."

"Don't I know it," Aiden replied, giving the cleric a look of unabashed admiration.

Chapter Fifteen

"If you ask me, you're all damned lucky to be alive," Armin observed a few minutes later, walking over after speaking with his people. "In my professional opinion, this was a narrowly averted catastrophe, and it was only the raw talent and courage of your young cleric that prevented the hunters from slaughtering you all. Tell me, how did you end up being so far out of position?"

"I guess we're just not used to moving around at night," Aiden replied in the form of a half-truth. "We fell behind and lost sight of Duncan, and rather than call to him and possibly give away both our position and the plan, we pressed on as best we could in order to make sure you had support on your eastern flank. Clearly we misjudged the direction we were heading in, and moved into the combat area far sooner than we should have."

"It seems to me," Armin mused, "that a competent ranger should have picked up on that. A pity you didn't have such an individual with you."

"Don't go too hard on him," Aiden protested. "We had to make a decision about which direction to go, and I made the call. If you want to blame someone for this, the man you want is sitting before you." Armin gazed over at Colt for a moment, then reached into a pouch and produced a pipe and smoking weed.

"I see. Clearly your inexperience in such conditions was an obstacle. Nevertheless, the situation has been resolved to my satisfaction, if not through a method I would have chosen. The conduct of you and your people bought you enough time to allow us to find you. Still, if I were you, I wouldn't be seeking employment with the rangers anytime soon."

"Rest assured, my ambitions lie elsewhere," Aiden said, unoffended by the frank assessment. He wasn't fully comfortable taking the blame for Colt's actions, but he knew if Armin found out the big man was responsible for losing their way, he'd never get back into the rangers.

"I have a question, if you don't mind," he continued. Armin nodded his assent as he lit his pipe and took a few puffs. "As he was talking to Nellise, Lord Thomas mentioned a

few things I found interesting. Namely, that he was the legitimate claimholder to these lands.”

“He’s wrong, I assure you. His family did name Calespur as one of their holdings over a century ago, but they ran it so poorly the King at the time – Alaric the second – seized control and created the Royal Rangers to oversee the proper governance of the forest. Fairchild believed he could seize it back from us just because the King is out of the country.”

“Yes, Nellise informed him of his error just before the end,” Aiden remarked. “What was of particular interest to me was when he mentioned that you had a communication with the man a week ago.”

“Correct,” Armin confirmed, puffing on his pipe.

“Why were we not informed of this during the briefing?”

“I deemed it irrelevant,” the Commander declared. “I had informed him that we, as agents of the King, were not going to recognise his claim, and that he was still subject to the Crown’s laws. All that remained was to remove him and his associates from the area, a task for which I was reluctant yet determined to see through. I do apologise if this seems like an arbitrary decision on my part, but I am not in the practice of asking consent from anyone, save for His Majesty, when it comes to protecting my demesne.”

“Fair enough then,” Aiden mumbled, not about to contest the point further with the rugged frontiersman. “I think that covers it, unless you’ve something else to add.”

“No, except to offer both a handshake, and my gratitude, for the assistance of you and your party. This action will go a long way toward showing those who doubt the will of the Crown that we will not stand idly by while the laws of this land are being ignored. Now, I can see your lovely lady of the cloth is beckoning your attention, so I shall leave you to it.” Aiden stood up and shook Armin’s hand firmly, then walked over to rejoin the others.

“Well, he’s happy with the result, although I suspect he was hoping for a little more blood, to be honest,” Aiden informed them.

“I can understand his position,” Clavis said, smoking his pipe. “Corrupt lords have a way of avoiding justice, if’n ya know what I mean.”

“I was trying to get closer to him to give him what he deserved, but Nellise went and spoiled it all,” Pacian complained, though he glanced at her with unabashed admiration.

“For which I am very pleased to know,” she admonished him. “Please, I’ve heard enough praise for now; just know that I acted according to my conscience, and I would do it again in a heartbeat. Those weren’t savages or criminals, they were simply misguided noblemen.” She turned to see Lord Thomas being led away, and the two of them locked eyes for a long moment, but said nothing.

Colt, dealing with a terrible hangover, looked more uncomfortable than usual and made his thoughts known to Aiden.

“I overheard what you said,” the big man whispered. “I don’t know why you’re covering for me, but I’m real appreciative.”

“You’ve saved our lives more than once,” Aiden informed him under his breath. “Also, I’m sure if I’d told Armin what really happened, he’d never let you back into the Rangers.”

“True,” Colt agreed. “Well, if there’s anything I can do for you, just ask.”

"I'll bear it in mind," Aiden agreed, watching as the commander headed their way once more. He tossed a pouch of coins to Pacian, who caught it with ease.

"I was wondering if we were going to be paid for this," the blond rogue wondered.

"Fair pay for fair work, that's what my father always used to say," the Commander said. "Now, I think we're just about finished with this unseemly business. We will take the bodies back for burial, and see these other criminals back to Culdeny as a present for their watch commander. This concludes our association. I want to thank you all for your bravery, and your service to the crown. Even you, Colt. Keep this up and I might just forget about our little 'incident'."

"Well, that's real big of you sir, I'm honoured," Colt replied hesitantly.

"Don't be honoured, be careful," Armin retorted. "If I hear you screw up one more time, I'll see to it you never work for the King again."

"Don't worry about me, I'm on the straight and narrow, now," Colt said.

"See that you are. Alright then Duncan, get these outlaws back to the Lodge, and tell Mona she's free to return to her vigil."

"Very good, sir," Duncan replied. He gave Nellise a quick salute, then turned and started moving the shackled hunters northward, followed by the rest of the rangers.

"Wait, Mona is still here?" Colt exclaimed as Armin was about to join the rest of his people.

"Yes, she was instrumental in preventing your deaths, as it happens. Why?"

"I... just assumed she would have gone with the King," Colt stammered.

"Well, as the old saying goes, 'When you assume, you make an ass out of you and me'. Except that in this case, it's just you. King Seamus did request that she went along on his expedition, but she refused, saying 'it wasn't her war'."

"That mustn't have gone down too well," Nellise observed. Armin chuckled ruefully.

"The King was incensed, actually. But he has no authority over her, and was wise not to press the issue. If you're heading west, you'll run into her before long, but for now we must be going. Farewell friends, and safe travels." Aiden and the others said their goodbyes as the rangers started to move off into the forest.

"I don't know about you lot, but I could use a rest," Pacian said with a yawn. "I hate early mornings."

"We could all use a chance to freshen up a bit," Nellise agreed.

"I was thinkin' that high and mighty Lord Thomas wouldn't be needing his cabin anymore," Clavis suggested. "How about we settle in there for a nap afore we head into the mountains?"

"I love it," Pacian grinned at the prospect. Without any further dissent, they set off at a casual walk through the forest.

The sun peeked out from behind the clouds as they walked, dissipating the last of the fog and sending soft streams of light filtering through the forest canopy. The occasional fleeting sign of deer moving through the woods could be seen in the distance, but Aiden and the others were moving too loudly to ever get close enough to the timid creatures. A thought occurred to the young explorer as they walked along through the picturesque scene, so he dropped back to speak with Colt about something that was bothering him.

The big ranger was strolling along lazily towards the rear of the group, his face obscured by the olive drab hood of his cloak. He didn't react as Aiden fell into step

alongside him, content to meander along through the after-effects of the previous night's indiscretions.

"I have to wonder, what exactly is your problem?" Aiden asked in a rather blunt fashion. "What is eating away at you so badly that you go and drink yourself to a stupor at the worst possible times?"

"It's personal," Colt grated, his voice hoarse. But Aiden already had a fair idea of what his problem was.

"Who's Mona?" he asked casually, noticing Colt flinch at the mention of the name. "I mean, I know she's one of the rangers, from what Armin was saying, but who is she to *you*? And for that matter, why was she exempt from the King's authority?"

"She's an elf-maiden," Colt explained. "Her people used to live around here centuries ago, before humanity moved into the area. They pulled back to the western end of the continent and set up a new city there, but left a few of their people behind to watch over their forests. Calespur is Mona's area, so she hangs around here a lot. We work with her from time to time, but mostly she keeps to herself."

"Somehow I don't think you're being entirely truthful with me," Aiden said, eyeing him shrewdly.

"Maybe because it's a private matter, and you should keep your bloody nose out of it," Colt growled in reply.

"Sorry, can't do it," Aiden shot back. "It's affecting your judgement, and you nearly got us lost back there. So you're going to tell me what the hell is the matter with you, or I'm going to tell Armin what *really* happened today. And you won't be travelling with us anymore either, so you'll be free to drink yourself into oblivion." Colt glared back at Aiden with bloodshot eyes staring out from under the shade of his hood. For a moment, he looked like he was about to object vociferously, but his shoulders sagged and he relented.

"Alright, I'm in love with her. Happy now?"

"I had a feeling that was the case," Aiden replied evenly, "But there's more to it than that. I'm guessing that your feelings have not been returned?"

"They have," Colt objected, "but I wasn't the only one interested in her. Mona was helping us track down some poachers nearly a month ago, and we worked together closely for near on a week. She and I were getting well acquainted, spending nights talking next to the campfire. She's something special alright, I ain't never met a woman like her." His eyes glazed over a little as he looked back at better days. "But Armin had his sights on her too. He'd worked with her on and off for twenty years, you see, and never had the guts to say what's in his heart."

"Something changed, I'm guessing," Aiden remarked, drawing a nod from the unusually communicative ranger.

"He made his intentions clear not long after we got back from our week-long expedition. Finally had the courage to make his move, right when I was about to. You may not have noticed, but I'm not real good at being subtle."

"It's news to me," Aiden deadpanned.

"Well, I told him what I thought of his little gesture, but he ignored me and went to kiss Mona. She seemed amused by the whole thing, until I grabbed Armin and punched his lights out. And some of his teeth, for that matter."

"Ah, that explains a lot."

“That's only the half of it,” Colt continued. “Mona thought of me as a typical savage human, told me so, then left. That was the last time I saw her, 'cause Armin had me take a leave of absence. For all I know, she never wants to speak to me again. But I still love her Aiden, and it tears me up inside.”

“Well, I guess you're going to get your closure soon,” Aiden offered after considering all he'd heard. “You can speak with her on the way to the mountains later on, alright?”

“It'll be impossible to get past without her knowing.”

“Good enough then. You're going to have your answer, one way or another. And then you're going to pull yourself together and move on, because we need you sharp, and sober.” Colt nodded, and the two of them trudged along for a while. It wasn't long before they could see the cabin up ahead, a quaint-looking structure constructed of horizontal logs in a secluded place behind a small rise.

“Here it is then,” Colt observed. “Thanks for letting me get that off my chest Aiden, I don't feel so bad about it now.”

“You certainly made me work for it,” Aiden said refully, clapping the big man on the back. Although it was hard for him to picture a tall, beautiful, elf-maiden loving this brutish outdoorsman, he supposed stranger things had happened in the course of history, and if talking about his problem helped Colt get his act together, so much the better.

“It's not a badly built place at all,” Clavis was saying, as Aiden and Colt caught up with the group.

“It's real quaint,” Colt grunted as Pacian opened the door and peered inside. “Make yourselves comfortable, and I'll be back in an hour. Just be ready to get moving by then.” He strode off into the forest in something of a hurry.

“I guess it's time for his annual bath,” Aiden remarked with a knowing grin as he followed the others inside the cabin, pleased to note that it was still warm from the glowing embers of a fire.

The remains of a fine breakfast were laid out on a large oaken table – an assortment of cheeses, loaves of bread, fruit and sausages lay upon a silver platter, suggesting their previous owners had left here in a hurry. Half a dozen bunk beds were arrayed along the walls, and a bearskin rug adorned the floor, complete with a gaping head. Above the fireplace, three deer heads were mounted and leered down over the interior. The middle head was an eighteen-point buck, and although Aiden was no hunter, even he knew that it was a rare find.

Pacian set about scouring the place for any possessions left behind by the hunters while Nellise threw a few more logs on the fire. The rest of them sat down and ate their fill of the available foods, complimented by the last of the fresh vegetables they had bought from Culdeny. It was a welcome respite that allowed them to settle down after the adrenaline-filled morning they'd had.

After nearly an hour of relaxing in front of the fire, Aiden started to grow impatient. Now that their other tasks were out of the way, the next step for them was to explore Ferrumgaard, and his heart started to beat faster at the thought. The prospect of finding the answers he had sought for so long was making him fidget, which did not go unnoticed by his friends.

“Looks like yer eager to get back on the road,” Clavis observed. “I can't say I feel any different, being this close to finally getting back down to me ancient home.”

"I'm sorry if I was annoying you," Aiden apologised with a rueful smile. "But it's been at least an hour, and Colt still isn't back. Perhaps we can head out and pick him up on the way?"

"We don't even know where he went," Nellise objected. "How are we going to find him?"

"I can track him down," Sayana said confidently.

"Well if there aren't any objections, we could head out then?" Aiden asked. With no dissenting replies, they gathered up their gear and left the warm shelter of the cabin for the brisk winter air of the Calespur ranges once more. Aiden noticed that Pacian was carrying a longbow that he'd found above the mantelpiece.

Aiden pointed out the direction Colt had been heading to Sayana, who spent a minute searching around on the ground for signs of his passage. Once she had the trail, it was a simple matter to follow it to the same destination that Colt had chosen. Along the way, she noticed animal tracks alongside the human ones.

Before long, the sound of flowing water could be heard through the forest as they moved, and within a minute, they had arrived on the banks of small creek, swollen with the waters coming in from the heavy rain to the south, but still a modest flow by the standards of rivers. As Aiden scanned the banks for signs of the wayward ranger, he heard Nellise gasp.

Turning to look, his eyes were assaulted by a naked man rising out of the water. It was Colt, of course, but as nature had made him – not something he would have chosen to see, given a choice. Pacian was a little more melodramatic in his response, recoiling in horror and covering his face.

"Hey, I just ate you know," he groaned.

"If you didn't want to see anything, you should have waited for me back at the cabin, like I told you," Colt growled, quickly grabbing his trunks from the pile of equipment on the bank and dressing himself. Not only had he bathed, the big man was also clean-shaven, and had washed and brushed his brown hair.

"It's been over an hour, in case you were wondering," Sayana mentioned, finding the surrounding trees to be of great interest all of a sudden.

"I may or may not have fallen asleep," Colt replied ruefully. "Don't worry, I had Faolan to keep me company." Aiden looked into the trees and saw the wolf, lying down in amongst the greenery as if he were someone's pet.

"You named it?" Aiden asked. "You do know that 'Faolan' is Olde Aielish for 'wolf', right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So instead of calling it 'wolf' in one language, you're calling it the same thing in another," Aiden explained dryly.

"Seems pretty clever to me," Colt remarked, quite pleased with himself. "Okay you can look now, but any more smartass remarks and I'm gonna hit someone."

"Perish the thought," Nellise assured him. "I'm so pleased that you've finally bathed, I'm going to refrain from saying all the things I'd written down for this very occasion."

"I'm touched," Colt said. "Just give me a few minutes and I'll be ready to go. I'll even catch you up if you want to keep moving."

"Actually, there is a small issue we need to address before we continue onward," Pacian said, without a trace of humour in his voice. "Colt got us into a lot of trouble this

morning because he was drunk. From what Clavis has told us, we could be heading into yet another dangerous situation in Ferrumgaard, and I don't know about the rest of you, but I'd feel a little more secure leaving Colt behind to sort himself out. A woodsman isn't going to be real useful underground anyway, if you think about it." Nobody responded straight away to his statement, and Colt continued dressing himself, though he must have been feeling very self-conscious.

"I had been thinking about this myself while walking here," Nellise said delicately, leaning against a tree. "But not from the perspective of punishing him, merely to give him the time he needs to clear his mind."

"He's had plenty of time to do that over the past few weeks, and he's still a sodding mess," Pacian complained. "What makes you think more time is going to make a difference?"

"Time heals all wounds', as the saying goes," Nellise intoned. "Aiden, what do you think?"

"I spoke with Colt about this earlier," the young man said. "I have a sneaking suspicion that his issue is going to be resolved in the next hour or two anyway."

"Ah, so it *is* about a woman," Nellise said triumphantly, smiling at Colt.

"I know I probably don't get a say in this," Colt interrupted, "but I just want to point out that Pacian killed Fletcher in cold blood and we forgave him for it. Is my mistake any worse than his?"

"No, it isn't," Sayana replied for them. "I would remind you all of the times Colt saved our lives, particularly against the wolves in the mountains. He is very brave, and you should not disregard him so easily."

"Thanks, Sy," Colt grunted. "As Aiden said, we talked about this earlier, and I swear I'm gonna get over this. If it makes you feel better, there isn't any booze where we're going, am I right Clavis?"

"I would'na think we'd be finding any palatable ales down below," the dwarf confirmed. "Anything drinkable would be long since spoilt."

"There you have it," Colt finished, pulling on his backpack and picking up his weapons. "I can promise you I'll be focused and sober, if that's what you're looking for."

"That's good enough for me," Nellise observed. Pacian nodded thoughtfully, then stepped forward and produced the longbow he had brought with him.

"I found this bow in the cabin, above the mantelpiece in a place of honour. If my guess is right, it's a quality weapon... and it's yours, so long as you can keep your promise." Colt leaned forward curiously to inspect the weapon, taking the unstrung bow in his hands to get a closer look.

"Bloody hell, this is a masterpiece. Look at the different layers of wood... the pull on this thing must be immense. Thanks Pace," Colt grunted in a rare show of gratitude. "I'll put it to good use, you can count on that. Now let's get going before we start hugging, or something."

"Yes, we wouldn't want to make the ladies jealous now would we?" They all had a good laugh at this, particularly Nellise, who actually blushed, then let the ranger take the lead as they continued on through the forest with a renewed sense of comradeship.

Sunlight streamed through the canopy above, allowing Aiden to fully appreciate the natural beauty of the forest. The ground was becoming rougher and more inclined as they walked, a sure sign they were nearly into the mountains. According to Clavis, the main

gate to Ferrumgaard was half a day's travel from their current position, so they would most likely arrive there just after sunset. Not exactly the best time to enter an abandoned underground city, but then again it was going to be pitch black inside anyway.

The already brisk air grew even more frigid as they continued on, carrying with it the faint smell of wood smoke. Colt paused in mid-stride, holding up one hand to signal for a halt.

"I think someone's having lunch nearby," he said, keeping his voice low. "It's probably Mona, but I'm going to scout ahead just to be sure."

"Don't bother, I'm here already," a hooded woman replied in a sweet, melodious voice that was nonetheless firm with resolve. She had stepped out of the brush right next to Colt, giving them all a start. Colt whirled around to face her, hand on the hilt of his weapon, but relaxed a little when he saw who it was. She pulled back the hood on her cloak, and allowed her honey-coloured hair to tumble down around her shoulders.

Aiden had never seen a true elf before, and was not disappointed – her angular eyes and pointed ears gave her an alien appearance, and at nearly six feet in height, she towered over Nellise and Sayana. Despite her youthful appearance, her eyes had the look of one who had seen the passing of many years, not all of them pleasant.

"You should not be here, Dante," she said with a note of warning. "Why have you come this way?" Aiden frowned in confusion, until he realised she was talking to Colt. He exchanged an amused look with Pacian, who was trying to suppress a laugh at the mention of the big ranger's first name.

"Mona, hi, it's great to see you again," Colt replied, a slight tremor in his voice. "We're heading west from here on business, nothing to do with you really; if you hadn't crept up on us like that we wouldn't have bothered you." She nodded at this, standing at ease a few yards in front of him. Despite this, an uncomfortable silence ensued as neither of them spoke for a long moment. Colt swore under his breath, raising an eyebrow from Mona.

"Look, can we talk in private?" the big ranger asked in a hushed voice. "There's things that need saying, and I don't talk well with an audience."

"No need," she replied coolly. "I am here simply to offer my customary warning about travelling close to Ferrumgaard. But I see you have a veteran here who has no doubt informed you of potential dangers already, is that not so, Clavis?" The dwarf looked up at her with an unreadable expression.

"They've been made fully aware of the hazards, elf," he replied stoically. "And I'll thank ye to keep yer opinions as to the wisdom of our journey to yerself."

"Far be it for me to speak of such things, I am far more discreet than that," Mona remarked, casually glancing around at Aiden and the others. Her eyes locked on Sayana for a brief moment, but did not linger. "Everyone walks the path of their own choosing, in the end," the elfin ranger finished, looking at Colt directly with a hint of sadness in her eyes.

"Don't get subtle on me Mona, you know I can't follow you when you do that," he complained.

"Then I shall be blunt, just for you Dante," she sighed. "I have had many admirers over the years, but around here they were predominately uncouth frontiersmen, only interested in one thing. I rebuffed all such advances and kept to myself, until I met you.

Forgive me for speaking of such things in front of your friends, I do not mean to embarrass you.”

“Oh it's quite alright,” Nellise assured her a little too eagerly, before Colt could say anything. “Just pretend we're not here.”

“You know what would be better than that?” the big man asked in a restrained voice. “*Actually* not being here. Why don't you try that?”

“Because this is more fun, Dante,” Pacian smirked.

“Nobody but Mona calls me that,” Colt growled, leaning in towards Pacian threateningly. Mona sighed in exasperation.

“There it is again,” she remarked. “And you wonder why I didn't want to be with you after the incident.”

“What, because I defended your honour?” Colt exclaimed, turning to face her again. “I'm not a regular bloke, Mona. Sure, I'm a little rough around the edges, but don't ever doubt that I love you.” The uncomfortable silence descended upon them again as Mona locked eyes with Colt. By the look on his face, he couldn't believe he had just said it out loud either.

“You're a special man, Dante,” she said quietly. “You can be quite endearing when you want to be. So much like a little boy in some ways, but you can't obscure what you are deep inside. You should look to your clerical friend for inspiration, for her courage to stand before armed men with nothing but her conviction to protect her is the sort of person you need to become. More than once, you've proven yourself to be just as brutish as your predecessors, and striking Armin just because he was being nice to me was primitive, and so very human. I couldn't even voice how disappointed I was, Dante.”

“I never asked to be put on a pedestal, Mona,” Colt grated. “And I've never tried to hide who I really am. So I'm gonna ask you a question, and I want a straight answer. After that, we'll know where we stand.”

“I'm listening,” she replied, a hint of anticipation in her voice. Aiden noticed Nellise and Sayana watching with particular interest. He had the feeling they would burst into tears of joy if Mona took the big man back again.

“Do you love me enough to forgive me?” The question hung in the air for a long moment as the attention of everyone present centred on the tall elf-maiden.

“I do forgive you,” she replied, causing Nellise to let out a tiny little sigh, and Colt to flush with relief. “But... Armin has made his intentions to me clear, and I've started seeing him on a regular basis over the past few weeks. I'm sorry Dante.” Colt nodded, evidently not trusting himself to speak. Aiden saw the look in his eyes though, and could see he was barely holding himself together.

“Armin is a kind, stable man,” she continued, “and frankly he's a little closer to my age. I mean, when you think about it, you and I being together is almost like robbing the cradle, right?”

“Yeah, makes perfect sense,” Colt replied unemotionally. “Well, I'm glad you're happy, anyway. We should keep going though, if we want to make Ferrumgaard before dark.” Mona flushed, and for the first time seemed to appear a little insecure.

“Oh, of course. I apologise to the rest of you for that little display, but I think it needed to be said.”

“Yes, it really did,” Aiden agreed. He decided that he'd better get Colt out of the area before he fell to pieces. He'd advised the man to confront the issue, and knew this was a

possibility, but the young adventurer had underestimated just how deeply Colt was in love with her. "Thanks for helping us earlier today, Mona," Aiden continued. "I'm pretty sure we'd be dead without you and the other rangers saving our necks."

"Think nothing of it," she replied, regaining her composure. "Continue heading northwest and you'll be at the steps of Ferrumgaard before nightfall. But take extreme care, for many who enter that cursed place never come out again."

"We will," Nellise said. "Nice meeting you, Mona, although I wish it were under better circumstances."

"Don't we all," she lamented, her large eyes watching Colt walk past as a tear cascaded down her cheek, briefly glinted in the sunlight. The big ranger managed to hold himself together for a good ten minutes before the sound of quiet sobbing could be heard in the forest.

Chapter Sixteen

They continued to ascend, and the view over the top of the forest to the east was spectacular, but it was wasted on the big ranger. Colt walked apart from the rest of the group, travelling alone while he dealt with his grief. Although he hadn't asked for space, everyone gave it to him anyway.

Nellise had quietly asked Aiden if she should go and speak with him, but the young man had suggested that she wait a day or two before attempting to talk with him about it. Aiden didn't have much experience with love, but he'd had plenty of experience with Colt's anger, and considering his emotional state, he didn't want anyone to be on the receiving end of his frustration.

The snow crunched under their feet as they headed inexorably up the slope of Mount Cale, not the largest mountain in the kingdom, but quite steep nonetheless. Despite the remoteness of their location and the density of the pine trees, a road of sorts could be discerned amongst the scrub, winding its way along the mountainside. Clavis, normally taciturn, seemed to come to life at the sight of the road.

"This was the main highway between the city of Ferrumgaard and the human village of Culdeny," he said, pointing back down towards the coastal town far in the distance. "Engineers spent a year layin' down stonework to make this road, in the hopes of increased trade with the fledgling human community. Dig down through this snow and dirt, and the flagstones'll still be there, as solid as the day they were laid out. Aye, I know yer gonna say that Culdeny's a proper town now, but way back then, it weren't more'n a dock and an inn, a way to ship our goods to Fairloch by sea."

"How big is Ferrumgaard?" Nellise asked. "If we're going to be searching through it, we should probably know just how long it could take to explore."

"Nearly ten thousand of me kin called the inside of Ferrumgaard home," Clavis replied, a note of pride in his voice. "But it ain't sprawled out like a human city. 'Twas dug into the mountain, a quarter of a mile wide and twice that in length, but layered down through the rock to the valuable ore deep down. Twelve levels there were, with extensive tunnels branching around through the mountain as well. An amazing feat of engineering and design, when ya think about it."

"I'll reserve my excitement for when we get there," Pacian remarked dryly.

“That ya will, lad, that ya will,” Clavis chuckled, taking no offence from the blond rogue's apparent disinterest in engineering history. He seemed quite confident that the sight of the old dwarven city would impress Pacian, and so quietened down for the time being.

The cold mountain wind chilled Aiden to the bone as they walked along the road for hours, his camouflaged cloak wrapped around him as tightly as he could manage. A light snowfall whipped around them, reducing their vision a little but not enough to obscure the magnificent view of the Calespur Mountains around them. The road itself wound along the side of Mount Cale, the largest of the mountains in this range, with an ever increasing drop off to the right, but it was wide enough that he didn't fear accidentally falling off the edge.

It was just as the sun was dipping below the horizon that the road veered to the left and came to an end at a sheer cliff-face, fifty yards away. A massive pair of stone doors loomed up before them, easily fifteen feet high, and etched with strange patterns and words written in the old dwarven language, one Aiden wasn't familiar with.

One of the doors was hanging off its top hinge, leaving a large gap open near the ground, where it showed signs of a century of wear. The ominous howl of wind blowing through the opening into the chamber beyond assailed their ears, reminding them that this was a dead city, and one with a reputation for obliterating the lives of those that delved too deep.

“Tell me again why we're doing this?” Pacian asked timidly, looking up at the doors. The stark reality of the place was becoming apparent, even to him.

“In your case, money,” Aiden reminded him. “Mine too, actually,” he added, exchanging a glance with Sayana. If he found what he was really looking for in this damned city, he'd tell the others everything. Until then, discretion was called for.

“Aye, we're not here for glory or fame,” Clavis nodded soberly, taking out his crossbow and checking it carefully. “Twice before this place has thwarted me attempts at recovering the lost treasures of me kin, and I consider meself fortunate to still be drawing breath. But I can see the looks in yer eyes, and ye needn't worry – if'n it looks too dangerous to push through, we'll call the whole thing off.”

“How far in do we need to go,” Aiden asked, peering through the gap in the doors, but seeing only darkness beyond.

“The fifth floor down was the height of the flooding, if me memory services,” Clavis replied. “I'm thinking we'll swing through the fourth level, and maybe see if'n there might be a way to get at the things on the fifth. Might have to go for a bit of a swim, though.”

“Were we planning to rest before heading in?” Nellise inquired, glancing around at the freezing conditions without any enthusiasm. “I'm quite tired, and I can't imagine any of you are feeling any better after the long walk.”

“Aye, we can rest inside,” Clavis assured her. “It'll be safe, and sheltered from the worst of the weather.” He hefted his crossbow and took a step inside the ruined doorway, peering around cautiously.

“If it's safe... why do you have your crossbow ready?” Pacian asked with a certain amount of trepidation.

“The top level is basically a cave, these days,” Clavis called from inside, his voice echoing from the presumably stone walls within. “Once I've checked around, it'll be easy

to guard our camp, but it never hurts to be cautious. If yer feeling squeamish, feel free to bed down just outside the doors, I'm almost certain ya won't freeze to death."

"He makes a compelling argument," Aiden remarked dryly to Pacian, who merely shrugged in reply. The independently-minded Sayana crept in through the door in Clavis' footsteps, leaving Aiden to assume she could actually see in the near total darkness that lay within. He waited patiently for the better part of five minutes before he decided that it was probably safe enough for them to at least step in through the door and shelter out of the bitter wind.

Once inside, Aiden was for all intents and purposes blind, until Clavis or Sayana gave them the 'all-clear' signal. He stepped to one side of the door so as to avoid being shoved by anyone else coming in, and then stood in the dark with his cloak tightly wrapped around him. The wind was substantially less powerful even right inside the doorway, giving them some welcome respite.

"Aye, it's clear enough," Clavis muttered from somewhere ahead of them. "Ye can light up that little flame of yours, lass, if ye've a mind to." A small tongue of flame appeared about twenty yards away, dancing in the palm of Sayana's hand. The light it shed wasn't nearly enough to gauge the look of the place in which they now stood, but it was comforting nonetheless.

"We can set up camp here and get some kip," Clavis declared, as Nellise used her prayer of light on her staff to provide additional illumination. "We're in the main foyer, a vast chamber thirty feet high and a hunnerd long, so if there's something living in here, it'll find us whether or not we have a fire going."

"Nobody and nothing comes here," Colt said, sounding bleak. "This place is cursed, and even the animals know that. We'll be alone, don't worry about that, probably for the rest of our short lives." There was a moment of silence after that rather discouraging assessment, before Pacian spoke up.

"You know, ordinarily I'd say 'you really need a woman' after a comment like that, but somehow I don't think that's going to help this time."

"Sorry, I'm not real good company at the moment," Colt said in a rare apology.

"That's alright, Dante," Nellise replied in a sympathetic tone. "If we can tolerate you when you're drunk, then broken-hearted is almost like a holiday for us."

"What did you call me?" the big ranger growled dangerously.

"Colt, I called you Colt," Nellise replied hastily, frowning at Pacian's wide grin. Chatter died down after that, everyone deciding to focus on setting up the camp and preparing a hot evening meal to ward away the chill. They ate a simple yet hearty rabbit stew in near-silence, and then one by one turned in for the night. Clavis insisted on taking the first guard shift, but when Sayana volunteered for the second, Nellise reminded her about the last time she'd taken a guard shift.

The wild girl couldn't dispute her point without telling her everything that had really happened that night, a point she was as reluctant to make as Aiden was. In the end, Pacian offered to take a shift, as did their young cleric, for despite the combined assurances of Colt and the dwarven marksman, nobody really felt completely safe in that forlorn, dead city.

Aiden slept fitfully during the uneventful night, but was awoken by Nellise at what he assumed was just after dawn, judging by the faint light sifting in through the crack in the broken doorway. Awakening to her exquisite face and golden eyes in the flickering

orange firelight was one of the perks of adventuring with the beautiful young cleric, though Aiden would never actually tell her that.

Breakfast was a simple affair, consisting of last night's stew, reheated and served in a bowl, which they all ate with some measure of enthusiasm for the coming day. Nobody was more excited than Clavis, however, who was well refreshed from his night's rest, and ready to tackle his life-long dream - again. Not that Aiden held that against him of course, but it did give him pause as to what exactly prevented his prior success. He'd glossed over those facts when Aiden had first talked to the dwarf back in the Seaspray Inn, giving him reason to believe that something bad must have happened to thwart him.

"Keep an eye on our short friend," Aiden whispered to Pacian as they packed their belongings. "There's something he's not telling us about Ferrumgaard, and I don't want us to get killed as a result of that."

"You don't think he's lying to us do you?" Pace asked, eyeing the dwarf as he stood at the limit of their light sources, thirty feet away, looking away into the darkness of the fallen city.

"Lies? Not really, but... I don't know, call it a gut feeling if you want, just watch out for anything strange from him."

"Can do," Pacian shrugged. "But you'll have to keep an eye on Colt then, he looks like he might throw himself down a ravine or something." Aiden looked over at the big ranger, who seemed nonchalant enough for the moment. His mood seemed to be fluctuating from time to time without any obvious trigger, though, making it difficult to judge when he was struggling with his broken heart. Aiden could only hope that focusing on their current task was enough to help him through whatever was going on inside that thick skull of his.

With their supplies packed, they readied their weapons and fell into line behind Clavis. Nellise and Sayana used their unique skills to shed light on their surroundings, but the sheer size of the space they walked through meant they could barely see the ceiling, let alone the walls. The stone underfoot was smooth and unblemished, despite being carved into shape centuries before. There were no signs of any tracks, or other disturbances in the immediate vicinity, giving Aiden hope that the place really was deserted.

A few minutes of walking from their camp brought them to another set of double doors, similar to the massive gates at the entrance, but apparently in working condition. They were closed, and bore the marks of heavy siege equipment from some time in the past.

"Whoe'er cracked open the outer doors tried the same approach on these," he explained, as would a tour guide. "Little did they know that the ceiling behind these doors collapsed not long after the city were abandoned. Hunnerds of tons of rock have made sure they will never open again."

"I assume you have some sort of alternate route?" Nellise remarked, taking in the former majesty of the doors before them.

"Sure do," Clavis replied, gesturing to the left. "Figuring that there was still some sort of treasure to be found below, they opted to dig their way around the inner gates." He led them over to where the walls were rent by heavy tools. A tunnel of sorts had been dug in through the surrounding rock, circumventing the blocked doors. Clavis didn't hesitate, stepping straight into the roughly-hewn tunnel without caution, closely followed by

Aiden and the others. Unlike their short friend, they had to stoop a little to get through without bumping their heads.

“Was this carved by dwarves?” Aiden asked curiously, drawing an irate look from Clavis.

“Does this look like the same quality as the foyer ya just walked through?” he asked irritably. “Whoe'er did this had no finesse, no skill at all. Just wanted to get into the city and grab whate'er wasn't nailed down. Little more'n grave robbers,” he added for good measure, although it was unclear if he was disgusted by the grave-robbers, or the poor quality of their stonework. It occurred to Aiden that they were basically walking into a giant tomb, and were little better than grave robbers themselves. He refrained from asking Clavis what made them any different to the people who carved their way in here countless years ago.

The tunnel curved around in a large arc, then rejoined the main structure of the city's upper floor after a short distance. Not far to their right stood the doors they had travelled around, along with several hundred tons of rock piled up against it. The granite was piled all the way to the ceiling, a stark reminder of the simple fact that they were walking around inside a hollowed-out mountain.

“Somehow, several pillars came down in the first years after the exodus,” Clavis observed quietly. “Eventually the ceiling just gave way in the unsupported areas. The rest 'o the place is holding up just fine, in case ye were worried about a collapse by the way.”

“No, why would we be thinking about that,” Aiden replied dryly. He absently wiped his moist palms on his cloak and tried to focus on something else. The chamber they were now in was lined with what appeared to be empty houses, carved with intricacy and care from the surrounding rock.

Supporting columns similar to what Clavis described lined what could only be called a street, which continued off into the darkness beyond their lights. They walked down this path at Clavis' prompting, mindful of the people who used to fill this place with life.

“Most of the food industry worked up on this level,” he continued quietly, “so as the smoke from the fires could get out 'o the ceiling vents. 'Twas the most efficient way to feed the city, so just about everyone who lived up here was a cook 'o some sort.”

“I suppose the people that lived on the top few levels were the first out, then,” Aiden wondered aloud, looking in through one of the empty windows of a local residence, long since deserted.

“The MacTavish clan was the most predominant up here,” Clavis answered darkly. “Fancied themselves the kings 'o the upper levels. When the surge of people running up from below flooded this place with men and women lookin' ta get out as quick as they could, the MacTavishes joined them, without thinkin' 'o the real King 'o Ferrumgaard, Arland the seventh, trapped down below in his throne room, where he and his loyal servants drowned.”

His speech was laden with barely disguised hatred, so much so that Aiden turned and looked at the normally taciturn dwarf, just to make sure it was the same person. Clavis noticed that everyone else was looking at him the same way, and quickly shook off the dark mood.

“That's all in the past now,” he muttered in a more reasonable tone of voice. “It was a dark day, and I was naught but a young'n at the time. It's stayed with me for all me life, and it's shaped me into the man I am today. Forgive me passion, there was a lot 'o things

that went wrong back then, and a lot 'o people died because of the actions of a few.” He continued walking onwards; Nellise close by with her illuminated staff which showed her troubled expression quite clearly.

“Does that count as strange?” Pacian whispered to Aiden sarcastically when Clavis was out of earshot.

“Yeah, it is,” Aiden agreed, “and I have the feeling there’s more where that came from. This place has got a hold on him, that much is plain to see. Come on, we’re falling behind.” The two young men joined Sayana at the rear of the group, who gave Aiden an uncertain look. He silently shook his head, then gestured that they should keep moving regardless of their concerns.

“This place is a bit grim, but the next level might impress you some,” Clavis was saying to Nellise. “It’s just as empty and looted as here, but the architecture involved is damned impressive.”

Up ahead, the cavernous hallway ended in a large stone wall, with a massive stairwell carved out of it. The stairs were roughly twenty feet wide, and curved down in an arc as they went. Some of the steps were chipped and cracked in places, but seemed sturdy enough. They were fully enclosed by solid granite on either side anyway, so there was no chance of plunging to one’s death.

With her staff lighting the way, Nellise and Clavis led their descent, stepping around loose chunks of rock that had accumulated on the stairs over the past century and on to the second floor of the great dead city. The air was noticeably warmer here, and a clearly defined street stretched out before them as they reached the bottom of the stairs, threading its way in amongst tightly clustered buildings. They were similar in design to those on the floor above, but with larger doorways and pipes stemming from their sides that ran up to the ceiling.

“Each 'o the buildings you see around us was a craftsman’s forge,” Clavis proudly explained. “There be a hunnerd of 'em on this floor alone, and back in the day, the sound of all them hammers workin’ away was like no other sound ye ever heard. Tell yer light-fingered friend there’s nothing down here to be looted either,” Clavis mentioned to Nellise. “The place was cleaned out all the way down to the collapse on the third level, long ago.” She looked around in confusion at first, but then noticed that Pacian had vanished from the group.

“It’s the only way he’ll learn,” she admonished, shaking her head. “Don’t worry, he’ll grow bored with the lack of things to steal sooner or later.”

They continued along the street until they came to another collapsed section that blocked their passage. Clavis was unperturbed, instead choosing a different route through the ancient city that avoided the obstruction. More of the artisan’s forges were seen as they passed by, and it was certainly an impressive sight, but Aiden couldn’t help but feel somewhat disappointed after the dwarf’s glowing description earlier. Pacian rejoined the group after a while, sporting a flaming torch held in one hand, to light his way.

“Anything interesting?” Aiden inquired, already knowing the answer.

“Nah, it’s completely cleaned out,” he replied, sounding crestfallen. “Are you sure we’re going to find anything at all in this place, Clavis? I’m starting to get worried that it’ll all be for nothing.”

“The blockage on level three has been there for a long time,” Clavis recited from memory. “When we get past that, we’re bound to find a whole section of the city that

hasn't been accessible for nearly a century. Ye'll get yer fill 'o loot, don't ya worry. We're just about at the next stairs, in the middle of this floor, just past the foundry. It's not far now."

The tightly-clustered buildings of the city ended abruptly, giving way to an immense open area before them. In the middle of this cavern was a gargantuan device, much like a giant pot – it had to be over fifty feet in width, and he couldn't even guess at the weight of the thing. One of the massive braces holding it up had failed years ago, leaving the giant pot leaning heavily to one side. Old and decaying leather gloves, rusty metal tongs and other equipment were strewn around on the stone floor at its base, as well as a fine layer of sand that had spilled out of a large clay vessel.

Huge blocks of stone, carved to channel molten iron into moulds, hung suspended over a gaping hole in the floor by big, rusty chains, obviously where the white hot metal would drop to. Their puny lights could not penetrate the darkness of that hole well enough to see the bottom, though he could see the outline of a stairwell not far from their position.

Beyond the pot, a colossal furnace laid dormant, charred black from years of use, but decaying slowly over time. A solid layer of rust covered the machine, along with scattered parts to what could only have been an elaborate pulley system. Aiden couldn't help but stare in amazement at the sheer scope of the foundry, and couldn't begin to fathom what they had needed such constructions for.

"Told ya ye'd be impressed," Clavis chuckled at their faces. "This is just a hint of what the dwarves of Ferrumgaard were capable of back in the day, and I doubt we'll see their like again. They'd forge massive engines here, both for peacetime and for war, and of course parts for maintaining the great doors. But there's no point dwelling on the distant past, for the real treasure lies beneath us. The stairwell beckons, over yonder." He pointed towards an area past the gaping maw of the furnace, over near the northern wall.

Wordlessly, they moved on, and soon laid eyes on the stairwell down to the next floor just ahead. It was just like the last one they had taken, wide and smooth, but circled around the great hole in the floor, where they would have been able to see the machinery of dwarven industry at work, if it had still been working.

The air was becoming stale as they descended into areas where fresh air couldn't reach, and the dry smell of stone and dirt was becoming stronger. Aiden heard the sound of someone sniffing, and guessed that Colt was dealing with his bereavement once more. The big ranger said nothing, however, and was content to deal with his problem on his own for now.

The bottom of the stairwell featured large stone braces for some sort of heavy devices that were no longer there. The architecture of the nearby buildings returned to the closely-built, multi-storey structures that the dwarves seemed to have favoured, although here they seemed to be less intricately carved than on the floors above. Several of them had collapsed over the years, leaving large chunks of rock strewn about on the empty streets.

"Housing for the workers," Clavis grunted as way of explanation. "Our industrious grave-robbers were probably disappointed with what they found when they first set eyes on this place."

"So I'm guessing there's nothing to be found around here either," Pacian drawled.

“Just a few stray rats I'd imagine,” Clavis replied, hardly paying the nearby structures any heed. “We're close to the collapsed section that stopped me progress a few years back. It's naught but a five minute walk from here.” The dwarf led them past the remains of his people's engineering accomplishments and through a narrow street, lined with crumbling tenements of the dwarven working class.

“If it's so easy to get to this point,” Pacian inquired as they travelled, “why has it taken you years to get back down here?”

“It's hard to find anyone crazy enough to come with me,” Clavis muttered ruefully. “Ferrumgaard is no place to travel alone, something I learned the hard way. That's why together, we'll beat this place, and ye'll be all the richer for it.”

Twice over the next few minutes they had to clamber over piles of rock, or detour around even larger piles of rock. The place was really coming apart, Aiden thought, while continuing to hope that it didn't collapse on them completely for the next few days. As if to tweak his fears, he swore he could feel a slight vibration through the soles of his boots again, although it was possible he was imagining things.

It was closer to ten minutes before they reached a towering section of fallen rock, large enough to bury several buildings completely. There wasn't any way around this one that they could see within the range of their light sources, so Aiden assumed this was the collapse that Clavis had spoke of.

“Here it be,” he muttered, looking up towards the unseen ceiling above them somewhere.

“This?” Pacian remarked incredulously. “This is what stopped you last time you were here?”

“Aye lad, and I barely escaped with me life to boot.”

“I see, so, how exactly were you planning to get around it this time?” Pacian accused. “It's just as big as the pile blocking the big doors upstairs!”

“Ah, but this time I came prepared, with tools, and with knowledge,” Clavis answered, giving the others a wink. He took off his backpack and pulled out something wrapped in hessian. He withdrew a few things from the wrapping, and then carefully assembled a heavy pickaxe, with a flat bladed shovel on the back end.

“You're going to dig through all that, with a bloody pickaxe?” Colt asked flatly. “I don't suppose you brought enough for all of us?”

“By me calculations,” Clavis said, oblivious to the pessimism brewing in the group, “the uppermost rock will be the thinnest, and will only take a day or two ta clear. Ye can help me move some 'o the looser rock, and to be sure that'll speed our progress. I'd ask that one of ya keep watch on our little excavation site though, just to be safe.”

“I'll do that,” Pacian volunteered. “The rest of you can move rocks around all day long if you like.”

“Ever the gallant gentleman,” Nellise remarked dryly.

“Well I would assume that Clavis isn't asking the women to do heavy lifting, am I right?” Pacian pressed.

“Only if'n they feel like it,” the dwarf replied. “But no, I was thinking our big ranger friend might like some heavy work to distract him from his woman troubles, fer starters.”

“Fine by me,” Colt shrugged, stripping down his equipment and the top half of his armour, and placing it all into a pile nearby. “Don't go stealing that Pace, or I'll knock your teeth out.”

"Sure, like I'm going to steal a bloody greatsword," the blond rogue retorted. "Where would I even stash it?"

"I'm sure you can find some place big enough to stow it. Your mouth springs to mind..." Colt grunted, sounding like his old self again, even if just for a little while.

"Okay, patrolling now," Pacian stated flatly, then walked off to look around the local area. Clavis was already carefully negotiating his way to the top of the rock pile, so Aiden took off his chain shirt and leather jack so he could help out as well. Nellise took out a few torches from her pack, lit them up, and tossed them around the site to provide them with some more illumination.

"What's that over there, sticking out of the rock?" Sayana said, appearing beside him suddenly. Aiden turned and peered in the direction she was pointing to, and saw something other than rock at the bottom of the pile, close to the edge of the light. Whatever the object was, it was yellowish-white, and seemed to be sticking out from the stone at an awkward angle. Curious, the two of them moved in for a closer look.

"Is that... what I think it is?" Aiden asked, suddenly finding the object taking on a disturbing shape.

"It looks like bone to me," Sayana answered clinically. She knelt down and moved away some of the rock and dirt with her free hand, to reveal the forearm of a formerly living person. The arm was reaching out from the rock pile, with broken finger bones extending out a little way further, as if the person had been trying to pull themselves out.

"There's probably more of him under the rock," Aiden commented dourly, not exactly enthusiastic about trying to find out. He couldn't tell if it was male or female, and wasn't sure it was important. The bones were clean, without any trace of flesh upon them, but down here that could mean anything.

"What have you found?" Nellise asked, coming over to see what the fuss was about. She gasped slightly as the young cleric saw what they were looking at, and then leaned in to inspect the remains with a professional eye.

"This is the forearm of a human male," she stated, pointing at the elbow. "Women have different elbows, and the other races have a different bone structure and size to ours."

"Any idea how long it's been here?" Aiden asked.

"It's hard to say from looking at the remains," Nellise mused. "But, I can pray on this, and ask for divine inspiration to provide me with an answer."

"You can do that?" Aiden asked, surprised.

"Of course, with a little help from above, I will find the answers I seek. I'm not just a pretty face, you know. Now, please move aside, I need to be close to the remains." Aiden obliged her, stepping back to give her some space. Sayana did likewise, though with a frown on her fair features. She tilted her head and looked around, puzzled for a moment, as if she wasn't sure if she'd heard something or not. Given their situation, Aiden felt it appropriate to inquire further.

"What is it?" he whispered.

"I thought I heard... no, *felt* something nearby," Sayana whispered back. Aiden looked directly at her, suddenly very serious.

"Kind of like a vibration?"

"I suppose so, yes I'm not sure what to make of it," she shrugged.

"But you definitely felt it," Aiden persisted. "You weren't imagining it, right?"

“Certainly not,” Sayana replied archly. “I didn't survive for years in the wild, unable to tell the difference between real and imagined things.”

“Right, sorry,” Aiden mumbled in apology, too distracted to pay much attention to what she was saying. If the vibrations he'd felt earlier weren't his imagination, then what were they?

“Hey, you can stop working, I found a better way to get through that rock pile,” Pacian called out as he jogged back towards the site where Clavis and Colt were just starting to really get things moving.

“Don't waste yer time lad,” Clavis replied from his perch near the top of the rock pile. “The only way through to the tunnels beyond is behind these rocks.”

“Or the bloody big tunnel I found over on the northwest wall,” Pacian replied smugly. “But you can keep digging if you really want, I'm okay with that. I'll just sit down over here and-” Colt interrupted his speech by letting a heavy rock drop to the ground with a loud 'thud', and then dusted off his gloved hands.

“Sometimes you don't know when to shut up, Pace,” he growled, leaning over to pick up his armour again. “Clavis, are you sure there wasn't another way through that you missed?”

“I'd think I'd remember another tunnel in me own home,” the dwarf replied, skidding down the inclined rocks to land on the stone floor. “But if you're sure about it, I'll take some time to look at it. Is this tunnel 'o yours big enough to squeeze through?”

“Yes, and with room to spare,” Pacian replied. “A lot of room to spare, actually. It's almost as big as the stairwell we came down.” Clavis paused in mid stride, his expression slack as he seemed to be struck by a horrible thought.

“There wasn't anything like that last time I was 'ere,” he said slowly and deliberately. “I think ya better show me lad, and quickly now.” Pacian gestured and used his torch to light the way back towards the tunnel he'd found. Aiden and Sayana followed, the young man with a feeling of growing dread in his stomach.

It only took a minute to reach the gaping hole in the side of the stone wall, and despite Pacian's brief description of its size, the walls of the tunnel didn't appear to be carved by crude tools, or even those of master craftsmen. They were, in fact, completely smooth, and the tunnel itself was more or less round, and over ten feet across. Clavis crept forward slowly, his left hand extended to touch the smooth stone, almost in disbelief. And then Aiden felt another vibration in the stone, this time much stronger than before.

“By Relnak, did you feel that?” Clavis exclaimed, invoking the name of the dwarven battle god. He didn't get quite close enough to touch the tunnel wall before they felt the tremor, for the dwarven marksman had already started backing away. Pacian did likewise, grabbing the hilts of his daggers, just in case.

“What caused this?” Sayana asked, her voice tight with anxiety. “Is it connected to that tremor we just felt?”

“Back in the day,” Clavis explained, licking his lips with consternation, “we had these critters we called Borers. They grew to about yea big,” he described, holding his hands about two feet apart. “Kinda like moles, but with a hard shell, and able to dig their way through stone given enough time. In the wild, they'd cause all sorts 'o problems with the tunnels, causing collapses and other mischief, but they're usually not dangerous, 'cause we'd cull their numbers every few years.”

“Clavis, this tunnel is *huge*,” Aiden pointed out, placing a hand on the hilt of his sword as he did so. “How many Borers would it have taken to do this?” Another tremor rippled through the stone, this one sustained for over five seconds before it stopped. Motes of dust and dirt cascaded down from above them, coating them in a fine layer.

“Thing is,” Clavis explained, his voice too calm. “Thing is... without anyone around to cull 'em, there's no telling how big they could grow.” The implications of this statement slowly sunk in to Aiden's mind, and the picture it formed was not something he wanted to see emerging from the tunnel.

“Get your gear, everyone,” he instructed tersely. “We're not waiting around to see-” He was interrupted by another tremor, this one even more intense than before, and this time it was accompanied by a loud screeching noise. Aiden's heart almost leapt out of his chest as his natural instincts to run kicked in. The tremor did not stop, and instead continued to build in intensity.

“Run!” Aiden shouted, not waiting to see if anyone was listening to him. He bolted back over towards their excavation site, still being lit by Nellise's staff, and several flaming torches on the ground that shook from the force of the tremor. The young cleric was on her feet, using her staff to help her move across the unsteady ground towards Aiden. Colt had managed to get his equipment together, just as the rock behind him exploded outwards, showering him in gravel and dirt. The spray obscured Nellise and most of the torches, but there was enough light around to see that something... *big* had emerged.

“They go after loud noises!” Clavis roared over the immense sound of the rocks tumbling around them. From behind, the loud screeching sound grew louder, and the torch Pacian had dropped when he took flight with the rest of them illuminated a huge creature, easily filling out the tunnel it was crawling through. Although Aiden only caught a glimpse, his heightened senses at that moment detected a shiny, dense outer shell and two beady little eyes, glowing yellow from the torchlight.

Aiden was still half running, half stumbling across the rock-strewn floor towards Nellise, who was backing away from the Borer that had emerged almost right next to her. She was clearly stunned by what she was seeing, and was not reacting fast enough. One of the Borer's great paws, tipped with huge razor-sharp claws, lashed out and struck her in the chest, sending her tumbling backwards from the tremendous force. Colt was closer to her than Aiden was, but was still recovering from being pummelled with rocks and wasn't ready to strike.

Aiden drew his sword and spoke the command word to activate his magical glove, bringing the shimmering force field in to existence. He continued moving as fast as he could towards Nellise, to see if her armour had allowed her to survive that crushing blow. Her staff was still glowing, making it easy to locate her in the dusty mess they were mired in, though getting there through the shadowy half-light without tripping was challenging. Nellise was starting to pick herself up as Aiden reached her, a sizeable dent clearly visible on the lower part of her breastplate.

“I'm fine,” she coughed in the dusty conditions as the young adventurer helped her back to her feet. He didn't get a chance to say anything to her, for the two giant Borer's they now faced screeched in unison, and started shambling their way with alarming speed towards the light sources – Nellise and Sayana. Aiden was no tactical genius, but it was obvious they wouldn't stand a chance against these things unless they worked together.

Colt had already started backing away from one of the Borer's, moving to cover Nellise, so it seemed expedient just to bring everyone over to him.

"Everyone, rally around me!" Aiden cried out, readying his sword as the others rushed over to him. "Clavis, can we outrun these things?"

"They can keep up with us, if yer thinkin' of running lad!" he called back, pulling out a hand axe as he skidded to a halt next to Aiden. "They hate bright lights, loud sounds, and fire though, and I think we have plenty 'o that right here with us. We don't have to flee, man; we can hold here!"

"You better be right about this," Aiden muttered as one of the two Borers shrieked and charged towards the light that was hurting its puny eyes. When this was over, and assuming they survived, Aiden would have to have a word with their dwarven friend about the concept of 'full disclosure'.

Chapter Seventeen

The giant borers moved on all fours, and seemed to resemble a cross between a wolverine, a tortoise, and a mole. Their armoured hides glistened a sickening shade of yellow-white, and each of their four paws was tipped with vicious claws. They towered over Aiden and the others by a full three feet, and must have weighed close to a ton. Colt was the closest to the giant borers, and had been backing away from them to regroup with Aiden and the others, but now that it was clear they were going to stay and fight these things, his posture changed from defensive to offensive.

The big ranger drew his greatsword and waited for the first borer to move in close enough, then swung his huge weapon at the flank of the beast, slicing through its chitinous hide and gashing it severely. He hadn't anticipated the creature's hind legs though, and was suddenly thrown backward by a retaliatory blow from a leg that sent him into the path of the second Borer. Colt roared with pain as that creature struck him from behind, and seemed ready to trample the big man until it was distracted by Pacian's sudden appearance from the other side.

Aiden had lost track of him in the darkness, but as usual, the blond rogue had found a way to be of use. He struck hard, plunging a dagger in between the armoured plates of the beast, giving Colt a chance to stagger back to the rest of the group. Pacian tried to hit it again with his other dagger, but it was turned away by the Borer's thrashing, and he was thrown back into the shadows with his first dagger still sticking out of its side.

"Clavis, give Pacian some cover!" Aiden yelled as the Borer that Pacian had struck turned to follow its attacker into the shadows.

"I can't," Clavis exclaimed, "I left me bow over with me tools!"

"Same with my longbow," Colt grated, swinging his sword back and forth to try and keep the first Borer at bay. "Come up with another plan, quick!"

"I still have my crossbow," Nellise cried, grabbing her weapon from over her shoulder and setting it up to shoot. Aiden wished he had time to get his own crossbow off his back, but was far too busy dealing with the giant creatures.

Sayana pulled out her axe and ran around to one side of the creature while it was focused on Colt, lashing out with its paws as it warily searched for a way past. Aiden didn't wait around to see what she was going to do however, for while they could probably handle that borer, the other one was going to make a meal of Pacian in a one-

on-one fight. There was enough light to see the back end of the second creature, which gave Aiden an easy target for his sword. Dashing up to it, he struck with his blade, and then hit it again on the back swing before it could react.

The borer shrieked in pain, and then lashed out with its rear paws. Aiden had anticipated this response, however, and held his shield ready to block the attacks. The first paw scraped the front of the shield well enough, but the second paw slammed in to Aiden's left side, slashing him through his unarmoured shirt, and pushing him backward.

A flash of light lit up the area of the cavernous hall they were fighting in, followed by the roar of the other borer as Sayana bathed it in flame. Aiden risked a quick glance over to see that Clavis was slashing away at its flank with his hand axe, while Colt was trying to bash its head in with his sword. A crossbow bolt from Nellise's direction struck the side of the creature Aiden was fighting, but didn't seem to do a lot of damage.

The blow did, however, get its attention. The borer turned to its left in a slow, lumbering fashion, and then squirted a stream of liquid from its mouth in the direction of the other group. Aiden swung his sword again as it moved, which was deflected off its thick hide, but had the unintended effect of ruining its aim. Whatever the liquid was, it splashed on the ground at Nellise's feet, sending up a cloud of noxious vapour as it sizzled on the bare rock.

"Oh they also squirt acid for eatin' through rock!" Clavis yelled as an afterthought.

"That would have been handy to know a few minutes ago!" Aiden called back, his heart racing as he took another swing at the borer in front of him. The armoured hide on the beast was too thick to get through with his sword though, so he decided to try another tactic. Locating one of its paws in the shadows, he swung at that instead and connected, slicing a huge gash along its rear leg. The beast lurched towards Aiden, as its crippled leg couldn't maintain its weight.

"Pace, are you still over there?" Aiden called, hoping that while he had been occupied with the back end, his friend hadn't been killed in the meantime.

"Yeah, thanks for the assist, mate!" Pacian yelled back. "I'm pulling back though, it got my right arm pretty good."

"I'll follow you out," Aiden cried, stepping to one side and bolting for the group that fought the other creature not twenty yards away. More flame erupted from Sayana's position, causing the borer to shriek and recoil from the heat and light. With the other beast partially crippled, they had a better chance of surviving this fight. Aiden wasn't sure what had motivated them to attack – it might have been hunger, or the light pained their eyes, or some other reason. But they couldn't just run them off, considering how dangerous they were. This had to be a decisive victory if they wanted to continue on through Ferrumgaard.

With the first borer on the defensive, Colt took the opportunity to take a powerful, reckless swing at its head. His weapon struck a telling blow, gouging out one of its puny eyes and spattering blood onto the stone, but in doing so the big man was squirted with acid, which splashed on to his left arm and quickly ate through his leather armour to burn his skin. Colt dropped his sword and staggered backward, clutching at his arm and screaming. Nellise immediately dropped her crossbow and went to his aid, leaving the rest of them to deal with the creatures.

"Bugger it, I'm goin' for me crossbow!" Clavis bellowed, running past the gravely wounded borer and over to the rock pile as fast as his little legs would carry him.

"Pacian, you still okay to fight?" Aiden asked in as calm a voice as he could manage, as he stepped up to take Colt's place. The sight and sound of Colt being burned like that had shaken him badly, but there was no time to even think about it at the moment.

"Yeah I'll manage," came the rogue's reply, his voice also betraying his trepidation. "I'm going to get into position; give it something to think about!"

"Watch out behind you!" Sayana called, spotting the other borer starting to move in, slowly but surely, its wounded hind leg dragging behind it. Aiden feared another squirt of acid coming for them, so positioned himself on the left flank of the first beast, using its bulk as a shield against the other.

"What are you doing, Aiden?" Sayana said with exasperation. "It's going to head for Nellise instead! Cover your ears." Aiden hadn't even thought of that possibility, and silently cursed himself for not thinking about protecting the cleric as she helped out Colt.

Sayana brought her hands together in front of her as she unleashed her spell, shaking the rock around them and blasting the two wounded borers with deafening sound, something Aiden hadn't seen her achieve before. They shrieked in agony, unable to withdraw or cover their ears from the assault, but worse still, dislodged rock and debris from above showered upon them all, including several sizeable chunks that could have crushed someone's skull if they'd been unlucky enough to be standing there at the time.

"Sayana, don't do that again," Aiden cried, "the ceiling could come down on us completely!"

"I had to do *something*," she yelled back as the echoes from the sound blast slowly dissipated. The first borer slumped to the ground, blood oozing from its ear holes and its tongue unfurled onto the stone floor. The second borer was not only still active, it had gone berserk. Its tiny eyes narrowed on Sayana and spit a stream of acid at her.

The wild sorceress was quick to react, leaping to her right and continuing on in a cartwheeling motion that let her avoid most of the acid, but she still caught some of it on her legs.

Aiden knew they were in trouble now, with half of the group preoccupied with damage control, and the remaining borer enraged beyond measure. But it was wounded too, and with its crippled leg preventing any rapid movement, they still had a chance.

"Flank it, Pace," Aiden instructed his friend. "Take its right side, I'll take the left, and keep moving!" Pacian didn't reply, instead acting quickly to get out of the line-of-sight of the beasts acid stream, in case another jet came towards them. Aiden moved just as quickly as his blond friend, slashing the armoured flank of the Borer as he ran past to get its attention.

The wounded creature attempted to swipe at him with its front paw, but met Aiden's force shield instead. The shield shimmered at the impact, vanished for a second, then reappeared, giving the young adventurer the distinct impression it was about to cut out altogether.

He couldn't worry about it now, however, with the imposing bulk of the borer before him. Pacian had started to work on the other side, stabbing at its exposed flank with great effectiveness, drawing painful grunts with every strike. Aiden opted to change tactics, stabbing with the point of his weapon instead of trying to slash through the armoured hide of the borer. This turned out to be a little more effective, drawing some blood from in-between its chitinous plates.

Between the two young men, they were slowly whittling away at the berserk creature, which lashed out with its great paws left and right, unable to land a hit on its rapidly moving assailants. And then its problems increased, as crossbow bolts started striking its side, cutting right through the armoured hide to penetrate deeply into the borer's flesh underneath. Clavis stood amidst the rubble, cranking out bolts as fast as his mighty crossbow could manage.

Pummelled from all sides, the beast eventually stopped moving and slumped to the ground, with five bolts sticking out of its side, oozing blood. Aiden struggled to catch his breath, with the left side of his chest stabbing with pain if he breathed too deeply. Clutching at his side, he staggered over to check on the others. Around the other side, Pacian had one leg up against the flank of the borer, as he attempted to pull out his stuck dagger.

"Everyone okay?" Aiden croaked, heading back over to see how Nellise and Colt were faring. A soft light was exuding from the crystal she held in one hand as she healed the big man's burned arm. Grimacing through the pain, Sayana had dragged herself back over to Nellise as well, her legs sporting some nasty burns that would need tending to as soon as the young cleric could manage.

"We're fine," Colt replied gruffly, examining what remained of the armour on his left arm.

"Everyone gather around and I'll do some group healing," Nellise instructed, opening her eyes to take in the line of patients awaiting her care. Only Clavis had escaped harm altogether, though it wasn't for a lack of trying on the part of the Borers. The dwarf walked over and sat on the ground with the rest of them, looking overwhelmed at what he'd just seen.

"We used to keep 'em as pets," he mumbled in disbelief, looking at the massive bulk of the dead creatures nearby. "Now I see why we used to cull 'em in the wild, I wouldn't want a bunch of those things running through me city."

"Clavis, it would have been handy to know about those things *before* we entered the city," Aiden said a few moments later. "Even if they were two feet long, it would have been nice to be prepared, if you know what I mean."

"Pets, I tell ye!" Clavis protested, his hands raised in supplication. "If'n I thought they'd be a problem, I woulda told ya, I swear on me life."

"So you never encountered them before on your previous visits?" Aiden pressed. "Not even a tremor?"

"Nay, the first time down I ran into a pack of bandits that were using the top level as a hideout," he replied as way of explanation. "Twenty five of the bastards, more'n I could take by meself. So I left again before they saw me, never having gone beyond the entrance."

"What about the last time," Pacian asked bluntly. "You made it to this point, and yet no giant monsters?"

"That's right, I never saw or felt the damn things," Clavis shot back. "Me and my team made it here and no further, with no sightings."

"Easy," Nellise said gently. "No-one is accusing you of hiding their existence on purpose. The question we need to ponder now, however, is do we continue on, knowing there could be more of them?"

"Yes," Aiden said immediately. "We were taken by surprise this time, and we won't let that happen again."

"Nothin's changed really," Clavis added. "I told ye all that Ferrumgaard was dangerous, but the reward is gonna outweigh the risk, so long as ya have the courage to persevere. And on the upside, we've got a way through now that we never woulda had afore them borers came through."

"Does save us a lot of rock-moving," Colt grunted. "If anyone's wondering, I'm fine with continuing on. Any more giant mole-things that are unfortunate enough to get in the way are gonna get *so* killed by me."

"There's the solution then, we just throw Colt at them," Pacian grumbled. "It'll take care of two birds with one stone."

"Okay, enough already," Aiden said, seeing Colt's gaze narrowing on his old friend. "We're moving on, if everyone's feeling better."

"My arm's kinda sore, but it's a hell of a lot better than it was," the big ranger grunted in reluctant appreciation. "I'm good to go."

"Me too," Pacian agreed. "That hidden gold isn't going to uncover itself." Aiden stood and went over to the pile of rocks to put on his armour once more, swearing to never take it off again while they were still underground. The others gathered up their things, and moved towards the new tunnel.

"There's something I never thought to pack," Sayana observed quietly as she mournfully picked at the tattered remains of her leathers. "Spare pants."

* * *

The tunnel curved around through the rock strata for a few minutes, then re-entered the main chambers of Ferrumgaard once more. Clavis explained that the borers could dig through rock well enough, but it took a lot of effort so they preferred to set up a tunnel network to move through with ease. They had apparently made the remains of the city into part of their network, so any tunnels they found made by borers would connect back to part of the city at some point.

While they were walking, Aiden dropped back to the rear of the group to speak with Nellise about the body they had found under the fallen rock.

"It was no more than three years gone, at the most," she informed him quietly. "Apparently the local wildlife cleaned up the bones quite rapidly, for if he had received a proper burial, the body would obviously have appeared quite differently. A little more... fleshy, as it were."

"Only three years..." Aiden mused, trying to resolve something that didn't quite add up. "Clavis said that rockfall was what stopped their progress two years ago, but that body was definitely buried underneath it." The conclusion could only be that the passage had collapsed, trapping those underneath. This seemed to suggest a singular truth, though the young man didn't like the implications.

"Clavis lied about what happened the last time he was here," he said grimly, keeping his voice lowered so no-one else could hear. "That body must be the remains of one of his companions."

"It doesn't please me to say it, but I don't see any other way he could have become trapped there," Nellise whispered. "We shouldn't jump to conclusions though - perhaps there was an accident, or he ran in to something... *unpleasant*, which attacked his team."

"Even if that's true," Aiden disagreed, "then why would he keep that information from us? The same thing applies to the borers; he really should have mentioned them, even if he only thought they were the size of a house cat. I don't know about you, but if cats could claw their way through rock and spit acid, I'd like to be informed."

"When next we stop to rest, I think we should confront him about these omissions," Nellise suggested. "I have the distinct feeling this place is only going to become more dangerous the further we go."

"No argument here," Aiden replied, wondering what else lay between them and his goal. For that matter, he wasn't sure where, exactly, he needed to look for the item he sought. A library or laboratory was most likely the best place to start looking, but he hadn't yet seen anything resembling such a building.

The best Aiden could figure, a place of knowledge would be in the more affluent places in the city, so he would have to keep his eyes peeled for anything important - they were entering the places in the city that had been long-buried, and the chances of coming across things of interest was increasing the further they travelled.

They left the confines of the borers' tunnel and entered the part of the city beyond, and weren't quite prepared for what they saw. The decaying bones of hundreds of dwarves lay strewn around the streets, and the buildings here were heavily damaged, but from what, Aiden couldn't tell. The air was quite stale and warm in this part of the complex, giving it more of an alien feel than the upper levels.

"What in God's name happened here?" Nellise breathed, looking around at the carnage. The others were similarly taken aback, but nobody, not even Clavis, had any answers.

"My first thought was that these folks died in the flood," he muttered grimly, "but the water never came up this far."

"And what about this?" Pacian called from behind them. Aiden turned and saw that his friend was pointing at the collapsed section they had just bypassed. The bones of many dwarves were sticking out of the rocks, much in the same way as the other body they'd seen on the other side of this rockfall. Aiden exchanged a knowing glance with Nellise, who was now looking puzzled by this new development.

"Give me a few minutes to examine these bodies, and to pray," she asked. "I need an answer to the carnage I see before me."

"I think we all do," Sayana said, appearing distraught at the scene before them. Aiden gave Nellise the space she needed, moving over to speak with Clavis.

"Is this still the worker's district?" he asked, looking around at the wreckage and trying to see if there was any similarity to the buildings further back.

"If memory serves," the dwarf replied, tugging his beard thoughtfully, "this was the dwellings 'o the common folk. More'n that, I couldn't tell ya with any accuracy. I haven't stood on this ground in nearly a hunnerd years, Aiden, and truth be told, there's much that I didn't know, even back then."

The young explorer was tempted to take this moment to ask a few confronting questions, but decided against it. He would prefer to have Nellise with him for that, and she was a little preoccupied at the moment. They stood amongst the devastation of the

city for a few more minutes, virtually silent, for there was little else to be said. Only the faint whispers of Nellise's prayers could be heard, echoing through the streets.

"It would seem this group of people left this world nearly a century ago," she eventually reported, looking drained, although whether it was from the prayer, or the information she'd gleaned, it was hard to tell. "The manner of their deaths was not revealed to me, but it was virtually simultaneous. This applies to all of the bodies present, too; all of them died at around the same time. A cursory examination of the bodies shows broken bones from weapon hits, so I think we can safely assume there was a battle, and we are looking at the losers."

It was a sobering thought, to understand that the people that had been left behind in the flood had ended their lives at each other's throats. It must have been a chaotic scene, with thousands scrambling to be free of the dying city, only to run into a collapsed tunnel, trapping them here.

How the tunnel had collapsed was unknown, but it did practically confirm that the body found earlier had indeed died as part of Clavis' team – the time difference between the two graves Nellise had discovered left no doubt, assuming of course that one believed in her source. Colt might have issues with it, but Aiden had a little more faith than the big man. He was about to nudge Nellise into talking to the dwarf about this, but Colt was already moving the group forward.

"This place stinks of death and betrayal," he growled. "There's nothing further to be gained by standing around, so lets get this bloody expedition over with, and get what Clavis came for."

"Aye, the sooner we're out of here the better," he agreed soberly, following Colt through the pile of fallen masonry, and pointing him in the direction they needed to travel by Sayana's torchlight. Aiden kept his eye on the dwarf for the first few minutes, and then moved forward to speak with him.

"Clavis, a word?" he asked tactfully upon catching up to him. Colt and Sayana were a few steps ahead, leading the group towards what appeared to be another stairwell, down at the edge of their light. The dwarf grunted absently, intent upon their surroundings, so Aiden leaned in and spoke quietly.

"Do you remember where in the city the library was situated?"

"Library?" he replied, having his full attention now. "I don't remember a lot 'o books from my time here lad, except those as kept by the engineering corp. I do remember a tall fellow, though, who used to visit all the time, had a strange name that I can't recall. Anyway, he was a human from Aielund, and was always looking for bits and pieces that we would dig out of the ground. He visited so often the King let 'im set up shop here. If anyone would've had a collection of knowledge like that, it woulda been him."

"That sounds like the sort of place I'm looking for," Aiden said, trying to hide his excitement. "We haven't passed his chambers I hope?"

"Nay, he was housed in amongst the nobles, on the fourth level. We should pass by there soon enough, and I'll be sure'n point his old place out to ya. Better that you keep anything he might have had 'o value, than leave it here for the rats and borers to eat. Mind yer step there lad, looks like the floor has given way."

A hole roughly ten feet across lay just to the right of the path they walked upon, partially hidden by the shadows cast by Sayana's arcane torch. They carefully moved

around the edge on the way to the stairs, noting with some discomfort that the bottom of the hole was deeper than their lights could reach.

The stairs were the same as before, wide, and carved out of the stone itself. Dust and dirt kept a record of their footprints as they passed by with an unconscious urge to keep as quiet as possible. Aiden had the feeling, now more than ever, that they were walking in a tomb, and they should disturb the surroundings as little as possible. It didn't help that they passed a number of dwarven skeletons, covered in cobwebs and a century of dust as they descended, their skulls staring at them with hollow sockets.

Upon reaching the fourth floor, Aiden could see the buildings were indeed larger, and more elaborate than those above, indicating they were in the wealthier section of the city. The smell was a little strange, though – far from the musty dankness that had been intensifying for the last hour, this area smelled almost like something had been burned, and it was an aroma he couldn't recognise.

“Smells like boiled crab down here,” Colt grunted, apparently noticing the smell too. They followed Clavis along a wide street, taking in the eerie sights and smells of part of the city that had not been visited in nearly a century. Pacian had already disappeared into a nearby building, eager to finally locate some hidden treasure in amongst the crumbling buildings of Ferrumgaard's nobility.

“I have the strangest feeling that we are being watched,” Sayana murmured, looking around as if trying to spot something about to pounce upon them from the shadows.

“Easy girl,” Clavis grumbled, “Ain't nothing been down here for longer'n ye've been alive.”

“No she's right, I feel it too,” Nellise said, her voice trembling slightly. “I can't put my finger on it, but there's something wrong here.”

“Balderdash,” Clavis muttered. “The worst we're going to see is a few more borers. Blimey... Sorry Aiden, I've got some bad news for ya. See that pile of stone up ahead blocking the street?”

“Yes, what of it?” Aiden replied, his ears pricking up at the prospect of more trouble.

“Yer library is in there. Or rather *was* in there, I should say. Looks like the ceiling came down from above, from that hole we went around. Damn place is coming apart... breaks me heart.” Nellise made a strange gesture for Clavis to not mention broken hearts, but Colt didn't seem to notice. Aiden practically ignored them, for his hopes of salvaging something from this cursed city were rapidly diminishing. He strode up to the rock fall, dragging Sayana along with him to provide some light.

The rock fall seemed fairly complete from this level, but Aiden wasn't about to give up just yet. He managed to heave away a large stone with his gloved hands, depositing it on the floor, and then returning for another one. Aiden guessed that the angle of the rock pile meant it was unlikely the entire lot was going to fall down as a result of this, so he felt it was safe enough to move a few rocks to get a better idea of what lay beyond. After a few minutes of shifting the rocks around, he noticed a pocket of air inside.

“Sayana, can you move your light in there?” he asked her, intent upon the gap inside. She complied, sending the tongue of flame hovering inside the gap with a gesture from her hand. As Aiden suspected, at least part of the interior was hollow, indicating that there was a chance he might be able to salvage something, if he could only get in there. He wasn't certain if any more stone could be shifted away without bringing the whole lot

down, though. Aiden conveyed his concerns to Clavis, who was much more of an expert on such things than he was.

"It's a tough call to make," he offered after a minute of close inspection. "With enough time, we might be able to brace part 'o the structure, enough to make a hole to crawl through. I guess it depends how badly ya want to get in there, to risk being buried alive should it come down on yer head."

"Aiden?" Nellise said, trying to get his attention.

"Just a moment Nel," he muttered absently, still focused on the problem before him. "I'd be prepared to take the risk, if the rest of you are prepared to spend the extra time here."

"I canna understand why yer so interested in some old books," Clavis muttered, tugging his beard. "But seein' as how ye've risked a lot to accompany me down here, I'm certainly prepared to help ya out."

"Aiden?" Nellise prodded again, an edge to her voice.

"Yes what is it?" Aiden asked, slightly annoyed.

"Aiden, *look*," Nellise cried. The young man turned around to see what had stirred her up so much, and was shocked to see that there were a number of glowing dots out in the darkness. The dots were clearly eyes, shining in the reflected light, staring at them. At a brief glance, Aiden could see that there were at least a dozen pairs of eyes out there, with more appearing every few seconds.

"What the hell are those things?" Pacian asked, his daggers drawn. Clavis turned and peered back at the unknown onlookers, but couldn't seem to make out any more than the rest of them.

"They ain't borers, in case ye were wondering," he whispered. "But I canna see past the lights. Can ya turn them down, ladies? I'll see a whole lot better without 'em."

"I am *not* going to stand here in pitch blackness with those things surrounding us!" Nellise exclaimed, gripping the staff tightly. Sayana said nothing, but closed the palm of her hand, extinguishing the flame and lowering the light level somewhat.

"Just cover it with your cloak for a minute," Aiden suggested to the young cleric. "Give Clavis a chance to see what's out there." By now there were over three dozen pairs of eyes watching them, effectively cutting them off from the way they had come. Aiden's sword was drawn, but he honestly thought that if these creatures had wanted them dead, they would have already attacked.

Against her better judgement, Nellise brought her cloak over the top of her staff, limiting the light from her prayer to the immediate area at her feet.

"That'll do just fine," Clavis said, a catch in his voice. He was clearly just as nervous as the rest of them, but apparently had a hunch about the nature of the creatures around them, enough to risk moving in a little closer to take a look.

"By Relnak, how can this be?" he breathed a few moments later. "These are me kin – they're dwarves!" This incredible statement left Aiden thunderstruck, and judging by their silence, the others were probably feeling much the same way. All their other problems flew from Aiden's mind, and were instead replaced with questions, such as how these dwarves could have survived, and why they were still down here.

Clavis took a few steps towards the group, who were still appearing only as glowing eyes in the darkness, and spoke a few words to them in the thick dwarvish language. He received a reply in the same tongue, but spoken with an even thicker accent. One of them

stepped forward, moving closer to Clavis to speak with him up close. They talked for several minutes, and it was a little frustrating to be unable to understand what was being said, but the tone of their voices didn't fill Aiden with encouragement.

"What the hell is going on," Pacian whispered nervously.

"I don't know, just don't make any threatening moves," Aiden advised through clenched teeth. Clavis was still talking to his counterpart, but the tone of their voices was becoming increasingly harsh. The dwarven marksman was actually starting to yell, which wasn't a good sign. Nellise unfurled her staff, shedding its illumination onto the proceedings, and Sayana brought her hovering torch back into existence. To their mutual dismay, the sight of Clavis backing up towards the group with a spear being pointed at his chest greeted their eyes.

"Shit, he's gone and started a bloody war," Colt growled, drawing his greatsword from its sheath and holding it in a threatening manner. With their lights shining brightly, Aiden could see the gleam from several dozen steel-tipped spears being levelled at them, and the dwarves holding them slowly moving forward, squinting in the bright light.

They were pale-skinned and clad in leather armour of strange design. The spears they held seemed to be well-made, and the dwarves held them with practised hands. But it was more than just their outright appearance and weaponry that had Aiden on edge – it was the look in their eyes, a look seemingly devoid of anything close to compassion or sanity.

"What did you say to them?" Pacian yelled at Clavis, who had backed away completely from the oncoming spearmen to shelter behind Colt's formidable presence.

"They're mad," Clavis gasped incredulously. "This is the MacAliese clan, me very own cousins! Their leader, Connor, just admitted that they were the ones that flooded the city a century ago, by breaking through a wall into an underground lake *on purpose*."

Clavis and the entire group were moving backward now, around the rock pile that covered Aiden's sole reason for coming here, and pushing them deeper in to the city itself. No dwarves barred the way behind them as yet, and the wall of spears blocking the way back to the surface kept on coming, one step at a time.

"Didn't you tell them who you were?" Aiden asked, looking about with consternation at the sudden turn of events.

"Aye, and they don't believe me," Clavis shot back. "They think all their kinsmen were with 'em at the time."

"What do they want with us now?" Nellise asked tremulously, holding her staff high.

"They don't allow anyone from the surface to come down here anymore," Clavis replied tersely, "and they're gonna make sure we don't get back up there'n let everyone know what's going on. The only reason we're still alive is 'cause 'o the light yer shining."

"Do we fight them, or run?" Colt asked, his voice tight. Despite their apparent hostility, the dwarves still hadn't actually tried to harm them, giving Aiden pause. Talking didn't seem to be an option, as Clavis had run into a dead-end, and he was the only one that even spoke the language.

Breaking back through to the stairway didn't seem to be an option either – he certainly wasn't game to try and break through three dozen spears. That left the way behind them as their only chance of avoiding a fight, assuming there wasn't another group of spearmen back there somewhere.

"Clavis, what's back in that direction?" Aiden quickly asked.

“The way down to the next level,” he answered, “but it's still a hunnerd feet or so. Maybe there be a prison set up fer intruders before then?”

“They don't seem like the type to keep prisoners,” Colt growled.

“I'm not willing to hang around and find out,” Pacian muttered, giving them a quick glance before turning and bolting into the darkness.

“Pace, get back here!” Aiden cried, noticing that half a dozen dwarves broke off from the main group in pursuit. The leader, the one Clavis had identified as Connor, barked out a few words, and the rest of his small army moved in, thrusting with their spears. Aiden spoke the command word to activate his shield, and used it to deflect the attacks as best he could.

The rest of them burst into action – Clavis reached for his crossbow, and Nellise and Sayana began to cast their protective magicks. Aiden was between them and the oncoming spearmen, so he decided he needed to buy some time for Sayana to do what she did best.

Bashing aside the spears with his force shield, Aiden stepped in and swung his sword, trying to slash away at the front ranks, or at least push them back a little. But he just didn't have the reach he needed to hit anything without risking the next line of spearmen having a clear strike at him. The young adventurer did have a trick up his sleeve though – an angry six foot ranger with a gigantic sword.

“Follow my lead!” Aiden ordered, and in an unexpected move, stepped sideways across the front of the spear line, bashing the weapons aside with his shield. Colt, who was right behind him, saw what he was doing and took advantage of the opening, swinging his sword overhead and bringing it down at the head of the nearest attacker. The dwarf tried to dodge, but was far too slow to avoid the strike, catching the blade with his shoulder, which was severed cleanly from his body..

Colt didn't relent, heaving his blade to the right in a chopping motion, taking the head off the dwarf next to him before they could react to the sudden shock of the big ranger's deadly strike. His advantage was short-lived, however, as the second line of spearmen moved in and thrust their weapons forward, bellowing incomprehensible war cries, impacting Colt in several places.

Aiden was fully on the defensive now, as the spear line closed in around them, looking for opportunities to stab at him, or anyone close enough to hit. Their chances of breaking through to the surface had evaporated, leaving only one possible escape for them; the stairs downward.

Clavis started unleashing bolts from his repeater into the line of spearmen, hitting true time and again. The close range meant the crossbow was particularly effective, especially against the poorly armoured dwarves. The marksman took down two of their attackers in a short span of time, and wounded another before having to change out the cartridge.

Nellise finished a prayer and bathed Aiden and the others in a glowing radiance that infused them with energy, and put their attackers at a disadvantage – for the insane dwarves of Ferrumgaard, so used to total darkness, it was like squinting straight into the sun. The thrusting attacks of the spearmen become far less effective as they tried to continue the fight in the blinding light. In spite of this, the sheer bulk of their numbers was pushing them backward further and further into the city.

From the back of the group of spearmen, a deep, chanting voice could be heard over the sounds of battle. The sound grew in volume and intensity, and as it did so, the light from Nellise's prayer started to waver, and dim, allowing the spearmen to see better and strike with greater accuracy.

"He's countering me!" Nellise cried in astonishment, noticing that it was starting to become very dark in their immediate area. The young cleric raised her voice, chanting aloud for the first time that Aiden could recall in an effort to bolster her prayers.

"...Praise be unto you, light of Heavens, I am one with the light and the faith, it surges through me, unceasing, unrelenting, bathing the faithful in your power and...". It was working, after a fashion – the light slowly grew stronger, overcoming the unnatural darkness being thrown at them, though Nellise's opposite number hadn't given up yet, for the light dimmed and grew again in a constant struggle for control.

Sayana moved forward as this was going on, the tattoos on her legs glowing as she unleashed magical flames in front of her, scorching the four or five spearmen in the front row. The smell of burned hair and skin accompanied the sounds of screaming as the wounded dwarves fell back, only to be replaced by others.

Other spearmen continued to strike at them, and they were learning to anticipate where Aiden's shield was. The young man was struck again and again, minor cuts but enough to slow him down.

Colt seemed to be somehow able to ignore the wounds he was racking up as he swung his mighty weapon back and forth, snarling with rage all the while, but Sayana took a devastating hit to her leg and fell back, limping badly. She let out a war cry, startling Aiden just as much as their enemies as she drew out her battleaxe and threw it in an overhead strike towards the nearest dwarf, striking him in the chest and throwing him back onto the ground.

The sorceress stretched out her hand towards the axe, extending her power to the weapon and drawing it out of the twitching body, back through the air and into her hand, ready to be thrown again.

Aiden could see how hopeless it was – they were just too heavily outnumbered. Despite their efforts, at least two dozen dwarves were still standing before them, and he didn't know how much longer they could last. As Clavis started shooting bolts into the crowd again, the novice warrior came to the decision that it was time to withdraw.

"Clavis, get everyone to that stairwell!" he gasped. If this kept up for much longer, they weren't going to be able to move at all, let alone run away from their attackers.

"Sounds like a plan to me," Clavis yelled back, shooting another spearman in the neck as he started shuffling backward. Despite his wounds, Aiden kept himself in front of the line of spearmen to prevent them from having a clear strike at anyone else. The group started following after Clavis, moving as fast as possible, considering Sayana and Colt being as wounded as they were.

The dwarven leader barked out a few commands, pressing the attack. Aiden was struck on his right arm, and nearly dropped his sword as a result. The dwarves were grinning maliciously now, sensing their advantage, and Aiden knew he would be unable to hold them back for much longer.

"I'm just about done in," Colt grated, the big man panting heavily and bleeding from half a dozen wounds. "Make a break for the stairs, now!"

"I'm not going to leave you here," Aiden yelled back at him.

“I didn't say I was staying!” Colt shouted, taking one last swipe at their enemies and turning to run for it. Aiden did the same, hurrying after the group that Clavis was gradually leading away, and the sight of the two warriors with a horde of spearmen running after them was enough to spur their legs on to greater efforts.

Aiden felt a sudden sharp pain in his back, and almost lost his footing as he was struck by a spear that had been thrown as he was running away. He went to raise his arm to position the force shield behind his head, to give him some protection, but noticed that it had vanished already. He was unable to ponder this strange event as he was struck in the leg by another thrown spear, and went down in a heap onto the ground, tumbling over twice before coming to a stop.

Aiden's leg was a world of agony, and when he went to grasp it reflexively he felt the spear sticking gruesomely out of it. The shaft had broken off in the tumble, but the point had gone in deeply. He cried out as he tried to dislodge it, but to no avail. The dwarven host, despite the slower movement afforded by their stumpy legs, was quickly descending upon him. With no shield, he had just about consigned himself to an early grave when a blast of flame shot over his head, stopping the oncoming dwarves in their tracks and severely scorching the frontrunners.

The young man felt strong hands grasp him underneath his arms and drag him backwards, past Sayana who stood guard over him, flames roaring in front of her to keep the enemy at bay. They were distracted further as knives flew through the air from the darkness, putting them on the defensive.

A bloodied and angry Pacian darted into the light, the daggers on his hips dripping with blood as he raced past Sayana and headed for the stairs nearby. She turned and followed him, using the diversion as a chance to break away without risk.

“You gotta stand up, man!” Colt bellowed, lifting Aiden back on to his feet, causing agony to shoot through his wounded leg. He stifled a scream and managed to limp over to the first stair, noticing that everyone else was already there and awaiting him a few steps down. The light started to dim again, plunging them into near-darkness as Nellise leaned heavily against the stone wall.

“It's no use, he's too strong,” she breathed, clearly exhausted from her own personal battle.

“We'll never get away from them, with half of you unable to run,” Pacian remarked, also trying hard to catch his breath. “They're just going to keep on coming until we're dead!” Aiden, looking out at the sea of shining eyes closing in on them, couldn't believe it was going to end like this. If only they had a door they could jam shut or something else that could block the stairs, they could at least remove the immediate threat...

“Sayana, use a sound blast!” he said, gasping from the pain in his leg.

“But you told me not to,” she replied warily, “it could bury us alive!”

“If you *don't* do it, we're dead anyway!” Aiden shouted. “Everyone, get down the stairs as fast as you can!” The others complied, with Colt offering his shoulder to help Aiden hobble down, one stair at a time. Despite her reservations, the exhausted sorceress turned and began to invoke the spell, light swirling along the tattoos in her legs as she brought her hands together.

The clap of thunder that erupted from her hands was deafening, and shook the very ground they stood upon. The dwarves roared in dismay, dropping their spears to clutch at

their ears in agony. Small rocks and a pile of dirt dislodged from the ceiling above, but it still held.

“Do it again, drop the ceiling!” Aiden shouted. Sayana swayed to one side but managed to steady herself. Again, the lights surged along her legs, but before she could finish a spear suddenly appeared out of her back, having just been thrown by a nearby dwarf. Time seemed to slow as Aiden saw all their hopes crumbling as Sayana staggered backward from the blow, but with an incredible feat of discipline, she managed to finish the spell and unleash a final blast of sound.

This time, the ceiling came down, slowly at first, but with larger and larger pieces tumbling down upon the stairs. Aiden was unable to move – his legs just wouldn't respond to any commands as he tried to get forward to grab the wounded girl before she was crushed to death by the falling rocks.

“Get him out of here!” Nellise yelled over the tumult as she dashed past, pushing Aiden and Colt backward down the stairs. The young cleric, exhausted as she was, pushed forward through the rocks and managed to grab the back of Sayana's belt just as the remaining light from her staff was obscured, and the rest of the ceiling came crashing to down. The sounds of screaming could be heard over the rock fall, just before Aiden was left in darkness and pain.

Chapter Eighteen

When the noise from falling rock had finally subsided, the unnatural silence of the dead city returned. Aiden lay next to Colt on the bottom part of the stairwell, both of the men coughing from the cloud of dirt and dust that had been dumped on them. Clavis and Pacian were nearby, having been furthest from the devastation, and were already moving to support the others. There was no light whatsoever – everything Aiden knew about his surroundings was based solely on his hearing.

The novice warrior was in tremendous pain, from both the spearhead lodged in his leg, and the fact that it was broken from the fall. His right arm was practically useless, and he felt the warmth of blood running down his body from several other smaller wounds, but at least he was still alive for the moment.

A brief flash of light pierced the stifling darkness as someone started striking flint and steel to ignite a torch. It took several tries before the sparks caught, and the flame from the torch took. By its light, he could see Pacian holding it, the blond rogue covered in dirt and blood from the fight but otherwise still standing. Clavis was next to him, searching through the rubble for signs of life, ignoring the cuts and bruises that he'd received from the falling rock.

“Ah, found 'em,” he exclaimed, spying Colt slowly pushing rocks and dirt off his body so he could get to his feet. “Hold still man, ya might have a broken bone or three.”

“I'm fine,” the big ranger choked, coughing some more to disprove his point. “Nothing broken, though it's not for a lack of trying.”

“What about Nel and Sayana?” Aiden managed to croak.

“I think they're a little further up the stairs,” Colt said grimly, dusting off his leathers. “Which means they're at least partially buried under that rock.”

“They might still be alive,” Pacian said stubbornly, wedging the torch into some nearby rocks and moving up the stairs to begin excavating.

“Aye, there's always a chance lad,” Clavis said, keeping his voice neutral. “You two can make a start on it, I'll tend to Aiden's wounds a bit.” The dwarf came in closer and carefully examined Aiden's leg, and took a cursory look at the rest of him too.

“I'm broken up pretty badly, aren't I,” Aiden breathed, already knowing what Clavis was going to say.

“There's no foolin' you,” he replied, taking off his belt and folding it over, then leaning forward and offering it for Aiden to bite down on. “Me belt might taste like dirt, but it'll do the job. Just think of it as a really tough steak, and I'll put you back together as best I can.” Aiden reluctantly did what he was told, knowing that this was *really* going to hurt.

“I gotta take out this spear first, and then I'm gonna to set your leg,” Clavis informed him, clearly not a proponent of the 'ignorance is bliss' line of thought. The dull ache numbing his senses became a sharp shock, causing Aiden to stifle a scream as the spearhead was pulled out of the broken leg. His breath came in short gasps and he was covered in sweat, but the spear was out, at the very least.

“You're doin' real good, lad,” Clavis assured him, taking out a small flask and splashing its contents into the wound. Aiden bit back another scream as his wound burned from what must have been alcohol, to clean the wound. “When we've dug Nellise out, we'll be using some 'o those healing flasks she was given back in town to fix you quicker, but right now I need to spend a few minutes to clean ya up a bit before I set this leg in place.”

Aiden nodded, resting his head back against the least uncomfortable rock he could find as he caught his breath. A few seconds later, his leg exploded with pain as Clavis set the broken bone back into place with one swift, sharp move. Aiden's last thought before the blackness rolled over him, was 'lying bastard'.

* * *

It was almost completely dark when he finally came to, a headache pounding behind his eyes and sharp pains throughout the rest of his body. The nearby torch was burning low, with its flickering tongue of flame no larger than that of a candle. A strong smell was in the air, a kind of damp, musty odour that reminded Aiden of rotting vegetables.

His leg still ached, but it was a dull throbbing pain as opposed to a sharp, spear-sticking-out-of-my-leg sort of affair, which was something of an improvement. The leg had been splinted, with the handle of an axe no less, and had been wrapped with a combination of torn clothing and regular bandages. Turning his head slightly, he could see a lot of the rock that was piled next to him had been removed, and was replaced by Nellise's prone form.

“Took an hour to dig them out,” Pacian said to Aiden quietly, sitting on the other side of her. The blonde rogue looked unusually sombre, and didn't take his eyes from her when he spoke, and his words were heavy with emotion. “Nel took a blow to the head, obviously from a bloody big rock. She's lucky to be alive at all, although there's no telling how long she'll be out. After all that effort to armour herself up, she couldn't have bought a helmet too?”

Aiden slowly raised himself up to rest on his elbows, wincing at the various shooting pains that sparked throughout his body at the slight movement. Nellise's breathing was

shallow, and the parts of her body that weren't covered by armour were torn and cut or wrapped in bloodied bandages, though it wasn't as bad as he thought it might be. Clavis, sitting at the base of the stairs, noticed Aiden's movement and quickly came closer to investigate.

"Ah, good to see yer awake, Aiden," he said, checking out the splint on the young man's right leg. "Ordinarily I'd say ya'd have to wear this thing for six weeks before ya could walk unaided again, but if... *when* Nel wakes up, she should hopefully be able to get ya back on yer feet in a few hours." He produced a small vial, most likely taken from Nellise's pack, and handed it to Aiden.

The young adventurer leaned to one side and used a free arm to take the offered medicine, which he drank down in one gulp. It was foul-tasting stuff, but almost immediately he began to feel a tingling throughout his body, particularly the wounded parts.

"That'll help ya out some, but it's not nearly enough to fix yer leg. We used most of them to help out Sayana, and we've only got one left for when Nel wakes up."

Aiden heard a catch in his voice, and with a cold realisation dawning upon him, began to pay closer attention to their surroundings. The sounds of rapid, shallow breathing could be heard from nearby, and it wasn't Nellise. Fearing the worst, Aiden carefully dragged himself up the stairs towards the noise, until he could see Colt sitting beside the wild girl, who lay upon the stairs in amongst the rubble.

The ranger held a torch in one hand, and Sayana's right hand with the other. Sweat beaded on her brow and her eyes were wide open, but she stared straight up at the stone ceiling and barely noticed Aiden's approach at all. He had seen the girl take a spear in the gut before she fell, but it had been removed, and all that remained was a gruesome wound, soaking the bandages around her midriff with blood.

"She should be dead, or at least unconscious with a wound like that," Colt said softly, looking down at the tiny girl without any visible emotion. "I can't imagine what keeps her hanging on to life like this, but she's a tough one, no doubt about it."

"Will she live?" Aiden asked, drawing a shrug from the big man.

"She's holding steady, though she's obviously lost a lot of blood. The only reason she's still breathing is 'cause of those tonics and whatnot we retrieved from Nel's pack. Before she took 'em, I was holding her guts in with my bare hands, I swear to God." Aiden had taken Colt's lack of feeling as a callous disregard for her well-being, but now he could see he was emotionally burnt out from what they'd gone through while Aiden had been unconscious.

"Hang in there a little longer," Aiden whispered to Sayana, being careful to keep his voice sounding hopeful. "Once Nellise is awake, she'll fix you up good and fast, do you understand?" Sayana didn't respond, but she did blink emphatically, so Aiden took that as some sort of acknowledgement.

As he sat there watching her cling to life, his sense of relief was slowly diminished by a feeling of cold rage at their situation. Aiden hadn't thought it would be quite so difficult to go through this old, supposedly abandoned city – certainly not to the point of nearly killing two of their number, and it may not have been fair, but he looked to Clavis as part of the reason Nellise and Sayana were flirting with death at this very moment.

"Clavis, when did you say you were here last?" he began.

“A few years back,” the dwarf said, “though I take it ya mean in the city in general, for I ain't been down this far since I was in short pants.”

“So when you say 'a few years', do you mean three?”

“Roughly, sure,” Clavis agreed.

“And when you reached that passageway upstairs,” Aiden continued smoothly, “you said it was blocked, so you had to turn around and leave, is that correct?”

“Aye, and how is this line 'o questioning relevant to our current situation?” Clavis snapped back, the usually taciturn dwarf apparently feeling the stress of their predicament.

“Aiden, maybe this isn't the time to talk about the past,” Pacian advised, confused as to why his friend was bringing this up.

“We appear to have plenty of time,” the young explorer replied somewhat coldly. “We found a body, half-buried under the rock fall, and Nellise says it was less than three years old, so it just couldn't have been buried beneath hundreds of tons of stone if it had already collapsed when you arrived.” Clavis levelled a stern glare at the young man and took a step forward.

“What's yer point,” he growled. But Aiden was too tired, and sore, and just plain cranky to care about his threatening attitude.

“I think at least one of your associates died under that rock fall,” he said bluntly. “I think you had a few people with you when you came back here, and they all died in that collapse. But what I can't figure is why you felt it necessary to keep that from us.”

“How can she know how old a skeleton is anyway?” Clavis grunted, dismissing his argument.

“She's studied anatomy, for one thing,” Aiden replied, “and she received some divine insights as well. Now I'm not a particularly religious person,” he added, seeing Clavis scoff at this news, “but Nellise is. We're still alive today because of her faith and devotion to a higher power, and if that same power says to her that that a body is three years old, I'm disinclined to doubt her word. Can you honestly look me in the eye, and tell me she's wrong? If you *can* do that, I'll drop this whole thing right now.”

Aiden considered himself a reasonable judge of character, and his measure of Clavis MacAliese was that he was a man of his word, not prone to excessive lying, and would probably speak truthfully given the opportunity. The dwarf hadn't answered yet – he was clearly thinking about it, while Colt and Pacian looked on with uncertainty, keeping their silence to see what happened.

“Yer wrong,” Clavis replied with a shrug, but Aiden thought he could detect a distinct lack of conviction in his words.

“You can lie to us, but you can't lie to yourself,” he responded through the haze. “Look at it this way; if you *really* believe what happened was an accident, or you're just simply not at fault, tell us. I'm not going to judge your actions with hindsight, or put blame on you where it isn't due; I just need to know the truth.” The dwarf stroked his beard absently, never taking his eyes from Aiden until he finally spoke.

“Yeah, they died in my keeping,” Clavis eventually spoke in little more than a whisper, validating Aiden's suspicions at last. “I had seven men with me when I came back to claim what was mine, and they all perished in this cursed place. It wasn't really me own fault, but I still carry the burden, nonetheless.”

“What the *hell* is this?” Colt bellowed, standing up and taking a few steps towards the dwarf. “Did you lie to them as well? Blow sunshine up their asses about lost treasures just sitting here, waiting to be plundered?”

“Hang on Colt,” Aiden cautioned him while keeping a close eye on Pacian, who was reaching for a dagger. “I want to hear his explanation first.”

“Look, you don't understand,” Clavis said, his voice laced with an intensity they hadn't heard from him before. “Do you know who the King of this place was? King Arland *MacAliese*, one 'o me cousins! There be only seventeen MacAliese's still alive after the flood, and I'm next in line fer the throne!”

“I'm not even sure where to start with that,” Aiden retorted after a few seconds of trying to process this new information. “Let's begin with the fact that we've found at least three dozen or so of your clan still alive in the city. They're *insane*, and tried to kill us, but I'm guessing they've more right to the throne of this wretched city than you do.”

“And then there's the fact that being King of this place probably won't have any bearing on the rest of your people back in Stonegaard,” Aiden continued. “Last I heard, they have a King already and they're pretty happy with him.”

“A bloody MacTavish!” Clavis shouted back. “They was making me meals, and cleaning me house when I was a wee lad, and now they think themselves the new nobility? They don't have the right, nor the brains to lead, and when I get out of here, I'm gonna give 'em a choice between the pretender, Sulinus MacTavish, or meself, a descendant of the real King 'o the dwarves, a *proper* King.”

“What is down here that makes you think they're not going to just throw you out on your ass, when you try to tell them this load of tripe?” Colt growled.

“I've got me lineage,” Clavis said haughtily, “and that's enough to get 'em to listen. But they need a symbol, something connected to the old empire to inspire them. King Arland had a war axe that he kept with him most of the time, his own personal weapon, made by our finest artisans. Magnificent craftsmanship, and real distinctive, so it can't be faked. I show up with that weapon, and it'll turn some heads, especially the old guard that can remember what life was like back then. They'll listen alright, no question.”

“So that's what you're after?” Pacian mused. “And you were prepared to sacrifice us to get it?”

“No, no it ain't like that at all,” Clavis said, shaking his head. “After I saw that a group of bandits had set up camp here years ago, I went and hired some likely lads to help clear 'em out. Took some time, since no-one really wanted to come down here, but I finally found me a fearless group 'o lads, and we sent those bandits packing.”

“Thing about those boys though,” he continued, “fearless they may have been, but they had more courage than brains. We got to that tunnel up above that me and you lot were going to break through, but ya could walk a good fifty paces further along before ya met the old collapsed section back in those days... before the accident.”

“So they started digging, and the roof came down on them I guess,” Pacian drawled. “How did you manage to be the only survivor?”

“I was hearin' some funny vibrations that the others couldn't, and went to have a look-see,” Clavis explained with a heavy voice. “I did notice that the roof was starting to come in, but by the time that happened, it was already too late. They were good lads, and certainly didn't deserve to be crushed to death like that. Anyway, I didn't mention it to ya,

because I was afraid that ye wouldn't want to come with me if you'd heard that me last helpers died 'orribly."

"Seems reasonable to me," Pacian remarked. "But this hair-brained quest of yours to become King is ridiculous. You think an old axe is going to have thousands of your people bowing before you?" The blond rogue shook his head. "Not going to happen. You were right not to mention all this to us, by the way. I sure as hell wouldn't have agreed to this if I'd known."

"You don't seem to understand," an exasperated Clavis countered. "Me people are being led by the descendants of our servants – our King was a bloody *baker*, by Relnak! The first big crisis they have, they'll be in trouble, mark me words!"

"What does a girl have to do to get some peace around here?" came the softly spoken words from Nellise, quelling the discussion. Aiden instantly put aside this whole issue and carefully moved over to her side, along with everyone else. The beautiful young cleric's golden eyes were open, and she smiled wanly up at them.

"You have no idea how glad we are to see you awake," Aiden said, smiling with genuine relief.

"What happened?" she asked, slowly touching her head with one hand and wincing at the result.

"You grabbed Sayana just as the ceiling was coming down," Pacian explained, gently stroking her hair with his hand in a rather obvious display of affection, but nobody seemed to notice. "You were hit in the head with a rock in the process. Next time you go to buy armour, include a helmet, okay?"

"I'll make a point to remember that," she whispered, very weak from her ordeal. "I see someone did an expert job on the bandages," the young cleric observed. "Pretty soon you won't need me at all."

"Perish the thought," Aiden assured her, taking a small vial of liquid that Colt handed to him. "This is one of your healing tonics Nel, so drink up and get your strength back." She did so, imbibing the concoction, then rested her head back down against her bedroll again.

"I'm having trouble breathing," she mentioned, shifting her body around to try and resolve the problem.

"Yer breastplate took a few dings during the rockfall," Clavis told her. "It's probably a bit too tight for ya now, so if you lads can take it off, I'll get me little hammer and see if I can pound it back into shape."

"Thank you Clavis, that's very kind of you," Nellise replied. "And for what it's worth, I've been listening to the conversation, and I understand why you acted the way you did. I forgive you for your deception, and the rest of you might consider doing the same. We need to focus on our predicament if we're to survive."

"We'll get to that in a little while," Colt grumbled as he and Aiden undid the straps on Nellise' breastplate. "As soon as you're able, Sayana is in dire need of some healing. I honestly don't know how much longer she's gonna last."

"I knew she was going to be gravely wounded, but it's good to hear she's still among the living," she said as the dented breastplate was lifted away. Clavis took it, giving Aiden a quick, unreadable look, and went over to his pack further down the stairs to do some repairs. Nellise took a deep, slow breath, and then fished around the inside of her robe for something, but seemed unable to find it. Pacian seemed to know what she was

looking for, however, and produced the crystal she used for healing from one of his pouches.

“Looking for this?” he asked, handing it over to her.

“No, actually, but I would have needed it eventually,” she told him, still searching around in the bodice of her robe. “Oh here it is, never mind.” She produced a necklace with a small amulet hanging from it – it looked like a tiny sword with a broad crosspiece, but set in a circle with some elaborate fluting around it. Nellise raised it to her lips and kissed it, her eyes closed in a quick prayer. Aiden recognised it as the symbol of her order, and now understood why she had been making sure it was still there. She was about to move over to Sayana's position when she was struck with a thought.

“Wait, what were you doing with my crystal?” the young cleric asked Pacian.

“I... wanted to see if I could heal you,” he answered awkwardly.

“It's not the crystal that does the healing,” she said, smiling wanly as she continued over to the wild sorceress. “Your faith needs to be strong, and I really don't think you qualify.”

“Well... you never know,” he replied soberly. “One of these days I might surprise you.”

Nellise spent a minute examining Sayana's wound, then made herself as comfortable as one could while sitting upon a stone stairway and began her prayers. It wasn't long before Aiden began to feel a subtle change in the air as the channelled energy flowed around them. The young man laid back and closed his eyes for a little while, content for the time being to allow the process to work on his battered body. The rhythmic sounds of Clavis' hammer striking metal could be heard as the dwarf fixed Nellise's armour, while she worked.

It was only five minutes later that Nellise stopped, slumping to one side as her strength was spent. Pacian quickly put his arm around her shoulders to make sure she didn't hurt herself, instead helping her lay back down next to Sayana.

“She will live,” Nellise whispered, placing a hand on the girl's arm supportively. Aiden felt greatly improved from the healing, though he was still unsure about his leg. He hobbled over to check on Sayana, keeping his weight to one side just in case. The sorceress was breathing normally now, though he couldn't tell if the wound had healed over completely, without taking off the bandage. Just the fact that her eyes were closed and she seemed to be resting normally was a good sign, though, so it seemed they were out of trouble for the time being.

“Did you hear that?” Pacian asked, tilting his head slightly. Aiden gave him a curious look, listening carefully for any kind of unusual sound. He heard nothing strange for a long moment, and then a kind of dull 'thump' could be heard from above, accompanied by the sound of dirt and small rocks hitting the stone floor of the stairwell.

“Is this tunnel about to collapse?” Aiden asked, suddenly anxious at the thought. Now that the pain had subsided, he was more acutely aware of the fact that they were cut off from the surface by tons of rock, and it was a stark realisation that did nothing to calm his nerves. Clavis quickly moved closer to the collapsed rock – a brave move by Aiden's standards – and took a look at it, trying to find the source of the noise.

“I need more light up 'ere,” he complained. “Light up another torch and shine it on this section for me lad.”

"That's the last torch," Pacian hedged. "Once it's gone, we'll have to wait for one of the ladies to light our way."

"Bollocks, I'll have to feel me way around," Clavis muttered, carefully feeling the surface of the stone to gain some insight as to its stability. "The rock ain't fallin' away from this side, but that surely does sound like stones being moved away on t'other. I guess me cousins aren't quite finished with us yet." Pacian groaned at this news, and Colt spat out a few choice curses.

"Way I see it, we got two options," the big man growled. "Either we start lookin' for another way to the surface real quick, or we fortify the place and fight them when they break through."

"Does it look like we're in any condition to fight a small army?" Pacian snapped. "Of *course* we're running, the only question is; where to?"

"There weren't no other way up that I know of," Clavis retorted, "otherwise most of me people would have made it out alive when the waters came. All I know is that we canna go back up this way without a fight. There's only this level, as far as I know, that ain't flooded out. If we don't find a way through there, maybe we can hide and wait 'til their search teams pass us, then make a break for it."

"Wait..." Aiden said hesitantly as an idea flashed through his mind. "You said 'when the waters came'... that means there has to be a breach in the walls on one of the lower levels, right?"

"Yeah, it does," Clavis replied gravely, "but we got no idea what level that breach is on. Could have been on the eighth for all we know, and there's no way we can swim down that far to find out. And even if we could, it just opens out into the lake that was struck, so we'd have to swim up through that, and hope there be a way out someplace above."

"Okay, so there's a chance it might not work," Aiden conceded, "but if your clan was involved in flooding out the city with the aim of deposing their own King," - Clavis visibly flinched at the mention of this - "then it's possible they cut that hole on the fifth floor, where his chambers were, just to make sure they got him."

"How do you know the lake was there, though?" Pacian asked. "Maybe the lake was way down at the bottom of the city, where the mines were."

"No, he's right," Clavis said dismissively. "I don't rightly recall if there was a lake 'o water someplace near the King's throne room, but if the water filled up to the fifth level, then it must 'ave achieved a kind of equilibrium with the rest 'o the lake, meanin' it had to be pretty high up, even if the breach was lower down. We better get down to the next level and start searching around, I think there be a strong chance we'll find that breach there, somewhere."

"Anything to get away from this damn smell," Pacian agreed, screwing up his face. "What the hell do they keep down here anyway?"

"Smells like they're using it as a garbage dump," Colt grunted. "It has to go somewhere, I suppose. It'd at least explain why they don't live down here, a fact which saved our lives."

"Okay, pack up our things and pick up the ladies, we're going down to the next floor," Aiden instructed, clambering to his feet and wondering if he needed to have Sayana's axe strapped to his leg any longer. He decided to risk removing it, cutting away the bandages holding it in place with his sword, and hefting the axe on to his back, since

the wild girl wouldn't be able to carry it yet. His leg seemed to support his weight without any pain, though it did still feel quite tender, so he resolved to keep his weight off it as best he could.

Colt lifted Sayana as if she weighed nothing at all, leaving most of her equipment on the stairs, since they couldn't take everything with them. Nellise allowed herself to be lifted without complaint, though she wouldn't permit Pacian to carry her. She leaned on him instead, and allowed herself to be guided along by the waning torchlight.

"In God's name, I have never been so tired," she whispered. "Clavis, who was that man back there who was countering my prayers?"

"Priest 'o Relnak probably," Clavis grunted. "Though I can scarcely believe Ol' Greybeard would answer the call of a treacherous cur like that." Nellise said nothing, but Aiden could tell from her expression that she was unimpressed with the thought of a pagan god. He surmised she was just too tired to start a theological debate.

Colt's theory on the nature of the stench permeating the air proved to be correct, as they saw piles of refuse, offal and garbage littering the streets and buildings of this section of the once-great city. The smell became overpowering as they moved through it, glad to find a clear path that the dwarves above kept clear, to allow travel through the muck.

To Aiden's eyes, it seemed like the offal was moving, until he looked closer and saw that millions of beetles were crawling over the garbage, feasting on the rotting piles. They were no larger than his thumb, but that still counted as a pretty big beetle. They didn't seem to care at the passing of the adventurers, content to feed and live out their lives as the only inhabitants in this section of the decaying city.

The immense, white armoured hide of a borer loomed up in the street before them as they walked along, scaring them half to death before they realised it was already dead, the flesh having been eaten from its bones by the voracious beetles crawling over its hide. What was even more disturbing, though, were the huge gashes along its armoured side, as if a massive claw had slashed at the beast. Clavis was at a loss to explain it, however, and they didn't have any choice but to keep moving forward.

They were deep underground now, and the pressure of it was starting to get to Aiden. He was constantly nervous now, worrying about too many things to truly relax - if his theory about the breach being on the fifth floor was wrong, they were most likely doomed to die down here. The ceiling was much lower this far into the city as well, being little more than fifteen feet above their heads, acting as a constant reminder of their location.

The sound of water splashing could be heard just up ahead, which puzzled Clavis no end, until they arrived at the edge of the stone floor, and looked out across a vast body of water.

"Well blow me down," he breathed in awe. "The entire floor has cracked in half and sunk at least a few feet, judging by the height those buildings ahead are at. The whole floor is at an angle too, so I have to assume that some of the supports on the lower level have given way over the years." The stone floor they stood upon was a good two feet above the waterline, the paving stones showing signs of having been split apart by tremendous force.

"So, we have to wade the rest of the way, through freezing cold water?" Pacian asked with dismay.

“Aye, unless ya want to try lashing together a raft made out of beetles and excrement, lad,” Clavis replied.

The torch was almost gone now, and it was too dark to see anything else, so the young man called for a stop to rest. They would have to rely on Nellise or Sayana to provide them with light now, and until they were able to do so, they may as well rest where they were. So they sat down at the edge of the artificial lake, bunched together for warmth and the comforting reminder of each other’s presence. As the torch died, only Clavis could see their surroundings, and he told them what he saw with a sad note to his voice.

“This used to be the council chambers, where the bureaucracy that kept the city running was set up. A lot of what I can see – and that ain’t much, let me be clear – has been destroyed by the waters. There’s a big pile of rubble at the end of me vision ahead that practically reaches the ceiling, and some of the buildings look like they’re gonna topple over at any minute. Looks like some of those bastards come here to fish, as there’s some netting just over to our left here with some dead fish and crabs tangled up in it. Don’t look fresh though, so I don’t think any of me wayward kin are hiding around here.”

“Damn that’s a lot of water though...” he continued. “We’re gonna get wet moving around, no doubt about it, and I ain’t lookin forward to diving through that to look for a way down to the throne room.” They sat quietly in the darkness, listening to the water lap at the stairs for a few minutes before Clavis spoke again, this time in little more than a whisper. “I’m sorry I got ye all in to this mess, and I’m sorry I didn’t tell ya up front what really happened to me. Ye’ve been good to me this whole trip, and ya deserved better than this.”

No-one answered him, for whatever personal reasons they might have had. Maybe it was the aching in his body, or the tiredness from their ongoing ordeal, but try as he might, Aiden couldn’t offer him any sort of consolation. If they actually found a way out of here, then maybe one day he would forgive the dwarf for his deception, but until then, he just couldn’t do it.

He had come here with the hope of recovering some more information about that enchanted glass sphere that had changed his life years ago, and the feeling of disappointment he felt at knowing that the most likely place to find it was buried just out of reach, behind a wall of insane dwarves, was affecting him more than he realised.

A soft white light appeared at the end of Nellise’s staff, offering them some illumination of the gloomy scene around them. The young cleric was leaning against a pile of rock while Pacian rummaged through her backpack, apparently searching for something at her behest.

“Is this it?” he asked of Nellise, showing her what appeared to be a small pouch. Moving very slowly, she reached up and opened the pouch, looking inside to check the contents. She nodded, taking the pouch from the blond rogue’s hands and emptying it into a small mortar. Aiden only caught a brief glimpse, but it looked like some sort of herbs that she was about to grind up.

“What is that stuff going to do?” Pacian asked, sitting next to her and watching curiously.

“A concoction that will keep us going,” she whispered in reply. “Though we may come to regret taking it when its effects wear off. However, we cannot afford to stay here for much longer, despite our need to rest. They will be coming.”

“Right, then I better get to it,” Clavis declared, standing up and starting to strip off his armour, equipment, and weapons in preparation for swimming.

“You’re still planning to try and get that damned axe?” Aiden asked, already knowing the answer.

“We may have gone through hell down here, but it’ll all be for naught if’n I canna find the bloody thing I came here to get,” Clavis said. “Besides, I might just find that breach ya talked about, assuming I can find a way down to the next level.

“Considering the state of this place, I’d be surprised if you *didn’t* find a hole in the floor,” Aiden replied caustically. “Still, for what it’s worth, good luck to you. When we’re able to move, we’ll start searching around through the flooded areas ahead for any sign of a way up, so we’ll meet you up ahead some place.” The dwarf nodded brusquely in response, then stepped off the stone floor and into the water, tentatively at first to be sure of its depth, but with greater confidence as he waded out into the city.

“Hey, Sayana’s awake,” Colt said at that moment, the sorceress stirring in his arms. Aiden and the other two turned to look, the young man heartened at the sight of her rising to her feet unsteadily.

“How are you feeling?” Aiden asked.

“I’m starving,” she replied weakly, leaning against the big ranger as she looked about at their surroundings.

“Yep, she’s back to normal,” Pacian said with relief as Colt pulled out some of their rations for her to eat. Sayana quickly took what she was offered, wolfing down cold sausages, bread and cheese much faster than she should have. She managed to avoid choking, however, despite her best efforts.

“Here’s something else you can have,” Nellise remarked, shaking a small vial of dark liquid vigorously in one hand. “I’ve made enough for all of us, but just take one mouthful or you’ll regret it later.” She took a swig from the vial herself, shuddering as she swallowed the liquid, then handed it to Pacian who looked at it dubiously.

“This stuff better be good, because it smells worse than this garbage pile we’re sitting next to,” he grumbled, taking his mouthful and screwing up his face in silent complaint. “Good God, it smells better than it tastes! Your turn, Aiden.”

“Oh, thanks Pace, I can’t wait to try it after such a ringing endorsement,” Aiden deadpanned, leaning over to take the vial.

“Just swallow quickly, and it will be over before you know it,” Nellise offered, her voice sounding stronger already. Aiden took her advice and drank a mouthful in the hopes of avoiding the taste, but to no avail. It was a bitter, acrid tasting substance that made him shudder involuntarily, but almost immediately he felt more energetic.

“Whatever it is, it’s working,” Aiden remarked, handing the vial over to Colt, who took a swig from it without complaint. The big ranger passed it to Sayana, who finished off what remained in the vial while she was still eating some bread. The food must have mitigated the taste somewhat, for she didn’t seem to react to it as badly as the others had, but the wild girl did seem to display the most benefit from the concoction as well, her eyes widening and her slouched back straightening up.

“It will last for little more than an hour,” Nellise explained, “but should give us the strength we need to search this place for a way out. And if we don’t find one, I guess it doesn’t really matter after that.”

"I feel great," Pacian exclaimed, practically leaping to his feet. "I'm going to search around a bit for anything... interesting."

"And how do you expect to find your way around?" Aiden wondered, feeling better and better with each passing moment.

"I still have the torch here," Pacian replied after a moments thought. "I'll just re-wrap it in some cloth and a little oil and it should give me some light for a little while at least." The blond rogue tore off some cloth from the bottom of his camouflage cloak, while the others rose to their feet and prepared to wade in to the freezing waters to look for a way out.

Clavis had disappeared from sight several minutes ago, but Aiden could still hear his muttered complaints about the cold, and splashes as he moved around the broken, flooded floor. Aiden kept all of his gear on, even the chain mail shirt – nothing was going to make him take it off this time, not even diving under water if the need arose – and Nellise also put her mended breastplate back on with Pacian's help, probably for the same reason.

Although their boots and clothing did offer some protection from the cold at first, Sayana's ruined pants did nothing to shield her from the freezing waters as they stepped in, being practically non-existent below her thighs.

"Are you feeling alright?" the young adventurer asked her as they started wading through the waters.

"Still feeling weak," she whispered. "I don't think I'm going to be much use if another fight breaks out, and I'm too drained to invoke any magic. I'll take my axe though, if you please." Aiden nodded in understanding, for he hadn't been expecting anything major from her, and was actually inquiring about her stomach wound.

"Don't worry about that," he replied, handing her axe back to her, "if we do run into another fight, just get out of the way and let us take care of it. Your wound is better though, I trust?"

"It's still very tender, so I won't take the bandages off yet. But my innards are staying on the inside at least."

"Always a good thing," Aiden said, smiling wanly to hide his concern.

"Hey, I've found a way down!" came Clavis' cry from the darkness ahead. "There's holes in the floor all over the place, fer some reason, so mind yer steps."

"What sort of holes?" Aiden called back, looking down at the water with trepidation, hoping that they didn't blunder into any by accident.

"I dunno, it's kinda hard to make out any detail on 'em, but they ain't natural, which means some borers might have dug through some time ago," Clavis guessed. "I dunno if they can swim or not, never thought about it before. But I don't know what else coulda done it."

"Well for our sake, I hope they're as dead as the one we saw on the way through. Any sign of a breach in the walls?" Aiden asked, hoping against hope that a way out had been found, though part of him knew it couldn't be that easy.

"Nay, though I only been searchin' for a few minutes," Clavis answered with a shake of his head. "The problem is trying to hold me breath long enough to get a good look-see. Anyway be careful where ya step, I'm headin' back under again." There was the sound of splashing water, and then silence as the dwarf continued his search.

"This kind of reminds me of Bracksford," Nellise remarked wistfully as they splashed along through the dark waters, leaning on her staff for support.

“Yeah, I never thought I'd miss that place,” Colt grunted, testing the ground ahead with his greatsword. “Nothing like being buried in an ancient city, filled with insane dwarves and giant mole-monsters to give you some perspective.”

Aiden wasn't really paying attention, as he was watching Pacian climbing the pile of rubble that Clavis had mentioned earlier. It rose up out of the shattered buildings and flood waters around them, and seemed to consist mostly of carved stone sections from housing, but the style was different to that of the structures around them.

The light from Pacian's makeshift torch was illuminating the ceiling, and there appeared to be a sizeable hole above him. That could only mean that the rubble Pacian was climbing had come from... *the floor above them.*

“Pace, watch out, that hole above you leads right up through to where those crazy dwarves are living!” Everyone halted immediately at this statement, looking up at the hole in trepidation.

“I'm just going to take a quick look,” Pacian assured them, clambering over the rubble with ease towards the gap in the wall.

“No, wait!” Aiden whispered as loudly as he could, hoping that they hadn't already alerted their enemies to their presence on the floor right below them. Pacian ignored the warning, sitting directly underneath the hole and looking up through it cautiously. It was much bigger than he was, probably close to ten feet across and had smooth sides, much like the borer holes they had seen on the higher levels.

Looking around at the base, Aiden couldn't see any signs that it was used as a passage between the levels on a regular basis, but he couldn't understand why. Despite his reservations, he started to climb up the pile of rubble to join his blond friend, for although part of him was wary of bringing their enemies down upon them again, another part wanted to know if they'd just found their way out of this dreadful place.

“Ere, what's goin' on up there?” Clavis said, surfacing not far from the base of the rock pile.

“There's a hole leading up through to the next level,” Nellise informed him. “I think they're trying to see if we can get out that way.”

“Well, I ain't found any way out from down there yet, but I did find the throne room. If I can just hold me breath a bit longer, I can get in there and see if the King's axe is still there!”

“Wouldn't it have rusted away by now?” Colt asked.

“It woulda if'n it were made 'o steel mate, but it was fashioned from precious mithral, and immune to the ravages of time.”

“Mithral?” Pacian called down to the dwarf. “Isn't that stuff worth a fortune?”

“Aye, and don't think fer a second that yer gonna sell it, ya greedy bastard!”

“I was just curious,” Pacian protested.

“Focus, Pace,” Aiden cautioned his friend, still examining the hole to see if there were any handholds.

“Sorry, it's really hard,” he replied. “I feel like I'm jumping out of my skin here.”

“I know what you mean, I can barely keep my feet from twitching,” Aiden muttered.

“Alright, this time I'll make it all the way down,” Clavis declared, almost to himself. He exhaled as much as he could, and then inhaled a mighty breath before plunging back down into the depths.

“Give me a boost would you?” Aiden asked his old friend, having figured out the best way to climb up. Pacian complied, managing to push the young adventurer up, while maintaining his precarious perch on top of the pile of destroyed buildings. Aiden managed to get a hold above the edge of the stone, and pull himself up high enough to peer over the edge.

It was completely dark, but there were also no signs of glowing eyes looking back at him either. His heart racing, he continued to climb all the way up, heaving himself over the edge to sit on the stone floor to get an impression of his surroundings.

Although he couldn't see, his hearing gave him a sense of an enclosed space, as if he'd climbed in to one of the buildings they'd passed on their way through. Despite his desire to remain inconspicuous, he motioned for Pacian to throw the torch up through the hole so he could see where he was exactly. The torch flipped through the gap with ease, and landed across from Aiden, shedding a small amount of light on his surroundings.

He was underneath a vast pile of fallen rock that was hollow in the section around the hole he sat next to. The rocks made an almost perfect dome shape over the hole, peaking at the front of a building roughly fifteen feet away. The door to the building was still intact, though it appeared to be blackened in places, and the bones of several dwarf-sized individuals were scattered and broken around it.

But what really caught Aiden's attention was the gap in the surrounding rock just behind him, at roughly chest height, that opened out into the main thoroughfare – the hole he himself had made only hours ago.

Aiden could barely contain his excitement, for he had stumbled into the laboratory he had sought, right under the noses of the insane occupants of Ferrumgaard.

Chapter Nineteen

Thinking quickly, mostly thanks to Nellise' tonic, Aiden took off his camouflaged cloak and draped it over the hole in the stone to stem the flow of light from the torch alerting any nearby dwarves to his presence. Then, he poked his head down through the hole in the floor and raised a finger to his lips to call for quiet from the others, lest any noise they make echo up through the stonework. Ignoring their curious looks, he limped over to the torch, picked it up, and then cautiously approached the area near the blackened door.

The stone around and above him - from what Aiden assumed came from a collapsed section of the ceiling - was too perfect to have happened by accident. Combined with the scorched door and the broken bones, it was clear that this doorway had some rather serious eldritch protection upon it. Clavis didn't mention that the stranger who came to collect recovered relics was a wizard of any sort, but it seemed likely, given his interest in buried relics.

Leaning in for a closer look, Aiden could see etched runes around the edge of the door, familiar shapes that he recognised from his long studies of arcane devices. Most of them he could interpret as protective wards that invoked tremendous energies if the door was touched, but some of them he did not recognise. Whatever they were, it seemed likely they were all related to keeping people out of that room, at the cost of their lives.

Despite the ominous implications, this actually gave Aiden hope, for it increased the likelihood of the contents of the room beyond remaining undisturbed for the past century.

If he could just figure out how to bypass the protective runes upon the door, he'd be able to find out, one way or another. The trick was to determine if the wards were permanent, or if they would allow the owner to pass through them, and perhaps there was even a way to deactivate them altogether, for safety reasons.

"Dead bodies lying in front of an enchanted door probably means we should be running the other way," Pacian whispered over his shoulder, startling Aiden, who hadn't heard his approach. "You actually think you're going to get through that with all your limbs still attached?"

"I can read most of it," Aiden said irritably, trying to calm down again after the unexpected pleasure of Pacian's company. "All the parts I understand are the parts that summon fire to kill you, though. It's the section over here that I can't read that will probably have something to do with switching this off."

"But you can't read it," Pacian slowly replied. "How are you going to figure it out?"

"Context, Pace, context," Aiden instructed his friend. "I can see runes for 'passage' and 'authority' near the end, so the ones in-between should be related."

"If you say so mate," Pacian shrugged. "But if I know locks, it's probably something simpler than that. Can't imagine dealing with all this every time I wanted to go in or out of my room, if you know what I mean." Aiden nodded absently, too intent upon deciphering the runes before him to really pay him any heed. The aspiring scholar was fairly certain he'd skimmed over just about all the arcane runes ever written in the years he spent researching, and if he could just jog his memory, he might be able to recall exactly what they were.

The young men sat quietly amidst the bones of others who had attempted to force their way into the room, struggling to decipher the hidden meaning of the runes before them. Aiden's frustration started to build as the answer eluded him, impairing his ability to concentrate. Finally, he threw up his hands in exasperation, unable to crack the puzzle.

"It doesn't make any sense," he whispered to Pacian, who was fidgeting madly and seemed unable to sit still. "That rune is nonsense, as far as I can tell."

"How do you know?" Pacian whispered back impatiently. "Maybe it's just something you've never seen before, though that's hard to believe with the amount of reading you did."

"But the runes are pictographs at their core," Aiden explained, "and each has to represent something, in some fashion. This squiggly rune represents fire, for example. But that one right there seems to be complete nonsense, it just... has no relation to anything else up there." Pacian rubbed his chin stubble for a few moments, then before Aiden could stop him, reached forward and pushed the indecipherable rune.

Aiden recoiled reflexively, expecting a blast of arcane fire to incinerate them, but to his shock, the rune sank smoothly into the door frame and then stopped with a solid 'clunk'. The door seemed to open just a crack, as if a lock had been tripped, and a slight gust of stale air swept past them. Aiden stared at it for a long moment, and then glared sharply at Pacian, but his friend just shrugged.

"Told you it was simple," he shrugged. "Are you going in or what?"

"One of these days, you're going to get your hand blown off," Aiden growled softly, cautiously pushing the door inwards. He held the torch forward to shed some light inside the doorway, and saw a dusty environment that seemed to serve equally as both living space and laboratory. Feeling quite certain that there would be no further traps, he limped

into the room and started looking around. Pacian followed him in and did the same, although the two friends were looking for distinctly different things.

There were shelves on the wall to Aiden's right, and further along a large bookshelf was perched, filled with crumbling tomes. He carefully examined the contents of both as he slowly limped past, seeing only normal household objects or jars of long-expired foods. A huge wooden desk was positioned next to the bookshelf, covered in an assortment of curiously shaped items that were covered in a thick layer of dust.

Aiden inhaled sharply as he spotted the dessicated corpse of a robed man slumped upon the desk. He had clearly been dead for decades, but whether or not his passing occurred before or after the terrible events that befell the city was unknown.

Across the room, at the edge of the torch's light, Pacian was rifling through a large chest that he'd discovered at the foot of a large, plush bed. Rotten old leather shoes and other articles of clothing flew across the room as the blond rogue speedily 'sorted' the detritus, until he came across a pouch near the bottom of the chest.

"Finally, some worthwhile loot," he breathed, hearing the sounds of coins jingling within. He seemed to be pleased with his find as he emptied the contents into his palm for inspection, so Aiden went back to scouring this place for anything of relevance to him. Gingerly pushing the poor dead chap back in his chair, Aiden looked at the desk closely, taking a deep breath and blowing away clouds of dust to reveal what lay beneath.

"Aiden? Where are you?" came Nellise' voice from down below, a little louder than he would have liked.

"If you're done over there, you should probably go tell them what we've found," Aiden told Pacian.

"Yeah, I'm good," Pacian answered, pocketing the coin pouch. "The sooner we get out of here the better, you know? So don't take too long with all that decrepit junk over there, we all want to leave as soon as we can find a way out."

"Well, that'll give you something to do while I finish up here, then," Aiden said absently.

"Right... right," Pacian replied, unimpressed. Nevertheless, he turned and left the room, giving Aiden the chance to find out what he'd just uncovered. There were a number of strange objects and papers on the desk, apparently having been under examination around the time this poor fellow was still alive. In the background, he could hear Pacian quietly informing the others of their find, just as an odd sound could be heard echoing off the stonework.

It was a deep sound, little more than a vibration really, and was powerful enough to cause a few of the glass objects in the room to shake violently. Somewhat alarmed, Aiden tilted his head to try and discern where it had come from. He was fairly certain it was echoing up from below, so at least it wasn't something he'd unleashed by opening up this room.

"Aiden! Something's not right. We want to get moving, hurry up!" came Pacian's call from just outside the door, all pretence at stealth thrown to the wind.

"Just another minute and I'll be done here!" he called back, unable to pull himself away from the wealth of information he could sense laid out before him. If ever there was an answer to the questions he had, it would be found right here, and he wasn't leaving without it.

He quickly took off his backpack and pulled out a waterproof oil-sack, and started carefully placing object after object from the table into it for further examination once they were some place safer. His concentration was broken a moment later as a woman's scream could be heard from down below, only to be cut off by a deafening roar from some unimaginable creature.

Pacian swore loudly, and Aiden dropped the sack in shock, limping outside as fast as he could manage to join the startled rogue at the edge of the large hole to look down at the most terrifying sight he had ever seen.

Sticking out of the water below was a massive serpentine head, easily ten feet long, with a long, sleek body that disappeared into the depths. It glistened with the water dripping from its dark, scaled skin, and extended itself out of some breach in the floor, closing in on their companions below. Sayana was scrambling over the rubble beneath the breach that Aiden was looking through, trying to get away from the approaching monster, while Colt and Nellise were moving through the water as fast as they could.

The massive head moved in with uncanny speed, heading straight for Colt's back, but the big man must have sensed its approach for he turned around in the water, sword drawn, and looked straight down into the mouth of hell. Aiden clutched onto the edge of the stone hole with white-knuckled tension as he watched the scene unfolding below.

"Pace, you could jump down onto the back of that thing and stab its eyes out," Aiden exclaimed, seeing the exposed back of the snake extending out only six or seven feet beneath their position.

"Are you crazy? I'm not jumping down there, that thing is *huge*!" Pacian shot back, clearly as afraid as Aiden was.

"I'd do it, but my leg won't take the fall!"

"Bugger that!" Pacian retorted, refusing to budge. The giant serpent had clearly tired of poking at Colt, who was swinging his sword back and forth to keep the giant fanged mouth at bay, and instead lunged at Nellise, who was stumbling through the knee-deep waters nearby. She didn't even see it coming, so intent on escaping as she was, and was snatched up in the massive jaws of the serpent, which clamped down on her torso and then thrashed its head about, trying to tear her to pieces. As she screamed, Aiden pulled out his heavy crossbow and started to crank the windlass furiously, while a sudden change came over Pacian.

"Son of a *bitch*!" he yelled, drawing his two daggers and courageously leaping from the precipice, falling through the air to land upon the beast's back. Its head was too far from where he landed to permit any eye-gouging, as Aiden had advised, but that didn't stop Pacian driving both blades deep into the hide of the giant serpent, causing it to emit an ear-shattering roar as it spat Nellise out to land heavily in the waters nearby. Her staff was flung from her hands as she fell, landing on a nearby pile of detritus but still shedding enough light to see by, without which they would surely perish.

Colt seized the opportunity to move forward and lunge at the distracted beast with his mighty greatsword, finally facing a foe that the oversized weapon was ideal to fight with. With two sweeps of the weapon, Colt cut deep slashing wounds along the sides of the creature's underbelly, spilling blood out into the foul waters around them.

After several infuriating seconds of winding, Aiden set a bolt into place and with shaking hands, raised the weapon to take aim. The giant serpent was thrashing about,

trying to dislodge the persistent rogue who was stabbing it over and over again, but the sheer bulk of the monster was such that Aiden couldn't fail to hit it at this range.

He aimed closer for the head to avoid Pacian altogether and unleashed the bolt, which struck it between the eyes. It hardly seemed to notice, however, and continued to thrash about in an effort to dislodge Pacian. Despite his best efforts, Pace just couldn't maintain his grip on the slippery hide of the beast, and was thrown into the shallow water nearby.

Cursing the slow, heavy weapon he was forced to work with, Aiden wracked his brains, trying to figure out a better way of hurting the beast. Looking around frantically, he spied a large chunk of rock nearby, so he threw the crossbow aside and crawled over to the rough stone. Grasping it with his gloved hands, Aiden heaved with all the strength he could muster, slowly moving the massive chunk of stone towards the large hole, spurred on by the terrified shouts of his friends from down below.

He was covered in sweat from the exertion, and though it took him far too long to do so, Aiden eventually managed to get the rock into position, teetering on the edge of the hole. Looking down through it, he could see that Pacian and Colt were playing a desperate game of cat-and-mouse, each flanking the massive neck of the serpent as it warily tried to pick them off one by one.

Seizing the opportunity, Aiden gave the rock one last heave and pushed it over the edge, then grasped the side of the hole to watch the results. His aim was a little off, and the rock only managed to clip the side of the giant serpent's body, but it still must have caused it a good deal of pain at the very least, judging by its reaction.

The head pulled back from harassing Colt, then tilted upwards, looking Aiden straight in the eye. Panicking, the young man scuttled back from the edge as quickly as he could, just narrowly avoiding the head as it thrust straight up through the hole, slamming into the rock above it with deafening force. A large number of those huge stone pieces came loose, tumbling down on the monster's head, but they only seemed to aggravate it further.

The torch that Pacian had left with him was starting to die already, its meagre fuel having been used up, but it was enough for Aiden to see that the immense mouth before him was filled with razor sharp teeth, but even more disturbing was the notion that there was enough room for that head to dart over and snatch Aiden up and swallow him whole.

Seeing little choice, he lunged towards the doorway at full speed, only to have his wounded leg give way underneath him just as he hit the door. Pain surged up his body as he tumbled into the room just in time to avoid the serpent's head slamming into the wall behind him. It was too big to fit through the doorway, but gnashed its teeth and bellowed loudly trying to break through, leaving Aiden trapped unless his friends could get its attention once more.

Again and again the giant serpent slammed into the doorway, the sound of stone cracking from the impact becoming louder with each hit. He thought of drawing his sword, but the idea of doing enough damage to scare it off was laughable. If only the door's trap was still active, it'd probably blast the head off that thing... An idea flashed into Aiden's mind – if the man who had lived here had a mechanism to quickly switch off the trap to allow safe passage, there was probably a way to switch it back on, from the inside.

The young adventurer limped painfully over to the edge of the doorway, and prayed that it wouldn't give way while he was within biting distance of the great beast, which roared and snapped at him, just out of reach. By the dying light of his torch, he could see the same incomprehensible rune Pacian had recognised as the secret switch. He jumped back in fear for a moment, as the serpent slammed into the stone even harder, sensing how close Aiden was at the time and roaring so loud Aiden thought he would be deafened, then he rushed back in and pushed the rune.

The door closed by itself; whatever cunning mechanism that the dwarves had designed was still working after a century of neglect, and as soon as it closed fully, the unique crackle of arcane power being unleashed could be heard, along with the agonised roar of the serpent. Intensely bright light came in under a crack in the door, the colour of flame, and the sound of the serpent, still howling madly, could be heard withdrawing down the hole until it vanished altogether.

Aiden slumped against the door, breathing hard and shaking like a leaf. He sat there for the better part of a minute and gathering his courage. He leaned over and saw that the button to close the door had another one just next to it, most likely for releasing the door from the inside, so Aiden rolled out of the way of the door and pressed the button.

The smell of smoked fish and charcoal wafted in with the breeze as the door swung open. He could hear his friends below calling out for him, no doubt unaware that he was still alive, after a fashion.

"I'm okay!" he called back, picking himself up while being careful to keep his weight off his injured leg. While not broken it was certainly fractured, and wouldn't be much use to him until they had a chance for Nellise to rest, and for that, they would most likely have to escape from this infernal city first.

"We have to get moving, *now*!" Colt bellowed impatiently. "Drop whatever it is you're doing and get down here, Clavis thinks he's found us a way out." Aiden picked up the sack with the few items he'd managed to stow in there, and then hesitated, looking down at the desk, still laden with all sorts of interesting papers. Throwing caution to the wind, he stepped closer and swept the rest of the material into the sack, hoping that a few extra seconds of waiting wouldn't be their downfall.

Satisfied that he had everything valuable, Aiden said a mental farewell to the remains of the wizard whose trap had just saved his life, then limped outside, closing the door behind him so that the remains would continue to go undisturbed. He secured the sack over his shoulder, tying it in place so as not to lose it, then hurried over towards the hole, becoming increasingly alarmed at the sounds coming from down below.

Before he could make it there, the cloak he had secured over the hole suddenly gave way as several spears were thrust through it, coming close to taking Aiden in the chest. He almost fell over backwards in surprise, catching himself just before he toppled over, and then went around the other side of the hole to keep them at bay.

He cursed himself under his breath for taking the extra time to loot the place, for now their enemies had found another way down. The rocky ceiling above had been heavily damaged by the serpent, and it was only a matter of time before the dwarves managed to find out that they could get through to the level below that way.

Aiden tossed the sputtering torch down onto the pile of detritus below, made sure that he was about to drop onto the closest part of the pile, then lowered himself over the side and let go. He landed heavily on his good leg, as intended, and looked around to

gauge the situation. The others had been using this pile as the centre of their defensive efforts, for even though it was an uneven mound of rocky debris, it was still easier to move around on it, than in the water.

They were gathered around Nellise, who lay on the pile down near the waterline, her crystal held in one hand, and her battered breastplate cast aside. Great teeth had rent gouges all around the armour, to the point of leaving it almost beyond repair, but it had done its job, keeping Nellise alive and in one piece despite the numerous bloodstains on her torn robes.

“When Pacian loots something, he's at least quick about it,” Colt growled as Aiden made his way towards them.

“Sorry, but I found a few things that might turn out to be important. Is everyone okay?”

“Yes, but only because we got lucky,” Colt replied. “That damn snake was too cautious attacking us. Probably been stung in fights with the dwarves in the past, 'cause I saw a lot of scars along its hide. But you burned its face real good Aiden, it'll either swim back to its mother, or come back and attack us with everything it's got.”

“I'd prefer to be out of here before then,” Sayana stated bluntly, clutching her axe with shaking hands as she kept a close eye on the water.

“When it attacked me upstairs, the serpent damaged some of the rock up there too,” Aiden added, “enough so that the dwarves upstairs can probably climb down through that hole soon. They've already tried skewering me with spears, so they know what's going on around here.”

“This just keeps getting better and better,” Pacian muttered sarcastically.

“Ahoy thar!” Clavis called from nearby, interrupting their train of thought as he stood right at the outer edge of their light, holding something in his right hand. “I found me King's axe!” he roared, holding the shining weapon above his head in triumph. “I'm freezing me arse off, but I've other good news too – I found that breach ya thought might be there, Aiden, and it's a beautiful sight! Leads up into an old lake, mostly drained now 'o course, but I felt a breeze on me face... say, what the hell happened to ya, people?”

“We'll tell you later,” Nellise said with a tremulous voice, popping her crystal back into its pouch and slowly getting to her feet. “That's all the healing I can do for now, my friends. Any more and I won't have the strength to swim out of here.”

“We'll manage,” Pacian remarked hastily. “Let's get moving. Clavis, can you lead us over to this breach you found?” The dwarf was about to answer when the water between them erupted, and the serpent's head plunged towards them once more. In the brief, terrifying second before it struck, Aiden could see its face was hideously scarred from the explosion above, and its left eye was milky white, apparently having been blinded from the blast. But its fury had redoubled, and it lashed out with tremendous power as it sought vengeance.

It targeted Pacian, whose cat-like reflexes saved his life once more, for he managed to leap to one side just as the massive jaws clamped shut on the air he had once stood in. Nellise and Sayana backed away from it, wading through the water as fast as they could, for both of them were almost completely exhausted from their earlier efforts and the accumulation of wounds.

“What happened to my crossbow?” Nellise exclaimed, grabbing the space behind her back where it normally hung, frantically searching for the missing weapon.

“Never found it!” Colt barked back, manoeuvring for position against the immense creature. Aiden, committed to the fight despite his injury, drew his sword and spoke the command word to bring his shield into being, but as he suspected, nothing happened. Whatever magic had been in the glove's crystal was now gone, and it was just a rather expensive piece of clothing.

Pacian moved quickly around to the blind side of the serpent and prepared to strike, while Colt took a frontal approach, his massive sword giving him the confidence to take on this giant monster. But the beast wasn't waiting to see what happened this time; it struck out directly at the big ranger, slamming him back into the debris pile on which they stood, and then attempting to clamp down on his leg in an effort to bite it off.

The remains of his leathers weren't enough to thwart the serpent's attempt to dig in its huge fangs, but while it was busy doing that, Pacian managed to get a couple of vicious stabs in on its blind side. Aiden also moved in to slash at its slimy hide, cutting a deep gash along its side. In a surprise move, the serpent heaved its massive bulk to the left, knocking Pacian from his feet, and then began to swing back in Aiden's direction.

With his wounded leg, he couldn't move out of the way fast enough, and was crushed up against the pile of debris behind him. Aiden felt the distinct sensation of his ribs cracking and gasped in pain, but fortunately the giant serpent did not keep up the crushing attack, instead refocusing its efforts on Colt, who had managed to get back on his feet and was swinging wildly.

Gasping for breath, Aiden glanced to his left and noticed that Clavis still hadn't joined the fight. The dwarf stood there, not twenty yards away, clutching his new-found prize and watching the battle unfold before him. Aiden thought he might be paralysed with fear, for they were all terrified by the monster seeking to end their lives. But Clavis looked behind him, then down at his axe, and Aiden suddenly realised he was considering leaving them to the fight while he made his escape with his life's dream.

“Clavis, help us!” Aiden called, picking himself up and clutching at his side with his free hand. The dwarf continued to hesitate, and then made up his mind, sinking down into the water and disappearing from view. Aiden hurled a vile curse after him, his heart sinking in his chest, but the novice warrior couldn't stand around contemplating Clavis' treachery. He gripped the handle on his sword tightly, and limped back into the fray, taking a futile swing at the long body of the serpent as it continued to press the attack.

“You wanna eat something? Eat me, you hell-spawned bastard!” Colt yelled out in challenge to the giant serpent, swinging his weapon wildly at the monster. His fearless attacks were devastatingly effective, connecting with nearly every swing of his greatsword, and the serpent was focused solely on him, weaving about and seeking an opening in the ranger's defences. It had managed to manoeuvre its body in such a way that it was almost striking in from above, with the rest of its sleek form emerging from the water some distance away, making it difficult to hit from anywhere but the top of the debris pile where Colt was standing.

Pacian resorted to throwing his few remaining knives, trying to keep it distracted so that the others could attack it, but the giant serpent seemed beyond such minor annoyances. Colt moved in for a heavy swing at the beast, but misjudged the distance, almost losing his footing on the treacherous surface as his greatsword swung wildly past the serpent's head, which was more than enough opportunity for their wily foe to take advantage.

In one quick strike, it lunged forward and snatched Colt up in its jaws, shaking him about furiously in an attempt to tear him into smaller pieces, but the ranger's armour prevented the monster's teeth from digging through enough to cause any severe damage. Colt dropped his sword during the frenetic movement of the serpent, but that didn't stop the big man from trying to defiantly land a punch. Aiden looked up at the plight of his companion, and a feeling of absolute helplessness swept over him. Though it only took a second to flash through his mind, the sense that they were finally beaten took the remaining strength from his resolve.

And then Clavis emerged from the water at the base of the monster's body, roaring with battle rage and swinging the axe of his ancestors at the vulnerable flank of the beast. The shining axe cut through its hide like a hot knife through butter, spilling pints of blood and causing the great serpent to drop Colt unceremoniously onto the debris pile as it roared in agony. Quick as a flash, it started to retract its body back into the water, the mouth of razor-sharp teeth heading straight for the dwarf.

"Get out of me city, ya thrice-damned overgrown carpet snake!" he bellowed, slashing back and forth with the axe of his ancestors, slicing through flesh and muscle with each cut. He could easily have moved out of the way in time, but instead, he held fast, keeping up the attack with all of his might as the wounded serpent, enraged beyond measure, descended towards him.

At the last moment, Clavis swung, taking out one of the great fangs from that terrible mouth and cutting deep into the flesh, then reversing his stroke to smash the hilt of the weapon in to its snout.

Mortally wounded from its mounting injuries, it roared and lunged at him, jaws wide enough that the serpent almost took him into its mouth whole, except for his legs which were bitten off completely, swallowing the rest of him in one go as the precious axe dropped into the water and sank.

"No!" Aiden cried out in horror, accompanied by the rest of his companions who were in a similar state of disbelief. Sayana, who had been hiding around one side of the debris pile, threw all caution to the wind and ran to the top, her axe held over her head as the wild girl yelled in rage, letting the weapon fly through the air, striking the head of the beast solidly enough that they could hear the bone crack.

Nellise had picked up Clavis' crossbow and began to unleash bolt after bolt towards the beast. Colt picked himself up and dug into whatever reserves he had remaining, staggering through the water with his sword held high. Aiden joined them, a burst of adrenaline helping him to ignore the pain in his body and move in close enough to take a swing at the monster, vengeance the only thought in his mind.

The wounded serpent was pummelled from all directions as Pacian came around from behind and started stabbing it with his vicious daggers, combining with Colt and Aiden's swords to cut the terrible beast down.

Although it had shrugged off their combined attacks earlier, the serpent was mortally wounded, but before it could withdraw, Colt swept a might blow that cut deeply into its neck. The giant serpent bellowed weakly one last time as it bled out, slowly withdrawing into the hole from whence it came to swim away and die in some dark underwater hole.

A stunned silence had descended upon them as the rippling water grew still, and the magnitude of what had just occurred hit home. Aiden doubled over, hands on his knees as he tried to catch his breath after the furious fight, trying not to retch at the image of the

horrible manner Clavis had perished. Despite his deceptions, in the end he had been a loyal friend, to the point that he chose to fight and die, rather than abandon another group to the perils of Ferrumgaard.

Their brief moment of respite ended seconds later when rocks tumbled in from above through the breach in the ceiling, as the dwarves started to break through. Aiden almost cried out in dismay from the unrelenting challenges of this damned city, but managed to hold himself together.

"We are leaving, *now!*" he shouted, mostly to convince his battered body to keep moving. "We'll mourn Clavis later, once we're safe. He found a way out, and we're going to find it."

"We can't see underwater," Nellise remarked in a voice devoid of feeling.

"I'll swim down with your staff," Colt breathed. "When I find the breach, I'll leave it down there to light the way for the rest of you, okay?" Everyone nodded quietly in reply, too overwhelmed to say anything further. A large rock fell from the hole above, giving Aiden the final surge of adrenaline he needed to keep going, as Colt retrieved Nellise's staff and waded through the murky waters, looking for the hole that Clavis had found. A minute later, Colt took off his cloak and tossed it aside, then dove down into the frigid waters with the glowing staff wedged into his backpack.

Aiden and the others gathered around the point where the ranger had dived, and watched as the light descended beneath the water, catching a glint of something shiny nearby. Pacian reached down and retrieved the war axe that Clavis had found, the axe of the King of Ferrumgaard. Nobody spoke for a long moment as he held the axe before him, examining it until the light faded almost completely as Colt swam further away.

"He died recovering that thing," Nellise whispered.

"Doesn't seem worth the trade," Pacian mumbled, strapping it to his pack like any other piece of treasure he'd recover. Aiden set aside any feelings or thoughts he had about the axe for the moment, for he was more concerned about how long it was going to take the dwarves above them to start climbing down.

"How long has he been down there now?" Sayana asked, arms wrapped around her body to try and keep warm.

"Too long," Nellise muttered. "Unless he found the breach and swam through already. Did he say he was going to come back and tell us? I can't recall."

"I'm fairly certain he was just going to swim through and leave the staff down there for us to swim by," Aiden remarked. "I can just see the faintest flicker of light, and it hasn't moved for nearly a minute now."

"I'm going to go look," Pacian declared, removing his tattered cloak, and bracing himself for the cold. The sudden cries of the dwarves from the nearby ceiling breach helped him find his courage, and he plunged into the water without further complaint.

"We can't wait to see if they've made it," Aiden said, "those bastards will be on to us at any moment. Sayana, you're next." The wild girl steeled herself, drew in a deep breath, and then dived in. Aiden watched her swim down towards the light, and then turned to the young cleric standing next to him. "I'm going in last Nel, so don't even think about trying to change my mind on this."

"I wasn't going to say a thing," she protested, inhaling deeply and then diving gracefully into the waters before them. Aiden only waited a few seconds before preparing himself for the dive, for he knew their enemies were only moments away from breaking

through. He plunged unceremoniously into the water, stifling the urge to gasp at the bracing cold.

Though his injured leg hurt with every kick, he managed to swim downward towards the dim light coming from the staff without too much trouble. The chain shirt and all of his belongings certainly helped speed his descent, but he was still concerned about finding the breach that Clavis had spoken of.

He needn't have worried, however, for as soon as he'd passed through the floor completely, the eastern wall loomed up ahead, illuminated by the staff. Colt had dropped it down onto the floor near the breach, which was a great tear in the stone, over thirty feet long, nearly reaching from the ceiling to the floor.

He only spent a second or two gazing around at this level, but what he saw was astonishing – this was truly the home of royalty, for the remaining buildings and adornments here were shining with gold trim, and intricate carvings. Moss and other plant life were growing amidst the decaying ruins of the dwarven nobility, but it barely detracted from the opulence on display.

Small fish darted past as Aiden swam through the breach ahead, noting with some dismay that the staff was well beyond his reach on the floor below. He had no choice but to leave it behind and hoped the dwarves wouldn't locate their passage out before the prayer of light finally faded. He began to swim upwards now, kicking and pulling with his arms as hard as he could, for his breath was nearly gone, and the weight of his equipment was making it difficult.

A few long moments later, he reached the surface and breathed deeply, treading water as best he could, looking around the dark chamber he had entered. He could make out the faint sight of Nellise's white robe on the shore up ahead, and slowly swam towards her, struggling with the weight of the chain shirt which threatened to pull him under again. Colt was at the edge of the waters, reaching out a hand to guide him ashore.

Aiden clasped it with his good arm, and allowed the big man to drag him out of the water, where he promptly fell in a wet heap on the rocky ground, the echoing sounds of water dripping nearby providing the only sound aside from their laboured breathing and the occasional cough.

They lay there, drenched, cold and terribly injured, both in body and spirit for several minutes before they could recover from the swim and the deplorable loss of someone that they had come to know as a friend, in spite of everything. There was little to see around them, as the light from the sunken staff was barely visible here, providing only a dim glow to the water before them. But it could be easily surmised that they were in the remains of the underground lake, outside of Ferrumgaard proper, and were almost free from that dreadful place at last.

"Don't get too comfortable," Colt muttered tiredly. "I reckon since those dwarves were the ones to make that breach, they know it's there, so they'll probably be coming this far at least to see if they can catch us. And if we don't keep moving, we'll freeze to death in these wet clothes." Aiden knew he was right, but right now he just wanted to curl up into a ball and rest.

"How are we going to find our way out of here though?" he breathed. As if in answer, the light from Nellise's staff suddenly went out altogether, only to be replaced by a glowing illumination coming from her crossbow instead.

"I moved it," she explained, "though it won't prevent the staff being found by our pursuers." Colt started scouting around for a way out of the cavern, while Aiden took a moment to look back down at the water, and think of Clavis. It seemed appropriate to say a few words, but he could barely think clearly enough to force them out of his mouth. A hand rested on his shoulder a moment later, and he looked up to see Nellise looking down at him, with tears in her eyes.

"We'll mourn him when we're safe," she whispered. "For now, we just need to thank him for his sacrifice and make sure it wasn't in vain."

"Found a way out," Colt called, pointing up at a large tunnel entrance. "Looks like a small river flows through here during the warmer months, and that means this will lead us to the surface. Come on, let's keep moving."

Somehow, Aiden managed to find the strength to get back on his feet and slowly drag himself after the others, pausing only for a moment to send a silent farewell to their fallen comrade.

Chapter Twenty

It was an arduous climb from the depths of the mountain stronghold to the surface, made all the more difficult by the wounds they bore. But worse than that, the tonic Nellise had made to instil them with energy ebbed after the first half hour, and the after-effects were quite severe, so much so that they had to rest for an hour in the cold tunnels before they could find the strength to even put one foot in front of the other again.

The accompanying headache and unquenchable thirst was also less than welcome. It reminded Aiden of the first time he had gotten drunk on some cheap wine that Pacian had 'procured' from his father's cellar.

For reasons unknown, there were no signs of pursuit from the insane dwarves of Ferrumgaard. Whether they were uninterested in leaving the safety of their ruined city, or they felt that Aiden and the others had been slain by the serpent, they would never know. But it was a lucky break that they were all thankful for.

They were an exhausted, miserably cold bunch by the time they finally saw a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel, leaning on each other for support and to stave off the chill from their soaked clothing, for despite the hardship, nobody had wanted to sleep inside the caves. Aiden had been limping along, barely coherent, for the better part of the journey from the drained lake, and when they finally emerged from the cave into the night air, he almost toppled over in relief.

The ground before them was covered in a thick layer of fresh snow, which had an eerie glow to it from the moonlight filtering down through the clouds, and their breath misted in the frigid air with each exhalation, as even more snow drifted down from the grey skies above. Aiden guessed that they had emerged somewhere in the Calespur ranges, for there were thick pine trees silhouetted against the snow as far as the eye could see. It was almost picturesque, in a way, which made the things they had witnessed down below seem all the more surreal.

"How long were we down there?" Nellise whispered, looking around in disbelief. "It felt like less than a day."

"You lose track of time underground," Sayana replied wearily. "It may have felt like hours, but it was much longer."

“Probably closer to eighteen hours,” Aiden surmised, guessing that it was late at night on the day they'd entered Ferrumgaard. “I have no idea where we are though,” he added.

“Must be in the southwest of the ranges,” Colt muttered, looking around at the scene before them. “We only get two or three falls a season usually, though I don't remember ever seeing so much of it at once.”

“If it's okay with you, I think I'll just keel over and die here,” Pacian mumbled, leaning heavily against the stone wall, his teeth chattering.

“Don't even joke about that, you cruel bastard,” Colt spat, turning to glare at the blond rogue. “Clavis may have had his problems, but he died trying to save us, so if you ever crack wise about death again, my fist and your face are gonna have a short conversation.” Pacian lowered his gaze at the outburst, and wisely held his tongue.

“It's too cold out here to rest,” Sayana whispered, huddled up against the cave wall as she hugged herself for warmth. “Could we go to the Lodge?”

“It's hours from here,” Colt replied, mellowing his tone at the sight of the bedraggled sorceress. She had discarded her cloak for the swim through the underground lake, just like the rest of them had, but with most of her legs bared to the elements, she was feeling the cold far more keenly than they. “I think we can make Fairchild's cabin, though, if you can keep going for just a little while longer,” Colt offered in compromise, an idea that Aiden voiced his enthusiasm for, albeit without much of a voice. Sayana, however, wilted at the thought of pressing on.

“Sorry Sy, but it's gotta be done,” Colt said grimly. “I have a solution though, if you're not too proud to accept my help.” Too tired to reply, the wild girl just blinked slowly at him, which he interpreted as a 'yes'. Stepping forward, he picked her up in his arms as if she were made out of feathers, put her over his shoulder, then turned and led the others through the snow towards the east.

The decision to head to the old cabin turned out to be a smart one, for they arrived there in less than half an hour. Pacian quickened his step as they approached the welcome sight of the wooden cottage, a black box against the white background of snow, and opened the door to allow Colt to take his weary passenger through first. The temperature inside the cabin was only slightly better than the freezing conditions outside, but it was still the most beautiful sight Aiden had ever seen. The big ranger quickly set about lighting the fire as the others collapsed on to the beds nearby.

Aiden didn't recall falling on to one of the simple yet comfortable beds, but he nevertheless found himself lying face down despite the sharp pain coming from his ribs. The young man managed to remove his pack and some other equipment, and then slowly rolled over on to his back to give him some relief, and before he knew it, promptly fell asleep.

* * *

A younger Aiden stood once more upon the field of battle, the soldiers of the Kingdom clashing against their black-clad enemies that seemed to know no fear. He watched, helpless, as the giant, metal warriors came forth and began to slaughter the Aielunders, before a shadow grew over the battlefield as something obscured the sun. Aiden squinted against the light to see what was happening, and was stunned by what he

saw. An immense golden dragon was descending onto the battlefield, its wingspan easily over a hundred feet across. Talons the size of a man dug into the ground as it crashed to the surface far behind the black warrior.

The dragon turned to look directly at Aiden with piercing eyes that glowed with power. Paralysed with fear, he struggled to pull his gaze away, and focused on watching the cataclysmic fight before him. The black warrior was slowly being beaten by the behemoth, and it was only a matter of time until he fell.

A dull roaring sound slowly grew with intensity, similar to the sound of cattle stampeding in the distance. It was obscuring the noise from the fight, but Aiden couldn't understand what it was. When he turned to see what the dragon was doing, he was taken aback when he saw that it had moved much closer to him without seeming to have actually moved, towering over the field with its head held low as it peered at him with burning eyes.

Aiden felt a pain in his right leg, and looked down to see blood flowing from a terrible wound that made him gasp in pain. The noise grew louder, like the pounding of blood in his ears, and he clutched at his leg as a sharp pain shot through it. He was bewildered, overwhelmed, and he wanted to flee, but when he looked up again, his heart stopped as he looked straight into the eye of the immense dragon that was *right in front of him*. Aiden screamed and dropped the glowing orb, shattering it upon the ground of the cave.

* * *

He gasped awake, sitting bolt upright in the bed, trying to focus on where he was. It was mostly dark, but there were flames coming from a nearby fireplace, and Nellise was crouched by the side of his bed, watching him with concern.

"You're all right, Aiden," she whispered soothingly, "you were just having a bad dream. I hope you don't mind, but I just mended your leg." The young man breathed heavily as he slowly calmed down, and noticed that his injured leg was hurting much less than it had been.

"Thanks," he croaked, still shaken by the change in the dream, "What time is it?"

"Just after dawn," the cleric replied softly. "I usually awaken at this time to meditate, so I thought I would start tending to our wounds. You were sleeping fitfully, so I assumed the pain was affecting your dreams."

"You could say that," Aiden muttered, reluctant to say more. "Why don't you get some more rest?" Nellise fidgeted with her crystal for a few moments before answering, her voice quiet and introspective as her golden eyes glowed in the firelight.

"I... feel terrible about Clavis, Aiden, and I'm not sure we did all we could to save him. I despise feeling so powerless, and I felt the need to do something... constructive. And so I do what I do best, healing good people such as yourself, so I can feel better about *myself*." Aiden knew what she was talking about, for he had felt that awful sensation of helplessness as they faced that terrible monster, but in Aiden's case, it was compounded by something else.

"I keep thinking back to those last few minutes," he confided in a whispering voice, "wondering if I somehow caused his death by staying back a little too long, to collect

things. Perhaps if I'd just dropped everything and rushed back down, we might have--" Nellise interrupted him by placing a hand on his head, stroking his hair fondly.

"Don't blame yourself, Aiden, it wasn't your fault, or mine, or anyone else's but Clavis. He chose to keep looking for that axe even after you'd come down, remember? And imagine if we'd tried to swim away before slaying that serpent, we *all* most likely would have perished."

"I suppose so," Aiden said without conviction. This was going to weigh on him for days, at the very least, but she did make a good point. He was too tired to think about it more, however, and the intuitive young woman sensed this.

"Lean back, and I will see what can be done about your ribs. They aren't broken, or you would have likely punctured a lung by now. Cracked ribs I can deal with easily enough, however. Now, lie still." Aiden did as he was told, and reclined onto the bed and listened to the soft whispers of Nellise's prayers, and the distant sound of Colt's occasional snoring. Although he was still tired and his eyelids drooped, the dream had shaken Aiden mightily, and he was determined to stay awake.

* * *

He jolted awake some time later, unaware that he'd dropped off again. Light filtered in through the cabin's small windows, and the sound of the crackling fireplace accompanied Colt's continued snoring. Despite his earlier nightmare, he'd managed to get some quality, dragon-free sleep since he'd spoken to Nellise, and felt immensely relaxed and at peace. Aiden would have been content to lie there all day, but his grumbling stomach demanded attention.

Slowly rising from the bed, he rubbed the sleep from his eyes and surveyed the room. Nellise was reclining in a chair next to the fire, half asleep as she rested after her morning endeavours. Pacian was sitting cross-legged on the floor, sorting through the equipment they'd left here after their fight with the hunters.

Sayana was up as well, and had managed to find food of some description, though Aiden didn't recall exactly what was left over from the previous occupants before their demise. Upon closer inspection, she appeared to be eating some bread and cheese, having cut away the mould to get at the edible stuff underneath. The young man lamented that their supplies had been either destroyed in the collapse, or ruined by the swim under water while in Ferrumgaard. Still, at least the wild girl seemed to be recovering from her grievous stomach injury, for her appetite was as insatiable as ever.

"There's more in that box with doors over there," she said to Aiden while nodding her head towards a cupboard near the fireplace. "Not much, but enough to get us to town again."

"Not at the rate you're eating it isn't," Aiden remarked, shaking his head in unending astonishment. She chose to eat rather than answer, so the young man decided to partake of what was available.

Colt struggled out of bed a few minutes later, as Aiden chewed on dried meat and bread, with Pacian following suit shortly thereafter. Everyone seemed to be in fairly good shape, all things considered, and quietly ate the tough but filling fare available to them.

"This isn't going to cut it," Colt grumbled. "If we're all able to move now, I think we should get back to Bracksford and get some proper food. I dreamed of roast pork last

night, and after what we just went through, I'll be damned if I'm going to sit around here all day and eat the stale leftovers of a dead man's banquet."

"I suppose they'd have supplies coming in by now," Aiden mused. "And I think we could all use a decent meal. And maybe have a drink in the memory of Clavis MacAliese, without whom we wouldn't be sitting here right now."

"In more ways than one," Pacian added caustically. "And before you get cross with me, just remember that he tricked us into going with him, with *lies*. Sacrificing himself to save us makes up for that, but I'm not going to make him my new hero for it."

"You wouldn't have that axe without him," Aiden pointed out. "And you know it's going to be worth a fortune when you go to sell it, so don't try telling us you didn't benefit from all this."

"I don't even care about the axe," Pacian shot back, "it just seemed a waste to leave it there, that's all. And it's probably priceless anyway, being a historical item and whatnot, so it'd only be worth something to his family, in all likelihood."

"I'm sure you wouldn't try selling it to them for a King's treasury," Colt growled sarcastically.

"You know what? I don't even want this damned thing anymore," Pacian yelled with a rising temper. "I didn't take it to get rich, but you don't want to believe me? I'm fine with that. Sayana can have it, since she lost her axe down below. Here Sy, have a priceless heirloom." He grabbed the axe from where it sat against the rest of his gear, and passed it over to the wild girl, who was starting to look like she wanted to run away from this heated argument.

"Okay," she offered weakly, clutching the magnificent weapon, while Pacian glared at Colt.

"There, happy now? Oh wait, I forgot who I was talking to for a moment there," he remarked, becoming more sarcastic by the minute.

"What the hell does that mean?" Colt growled dangerously.

"I think we should just cool things down a little," Nellise offered, becoming distressed by the direction of this discussion.

"You *know* what I mean," Pacian continued on anyway, ignoring the young cleric. "Pining away over a woman so far out of your class, you wouldn't have a shot with her even if you had ten thousand gold sovereigns to your name." Colt's answer came in the form of a fist, smashing Pacian in the nose with a loud 'crack', and spilling blood. The blond rogue stumbled to the floor as Colt rose to his feet, but Nellise was suddenly standing in between them, arms held high to keep them apart.

"Enough of this!" she ordered. "We're all tired from the ordeal we just went through, and this is not the time to be throwing around wild accusations, or fists."

"Good point, we *did* just go through an ordeal," Colt agreed, but with an edge to his voice as he turned to look at Aiden. "And you were in favour of it from the beginning, weren't you Aiden? When we fought those bloody borer things and were thinking about turning around, you were quick to say 'no, we keep going,'"

"Colt, this isn't helping," Nellise chastised him, but the big man pressed on.

"You were up in that little room for a long time," Pacian added, his voice sounding odd because of his broken nose, which he was tending to with a bloodied piece of cloth.

"Hey... you *were* looking for something, right from the beginning, weren't you!" Colt accused him. Aiden tried not to squirm in his seat, for he knew there was a chance they'd

figure out that he had been searching for something specific, eventually. But he never thought the conversation would end up like this. He glanced briefly at Sayana, who slowly nodded her head in answer to the unasked question – it was time.

“I had come to Bracksford to buy a book from the local antiques shop,” Aiden began calmly, in the manner of one who was tired of keeping a secret. “In this book, I had hoped to find some answers to a problem I’ve had for some time. Instead, I found clues that indicated that what I was looking for was deep within Ferrumgaard. Once I found out it was a long-abandoned city, I knew I’d have trouble getting in there without help. Clavis offered to join up with us, for his own reasons of course, but I’m afraid I haven’t been completely forthcoming with my own.”

Colt took an ominous step towards him, which was disturbing in itself, but made even more so by the fact that Nellise didn’t try to stop him. All eyes were on Aiden now, and the sense that he’d betrayed them was stronger than ever.

“So yes, I was striving to get to the information I sought the whole time,” Aiden admitted, “but like Clavis, if you were all adamant about not pressing forward due to the risk, I would have gladly turned around and left with you. I’m very sorry for not sharing this with you at the start, but I had my reasons.”

“You did more than that, Aiden,” Nellise corrected him in a quiet voice. “You lied to us about your reasons for going there. You said you had wanted to find lost treasures, enough to pay for mercenaries to protect your home town from savage raiders moving in to the area.”

“That part was absolutely true,” Aiden protested. “But in addition to that, I had my primary purpose, to which recent personal events have been pushing me towards.”

“You cold bastard,” Colt spat. “This kingdom is starting to tear itself apart, yet you have us on some wild goose chase in an old abandoned city, just on the slim chance you might find some musty old book that tells you... what exactly?” This was the part Aiden had been trying to avoid mentioning in the first place.

And so Aiden told them of his thirteenth birthday, the day he had fallen down into that strange cave, discovered the glowing orb that let him see the battle of Fort Highmarch, close to a century ago, but not as it appeared in the historical records – the presence of the dragon seemed to alarm Nellise, as did the strange iron warrior she had never heard of before, even though she was one who had studied history as part of her indoctrination into the Church of Aielund.

“So, all of that was traumatic enough, but the recurring dream I have been experiencing every few days since then, ensures that I will never forget it,” the young man finished.

“Except, that it isn’t a dream,” Sayana added, speaking for the first time in quite a while, causing Aiden to groan internally. “That shard of crystal he wears around his neck carries with it a strange power. When he has that dream, it glows, and I was unfortunate enough to touch it at the time, for it drew me in.”

“Regardless, the writing on that orb is unique,” Aiden continued, trying to keep things grounded in reality, “I spent years researching languages and arcane tomes looking for a clue, so that maybe I could find out what that orb was, and why I see what I see.” The only sounds to be heard after he’d finished speaking were the crackling of the fireplace and the wind blowing through the trees outside.

"This is all very dubious," Nellise said after a long minute of digesting this information. "Fascinating, certainly, but to risk all that you have over a dream? And one that isn't even accurate, either, for nobody has seen a dragon in these lands in one hundred and fifty years, and definitely not at the battle of Fort Highmarch. I'm sorry to say this, Aiden, because you know how fond I am of you, but this is more likely due to the trauma you suffered in that cave than any other factor."

"But what gets me," Colt added with a disappointed voice, "is that you risked our lives over this, and you didn't even have the guts to tell us what was going on."

"I told people about this after it started happening," Aiden countered, "but they all thought I was crazy, even my parents. So you'll excuse me if I don't go around telling people that the dragon in my dreams wants to eat me, and that I have to get it out of my head."

"He's right you know, that would be crazy," Pacian mumbled.

"Shut up Pace. You should have trusted us, Aiden," Colt muttered, heading back over to his bed and grabbing his gear. "You don't go risking people's lives, *friends lives*, without telling them why. It just isn't done. I'm going to head back to town and get drunk, and I'm not real interested in anything any of you have to say about that."

With his gear strapped on, Colt opened the door and stepped out into the bitter cold of the Calespur ranges. Nellise turned and started to tend to Pacian's broken nose, while Sayana looked to Aiden for what to do next. Having her on his side annoyed the young man, as all that dream talk hadn't helped his case in the slightest.

By the time they had packed and left the warm confines of the cabin, none of them were really talking to anyone else. Nellise was cross with Pacian for his behaviour, Aiden for his duplicity, and Sayana for all that weird dream talk that seemed to impinge upon her sensibilities. In the end, Aiden could see that everyone was tired, stressed, and trying to cope with the ordeal they had barely survived. They probably just needed some time apart to rest and recuperate, but then again, there was no real reason for them to stay together any more either after this.

Bracksford was open, probably trading freely with its neighbours once more, and Aiden had retrieved, well, *something* of interest from Ferrumgaard, so he didn't feel the need to take on any further work just yet either. There was still the matter of the Akoran raiders down south, but he wasn't a soldier, nor did they acquire enough wealth to hire some. He'd deal with that when the time came, but for now, as they walked along the road to Bracksford, he thought about the treasures he had retrieved from deep within the earth, and hoped that somewhere within that pile of knowledge were the answers that he sought.

Unsurprisingly, it was raining the entire journey, a steady downpour that did not abate as they reached the outskirts of the town at twilight. The Stormflow river didn't seem as swollen as it had when they left, and the water upon the ground wasn't very deep at all, giving Aiden the impression the rains had actually stopped while they were away. The gates were still open, and the militia guards scrutinised them closely as they passed through.

The streets were all but deserted at this time of day, and warm light illuminated the windows of the small cottages that lined the street. A number of large merchant wagons were parked nearby surrounded by townsfolk busily buying up everything in sight,

indicating a return to normal life for the men and women of the small farming community.

The alluring smells of roasted meat wafted along the wind, as the people of Bracksford made up for weeks of eating sparse rations with their own little celebrations. It made Aiden's mouth water, and put a spring in his step as he pictured a huge, hot meal laid out before him.

A hooded figure was standing near the wall as Aiden entered the town proper, and started to follow him as he slogged his way along the muddy road towards the Bracksfordshire Arms. He was about to turn and confront the strange man when he noticed that the hooded figure had caught up and was now walking alongside him.

"Welcome back, Aiden," spoke the voice of Harlin the druid. "I had a feeling you'd be here soon, and I'm pleased to see that my suspicions were not wrong."

"Well, you're obviously an expert at pleasing yourself, so I'll leave you to it," Aiden deadpanned, still walking towards the inn. He was in no mood to deal with the man's fake pleasantries, and was looking forward to the warmth of a roaring fireplace.

"How droll," Harlin remarked dryly. "I thought you might be interested to learn that we had several days of no rain at all, until a few hours ago."

"You're dead wrong - I'm not at all interested in that."

"I pay attention to such things, Aiden," Harlin pressed, keeping pace with the young adventurer. "For instance, did you know that the rains first settled in over Bracksford not long before you first arrived here?"

"As I recall, it had been raining all the way here from Coldstream, so no, I probably didn't notice that fact," Aiden replied, stopping to look directly at the man. "If you want to talk further about the weather, I'll be in town for a couple of days, so you can bore me to death tomorrow, perhaps."

"There's something about you, Mister Wainwright," Harlin continued, ignoring Aiden. "I don't know why, but somehow, your presence has something to do with the unnatural weather we've been having. It might also have been Pacian, but he seems more concerned with bedding the local ladies than reading books about relics." This comment finally snagged Aiden's full attention.

"How do you know about that?" he asked, eyes narrowed.

"I had a talk with Dale, of course," Harlin said. "You seemed to spend some time over there recently, studying some ancient book on arcane devices. And there's that glove you wear, that carries with it an eldritch aura." Aiden started at him for a few moments, pondering not only how best to handle this odd situation, but what this man was doing here in the first place. It had always seemed strange for a druid to reside within a small town, and the young man finally thought he had an idea why.

"I'm going to keep this brief, sir, because my feet hurt, my leg is sore, and I'm in dire need of a hot bath," Aiden began grimly. "I cannot fathom why you seem to think I have the sort of power that would affect the weather this way, nor can you explain any motives I might have to use such a fantastic power against the very town I have been living in during this unusual weather. It seems obvious to me, however, that your true purpose in Bracksford is not to cure sick animals, but to find the cause of what you must assume to be unnatural meddling in the order of things."

"Since your presence isn't universally accepted in this town," he continued, "I do not believe you have any authority to bring against me, even if you could prove such an

outlandish statement. So, I would suggest you stroll back to your tree trunk and rethink your assumptions, and quite possibly your choice of vocation.”

“Should it come to it, Mister Wainwright, I can bring such power to bear as you have never seen, for the forces of nature answer my prayers,” Harlin warned in a quietly firm voice, leaning in closer so as not to be overheard. “Go about your affairs, but know that I will be watching you closely.” With that, he walked past Aiden along the street, leaving the young man to ponder the meaning of this strange encounter.

“What the hell was that all about,” Pacian inquired as he stepped out of the nearby darkness, still carrying a large sack of the equipment recovered from the cabin.

“I’m not really sure,” Aiden replied, turning to continue on to the inn. “He’s a strange one, there’s no doubting that. Couldn’t really take a hint either, I was starting to wonder if he was going to follow me into bed.”

“If I was you, I would have just given him a swift kick in the baby makers,” Pacian advised. “That usually gets the message across.”

“You have much to teach me about dealing with humanity, oh wise one,” Aiden replied dryly as they stepped through the doorway before them. “So, you’re talking to me again? I thought you were all upset with me.”

“Why would I be upset? You told me most of that dream stuff before, remember?” Pacian shrugged. “And I’m pretty sure Sayana wants to have your children, so she’s not going to stay mad at you, even if she is now. So yeah, we’re good. Just give Colt and Nel a chance to cool down before you speak with them, yeah?”

“I don’t think we really need to talk much at the moment, so that won’t be a problem,” Aiden agreed, seeing Colt sitting at the bar nursing a large pitcher of beer. There was no sign of Nellise, so it was safe to assume she had gone upstairs early to meditate on the death of Clavis. Of Sayana, there was no sign either, and this could have meant anything, but he was in no mood to ponder the possibilities. “But what about you? You did kind of cross a line back there in the cabin.”

“I’m sort of counting on the beer to erase Colt’s memory. As for Nel, well... she’ll come around. No woman can resist my charms forever. The only question is how will she survive without me in the meantime?”

Aiden grinned, shaking his head at his blond friend’s unshakable cockiness in defiance of everything they had gone through recently. He looked around himself, taking in the simple splendour of the common room, and its familiar sights and smells. Even though he’d been raised in Coldstream, several miles down the road, in many ways this truly felt like home.

“Now if you’ll excuse me,” Aiden said, “I have to eat everything in this building *right now*.” Pacian laughed, and the two friends sat down at a nearby table to enjoy the first decent meal they’d had in some time, and tried to put the dark memories of recent events behind them, even if only for a little while. When they were finally done eating, Aiden bid his companion good night, and left him to throw a bit of his newfound money around, while he went up to their usual room for a proper night’s sleep, barring any disturbing dreams, of course.

As he stripped down to climb into bed, he glanced at his belongings, and to the sack which contained the recovered items. He was tired from his travails, to be sure, but the same curiosity that led him to the depths of Ferrumgaard refused to let him rest until he’d at least examined the contents.

There wasn't a great deal of light in the small inn room, just the one candle he had used to find his way upstairs. A small chest of drawers next to the bed yielded five extra candles, each of which he lit, and arrayed around the top of the chest. Satisfied there was enough light, he put a tunic and trunks back on to keep himself warm, then carefully upended the contents of the sack over the bed covers and sat down to sort through it all.

Back in Ferrumgaard, there hadn't been time to sort out what was worth taking on that old wizard's desk, and Aiden found out now that he had acquired a lot of junk, along with some objects of greater interest. The largest of the items before him was a metal rod, nearly two feet in length, and capped with a large, ornate head, much like a small mace. Like everything else he had taken, it was covered in a layer of dust, so Aiden used his torn shirt to wipe it down.

After only a few moments of cleaning, he could plainly see that the rod was encrusted with gems near the base and tip, and arcane writing was etched into the metal along its length. His heart beat excitedly as he began to examine it closely for the next ten minutes or so, eventually drawing the conclusion that it was a weapon of sorts, able to focus ambient energy into a tiny focal point. With a little more study, he could probably figure out how to activate it, and although a valuable find, it wasn't anything that was going to aid his quest for knowledge.

It occurred to Aiden that the real reason he was searching through his acquisitions this late at night was because he was afraid to go to sleep now, as the dragon in his dream seemed to be changing, becoming more alive each time ever since Sayana had appeared within. He would have to sleep eventually, but he had no problem putting it off for as long as possible.

There was a fairly large stack of parchment on the bed before him, so Aiden tackled those next. Most of them seemed to be quite delicate, and a good number of the papers had actually disintegrated on the journey out of the dead city. The first one he picked up was fortunately still intact. It was folded over several times, and upon closer inspection, turned out to be a large map of Feydwiir, the name of the vast island they lived on, and a scrawled note to one side mentioning 'Aeos', an Olde Aielish word meaning 'world'.

Its value was dubious, for a map that was over a century old was neither rare nor useful, except as a historical side-note, but it was an interesting look into the past nonetheless.

Some of the other papers that had survived were covered in dwarven script, which Aiden might take to Dale tomorrow for translation. He set those aside in their own pile and focused on the remaining papers.

As he picked up the next piece of parchment, Aiden was surprised to receive a small electrical shock, as if he'd been rubbing his feet on thick carpet, and then touched something metal. More curious than scared, he carefully looked at the contents of the page, and within moments his suspicions were confirmed – it was more arcane writing, the symbols of power covering the page from top to bottom. He could understand most of what was on there, and concluded that it was an incantation of some sort.

Aiden had read of scrolls like this, created by wizards to hold a spell right on the verge of being completed, indefinitely, to be unleashed when the page was read aloud. The skills to create such magicks were beyond Aiden, but he knew enough of the runes before him to figure out how it was supposed to work. The problem was, however, that

precision was an absolute must for this kind of thing, and if he mispronounced any of the words, it would likely explode in his face.

Leafing through the pile, he found several other pages just like it, and rolled them up together to keep them separate from the others. He would buy some scroll cases tomorrow to store them in, but for now he pushed them aside for later study.

The next item to pique his interest was basically two small, circular pieces of glass encased in leather straps. Aiden wasn't sure what to make of this contraption at first, but he did notice a few arcane runes etched into the casing around each piece of glass that had something to do with sight. Apparently it was some sort of aid for vision, though far more primitive than modern eyepieces. Curious, he put the leather strap over his head and fitted the lenses over his eyes.

What had been a dimly lit room illuminated only by a few small candles suddenly became clearly visible to Aiden, although with no colour whatsoever. The window, the grains on the wooden planks, even his equipment in the far corner of the room could be seen with ease. He glanced around a little, and suddenly noticed Sayana crouched over near the door, her eyes shining like a cat's. He jolted upright in surprise, then took the lenses off, noting that without them, she was practically invisible in the near darkness of the dim candlelight.

"Sayana, how long have you been there?" he sighed with a mixture of relief and mild annoyance.

"All night," she replied quietly. "I thought you would have noticed me by now, but you were so wrapped up in your studies..." She trailed off.

"Yes, I... wait, did you see me undress?" Sayana stood and walked over to the other bed, as yet unoccupied by Pacian, and sat down.

"I didn't want to disturb you," she said, ignoring his question while gazing at the items upon his bedspread. "Have you made any interesting discoveries?"

"A few, but nothing yet that would answer any of our questions," Aiden remarked, gesturing around at the pile before him. "You know, back in the cabin you made rather a mess of things with all that dream talk."

"Yes, and I am sorry for that," she apologised, speaking as plainly and honestly as ever. "I sometimes forget other people do not understand such things."

"Well, no real harm done I guess," Aiden lamented. "Here, take a look at this. These lenses allow the wearer to see at night, which I can think of roughly a thousand uses for. Give them a try, it's quite fascinating." He tossed the leather bound glasses over to the wild girl, who examined them curiously for a few seconds, before fitting them over her eyes.

"Oh!" she cried, pulling them away again almost instantly. "It's so bright, they hurt my eyes. How can you stand it?"

"Really?" Aiden said, taking the lenses back and looking through them, puzzled. "Maybe they don't work well on people who already see well at night. Anyway, there's not a lot else of interest here, just a few scrolls and pieces of parchment. Oh, that reminds me..." Aiden carefully leaned over and fetched his gloves from the floor, paying particular interest to the formerly enchanted one, its gemstone still glittering in the faint light.

"The shield magic seems to have stopped working for me," he mentioned, handing her the glove. "I first noticed this when I was being stabbed with spears down in

Ferrumgaard, ill-timing if I have ever seen it.” The sorceress examined the crystal closely, seeing things with her eyes that others could not. At least Aiden assumed that, he never really understood how she saw the things she did.

“The crystal has been damaged,” she finally surmised. “Quite badly, too. I would suggest that this device has not been working properly for a long time.”

“That can't be,” Aiden objected. “I definitely used it when we were down in the city, it just didn't last very long.” Sayana seemed to think about this for a long moment, and then she handed the glove back over to him.

“Put it on and activate it,” she instructed. Aiden looked at her dubiously.

“I can try, but I assure you, it isn't going to work.” Sayana only gazed at him until he finally relented and spoke the command word. To his astonishment, the shield of force appeared before him, as it had always done. With a subtle smile of satisfaction, she reached over and snatched the glove from his hand – he expected the shield to move with it, but incredibly it stayed where it was, floating about ten inches in front of his left hand.

“How...?” Aiden was speechless, which, for him, was rather disturbing in itself.

“You're like me, now,” Sayana replied pointing at Aiden's head. “You have been around this magic for some time now, and you carry within your mind the knowledge of how the energy flows. All you need to do now is invoke it with your words, and channel the power to your will.”

“No, wait,” he protested. “Down in the city, it didn't work at all. How do you explain that?”

“You were tired,” she explained. “The potion Nellise gave us made you *feel* like you were rested, but you were not. Channelling this power takes effort, and strength, and you were short on both down there. Remember that, when you next go to use this ability.” Aiden sat there, looking at the shield for a few moments, before he dismissed it with a gesture. This was an astonishing development – after years of study and research, not to mention a desire to travel to a school to learn magic, he had wanted to be able to harness the powers that he read about others doing on a daily basis, but figured the level of expertise required to be far too immense.

“Well, I suppose that's enough for one night,” Aiden said, stifling a yawn. “I'll have to read through these scrolls tomorrow to see if there's anything...” he lifted some of the papers up and noticed something he'd missed, sitting upon the bed covers. A small cube, no more than three inches across, had been in amongst the papers he'd been leafing through. Aiden's breath caught in his chest as he realised what he was looking at was the very item he had once seen in *Alcott's Treatise of Artefacts Most Ancient*. With trembling hands, he picked up the cube and brought it to the light for closer examination.

“What is that?” Sayana asked curiously.

“This,” Aiden breathed, “this, is something very important.” He hadn't intended to be so cryptic, but he was too engrossed to elaborate further. The resemblance of the item in his hands to the sketch in the *Treatise* was remarkable. He wiped some of the dirt and dust from it with his shirt, and could see a few markings along one side that looked very similar to the script he had seen on the glass orb.

“Aiden, it is a small box,” Sayana observed, with only a hint of impatience in her voice. “Tell me what it does!” Rather than tell her, he opted to show her the book so that she might learn the significance of this find. The young man reached down and fetched his backpack, opened it, and pulled out Alcott's book after a few moments of sorting

through the contents. A feeling of dread washed over him as he brought the book into the light, however, for he could see severe water damage on the cover, and he suddenly realised that he didn't place this book in the waterproof oil-sack along with the rest of his recovered valuables.

"Oh no," he sighed, opening the book to see that the contents had dissolved into an unreadable mess.

"Is that book supposed to be like that?" Sayana asked, sensing something amiss.

"No, not really," Aiden replied flatly, dropping the irreparably damaged book onto the floor like so much rubbish. "Never mind. I'll just say that this cube has writings on it similar to my orb, which is another clue to discovering what it's all about. Tomorrow, I'll take it to Dale and see if he can make heads or tails of it, but this is still a huge find." He looked at the cube for a little longer before accepting the fact that it wasn't going to reveal its secrets without a fight. Aiden gathered up all of his new treasures, carefully placed them back into the protective sack, and lowered it to the floor.

"Okay, I think we're done for the night," he said to his guest, who was looking at him in a very strange way. "Is... there something wrong?" Sayana shook her head, and gave him a strange smile before jumping onto him, and planting a kiss on his lips.

"Wha?" was all that came out of Aiden's mouth, as her lips were getting in the way of any meaningful conversation. After a few moments, he mentally shrugged and just went along with it. To his surprise, Sayana pulled back and lifted his tunic off, and then pulled the covers over both of them.

"Oh, and by the way, I did see you undress," she murmured with a grin before she blew out the candles.

Chapter Twenty One

The day dawned to the sound of rain after an eventful night, which was fast becoming the norm in Bracksford. Sayana was sleeping peacefully, her head nuzzled against Aiden's shoulder as they huddled together for warmth under the blankets. Their lovemaking had been gentle at first, for they were both still recovering from their respective wounds, but they eventually found their rhythm.

Aiden had been with a woman before, roughly a year ago - a brash young farm girl named Millie back in Coldstream, who wanted to get back at Pacian for something he'd done (or not done) to her, which had been quite an education for the young man.

Aside from that encounter, he'd never really had time to chase girls around. He was driven by events outside of his control to learn more and more about what had happened to him in that cave, and as a result, part of his life had been neglected. Apparently, he had been paying attention to Millie's 'lessons', though, for he found last night to be a pleasant diversion from more pressing matters.

He glanced over at the other bed, expecting the blond rogue to have brought back a 'trophy' of his previous evening, as was the custom, but surprisingly, the bed was empty. It was entirely possible he had slept elsewhere after hearing the amorous activity going on in this room, although from what Aiden had heard, the inn was booked solidly now – the only reason they had been able to get this room back was because he was sort of a local hero now.

Feeling the need to get up and investigate that strange cube further, Aiden began the delicate process of extricating himself from Sayana's embrace. He was halfway clear when she emitted a faint whimper and gripped him a little tighter, making the last few moments just that much more difficult.

Once he was finally free, Aiden dressed himself quietly, noting with mild annoyance that some of his clothes were damp from water dripping through the roof. The young man glanced over at Sayana briefly as he picked up his treasured relics and popped them into the oil sack, noticing that one of her eyes was open, and watching him.

"Good morning," he whispered with a grin. She smiled back at him sleepily.

"Where are you going?"

"Dale is an early riser," he explained. "After breakfast I'm going to see what he has to say about this cube. Why don't you sleep in a bit? I think you've earned it."

"Mmm, I think I will," she murmured. "And then I'm going to buy new pants. No... *two* new pants."

"Okay, well, have fun and I'll catch up with you later," Aiden said awkwardly, blushing as he quickly stepped over and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"My lips are down here," she whispered, looking up at him with amusement.

"Right, sorry," Aiden replied, kissing her in the correct location, and then hurrying out the door as quickly as he could to avoid further embarrassment. Aiden didn't know if that was just a one night thing, or the signal that they were now together in a more permanent fashion. He had to believe that Sayana was as inexperienced in these matters as he was, however confident she appeared.

Outside of the inn room, Aiden looked down the dimly lit hallway and saw someone slumped up against another door. The shock of blond hair indicated that it was Pacian, sleeping quite soundly in what Aiden could only assume was a drunken stupor. And while he wasn't sure, the young man suspected that it was Nellise's door he was outside of. Only God knew what had gone on out here while Aiden was asleep, but he suspected it involved drunken apologies met with stony silence.

Deciding to let his friend sleep it off, Aiden went down the stairs and stepped into the common room, to a familiar sight. Colt was in his customary position, sprawled on the floor, with three other local men unconscious nearby, sporting several impressive bruises. Some of the tables and chairs had been broken, most likely having been used as makeshift weapons during the night.

It was still a little early for patrons to be lining up for breakfast, but Tom the innkeeper, and his daughter Aislin were already up and about, preparing for the day ahead. The little girl was standing over Colt's prone form, poking the big man with a broom in a courageous, yet vain attempt to wake him.

"It's probably better for everyone if you let him sleep," Aiden advised her as he approached.

"But he smells so *bad*!" Aislin complained while continuing to poke him with great enthusiasm. "People will be eating breakfast soon, so he needs... to... *move*...."

"Uh, Tom, why don't you help me carry him some place else before your daughter breaks something important," Aiden requested.

"Not a bad idea," the innkeeper replied, setting aside his mop to assist. "Let's put him out in the stable for now, I think it's a kinder solution than throwing him out into the rain."

“You are the very soul of discretion, Tom.”

“I don't normally provide this level of service to customers,” he confided, “but you and yours did us a real favour by getting that north road cleared, and I'm not unappreciative, even if Colt is a loud-mouthed braggart.”

“Go easy on him, he's nursing a broken heart,” Aiden said as he picked up the big man's arms, while Tom grabbed his feet.

“Yes, with an elf-maiden,” Aislin added. “It would be more romantic if he would just bathe once in a while.”

“He told you that, did he?”

“He told everyone within earshot last night,” Tom grunted as they shuffled across the floor towards the back door, and the stables beyond. “Personally, I think he should settle for a nice human woman, although I don't know anyone that'd have him, to be honest. The man has some issues, no doubt about it. Here now, watch your footing mate, the bottom step is a bit loose.” With some careful footwork and manoeuvring, they managed to lay the big man down on a pile of hay in the adjoining stable without waking him.

Aiden washed his hands quickly in a nearby trough, and then headed back inside to enjoy a hearty breakfast. He briefly considered taking a tray of food up to Sayana, but figured that she was a big girl now, and wouldn't need pandering to. Or would she? Aiden kept second guessing himself when it came to this situation, and he wasn't sure if something was going to offend or not. Ultimately, he decided that she'd still be asleep anyway, and after throwing a few copper jacks in Tom's direction for the fine breakfast, he pressed on with his plan for the day.

It was still raining softly as he left the Bracksfordshire Arms, so he dashed across the street – or as close to 'dash' as he could get considering the swampy conditions on the ground – and purchased a new longcoat before heading over to Dale's. The streets were starting to get crowded, even this early in the day, for the majority of the local residents were farmers.

Aiden caught snatches of conversation as he strode along, and if one word could sum up the general feeling of the community, it was 'exasperation' with the continuing bad weather. But they were dealing with it stoically, as was the way of these hardy folk.

Through the crowd, Aiden spied Harlin across the street, casually leaning against a building and eating an apple as he watched the young man go about his business. Nothing was going to spoil Aiden's mood today, however, so he blew a kiss at the obstinate druid, who merely glared in response.

Presently, he arrived at the small cottage Dale resided in, and knocked on the door. The old man was already up, as Aiden had predicted, and welcomed him inside once more. The place hadn't changed at all since his last visit, except that there were, perhaps, a few dozen more books scattered around the unique topography of the house.

“Damn this inclement weather, wot?” Dale bristled, opening one of the curtains to let in a modicum of light. “If I had learned in advance that Bracksford was prone to this sort of prolonged moisture, I would have retired somewhere with a climate more suitable to the storage of old books. I've already lost two priceless tomes on the southern lands to water damage.”

“Yes, that book I bought from you last time was damaged by water too,” Aiden remarked truthfully.

“Blast, that was a one of a kind, too. I hope you were able to glean something of value from it beforehand.”

“Oh yes, it was of immense value to me,” Aiden assured him. “But I have something here that might be of even greater value, if you'd care to take a look.” He fished out the cube and held it out before him, drawing intense scrutiny from Dale almost immediately.

“Well, well, what have we here,” he murmured, peering at the odd device through his spectacles for a moment, before he plucked it out of Aiden's hand and sat down at his desk nearby, for an even closer look with a magnifying glass.

“There are small nodules on this side of the box,” he mentioned. “And the runes upon them are quite familiar to me, although I can't quite place where I have seen them before...” This caught Aiden's attention, and he had to fight the urge to prod the man to elaborate.

“I'm sure it will come to you eventually,” Aiden suggested. “Just tell me what you can, for now.”

“Well, it is clearly quite old indeed, judging by the slight scarring along the sides, as you can see here, and along here,” he said, pointing at the areas in question with a long, bony finger. “It seems to be made of metal, though I can find no signs of forging or working of any kind – it is completely seamless, aside from the aforementioned nodules. Where did you find this, lad?”

“I first saw a diagram of something like this in *Alcott's Treatise*, the very book I purchased from you recently,” Aiden explained. “I needed to know more, so we undertook an expedition into Ferrumgaard to see if anything more could be found. I was fortunate enough to locate the relic itself, amongst other things, and there may be something of importance written upon some scrolls I recovered with it.” Dale turned to look at him with astonishment.

“You ventured into Ferrumgaard? How remarkable! You must have seen such wonders down there... I'm rather envious, actually.”

“Don't be,” Aiden informed him soberly. “It was a less than pleasant experience for all concerned. Here, let me show you these scrolls. They're in dwarven, so I haven't been able to read them.” He reached into the sack and produced the relevant papers, and carefully deposited them on the desk next to the cube. Dale seemed somewhat crestfallen with Aiden's assessment of the old dwarven city, and silently went about translating the papers before him.

“Remarkable,” Dale finally declared after a few minutes, picking up the cube and pressing on one of the nodules. It sank into the side of the box with a soft, audible 'click', but nothing else happened.

“Was that supposed to do something?” Aiden asked uncertainly.

“Well, the chap who wrote these notes used to press that one, and strange glowing script would appear on the other side of the cube,” Dale explained patiently. “However, he also wrote that after a few weeks of experimentation, it stopped working altogether, and nothing he did ever made the script appear again. So, I think we can safely conclude that this arcane device has succumbed to the ravages of age. Much like myself, wot?”

“Was there anything else in those notes about what the device did when it was working?” Aiden asked, ignoring the attempted humour.

“A few scratchings here and there, but nothing substantive,” Dale replied. “If I'm reading this correctly, these were his research notes, used as a basis for writing a book on

the subject. They're incomplete, so either you missed something while you were down in Ferrumgaard, or he finished his book and left with it before the city fell."

"No, he was still there when I arrived," Aiden remarked dourly, drawing a raised eyebrow from Dale. "I suppose I could have missed something, but I don't recall seeing any other large books around, or I would have grabbed them too."

"I wish I could be of more help, but I'm afraid that's all I can tell you at this point," Dale concluded rather hastily. Aiden could see he was clearly impatient to get back to his own research.

"Thanks for your time, Dale," he offered graciously. "I'm very appreciative. Can I be of any help to you in return?"

"Only if you know what that damned thing over there is," the old man chuckled, gesturing at the large contraption Aiden had seen the last time he was here. Back then, it was covered in dirt and grime, but since then Dale had cleaned it thoroughly, and a gleaming device now stood against the wall. It was a glass tube, perhaps five feet in height, mounted vertically on a metal base, and capped on the top with more metal. Metal pipes wound their way from the base up the sides where they connected to the top, and it was the strangest thing Aiden had ever seen.

He moved to examine it closely, more for personal curiosity than for any insights he might provide. The tube was pitted and scarred to the point that it looked more like frosted glass, and prevented him from seeing what might have been inside. Aiden tentatively ran his hand along the tube, remarking to himself that it felt more like metal than glass.

The metal base it was mounted in was dark grey, not from dirt, but by design. It was just as worn as the tube, but featured several nodules along the top, with runes etched into them that were barely legible. Crouching down for a closer look, Aiden could immediately tell that the runes were in the same language as the ones on the cube.

"Dale, the runes on this device of yours are similar to the ones on my box, did you know that?"

"Of course!" the old man exclaimed, slapping himself on the forehead. "I would forget my head if it wasn't attached to my neck. Yes, that is where I had seen them before, my boy. Forgive my poor memory; it's the first thing to go at my age." He stood up and shuffled over to the large contraption with the cube held in one hand.

"Yes, yes, clearly from the same creator," Dale muttered, comparing the two devices. "Even these nodules are the same shape; it's just a pity that neither of them are working."

"Have you any idea what the runes represent?"

"I haven't yet seen enough of them to provide a basis for translating the language, although this cube of yours does provide me with a few more letters... words... whatever they are. I shall take notes." He shuffled back to his desk, dipped a quill into a vial of ink, and began writing down notes of this new finding. Aiden stood there, looking down at the contraption, trying to make it relinquish its secrets with sheer force of will, but was thwarted by the laws of nature.

On an impulse, he leaned over and tried to push in one of the nodules, much in the same way as Dale had done with the cube, and was pleased to see that something interesting happened.

A small hatch flipped open near the nodule he had pushed. The inside of the little hatch was empty, but it was lined with tiny metal bumps and grooves.

“Did you know about this little hatch?” Aiden asked of Dale.

“Yes, it's the only thing that still works,” the old man replied. “Another press on that same nodule closes the hatch again, but the rest of them seem bereft of purpose.” Aiden rubbed his chin absently, pondering the meaning of this development, when a thought occurred to him.

“Pass me the cube, if you've finished with it.” The young adventurer took the cube and placed it over the hatch, discovering that it was the same size. Applying pressure gently to the cube, he slowly pushed it inside the chamber until it made a 'click' sound. Astonishingly, it was a perfect fit.

“My word, they're more intricately connected than I thought,” Dale exclaimed, having watched the whole thing. He tried pressing a few more nodules, but nothing else happened. Aiden had felt like they were on the verge of discovering something, only to be disappointed once more. Nevertheless, it was a step forward, even if he didn't know in which direction. They looked down at the cube for nearly a minute before Dale spoke up.

“Aiden, I wish to buy your cube.”

“Funny, I was about to offer to purchase your contraption,” he replied, both of them enjoying a brief laugh. “Seriously though, despite this intriguing development, I don't think I'm willing to part with the cube just yet. I'll pay you for your time, though, and I'll also take your translated notes from the papers I brought in, if you please.”

“Oh, I was just translating in my head, I didn't actually write them down,” Dale apologised. “You'll have to give me an hour to write them all out for you.”

“That's not a problem, I've plenty of time today.”

“Well then, have a seat and I'll get started immediately,” Dale offered. Aiden took the box out of the contraption and dropped it into a pocket, then found a place to sit after clearing a few books of untold value from a nearby chair, where he could fruitlessly muse over these findings as Dale went about his business.

After half an hour, there came a knock at the door. Dale was too busy to pay it any heed, so Aiden opened it and saw Pacian standing outside in the rain, wearing a new cloak.

“Thought I might find you here,” he remarked, appearing somewhat hungover. “There's a meeting happening in a few minutes that you should come to, so finish up whatever you're doing and let's go.”

“Good morning to you too,” Aiden deadpanned. “What's this meeting about, and why do I have to be there?”

“It's about the Akoran raiders,” Pacian answered. “Things have gotten worse over the past week, and I'm told that there's some new information about what's happening. Their local militia leader is giving us the details, a 'Corporal Redfurn'. I guess they're short on Captains around here too. I wonder if it's Tim Redfurn, that farmer we met last year who kept talking about joining the army? I heard he signed up with the Bracksfordshire patrols, a year or so back.”

“Who told you all this?” Aiden inquired.

“Olaf, while I was eating breakfast. He seemed pretty upset, actually, although to be honest, I don't recall ever seeing him *not* upset. Maybe it was just gas.”

“Alright, whereabouts is this meeting going to happen?” Aiden asked.

“The main guard barracks, just down the south road a little. I think it's a converted barn, so don't go there expecting a fortress or anything.”

“Okay, I’ll be there as soon as I’ve finished up,” Aiden finished. “It should only be a few more minutes.”

“I’ll see you there,” Pacian said, and swaggered off along the street. Aiden closed the door and mulled over what the blond rogue had just told him. They’d been concerned about attacks against Coldstream since before they’d left Bracksford the first time, but now it seemed the threat had grown worse. Pace hadn’t mentioned that there had been an attack against the town itself, but if the savages of the southern mountains were stepping up their raids, it could only be a matter of time.

When Dale’s work was finally completed, Aiden paid him for his efforts, and even remembered to buy some scroll cases for his new acquisitions. He also noted with some dismay that his supply of coins was just about to run out again, so he made the decision to sell the formerly enchanted glove. The gem within was still somewhat valuable, and Dale was happy to give him a few silver nobles for it.

Their business concluded, Aiden shook his hand and bid him good day, then headed straight for the barracks. Pacian’s description had been correct, for it was indeed a converted barn. A local militia member stood guard outside the large doors, and upon recognising him, allowed Aiden to pass with a quick gesture.

There were over a dozen people inside, half sitting, half standing around, listening to a woman in chain mail talking to them. She hesitated mid-sentence as Aiden entered, casting an annoyed glance at him before she continued speaking. Pacian gestured Aiden over, where he had saved a seat for him. Feeling the eyes of the others in the room upon him, the novice warrior crept over to the chair as quickly as he could.

Glancing around, he could see Nellise and Colt across the room, pointedly focused upon the armoured woman. Aiden sighed inwardly, sensing the awkward distance between them, both physically and metaphorically. It was going to take some time before they forgave him for his choices in the recent past, and he couldn’t blame them for their standoffish attitude.

Sayana appeared next to Aiden, placing a hand lightly on his shoulder. He smiled up at her, but noticed a certain tension in her features that hadn’t been there before. Was it something he had done? Again, he found himself floundering along in a sea of self-doubt. He would have to talk with her later, just to make sure she understood what a novice he was at being a boyfriend.

Aiden suddenly noticed that Mayor Olaf was looking at him with disapproval, so the young man decided to focus on the woman leading the discussion. She was a robust looking lady, but was wearing the same gear as every other member of the local militia, which suggested she was the highest-ranking member they could find.

“No you’re right, Mister Clifton, in that they have avoided unladen carts returning from Coldstream,” she was saying, her voice sounding too small for her body. The man she addressed was a local wheat farmer, and like many of the other locals present, wore a look of mild anxiety on his face as they talked about the situation. “Clearly, the raiders are looking for food, primarily, even above riches. They have, for the most part, avoided the few patrols I have sent out along the road, which gives me hope that a show of force could send them running back to the hills.”

“So the threat isn’t as bad as we initially heard?” said an older man with weathered skin and grey hair, who Aiden recognised as David Patel, the man from whom Pacian had acquired his old ranger leathers, back when this all started.

“Apparently not. I'm inclined to issue a travel warning to anyone moving east from Bracksford, and send out a few more men to patrol the area. That should be sufficient.”

“So, as you can see we have the situation well in hand,” Olaf declared to the assembled audience. “Thank you for your time, I will make every effort to keep you apprised of the situation as it continues to develop.” Sensing the end of the conversation, most of the assembled crowd began to leave, talking amongst themselves in hushed tones. David, however, wore a look of obvious scepticism as he passed the Mayor. It suddenly occurred to Aiden what was really going on – he put his hand on Pacian's shoulder as he started to rise up out of the chair, and indicated he should wait.

He noticed that Nellise, Colt, and Hadush, the local blacksmith, weren't leaving either. When the last of the civilians left the room, the door was closed behind them, and then the real meeting began.

“I apologise for the deception,” Olaf began, stepping forward to address them, “but as you can imagine, the townsfolk are rather skittish after all the recent troubles-”

“So you lied to them to put them at ease, how unprecedented,” Aiden finished cynically.

“Regrettably, yes,” Olaf conceded. “When you hear what Corporal Redfurn has to say, I'm sure you'll understand my reasoning.”

“Alright then, where is this Corporal?”

“I'm right here, and my name is Tara,” the armoured woman replied wearily, clearly used to being overlooked.

“Ah,” said Aiden, trying to cover his embarrassment. He gave Pacian a sharp nudge in the ribs for his trouble, and then promptly ignored his friend's look of confused innocence.

“Now, you all have a lot to discuss, and I have to prepare for the arrival of a very important dignitary from Fort Highmarch, so I shall leave you to your affairs,” Olaf said. With that, the elderly statesman of Bracksford walked out through the door, closing it quietly behind him.

“Shifty bastard,” Colt muttered. “So, what the hell is going on?”

“Last night, I received word from an associate of yours, who has been keeping an eye on the Akorans,” Corporal Redfurn said, getting right to the point.

“A ranger? What's his name?”

“His name was Duncan, if that means anything to you.”

“Yeah I know him, damn good ranger,” the big man nodded. “If anyone can find out what's going on, it's him. Bit surprised that he got sent down there though, we only saw him a few days ago up in the Calespur.”

“I guess the rangers are short-handed as well,” the Corporal shrugged.

“What has he discovered so far?” Nellise asked politely.

“He relayed a message from a scout who has been down in the Highmarch Mountains for weeks, before heading back out to continue his surveillance,” Tara continued. “We've had good relations with the Akoran tribal people for decades, up until about three months ago when they cut off trade, and forbade anyone from entering their lands. We couldn't figure out what had happened, until recently. Apparently, they've had a change of leadership, and this new chief, Erag, is a pretty typical barbarian – a brutal, vicious bastard. Uh, present company excepted, of course.”

She looked sheepishly at Hadush, who leaned against the wall with his massive arms crossed, watching with only mild interest. He emitted a grunting sound, but quite what this translated to was anyone's guess.

After Corporal Redfurn began speaking again, the smith's gaze slipped over to Sayana, who was looking very uncomfortable under his stern scrutiny. This must have been the reason for her earlier tension, Aiden mused, but Hadush was not making any overt gestures, or any other facial expressions, so it was hard to figure out what the problem was.

"Anyway, this new war leader has a different perspective on the kingdom to his northern border - that would be us - and has whipped his people into a frenzy, preparing them for war. Several hundred of their warriors have set up a fortified camp not far south of Coldstream, and their numbers are growing day by day, moving up from the south. Pretty soon, they'll have enough people to crush everything in their path, and plunder this entire region."

"So, what would happen if this 'Erag' met with an unfortunate accident," Pacian asked delicately. Aiden noticed a flicker of irritation cross Nellise's face - clearly the blond rogue wasn't going to endear himself by proposing more bloodshed.

"Hard to say, really," Tara answered hesitantly. "Either the rest of them would go on a killing spree to honour him, or give you a big sloppy kiss for freeing them from tyranny."

"I don't like either of those options," Pacian murmured.

"Hang on a moment," Aiden interrupted seriously. "What exactly do you want from *us*?"

"I would have thought it obvious," Tara replied curiously. "All of you have shown that you're more than capable of dealing with situations like this, so instead of sending in what few people I have at my disposal, you and your team can do what needs to be done."

"I think the word 'team' is a little strong, to be honest," Aiden said delicately, noticing the uncomfortable looks from the others. "And if you think we're going to fight hundreds of savage warriors for you, you're a loon."

"Of course not," the Corporal objected. "What I'm talking about here is a precision strike against their leader. Duncan and I agree that without Erag, their momentum will waver, and the war won't happen."

"Ah, nothing like a good old assassination to solve all our problems," Pacian drawled.

"Whatever works," Aiden shrugged. "Look, my family lives in Coldstream, and if they haven't been attacked already, then they soon will be. I want to make sure that doesn't happen, so even if no-one else wants in on this job, I'm going."

"You believe this to be our only solution?" Nellise asked, looking mostly at Pacian but including Aiden in her stern gaze. "Kill whoever we don't like? Have you given any thought to the consequences of such an action? I would think that the Akoran people would be outraged at our meddling, and go to war anyway."

"I would agree with that," Tara interjected, "except for one thing; Hadush, tell them about the former chief of your people, if you could." All eyes turned to the huge blacksmith in anticipation.

“Former chief Morik Far-Eagle,” he said hesitantly, speaking the broken form of Aielish he had mastered so well. “Morik great man. Bring peace and... wealth, to Akora. We not starve any more. Enough for all. Erag is... 'vicious bastard', as you say. Thinks like old warriors – what we want, we take. Many young warriors follow him, for glory and plunder. But Morik... revered by many. If Erag kill, we all fight each other.”

“So you're saying Morik is still alive?” Aiden asked.

“Much likely, yes,” Hadush confirmed. “Given chance, Morik would reclaim power, no more war.”

“Just before we take your word for this,” Pacian said, “can I ask why you're living here instead of with your people?”

“Hadush story only for Hadush,” he replied gruffly. “But will say this – Hadush cannot go back to Akora, or bad things happen to Hadush.”

“Exiled huh,” Pacian remarked blandly. “Was it around the time that Morik lost power?” Hadush nodded, but said nothing further.

“That is quite unsettling,” Tara added, “since I was hoping you could lead these people safely to your homeland and guide them to Morik.” Hadush shook his head slowly, but then pointed at Sayana.

“Ask her, maybe she fly you to Akora and turn all Akorans into toads,” Hadush remarked, adding a strange word in his own language at the end. Aiden raised an eyebrow at this, and turned to look at Sayana, shocked to see that she had turned as pale as a sheet, and her grip on his shoulder was becoming painful.

“Me just humble blacksmith, but she knows the wilds better than I. Hadush leave now, but come see me before you go, I have things for you. Except you,” he added, pointing at Sayana. “I don't want curse on my head.” Nobody seemed to object as the huge Akoran turned and left the barracks, for everyone was looking at the wild sorceress, who quailed under the scrutiny.

“What was that word he said?” Nellise asked gently.

“It means 'witch' in my native language,” she replied quietly. “It is *not* a... polite term.”

“Is it ever?” Colt grunted. “Ignore him, he's a coward anyway. You can lead us in just fine, I reckon.”

“I don't think it's a good idea,” Sayana hedged. “They will have patrols covering the entrances, and getting past them without being seen will be all but impossible.”

“The rangers managed to do it,” Tara disagreed. “And from what I hear, your wilderness skills should easily be a match for them.”

“Myself and the rangers, yes, we can do it,” Sayana continued, “but what of the others? Nellise, you are not the stealthiest person I have ever met, nor is Aiden.”

“All you have to do is scout ahead for us and let us know when it's safe to move,” Aiden suggested. “We can get some white cloaks to help us blend in with the snow on the ground, and knowing our luck with the weather, it's going to be snowing down there anyway, reducing their vision even more. I think this could actually work.”

“If Morik is even being held near their forward camp, it will be extremely difficult to get to him without running in to the guards,” she retorted. “If you are planning to bypass the warriors, free Morik, and then have him lead an uprising, I think you had better come up with another plan.”

"All things being equal, I would prefer to do it the way you just described," Tara remarked. "I can only assume you will have to dispatch with a few guards here and there, as a matter of necessity. With your assistance, they will be able to minimise these casualties. Isn't that worth the risk, if it avoids a war?"

"I... can't," Sayana protested with a quivering voice. "I haven't been back to Akoran lands in a long time, I wouldn't have any chance of guiding you to the right place."

"I recall you saying you haven't been there for six months, back when we first met," Aiden noted. "That isn't such a long time. Is your memory that poor?" The wild girl looked like a trapped rabbit, eyes darting back and forth looking for a way out. Aiden knew that she hadn't been completely forthcoming with information about her past, or the real reasons for her exile to the mountains, but judging by the reaction of Hadush, it was becoming clear what had happened. Sayana seemed unable to admit it, however, so Aiden decided to make it easier for her.

"You were there for a lot longer than six months, weren't you," he began, speaking gently so as not to seem accusing. "And you didn't leave Akora because they were low on food either." Sayana shook her head meekly, before taking a deep breath and plunging in.

"As my... abilities began to manifest, the people became nervous, thinking that I was cursed," she spoke quietly. "They do not like sorcery, or those that practice it. My father, a respected man in the tribe, was pushed into doing something about me, over my mother's objections. They didn't dare kill me, for it is said that doing so brings a curse on to whoever kills a witch, so I was abandoned in the mountains as a small child, eighteen years ago," she stated without emotion.

"Eighteen?" Pacian said in disbelief. "But you can't be more than sixteen years old!"

"I'm not entirely human," she replied softly, pushing aside her wild hair to show off her slightly pointed ears, an act of courage on her part that Aiden had to respect her for. "My mother was elven, and they age far more slowly than humans. I am actually twenty eight years old. I was cast out and left to die in the wilderness by my own people, and if I return, they will surely do worse this time." There was only silence in the room as everyone present digested this startling turn of events.

"I, for one, consider the character of an individual over any concerns about blood," Nellise stated thoughtfully. "And I think I can safely speak for everyone here that your heritage is of little concern to us. As for this mission, they cannot force you to go, Sayana. I can only imagine the fear you must be feeling at the thought of walking back into your homeland to face your people. I still do not think this is the wisest course of action, but if we can avoid further bloodshed by freeing Morik, then I believe it is worth the risk."

"You needn't actually face them if you don't want to," Tara added, compassion evident in her voice. "Just guide the others in, then hide and wait for them to leave. It wouldn't help the situation if you went in and were recognised, so keeping hidden would be advisable anyway."

"I won't let anything happen to you," Aiden added firmly, drawing a wan smile from Sayana.

"Very well, I will help however I can," she finally relented. "Did Duncan say where their main camp was?"

“Yes, right over here,” Tara explained, pulling out a rolled up piece of parchment with a crude map sketched upon it. She laid it out on a small table in the middle of the room, and everyone gathered around to take a closer look.

Sayana pointed out a series of caves in the area that she remembered being used by the Akorans years ago, and there was a good chance they were still being used today. According to Duncan's information, a palisade had been erected around the caves, with enough room inside for a thousand warriors to make camp. It seemed like an impregnable defence, except for the hill to the west of the camp that the palisade ended at. With some cautious manoeuvring, they might be able to creep around the hill and get to the cave entrance from behind, with only minimal encounters with the guards.

“The inside of the caves is something you will have to figure out yourselves,” Sayana finished. “I can't recall much about their layout, as I was very young at the time.”

“We'll manage,” Pacian said. “If you like, I could sneak in there by myself, free Morik, disable the guards, and cut the head off Erag while he's sleeping. The only trouble is, I don't know what I'd do with the rest of my day.”

“Cocky little bastard isn't he,” Tara remarked.

“Yes, you're taking this far too lightly, Pacian,” Nellise chastised him. “As I have been telling you for the past two weeks, there are better ways to deal with people like this. Given the chance, I'm going to try and talk sense to this man before you stick a *knife into his back*.”

“And as I've been telling *you*,” Pacian shot back, “there are some real monsters out there, and I'm not talking about giant serpents either – while you're trying to deal with this man, he'll be laughing at your naivety and getting ready to cut your head off with his axe, or something else far worse! Some people *need killing*, Nellise, the sooner you learn that, the longer you'll live.”

“Enough!” Aiden barked. “We'll evaluate the situation when we get there, but from what I'm hearing, there isn't going to be much room for negotiation on this little trip, so don't get too attached to the idea Nel.” She didn't seem too impressed with Aiden's remarks, but crossed her arms and chose not to speak further.

“If we're gonna do this, then let's do it right,” Colt grunted. “No half-measures. I'm not sneaking past an army and breaking in to some bloke's cave of doom, just to have dinner with him.” The discussion went on for some time after that, Colt's poor attempts at settling the argument quickly not withstanding.

The brief exchange between Nellise and Pacian highlighted the strained relations within the group, and was a discouraging start to what, in all likelihood, promised to be a dangerous journey. During this time, Sayana held Aiden's hand under the table - her grip was tight, and a quick glance at her tense features showed that this was going to be difficult journey for her, no matter how much planning went into it.

Shortly after the meeting ended, Pacian took Sayana off to help her get some new clothes and better equipment for the coming task, while Aiden reluctantly accompanied Nellise and Colt to the smithy.

“Honestly, I cannot fathom the thought process of the man,” Nellise confided to Aiden as they strode along the muddy street. “I understand he endured a trauma when he was younger, but I would have thought it would have made him *less* prone to violence. I fear for the future of the Kingdom, should people with his cavalier attitude to murder and bloodshed gain more authority.”

"I don't think Pacian is looking to become King, much less any sort of authority figure," Aiden replied, unsure if he should even speak up. She seemed to be more upset with the blond rogue than himself, at the moment, so he figured it was safe for the time being.

"I spent a lot of time trying to educate him on the proper way to deal with things like this, but it seems like I haven't made any progress at all. Perhaps I was too subtle?"

"If I had to guess, I'd say you were a distracting teacher," Aiden replied diplomatically. "I think he might have been more interested in you personally, and took advantage of your time together to get to know you better."

"I feel duped," she sighed. "He did genuinely seem interested, and I suppose I mistook that for his desire to learn."

"It was worth a try, I mean, who knows? Perhaps you've had some effect upon him, in spite of everything."

"Quite possibly," the young cleric agreed. "I shall persevere, regardless of his attitude. It's for his own good, after all." Aiden decided not to reply to that, silently pleased that at least she was able to forgive people for their flaws. The young man hoped that she would do the same for him, soon. Presently, they arrived at the smithy and stepped through the doorway. The huge blacksmith was busy arranging equipment around in preparation for further work at the forge.

"You wanted us to stop by, Hadush?" Nellise said to him. Contrary to their last visit, there were now gleaming weapons and armour lining the walls. It seemed Hadush had been making good use of the iron ore Pacian had brought back from the mountains to the south.

"Yes," he replied, nodding with approval at their arrival. "Hadush think you head in to great danger. Need more than robe or clothing to protect. Hadush make good armour, knowing this day come soon. Here, look." The big man pointed at the wall where a gleaming metal-rimmed wooden shield, a breastplate, a helmet, and a sword lay – all of them absolutely magnificent in design. Clearly, Hadush had spent days and nights busily crafting this equipment, and if he wanted to, could no doubt charge a small fortune for it.

"And how much do you plan to charge us for this generosity?" Colt grumbled, clearly impressed with what he was seeing.

"You go to free my people from evil," he explained haltingly. "No charge. You take, use wisely."

"You're *giving* it to us?" Nellise asked, incredulous. Hadush nodded, then reached down and picked up a leather jacket and handed it to her. They spent a few minutes attaching the breastplate, making sure it fitted her properly – it did, making Aiden wonder just how much time Hadush had spent examining her torso without anyone noticing.

By the time they had finished equipping her, Nellise looked ready for anything. The helmet was open-faced but protected her brow, the sides of her face, as well as the top and back of her head. A gap up the back of the helmet allowed her fair hair to taper out, after she had tied it up in a tail. The only thing she wasn't eager to use was the sword, which remained on the weapon rack.

"I've never been trained with the use of a sword," she shrugged. "It is frowned upon in the chapter – far too war-like, you see."

"Take other weapon then," Hadush said, pointing to other items on the rack. While she browsed the selection, Aiden handed over his rusty chain shirt, which was met with a look of scorn from the huge blacksmith.

"You been taking baths in this?" he asked with what sounded like sarcasm. "Never mind, me fix good. Take another one, you will need it. Take sword too, since pretty lady not use it." Aiden had made the mistake of assuming the big man was slow-witted, and brutish, simply by the way he spoke. But the skill with which he had crafted this equipment, combined with the selfless generosity now evident, made Aiden reconsider his previous position on the man.

He took the arming sword with gratitude, handing over his plain blade as partial recompense. The difference in value between the two was immense, however, and it was a paltry gesture.

When he was done admiring the fine blade, he looked up to see Nellise standing before them, fully equipped, with a light mace held in one hand and the gleaming shield in the other. The breastplate had been engraved with a pair of wings on the front, spread wide like a bird in flight, and the flared shoulder epaulettes accentuated the impression.

"Well, how do I look?" she asked, surprisingly self-conscious. Hadush looked at her with what could only be described as obvious admiration.

"You look like angel of war," he said, and neither Aiden nor Colt could dispute that assessment.

Chapter Twenty Two

It was late afternoon by the time they'd finished gathering supplies and new equipment, so at Colt's suggestion, they stayed in town that night and resolved to leave before dawn the next day. Sayana showed up at the crowded common room of the Bracksfordshire Arms wearing a snug-fitting suit of leathers that caused Aiden to forget his own name for a few moments. Pacian had been assisting the wild girl with her purchases, which drew a raised eyebrow from his old friend.

"Look, she's always on the front line anyway," Pacian explained, "so I figured she could use some extra protection. It's no breastplate, but it's better than what she's been using."

"I told him I can use my magic to armour my skin," Sayana explained, "but he refused to listen."

"As I said, your strength is better used elsewhere," Pacian counselled.

"It sounds like he was very helpful," Aiden remarked, expecting some sort of trick to be involved.

"Yes, Pacian insisted I try on several outfits to make sure I picked the right one," Sayana added obliviously. "He was very thorough."

"I bet he was," Aiden stated flatly, glaring at his friend's fake expression of concern. Sayana still had a lot to learn about the civilised world, and the uncivilised people that dwelled within. However, he didn't make an issue out of it, instead choosing to ignore his blond friend's typical antics so as not to spoil the hot meal being presented before them.

Tom Ballard served them with a magnificent platter of roast pork and potatoes, thick gravy, and some hot-buttered bread on the side. It was a feast fit for a King, and Aiden

could only hope he would remember the taste after days of trail rations soured his palette once more.

The meal was a strange event for Aiden, as Colt and Nellise chose to sit apart as they ate, and Pacian, for once, didn't seem interested in talking at all. Sayana was uneasy with the tension in the group, and glanced around nervously, trying to understand the complex situation. The continuing rift didn't help Aiden's appetite, but he still managed to go back for seconds anyway, figuring that sooner or later, apologies would be given and received, and things would go back to the way they were before.

Either that, or they'd go their separate ways after this last mission. Perhaps then, Aiden could focus more on the discoveries he'd made, instead of running around playing soldier, a task better left to professionals.

He decided to retire early that night, since the prospect of sitting around being ignored by people he'd come to know and respect was less than appealing, despite the buoyant spirits of the inn's guests that evening. Pacian raised an eyebrow when Sayana moved to join the young man, but Aiden gave his friend a quick wink in the hope that it would keep his mouth shut. It did, fortunately, and the two young lovers managed to leave the crowded common room without raising further attention.

Their activities that evening were pleasant enough, but Aiden had the feeling that he was just there as a distraction for the red-headed sorceress, so she didn't have to think about the next day for a little while. It worked both ways, however, for Aiden didn't give it a lot of thought either. By the time Pacian arrived in the room to get some sleep, hours later, Sayana was already fast asleep in Aiden's arms, and it wasn't long before he nodded off as well. The last thought he had was whether or not he was going to have that nightmare tonight, and if this time, he might not wake up.

* * *

They started out just after dawn the next day, having slept in a little later than they'd planned, already cold and wet from the constant drizzle. Aiden had no illusions about what they were undertaking here, and could only hope that the skill of the rangers they were to meet up with were enough to sneak them into the cave where the Akoran leader, Erag Black-Tiger, was holed up.

From what Tara had described, the fortifications around the complex were formidable. Should an army arrive at the doorstep of the Akorans, a catapult would make short work of their palisade, but as he was constantly reminded, there *was* no army, no reinforcements, and not even stepped-up patrols for the highway. If they ran into trouble, nobody would be coming to get them.

Colt had taken the lead, and seemed to have avoided drinking too much last night, judging by his alert posture. The gravity of the situation was evidently not lost on him, and Aiden was secretly proud that the man finally knew where to draw the line.

Nellise strolled along with Pacian, the two of them appearing to have reopened talks, which was another good sign for their future involvement. The young cleric wore her white hood up over her head instead of her new helmet, and her gleaming new armour was partially concealed by a white cloak that Pacian had the foresight to purchase the previous day. He'd bought five such cloaks, one for each of them to wear as a kind of

snow camouflage, one of the few advantages they'd have when they arrived at the Akoran high plains.

Since they had yet to hit the snowline, the cloaks were rolled up and strapped to their backs, but Nellise seemed to have no compunctions about wearing the garment, even if it made her stand out in the greyish-brown landscape they now travelled through.

The surrounding fields were supposed to be filled with golden strands of wheat, or herds of cattle, but instead lay fallow; producing only the thick mud that was already so abundant in the surrounding lands. Only the distant shadow of Colt's wolf, Faolan, could be seen, keeping just within sight, loping along at an easy pace.

Trees were sparse along the highway which lent a gloomy aspect to the journey that did nothing to lift their spirits. The ground gradually inclined upwards as they travelled, leaving behind the valley of Bracksford for the colder climate of the nearby foothills.

At this rapid rate, they'd make Coldstream by sundown, which opened up all sorts of possibilities for disaster, as Aiden and Pacian had not left the town on good terms with their parents. Words like 'crazy' and 'ungrateful bastard' had been bandied around, though mostly by the temperamental rogue's father – Aiden's own parents had bid him farewell with cold silence for the most part, and the young man couldn't decide which farewell he preferred.

To pass the time, Sayana had decided to instruct Aiden on a few simple magical tricks. He was slow to learn them at first, since the wild sorceress had never tried to teach anyone anything before, but mostly because she talked in terms he didn't quite understand. To her, magic was a flow of energy through her body, whereas Aiden had only learned it as a kind of formula, gleaned from the obtuse texts he had managed to get a hold of in the few years since his defining 'event' in the cave.

Wizards studied such things for years in order to understand the underlying structures of the energies involved in their work, but Sayana seemed to be able to bypass all of that, and direct the energy around her through sheer force of will.

It was later in the day when Aiden finally managed to grasp a simple concept that a frustrated Sayana had been trying to explain for the past few hours. It was a simple incantation that would allow him to view the energies of people and objects around him as a kind of aura. The mindset involved in such a task was difficult to maintain, but he had managed to achieve it nonetheless, noting with some pride that he could see a shifting blue outline around the girl as she smiled at him.

His elation was short-lived, however, as Colt called for their attention to the road ahead. Peering along the road, Aiden could see what had caught the big man's attention – a large, four-wheeled wagon was sitting just off the road, with one of its wheels heavily damaged. Two draft horses lay dead, still strapped to the wagon, with vicious wounds arrayed along their massive flanks. The wagon was empty, except for a few broken wooden boxes scattered around, and there was no sign of the driver.

“Would I be correct in guessing that this was the work of Akoran raiders?” Aiden asked ominously, surveying the scene as Faolan silently sniffed around the fallen mounts. Colt was already crouched on the ground, looking for signs of tracks.

“Plenty of tracks around here,” the ranger reported, “at least half a dozen men in heavy boots were fighting here within the last twenty four hours. I can't tell apart the defenders from the attackers, so I've no idea how many there were of each. But it's pretty obvious who won.”

"We're really exposed here," Pacian added, looking around nervously at the lack of cover nearby. "If they had wanted to, the raiders could have waited here for more people to come and investigate, and then strike again. We're damn lucky they didn't think of that."

"It's not like they've been challenged sufficiently, yet," Nellise remarked. "Certainly there aren't enough soldiers patrolling the area to prevent them from doing whatever they please. This poor merchant never stood a chance."

"This right here?" Aiden mentioned to Sayana, gesturing at the wrecked wagon. "This is why we've got to put a stop to your people."

"I understand," she replied quietly. "But it doesn't make the task any easier for me." Aiden put an arm around her shoulder reassuringly, but he couldn't think of anything to say that would instill her with confidence. There was nothing further to be learned from the scene, so they pressed on to Coldstream, simultaneously more determined and cautious than before.

As the sun sank in the west, the dim lights of Coldstream could be seen only a short way ahead of them, flickering like fireflies in the evening light. The ground underneath their feet was partially frozen, and the rain that seemed to be following them around had turned to snow. Aiden swallowed with consternation as he contemplated the best way to greet his parents, something he'd been meaning to think about during the day, but had been far too distracted to do. He felt Sayana's hand squeeze his reassuringly, which was odd, considering she faced a far graver threat in the lands to their south.

"I have to tell you, I'm not looking forward to this," Pacian muttered, appearing out of the thickening shadows to Aiden's right, startling him. "I've half a mind to sleep outside town and skip this unpleasantness altogether."

"I know what you mean," Aiden agreed, running a hand through his thick black hair. "It's been quite a few weeks though, so hopefully they've had time to calm down."

"Speak for your own parents," Pacian scoffed. "My dad's either glad I was gone or he's been sharpening his axe this whole time, awaiting my return. All I can say, though, is the first sign of trouble from my old man, and I'll be gone. We've got enough to deal with without that bastard trying to kill me again."

"Give him a chance, Pace," Nellise said, having dropped back to see what the discussion was about. "Perhaps your absence has given him time to think things over with a clear head." Pacian gave her a considering look for a long moment before replying.

"Okay, I'll try it your way. Stick with me, and we'll see just how far being nice will go."

"If you go into this expecting a bad outcome," Nellise counselled, "you're probably going to get what you wish for."

"I'm going to be civil, and not say or do anything to provoke him," Pacian replied evenly. "If he has a go at me for that, then is it really my fault? His attitude counts just as much as mine, Nel."

"True," she conceded. "Just give him a chance, is all I'm asking."

"That's the plan," Pacian winked.

"If you hens are finished clucking," Colt growled from nearby, "I'm looking to find a place to get a meal and spend the night, and standing around out here in the cold ain't it."

“Fine, let's get this over with,” Aiden grumbled, crunching over the snow-covered ground, towards the town itself with a knot of trepidation in his stomach. He found it odd that he had faced monsters and soldiers in all manner of surroundings with less fear than he was experiencing now.

The main road went right through Coldstream, whose population was only just above the two hundred mark. Bracksford had more people living in the surrounding area overall, but they were spread out over the farms surrounding the central town. Coldstream was clustered together, for the most part, for as its name suggested, it was always cold, even in summer due to the altitude and the proximity of the nearby Highmarch Mountains.

Woodsmoke hung over the street as they pressed on, passing by the low brick wall that marked the outskirts of town where they encountered two nervous looking guardsmen, who issued the customary challenge, their breath misting in the cold conditions. They waved the group through, directing them towards the town's sole inn.

“We're leaving here at first light tomorrow, so I recommend you shut your face holes and get some rest,” Colt advised. “By tomorrow evening, we'll be in enemy territory and there won't be room for mistakes. I'm headed to the inn, I'm getting my own room, and I will see you out the front at first light.” With that, he turned and stalked off across the snow-covered ground in the direction of the large building just a bit further along the street.

“Succinct, as always,” Nellise sighed. “His message is pertinent, even in the uncouth manner in which he expressed it. Sayana and I will take a room at the inn, and I suspect you two will do the same?”

“Well...” Aiden hedged. Part of him wanted to stay at the inn without crossing paths with his family, but another, louder part said he should at least stop by to let his mother know that he was still alive. “Maybe. I think I'll stop by and see my family while I'm in town.”

“You should,” Nellise agreed, “I'm sure your mother is worried about you. Pacian is already going to see his father, isn't that right Pace?”

“Oh yes, we're going to have a meaningful dialog,” Pacian replied flatly. “Just be ready to call the guards when you hear the bloodthirsty screams later on.”

“Then it's settled,” Nellise said, ignoring the blond rogue's pessimism. “We will see you both tomorrow morning, for the unpleasantness ahead. Come along Sayana, these gentlemen have important affairs to attend to.” Nellise turned and followed Colt towards the inn, with Sayana reluctantly following along behind, giving Aiden a last forlorn look as she left him to his 'affairs'.

He had briefly considered bringing her along as a kind of diversion, but this was likely to be an awkward, if memorable meeting, and Sayana probably wouldn't enjoy watching Aiden and his parents fight, not to mention the fact that Aiden wasn't quite ready to have his parents meet Sayana, or the ensuing conversation that invariably would lead to.

“I guess I'll see you at the inn later,” Pacian sighed, resigned to his own reunion. “Promise me we'll have a drink.”

“I suspect we'll both need it,” Aiden agreed. “Good luck, and keep him away from any sharp objects.” Pacian barked out a cynical laugh, and then headed off along a side street towards his family home, while Aiden did the same.

Coldstream was a picturesque place, and one could even go so far as to call it 'quaint', if one were so inclined. The main street ran north-south, and since the town was built in the foothills of the Highmarch Mountains, the ground was inclined noticeably to the south. Snow covered every surface, and with the oil lanterns hanging from street poles providing soft illumination across the frozen landscape, some might even call the scene 'breathtaking'. It was all lost on Aiden though – like most residents, he had grown up with the sights and sounds of the little town, and barely noticed them on the best of days.

The Wainwright family home was near the centre of town, an appropriate place to attract customers for his father's business. He worked out of a large shed that had been added on to the home long before Aiden had been born, and produced the wagons and wains that merchants and common folk alike used to move their various cargoes around the countryside. Approaching the house, Aiden could see that the lights were still on in the workshop, and the faint but distinctive sounds of hammering could be heard, sounds that brought back pleasant memories of his childhood.

Aiden hesitated, standing in the street, oblivious to the snow swirling around him as he recalled the last 'conversation' with his father, and how incredibly unpleasant it was. The young adventurer almost faltered and walked away at the memory, but then scolded himself and decided to soften the impact of the encounter by talking with his mother first. The warm, inviting light coming from the house proper beckoned him forwards, and before he knew it, he had knocked softly on the front door.

It opened a few moments later and before him stood his mother, her mouth agape at the sight of her long lost son. A moment after that, Aiden was engulfed in a crushing hug, which he gratefully returned.

"Aiden, it's so good to see you again," she whispered, pulling back from the embrace to examine her son with tears of relief in her careworn blue eyes. Her hair was completely grey now, and her face lined and weathered beyond her years. "We've been so worried about you."

"I'm fine," Aiden assured her, "you needn't have worried."

"I'm your mother Aiden, it's what I do," she informed him with a wan smile. "Please, come in out of the cold, you must be freezing." Aiden stepped inside, grateful for the blazing fireplace that took the chill out of the air. The familiar surroundings of his childhood home put him at ease, and for a few moments it was like he had never left.

"What is all this?" his mother asked, gesturing at his equipment, and in particular, the sword hanging from his hip. "Have you joined the army?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Aiden hastily replied, taking off his leather gloves to warm his hands over the fire. "It's just a bit dangerous out there at the moment, and it pays to have some protection."

"Don't lie to your mother," she said dryly, closing the door. "You're still chasing answers to that cave, aren't you?" Aiden never could get away with lying to his parents, and his mother in particular had a knack for sniffing out the truth. But some part of him apparently still thought he could get away with it, despite countless instances to the contrary over the years.

"You know how important it is to me," he replied sombrely, quietly disappointed that the relief of a warm welcome had turned sour so quickly. There was a long, awkward pause between them, the memory of their last meeting still fresh in their minds.

“Well, you're home now at least,” she sighed, walking back into the kitchen to tend to the pot of stew that bubbled over a little stove. “We shall talk with your father and resolve this nonsense once and for all, and you can put that sword away and things can get back to normal.” Aiden looked over at her, busily preparing the evening meal, trying to pretend everything was the way it had been a few months ago. But there was no going back, and Aiden was trying to think of a way to tell her that he wasn't staying without hurting her feelings.

“He's not staying,” came the voice of his father from a nearby doorway across the room. The door connected to the workshop outside, and he stood there, looking at Aiden, his expression unreadable as he wiped his hands with a cloth. He was taller than Aiden, with broad shoulders and dark hair that was greyer than the young man remembered, framing an honest face unaccustomed to deception. “Aiden is just passing through, isn't that right son?”

“Dad's right, I'm on my way south with some allies,” he said. “We're going to be assisting the local militia with the Akoran problem.” Aiden's mother looked up at him, aghast.

“I thought you said you hadn't joined the army? And what does going after those barbarians have to do with your 'quest'.” Aiden didn't like the way she said 'quest', and wasn't overly fond of the word to begin with, but he let it pass without comment.

“I've been up to Culdeny recently, and tried to get the Mayor to send down some more patrols to this region,” he explained, “but they're short-handed everywhere. The threat down here is very real, and we're trying to remove that threat before they escalate their attacks. I'm trying to defend the town, and it has nothing to do with my 'quest', as you put it.”

“Watch your tone, boy,” his father cautioned. “Your mother has been worried sick about you, so show her some respect.”

“I apologise, but it's all true,” Aiden replied, not backing down. “I came by as a courtesy, to let you know I'm okay, that's all.”

“But you're not okay,” his father remarked, stepping closer and giving the young man the same examination his mother had done. “You're caparisoned for war, and that blade on your hip is something special, too, if I'm any judge of workmanship. I take it you've been practising?”

“After a fashion,” Aiden answered evasively. His father nodded to himself, looking straight at his son for a long moment, then turned and walked back out to the workshop. Aiden sighed quietly, recognising his father's usual response to bad news, which was to focus on his work.

“Don't pay attention to him,” his mother instructed, “you know what he's like. The two of you can resolve your differences over the next week or so, and then it'll be like you never fought. You... *are* staying... right? I mean, after you finish off whatever it is you have to do?” The hope in her voice was heartbreaking.

“I don't know,” the young explorer shrugged honestly. “I haven't really thought that far ahead, but I suspect I have some more research to do before I can leave all of that cave stuff behind me.” Aiden was surprised to hear a knife slam into the chopping board his mother was using. She looked at him with something akin to exasperation, and more than a little impatience.

“Why? Why can't you just forget it and get on with your life? You have so much potential, Aiden, and you're wasting it on some vision you thought you saw when you hit your head. Why can't you just *let it go*?”

“I don't have a say in the matter,” Aiden replied tersely, heading over to the workshop door. “It won't let *me* go.” He couldn't mention Sayana's warning about the dream, nor the golden dragon that awaited him when he closed his eyes, for neither fact helped his argument. It was with a cold realisation that he came to understand, at that moment, nothing had changed here since he had first left. Seeing his father working away on a damaged wagon, while he stood in the doorway, having returned from a fairly long absence, summed it up.

“I think I'd better just go,” Aiden said to his father's back, expecting no answer and receiving none. “I'll be back this way... sometime, I don't know when, really. Maybe when I've figured some things out, and I'm ready to go back to my old life, I'll return. Take care of mum, for me.” He couldn't figure out anything further to say, so he turned and started to walk out of the shed, feeling that the inn was probably a better place to stay, given the situation.

“Did I ever tell you about my old mate Sam Weathers?” His father asked suddenly, stopping Aiden in mid-stride. “We grew up together, south of Fairloch, the Kingswood, though it was before that place was properly settled. Best friend I ever had, and we did everything together, him and I. Explored that forest from end to end, and got into more trouble than I'd care to mention.”

“We were about your age when Sam got the itch for adventure, and wanted to head south to sign up with a mercenary company, and travel the land. I wanted to go along with him, but my old man was sick, and I had to work as a lumberjack to bring in enough money to keep us fed. So I said my goodbyes to Sam, and we went our separate ways.” Aiden turned to face his father, even though the man was still paying attention to the new spokes he was fitting to a wheel.

“A year or so later, Sam comes back from his travels, and I dropped what I was doing to head over and welcome him back,” his father continued. “He seemed fine at first, but there was something different about him... the way his face looked when he thought no-one was watching. There was a darkness in his eyes, that hadn't been there before, and when I asked him about it, all he tells me is that he got in to some big battle down near Trinity, and he killed a dozen men to stay alive.”

“Wasn't much I could say to that, so we drank our beer in silence, and the next day, he left town again. Ain't never seen him since, and I'm thankful for it, 'cause he wasn't the same bloke I'd known growing up. And he knew it, too, which is why he left. He knew he couldn't go back to the way he'd been before he'd done the things he'd done, and he'd never be the same again.”

“Interesting story,” Aiden remarked coolly, sensing a moral about to be revealed. His father stopped what he was doing and looked him straight in the eye before he spoke his next words.

“You've got that same look in your eyes, Aiden,” he said with a tired voice. “For whatever reason, you've killed a man, maybe more than one, and it's changed you. So don't say to me that you'll come back when it's all over, and settle in to build wagons with your old man, because it's not going to happen. You've chosen your path, for better or worse, and there's nothing that can be done about it now.” Aiden was silent as his

father's focus returned to his work, unable to form the words he wanted to explain himself because he knew they wouldn't be enough.

He hadn't given a lot of thought to the killing he'd done, probably because there was so much going on in his life at the moment, but also because he thought self-defence justified it. They were *bad men*, and that made it okay? Somehow it didn't seem enough, especially in the face of his father's story. There was nothing more to say to him, so instead, Aiden turned and trudged out into the swirling snow, head hanging low as he made for the inn. It may have been the house he grew up in, but it was no longer home.

* * *

The inn was less than a hundred yards away, a small fact Aiden remembered from his youth. He even recalled counting out the steps at one point to win a wager with Pacian, though the exact number escaped him now. As he approached it, however, he heard the sounds of distant voices, raised in argument, both of them quite familiar to Aiden. Groaning inwardly, he changed direction and headed over to the western end of town, walking faster.

The sounds grew louder as he approached the Savidge household, an old timber-worker's cottage that had seen better days. Half a dozen locals were peering out of their windows nearby, trying to find out more of what was going on inside Pacian's house. The shouted words were alarmingly loud, and punctuated by the sounds of ceramic plates smashing against the ground. Aiden stopped just outside the front door, wondering whether or not it was safe to open.

The words being hurled back and forth like weapons were quite harsh, and not unfamiliar. Pacian's father had never forgiven his blond son for the death of his wife, and the resentment brewing within the man often exploded into a terrible display of the less appealing aspects of human nature. Pace had taken a good deal of abuse over the years, probably out of a sense of guilt, but tonight, he was dishing it out as good as he was getting it, and it was just making the whole situation worse.

"Do you want me to show you how to throw plates, 'cause you're terrible at it, you drunken bastard!" Pacian taunted, loud enough to be heard through the thick wooden door. The sound of a plate smashing into the door itself led Aiden to the conclusion that leaving it closed for the time being was a prudent course of action.

"You shouldn't have come back here, you wretch," his father spat, "You're nothing but trouble, and you'll bring a curse down on this town!"

"Oh don't worry, I'm leaving tomorrow," Pacian assured him, "I just wanted to drop in and say hello before you drink yourself to death-" The sound of a plate hitting someone in the head stopped Pacian short, and was followed by the sounds of a scuffle within. The faint yet distinctive sound of a dagger being unsheathed alarmed Aiden, to the point that he risked opening the door, and saw the blond rogue wrestling his father to the ground with a dagger held to his throat and a look of blind rage on his face.

"Pace, stop!" Aiden cried, bolting inside to stop his friend from doing something he'd regret for the rest of his life. Pacian's father was a dried-up husk of a man – unkempt, bleary-eyed, and living in a house that would make a pig sty look neat. Pacian looked up at Aiden briefly, a trickle of blood dripping onto the floor from the small wound on his head.

"Back off Aiden," he growled, "I'm done with putting up with this bastard's abuse. Do you hear me!" he screamed into the old man's face, which was already contorted with fear.

"Just... ease up a little there, Pace," Aiden said in soft tones, trying to bring him back from the brink of murder. "Think about what you're doing for a moment – you don't want to kill him, that'll cause you no end of trouble."

"Maybe, but I wouldn't have to put up with this *shit* any more either," he said through clenched teeth. "I made a mistake, and she's dead, okay dad? How long do you plan on punishing me for being stupid, hmm? The rest of your life? It won't bring her back, as much as I wish it would."

"She was an angel," his father spat, gathering up his courage and his rage, and risking a quick death in the process. "You took her from me, with your stupid bravado, and now I have to live with that memory every day!"

"And you think I don't?" Pacian retorted. "I wasn't the one whose debts brought those bastards after us in the first place. But if you don't want to deal with the memories any more, I can end this right now." Pacian almost twitched his arm, a movement that would have spilt his own father's blood on the floor, but he kept the blade still against the exposed skin.

Long seconds went past, and the tension of the moment did not diminish until Aiden felt a hand lightly touch him on the shoulder. Turning, he saw Nellise standing in the doorway behind him, looking at the scene with a heartbreaking expression of concern.

"Pace, drop the knife," she instructed with a smooth, calm voice. Pacian kept his eyes locked with his father's, unwilling to step back from the brink. Nellise took a slow step towards him, and then repeated the words. This time, Pace glanced at her, and a bead of sweat dripped down his forehead, despite the low temperature in the room.

"Pacian, I want you to put the knife away, and come outside with me for a moment," Nellise said. "Killing this poor man won't change anything, except to brand you as a murderer, and you don't want that. Remember all those things we talked about, these past weeks?" Pacian nodded slowly. "Good, so, this would be one of those times when it's a good idea to listen to me, okay? Just put the knife away, and come outside with me." He looked at her, the veneer of hatred slipping away like a mask, and finally, the dagger slowly withdrew from the old man's throat and went back into its sheath.

Pacian stood up slowly, then, looking down at his terrified father, said in a very quiet voice, "You're dead to me, in spirit, if not in fact. We will not meet again," then turned and slowly followed Nellise towards the door, where she put an arm around his shoulder, and made gentle hushing sounds as his chest wracked with sobs.

Aiden exhaled, unaware that he'd been holding his breath. Bryce reacted differently; trembling like a newborn foal, he staggered to his feet and rushed over to a barrel and promptly threw up in it. The man had obviously been drinking heavily even before his son had shown up, which couldn't have helped the situation. Leaving him to clean himself up, Aiden walked outside to see a small crowd of people that had gathered around, most of them in their bedclothes, to find out what all the commotion was.

"That whole family was always trouble if you ask me," he overheard a large woman say. "Pity about his wife though, she was a lovely lass, though I can't imagine what she ever saw in a man like Bryce."

“Aye, and that son of theirs is a chip off the old block,” someone else replied sagely. Aiden was only just within earshot of these comments, but found their comments tasteless and invasive. He wasn't about to take sides in this fight, though, so he kept his mouth shut.

They'd already had a shot at orting out their feelings, years ago. The local priest had been unable to provide any sort of resolution when asked to intercede, even after months of trying, and so the wounds festered. This confrontation had been a long time coming, but Pacian had stood up to his old man this time, at least, and that was something akin to progress for him.

Nellise and Pacian were talking together in quiet whispers at the edge of the torchlight, and as usual, Aiden didn't feel the need to eavesdrop, so he decided to head over to the inn and drown his sorrows, and speak with his friend about this eventful evening later. Despite the distance between them at the moment, Aiden had no doubt Nellise was more than capable of taking care of Pacian, and might even be able to help his father out a little as well.

The Sleeping Bear was the creatively titled inn that mostly catered to merchants and the occasional travellers that passed through Coldstream, but the roads had been practically deserted of late, leaving most of the rooms vacant. But the fire in the hearth burned brightly and the food was good, which proved to be of some small comfort to Aiden, as he headed inside to settle in for the evening.

He was still coming to terms with the two life-changing events that had just occurred, and found himself gazing into the fire for some time while sitting in one of the comfortable, overstuffed chairs. The innkeeper, Alan Wright, a family friend from way back recognised him, but Aiden wasn't really in the mood to catch up with an old acquaintance, so he kept the chatter to a minimum. Despite being pleased to see him again, Alan didn't press the issue, clearly sensing the young man's need to sit, eat, and do as little as possible.

Perhaps an hour later, after Aiden had eaten half a roast chicken that had tasted like ashes, Pacian slumped down in the chair next to him. The two friends exchanged a tired glance, saying nothing, for they didn't need to speak to convey what they were feeling at that moment. They were both emotionally exhausted, and needed nothing more than quiet company for the evening. Nellise joined them at the fireplace a little while later, sitting next to Pacian in silence, while Sayana came over to sit on Aiden's lap, something that managed to distract him from his troubles quite effectively.

“I see that you two have become quite friendly,” Nellise remarked softly, a faint smile on her lips.

“Yes, it came as something of a surprise to me,” Aiden replied dryly. “And not at all unpleasant, either.”

“Why is everyone acting so strangely tonight?” Sayana asked without warning, causing a number of exchanged glances to be passed around.

“Sy has many fine qualities,” Aiden dead-panned a long moment later, “but I think it's her non-sequiturs that I find *really* attractive.”

“It would seem that both of these young gentlemen have some serious family issues,” Nellise said in reply to Sayana's question, smiling briefly at Aiden's cunning remark.

“Yes, and if it wasn't for Nel's advice,” Pacian added accusingly, “we would have had a quiet evening by the fireplace instead of horrible confrontations with certain people.”

“I still stand by what I said,” Nellise said stubbornly, looking at both him and Aiden pointedly. “In my experience, a lack of communication is the basis for all interpersonal conflict.”

“Maybe, but I'm never going to speak to my old man again after tonight, so I don't see the problem being fixed, ever,” Pacian said bitterly.

“Never is a long time, Pace,” Nellise counselled. “See how you feel in a few years, okay?” Pacian shrugged, then a few moments later, slowly stood up and stretched.

“This wasn't the best of days, and tomorrow isn't going to be any easier, so I'm going to bed,” he stated tiredly. “I'll see you all first thing, out front.” Aiden mumbled a quick 'goodnight' as Pacian turned and sauntered off towards his room. After he'd gone, Sayana stood up and took Aiden by the hand, easing him out of the chair and slowly leading him towards their own room.

“I guess we're off to bed as well,” Aiden remarked, looking back over his shoulder to see Nellise, who seemed to be blushing as they walked away. Despite her apparent eagerness, Sayana had something else in mind when they climbed into bed that evening. She apparently sensed Aiden's dour mood, and offered nothing more than her company for the night.

Lying there in her arms, the young man dwelled on the events of the day for some time before he became sleepy. The last thing he remembered thinking, was that if the dragon appeared in his dreams that night, he was going to give it a swift kick in the head before it ate him.

Chapter Twenty Three

It was a typical freezing winter's morning in Coldstream when the five of them met outside the Sleeping Bear Inn, a strong wind assailing them from the southwest and a thick layer of snow upon the ground. It was just before sunrise, with the sky only beginning to lighten, and everyone who didn't need to be up and about was sensibly still in their beds.

Their breath misted heavily in the frigid conditions, and Aiden smacked his gloved hands together to try to and generate some warmth, but it was a futile effort. The heavy, white winter cloaks they were wearing protected them from the worst of the bitter wind, but the real test would come when they moved out of the foothills and over the High Plains, a large expanse of empty land in the southern region of the kingdom that gradually became the Highmarch Mountains.

The tension among the five of them was palpable that morning, which was hardly surprising considering what they were about to attempt. Aiden had managed a few hours of sleep, but when he'd risen out of bed, it felt like he hadn't rested at all. His mind was sluggish and his body tired before the day had even begun. Still, it was better than his usual nightmare, of which his sleep was blissfully devoid this time around.

Nellise and Sayana were talking quietly, just outside of Aiden's hearing about matters that obviously didn't concern the others. This caused a flicker of concern with the young man for a brief moment, but he quickly dismissed the idea that they were talking

about him as selfish. Nellise did hand a small vial of some kind to the wild girl that she accepted and promptly drank down in one gulp.

Colt seemed remarkably alert, considering the early start, and was apparently able to avoid any drinking altogether for this mission, something Aiden was grateful for, since they would be relying on his skills more than ever. The big ranger was, however, eyeing Pacian and Aiden suspiciously as they checked their gear one last time.

"I hear tell from the innkeeper that something happened last night," he remarked to nobody in particular. "Bit of a local disturbance, as it were. I don't suppose either of you two heard about it?" Aiden shook his head after a moment of fake thought, and Pacian merely shrugged.

"I spoke with a drunken man in town last night," Nellise casually mentioned. "He had been creating quite a scene, as it happens, so perhaps that's what the innkeeper meant?" Colt looked her straight in the eye for a long moment, as if trying to determine if she was lying or not.

"Yeah, that was probably it," he grunted, hefting his greatsword over his shoulder. Aiden caught the young cleric's eye for a moment, and noticed a quick wink in his direction. He had to give credit where it was due, for Nellise hadn't actually lied about anything she'd said, and he silently thanked her for it too, for if Colt heard about Pacian almost killing his father, there would be yet another scene that the entire town would be talking about for some time to come.

"Alright, let's move out," Colt ordered. "We're supposed to meet up with Duncan ten miles or so upstream, and he'll lead us into enemy territory from there. His mate is relaying word on their patrol movements and fortifications to him, so we'll have everything we need moving forward."

"Meeting up with Duncan again eh?" Pacian remarked sarcastically. "That worked out really well last time, as I recall."

"Shut your face before I peel it off and feed it to the pigs," Colt growled, glaring at the blond rogue in the dim light provided by a nearby lantern. At least Pacian was his usual cynical self, Aiden thought, which was an improvement over his disposition last night.

"I was in a bad place then, I'll cop that," Colt continued, oblivious to Aiden's internal soliloquy, "but I'm deadly serious about this job, as should you be. We've done alright so far, getting through on blood and balls, if you'll beg my pardon, Nel, but this time the stakes are a lot higher."

"Charming," Nellise murmured, unimpressed as always by Colt's choice of words.

"I wouldn't have even come on this one if we didn't have some inside help, to be honest," the big man continued. "I know that's putting a lot on your shoulders, Sayana, but that's the truth of the situation. If at any time you don't think you can help us get in there and take this bastard out, you let us know. We won't think any less of you for it, either, you understand me?"

The sorceress nodded, continuing the silence she had begun this morning after they'd woken up. Clearly she was under enormous stress, and all Aiden could do was try to support her and keep her safe. Considering her abilities, and the bravery she had shown in the not-too-distant past, he did wonder, though, at just how much protecting he'd be doing.

Wordlessly, Colt turned and started trudging up the road, the snow crunching underfoot as the rest of them fell into line behind him. No lanterns on the street were still burning at this hour, for they only carried enough oil to keep them lit for half the night at this time of year, but there was just enough light being reflected off the ground for them to find their way through the town to the south gate. The two miserably cold militiamen still on duty gave them a terse farewell, and returned to their vigil.

Just outside of town, they crossed Southpoint Bridge, over the river Coldstream, which was mostly iced over at this time of year. The further they travelled, the thicker the ice would become, until it was almost permanently frozen by the time they reached the Highmarch Mountains. There was no trail visible beyond this point, for there had been practically no trade between the Akoran tribal people and the town of Coldstream for months, and even before they closed their borders, the mountain folk weren't known for their open, sociable nature.

Much of their land had been taken from them over the past century, as Aielund slowly expanded its borders as far as it could without running afoul of another major power, such as Tulsone in the west. There was little else of value in the mountains to the south, however, so an uneasy truce had been forged after fighting over the land Coldstream now stood upon, which left the Akorans with only the least valuable lands under their control. Aiden had met several Akorans over the years, and they seemed a hard, uncompromising people, accustomed to living in a place where life was short and often brutal, in order to survive.

Aiden's thoughts dwelled on historical matters for an hour or so, but after stepping on a branch and causing Colt to whirl around, sword drawn and ready to cut him down, the young adventurer decided to focus more on his surroundings, and keep an eye out for signs of enemy patrols.

The terrain was gradually taking them higher and higher as they travelled, and signs of life such as trees, bushes and animals, slowly disappeared from their surroundings. The reappearance of Faolan was no longer a surprise, for the wolf seemed to know where Colt was heading to, and always managed to ghost them quite effectively.

It was quite open terrain up here, and for once the foul weather that seemed to be following them around helped to obscure the landscape. It was a mixed blessing, however, as he soon discovered.

"Everyone, lie down in the snow, now!" Colt whispered harshly, surprising them all with the suddenness of the order. Faolan's fur was bunched up, and the wolf was snarling into the distance ahead of them at some unknown threat. The rest of them didn't hesitate, and like the others, Aiden threw himself down on to the ground.

"Use your cloaks to keep you covered," Colt whispered from just ahead, "and don't move at all until I say so." Aiden's heart raced as he quickly made sure that the white cloak covered his entire form, while Colt quickly moved along their line, brushing away their tracks as quickly as he could, until he and the wolf had disappeared into the fog behind them.

Aiden planted his face into the snow, and made every effort to remain perfectly still. He could hear only his own breath, and the sound of the wind gusting over the frigid landscape. Long moments passed, and still he heard nothing else, until, perhaps half a minute later, the sounds of people moving through the snow nearby pricked up his ears.

He held his breath unconsciously as he realised at least half a dozen raiders were moving past, only yards from where Aiden and the others lay.

He didn't dare lift his head to look, on the off chance he would be spotted, but he felt exposed, lying there with nothing but a white cloak to give him cover, and he desperately wanted to know if the raiders had seen them. But he held position as Colt had ordered, and prayed that they would remain undetected.

The longest minute Aiden had ever experienced went past, and his heart was thundering in his chest, but there was no sudden cry of alarm, and no attack against them from the passing raiders. Still, waiting for Colt to finally give the signal was interminable, and he gratefully lifted his head and shook off the thin layer of snow that had accumulated in the duration.

"That was too close," Pacian said in hushed tones as he dusted snow off his leathers.

"The patrols are likely to get more frequent, the closer we get," Colt growled as he surveyed the horizon. "We got lucky this time, 'cause we were downwind and Faolan smelled them, but next time, things might go differently for us, so we'd best stay on alert. Duncan is probably only a mile up the river, so let's get there as quickly as possible so we can figure out our next move. I don't like sitting around on this plain; if the snow stops falling, we're going to be visible to every barbarian and stray deer within a quarter mile."

"I wouldn't have chosen to come this way," Sayana remarked. "Coming in from the west would have given us a more sheltered approach."

"Well, this is where we were told to meet Duncan, so this is the way it had to be," Colt informed her. "You can impress us with your local knowledge in a few hours. Until then, you take the lead. I'm going to follow along behind and cover our tracks, so as them raiders don't find us." Sayana hesitated a moment, then nodded and started moving through the snow along the frozen river bank. They continued travelling in single-file, but made every effort to walk in the footsteps of the person in front of them, to make Colt's task easier.

Their progress through the snow was slower than Aiden would have liked, given the open terrain, but luck smiled on them and they encountered no further patrols. Shortly, from out of the swirling snow ahead, appeared a dead tree on the edge of the river, its branches clawing at the sky as if it had been clinging to life in this harsh environment right to the end. Colt jogged up from the rear of their column, indicating that everyone should stop here and keep low.

"This is the place," he observed quietly. "The way I figure it, we should be ten miles from town," he added, looking around their surroundings. "Duncan should have seen us coming and contacted us by now."

"You sure you haven't been sipping a little of the 'holy water' on the way here?" Pacian asked spitefully.

"Remind me to punch you in the face when we get out of here," Colt growled at him ominously.

"I'll make a note of it in my journal," Pacian replied with a healthy dose of sarcasm. "Dear diary, when we get back to town, Colt wants to express his manly affections for me through violence."

"Enough," Aiden said gruffly, in no mood for their usual repartee. "Do we wait here, or find our own way forward?" Everyone looked to Colt for an answer, but had to wait while the big ranger looked around for signs of any tracks, or indeed any indication that

something unpleasant might have befallen Duncan. Faolan sniffed around a little, following Colt's lead, but didn't seem to detect anything.

"There's no sign of anyone having passed by here in the past day, as far as I can tell," the big man finally offered. "Whatever happened, didn't happen here. But we can't afford to just sit here and waste precious daylight freezing our backsides off - we press on with the mission. Sy, can you lead us in?" The sorceress nodded meekly, her lack of enthusiasm perfectly understandable, given that she wasn't supposed to be going in with the rest of them.

"I'm sorry you have to do this," Aiden offered, rubbing her shoulder in what he hoped was a reassuring fashion. "But plans change sometimes, usually when something goes wrong, and Duncan's absence certainly counts as such. If we run into any raiders, feel free to burn them horribly, okay?" Sayana gave him a weak smile and squeezed his hand in reply.

"Let me just get my bearings, and I'll do my best to avoid any 'trouble'," she replied, stepping back from Aiden's touch and looking up at the tree.

"You're not thinking of climbing that, are you?" Pacian asked. "Those branches probably won't hold much weight, even someone as... slender... as yourself."

"I won't need to," Sayana assured him quietly, flattening her arms against her side, and turning her palms towards the ground. A moment later, she began to rise off the ground, as if being lifted by a great invisible hand. Aiden and the others were startled by this new ability the wild girl was using, and could only watch in silence as she slowly rose up forty feet off the ground. Despite the high winds, she was not blown away, and instead levitated in the air, perfectly still until she began to rotate around, allowing her to observe the entire horizon from altitude.

"She has some talent, that one," Nellise murmured, drawing an appreciative nod of agreement from Aiden. He almost missed the fine crinkle of her frown as she spoke, and wondered if she somehow disapproved of their companion's capabilities, but he didn't press the issue, and dismissed it as Nellise just worrying over their situation. Sayana hovered up in the air for half a minute, and then slowly descended back to earth, landing softly in the snow.

"We go this way," she declared, pointing off into the distance, and striding forward with purpose. The others fell into line behind her, as before, with Colt doing his best to cover their passing. They travelled across the frozen plain for more than an hour, pausing once or twice as Sayana deemed necessary to avoid patrols, until she froze in place, mid-stride. Aiden, directly behind her, also held still, looking around nervously to see if they had been discovered. But it wasn't his sight that alerted him to the danger, but rather his hearing.

The wind was still quite strong, but beneath it could be heard the occasional sounds of deep voices in conversation. It could only be the Akorans, but their exact location was a cause of some concern for Aiden, for while their voices seemed to be drifting in from the south, he couldn't be sure.

Fortunately, Sayana and Colt were both experts on outdoor matters, and used that extensive knowledge to point them in the right direction. The big ranger signalled in from the back, that they should move off to the right, and Sayana seemed to agree, for she nodded and changed direction, with the rest following her lead.

The swirling snow, ever-present throughout their recent journey, was proving to be excellent cover for the group, but right at the very edge of their vision, Aiden could see the faint lines of dark smoke from a campfire, and more ominously, a large, dark object that they were moving parallel to. There could be no doubt that they had reached the palisade, a huge wooden wall constructed out of felled trees that ran for many dozens of yards in either direction.

Aiden's heart was racing now, for he realised that if he could see the wall, then those near the wall could probably see them, and if he squinted, he thought he could see the silhouettes of towering Akoran warriors with weapons at the ready. The young explorer could only hope that in this terrible weather, they appeared to be just another patrol of raiders, marching out to the west. The sounds of more boisterous laughing, as well as more general talk, could still be heard through the snow, and Aiden had to trust in Sayana's abilities completely.

As if some forgotten god of irony had been listening to Aiden's thoughts, less than a minute later, their path took them straight into a patrol of raiders, who emerged from the snow-filled air before them, close enough to see that the young man and his companions were not their comrades. There was a moment of shocked realisation from both groups, as the three patrolling Akorans stared straight at Sayana and Aiden, and then an explosion of movement ensued as both sides rushed to the attack.

Fortunately, the enemy did not sound an alarm, nor did they scream a battlecry, as Aiden had heard they were want to do in combat. The reasons for this became painfully clear a moment later as he saw a crossbow bolt sticking out of the neck of one man, and a knife in another. Aiden hadn't even heard his friends loose their weapons, but they had apparently been far more alert than he was, and had acted quickly to prevent their foes from calling for help. The third man had drawn a compact short bow and loosed an arrow in their direction, but he didn't account for the high winds, and it passed by without hitting anyone.

Colt responded in kind, drawing his mighty composite longbow, making the necessary adjustments for the wind that his opponent hadn't done, and sending a clothyard shaft straight into his chest. The effect of the weapon was devastating – the arrow went right through the raider's chest, and dropped him to the ground where his life's blood began spilling onto the pure, white snow beneath.

Another arrow followed quickly, finishing the Akoran warrior off with a shot to the head, while Pacian ran in and threw a couple more knives at his target, quickly dropping him as well. Aiden, sensing an opportunity, rushed in and slid his sword straight into the heart of the last warrior, whom Nellise had already struck with her crossbow. The man looked Aiden straight in the eyes with a look of grim determination on his face, and somehow managed to slug the young man with a massive fist before he finally succumbed to his wounds.

Aiden's head pounded from the force of the blow, made worse by having not anticipated the strike. Any ordinary man would have been on the ground after being stabbed through the heart like that, and if his kin were anything like that warrior, then it was imperative that Aiden's group avoid fighting them at all costs, for their strength and resilience were apparently quite exceptional.

"Are you okay?" Sayana asked with concern. Aiden nodded, attempting to appear unaffected by the blow. Colt and Pacian were already moving to bury the bodies under

the snow as fast as they could, while Nellise stood watch, Clavis's repeating crossbow held firmly in her grasp. They spent just under two tense minutes there, watching as the bodies were slowly covered by snow that Colt was expertly moving from around the immediate area, in such a way so as not to leave any sign that he'd done so.

"Good enough," Pacian voiced in hushed tones.

"Only if you want them on alert after finding that foot sticking out of the ground," Colt spat back harshly, also making an effort to keep his voice low. "Stop being lazy and do your job."

"Those idiots couldn't find their own nose if it was pointed out to them," Pacian blustered. "They're not going to see half a foot sticking up in a snowstorm, and in about ten minutes it'll be covered anyway. We should keep moving!"

"A patrol is likely to come past here before then," Colt countered, as he finished covering up one of the other bodies. "The longer we keep them from detecting us, the more time we get."

"This is hardly the place to argue about it!" Nellise whispered sharply. "We may be standing in the middle of one of their well-travelled paths, and we are not so far past their front gate that we can loiter as we please. We should move, and quickly." Sayana's head was darting back and forth, clearly distraught over the possibilities of being caught out here like this, a feeling Aiden shared.

"Forget the bloody foot, we need to keep moving before we're found," he declared. "If they catch us off guard, the fight might end quite differently next time. Sayana, lead us out of here." She didn't hesitate, turning in the direction they had been heading before the brief encounter, and striding forward as fast as the terrain would allow. Aiden followed her without waiting to see what the others were doing, but the distinctive sound of Colt swearing under his breath was a good indication they were right behind them.

The ground underneath began to incline sharply, and large rocks were evident around them after only a few more minutes of travel. Sayana began climbing through gaps in the rocky ground, leading them up through a cluster of boulders, and on to a rocky hill. The sounds of more nearby Akorans could be heard, and the winding path the wild sorceress was leading them on brought the small group around a corner to a sight that took Aiden's breath away.

Less than fifty yards away were dozens of camp fires, the smoke from their flames twisting and swirling in the freezing winds, and leaving no doubt that they were looking upon the main host of the Akoran raiders. Aiden and the others unconsciously crouched down, even though it was practically impossible for them to be seen in amongst the rocks in this weather from below.

"Dear God," Nellise breathed. "There must be hundreds of them."

"And that's just what we can see here," Colt grunted. "Judging by the size of the palisade, the camp is at least three times the size of what we're looking at. Could be over a thousand of the bastards there."

"I think I can see a few broken wagons down there," Pacian said, pointing to a pile of broken wood and other parts not too far away. "They probably bring most of what they steal back here to feed the rest of 'em."

"It won't be enough," Aiden added, "not for much longer anyway. Their numbers are too great; they'll have to head out in force soon. Let's keep going, Sy." Sayana was transfixed by the sight, and needed a nudge from Aiden to snap her back to reality. She

noded quickly, and then continued picking her way through the rocks around them to find a way through.

They kept moving for nearly ten minutes, keeping low to avoid accidental detection by their numerous adversaries. The path Sayana was leading them upon was apparently unknown to the host, for they ran into no guards at all as they pressed on. Whether it was from ignorance of the path, or the belief that no-one would get that close without being spotted first, Aiden couldn't tell, but he hoped their luck held a little longer. Colt's estimate of the size of the camp seemed to be accurate, for the further they moved, the more camp fires they saw.

Aiden's legs, accustomed to walking long distances, were beginning to show the strain of moving rapidly through the heavy snow. It was getting harder and harder for him to put one foot in front of the other, and with a quick glance, he could tell Pacian and Nellise were having similar problems, but if Sayana or Colt were experiencing any fatigue, they certainly didn't show it.

Roughly a quarter of an hour later, after following the meandering path in-between the boulders of this rocky slope around to the east, Sayana finally gave the signal to stop.

"We're nearly there," she said as the others gathered around. "If I remember correctly, the cave entrance lies just beyond that rise, down by the frozen river."

"I'm going to scout ahead and see what's going on," Colt grunted, moving his bulk through the adverse terrain with relative ease. Aiden crouched down on the most comfortable lump of rock he could see and rubbed his aching legs, while catching his breath. Pacian slipped off his pack and quickly retrieved some sausage and crusty bread, and the two ladies did likewise. Faolan lay down in the snow, paws before him, observing them curiously from a distance, as was his custom. They rested in silence while Colt went about his work, the freezing wind blasting across the hillside and the snow continuing to fall.

A few minutes later, the big ranger returned, crouching down in amongst the group to give his report.

"There's a cave out there, all right," he said in a low voice, sweeping a gloved hand across a patch of snow before him and making an indentation with his index finger. "Four guards standing out the front of it, checking everyone that walks through. The river is frozen not far from its entrance, and no-one is hanging around near that area. The rest of the camp seems to be a little further north, up here," he said, making a large circle to the north of the indentation.

"Are the rest of them within sight of the cave entrance?" Pacian asked, his mouth full of bread.

"Not in this weather, no," Colt replied. "If it was a clear day, we'd just wait until nightfall and then hit them hard. But I reckon we can take those four guards and get inside before anyone notices they're down, and then get out of here under cover of night."

"It wouldn't be long before their absence became obvious, I would imagine," Nellise observed as she put her helmet on. "How deep is this cave, anyway? Can we make it through to the leader's chamber before a fight breaks out?"

"I can't tell you much more about the inside of the cave," Sayana said, "it has been a very long time since I last walked its length. It is not a small cave, however, and features many chambers, that much I can tell you with certainty."

“Good enough,” Aiden remarked. “If you can stay out here, hidden, the rest of us will head inside, deal with Erag, try to locate this Morik chap, and then come back outside again. If we get into trouble, I want you to rain down seven kinds of hell, okay?”

“There are hundreds of them,” Sayana pointed out pessimistically, “but... I will do my best.”

“I know you will. Okay, let's get on with this,” Aiden ordered, eager to have this over and done with so they could return to the relative warmth of civilisation. Wordlessly, Colt turned and made a flicking gesture with one hand, something that Faolan clearly understood, for the wolf stood up and loped off into the swirling snow, away from the tenuous situation. The big ranger then moved as quietly as he could manage along the path he'd used to scout earlier, but this time Aiden, Pacian and Nellise followed, weapons at the ready, while Sayana stayed hidden, practically invisible against the snow-covered ground in her cloak.

Aiden could hear Nellise whisper a prayer as they came to a sharp, downward slope that led right down to the cave itself. From here, the novice warrior could see that they were just above the entrance, though the altitude was such that dropping on top of the guards below was impractical. The sloping ground continued around to their right, which was the direction Colt was moving, placing one foot in front of the other with care so as not to make any noise, nor send some loose rocks tumbling down below.

It took nearly a minute to reach the ground near the cave entrance at that rate, and the delay had Aiden's nerves on edge. The Akoran guards were just around the corner, and with a quick strike, they would be inside in less than a minute. Pacian crept forward, his daggers drawn, and made a slashing motion across his throat, indicating that he was going to head in to make the first strike. Colt nodded and drew his bow, ready to support him. Aiden gripped the hilt of his sword tightly, his heart racing as he waited for the instant to attack.

They gave Pacian a few seconds to get into position, and then it was on, Colt stepping around the corner to loose his first arrow, striking his target, while Nellise stepped out to his right and unleashed her crossbow. Aiden lunged past the big ranger, his aches and pains forgotten as he sought to strike at the last guard before he made a noise, only to see at least *ten* heavily armed Akoran warriors standing just inside the mouth of the cave, weapons ready, and the roar of their battle-cries echoing across the frigid landscape as they saw the attack begin.

“Ambush!” Colt bellowed as he quickly drew another arrow and loosed it before the charging Akorans closed the distance. Pacian, who had crept around the edge of the rock face, and effectively 'silenced' one of the guards, was the first to meet the surprise attack, and only his reflexes saved him from being trampled in the rush. The nimble rogue tumbled back towards Colt, and then stretched out into a back flip, moving past the big man with the swinging axes of their enemies biting at the empty air behind him.

Aiden spoke the command word to summon his force shield almost as a reflex, and as it shimmered into existence his mind went in a dozen different directions, analysing the situation and trying to figure out what had gone wrong, and the possibilities of salvaging the situation. He didn't have time to think about it, however, as three massive warriors bore directly down upon him, their axes poised to strike.

He stepped to his right and swung his sword at the midriff of the closest savage, striking hard and bowling the man down from the force of his own charge. Sparks flew

off his shield as another warrior's axe struck it and was deflected away. Aiden found his footing and delivered another quick slash, but his blade met the bulwark of his opponent's round wooden shield and was turned away.

Colt threw down his longbow and drew his greatsword, managing to take a swing at his nearest enemy in the same stroke, but after their furious charge the Akorans began working together to defend their flanks and take advantage of any opportunities that the beleaguered adventurers presented. Aiden was pushed back towards Colt's position by the relentless attacks of his opponents, and was fighting on a purely defensive level, unable to press the attack at all against such odds.

The sounds of men screaming in pain could be heard coming from above, accompanied by the crackle of flame and the snarl of a wolf, reassuring Aiden that Sayana and Faolan were now in the fight, but also indicating that they had been attacked from the direction they had come in from as well. That could only mean that the bodies of that patrol they'd encountered had been discovered... which also meant that the Akoran warriors had known they were coming, and set this trap for them.

"We have to get out of here, now!" he cried over the din of the clashing weapons, but couldn't find the time to actually figure a way out – they were boxed in on all sides, so unless they cut their way through the enemy line, they weren't going anywhere. Colt swung his mighty blade back and forth with all his strength, striking down first one warrior, then another in a shower of blood, but they were replaced as quickly as they fell, showing no fear at the sight of their fallen comrades.

They were being pushed back against the side of the hill, with their right flank a mass of warriors looking for a chance to get into the fight. Arrows started whistling past his head, causing Aiden to crouch down behind his shield as best he could while still doing his best to keep Colt's flank as clear as possible, smashing his sword against the shields of the enemy.

The savage warriors pressed their assault, making the best use of their overwhelming numbers and power to force Aiden to back up even further, until he bumped into Nellise, who had long ago discarded her crossbow in favour of her mace and shield. With her improved armour, she was actually able to push back against the attackers that were threatening their rear quarter, which also happened to be the best path for them to retreat.

Pacian was doing the best he could, despite being ill-equipped for this style of fighting. The Akorans were wielding vicious axes and short spears, weapons that would be devastating if they connected squarely on the lightly armoured rogue, and he was using all his skill to avoid just such an eventuality. Aiden's attention was suddenly drawn back to his personal fight, as he was struck on his shoulder, rocking him back on his feet as he grimaced from the shock.

Aiden regained his footing quickly and slashed back at the warrior, a towering figure adorned with animal skins, throwing axes, and an expression of sheer rage on his scarred face. He hadn't recovered from the swing yet, and had no defence in place to parry Aiden's sword, which went straight through the furs and cut deeply into the barbarian's side. The man staggered to one side and dropped into the snow, wounded but not mortally so, but it didn't really matter as he was replaced on the front line by yet another warrior, almost as large and wielding an axe just as deadly.

Their situation was looking worse every second that passed, but it could be turned around in a heartbeat if they could just break out of the surrounding warriors. And it was

at that moment Sayana could be heard screaming the same war-cry that the Akoran's had, drawing Aiden's attention upwards. Above them, descending through the air in an impossibly long jump, with her shining mithral axe poised above her head, came the most welcome sight the young man had ever seen.

Sayana crashed into one of the barbarians, bringing down her axe and using all the momentum from her fall to practically split the man in half, right down the middle. Instead of falling into the ground in a pile of broken bones, she instead landed gracefully, cat-like upon the snow, having slowed her fall at the last moment with a levitation spell.

Holding the axe in her left hand, she turned to her right, and flames shot forth from her extended arm, enveloping the nearby warriors in fire. They fell back in shock, some of them screaming in pain, their bodies burned terribly and providing enough of a distraction for Aiden and the others to take advantage of the confusion.

Pacian, always on the watch for a chance to fight dirty, dodged a clumsy axe swing, and then stepped in underneath the weapon, stabbing the fierce warrior with both daggers, one in each side of the chest, dropping him like a stone. Colt took a few steps back, keeping his eye on the startled Akorans that were falling back before them, while Aiden turned and moved behind Sayana to guide their way out while she covered them.

"Where the hell are you going?" Pacian called, bringing Aiden up short as he looked around at the fragile situation.

"Getting us out of here, what does it look like?" he shot back, scarcely believing they were going to have a discussion about it. An arrow shot past, right above their heads, and Sayana retaliated with a stream of fire over twenty feet long, bathing the area in flames and pushing the enemy further back.

"We still have to do what we came here to do!" Pacian retorted.

"The hell we are," Colt growled, "we got no chance of getting through now, and even if we did we'd never get out of there alive. We leave now and wait for a better opportunity!"

"I can't keep this up forever," Sayana said, her voice trembling with the strain as she blasted torrents of flame around them.

"Okay, you get out of here, I'll assassinate the bastard," Pacian spat. "Just draw them away from the cave so I can disappear!"

"Let him," Colt barked, "I'm just fine with him sacrificing his life to get the job done."

"We are *all* leaving!" Aiden roared, sick of the arguing, and attempting to end the discussion quickly. "Let's move out of here, *now*! Nel, make sure Sayana pulls back as soon as we're clear. Colt, lead the--"

Sayana's flames abruptly died at that moment, and the wild sorceress staggered backwards, as if struck, but there was no sign that she had been hit. The view beyond the area where her fires had been was now occupied by several Akoran warriors, standing on either side of a venerable man wearing a black bearskin robe, with the head still attached, its maw gaping at them from atop the man's own head. He held a staff in one hand, a thick piece of oak, etched with many runes and sigils upon it that glowed with an eldritch light.

"A shaman," Sayana breathed, fear evident in her voice. Although he appreciated her respect for the newcomer, Aiden had a different reaction to the scene before him.

“Go! Now!” he cried, and began to run around the corner and up the slope as fast as he could, a burst of adrenaline spurring his tired limbs on to new efforts. Nellise grabbed Sayana with a free hand and began following, while Colt retrieved their dropped weapons and did the same. Aiden had been running for only a few seconds, though, when he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

A surge of pain flashed through his body, and gasping, he dropped to the ground, his heart fluttering in his chest. The smell of burnt hair permeated the air, and looking back, he could see that the rest of his companions were on the ground as well. Looking across at the shaman, Aiden could see sparks and flashes of electricity arcing from the end of the staff, and he knew then what had hit them.

“Get that shaman, or we're going to die here,” he said, his voice trembling as he tried to recover from the stroke of lightning they had been hit with. Pacian was the quickest to react, drawing two knives from his boots and throwing them at the shaman, only to watch in disbelief as they bounced off his skin, as if they had struck some sort of barrier. Colt went for his longbow, while Sayana stepped forward and brought her hands together, sending a burst of deafening sound at the old man and his guards.

The warriors around him clutched at their ears, weapons falling from their hands as they did so, and the shaman himself grimaced at the sound, but managed to hold himself together. He thrust his staff at the heavens, which responded by sending another crackling bolt of lightning down upon Aiden and his companions, who were thrown back into the snow once more.

Aiden lay there for several long seconds, twitching involuntarily and feeling like he'd just been run over by a herd of cattle. But their lives, and the lives of many people in the nearby towns depended on them getting back on their feet, so the novice warrior gritted his teeth and pulled himself up once more.

When he'd finally managed to stand up, he saw a dozen savage warriors rushing towards them once more, while the old man stood and watched. At that moment, Aiden realised the futility of their situation and understood that he and the others had pushed their luck too far this time; they weren't going to make it out of there alive. Their internal strife and bickering, combined with the dangerous situation had proved their undoing, and there would be no second chance.

He parried the first attack with his force shield and countered with his blade, slicing and chopping with all of his remaining strength. Nellise was beside him, whispering a prayer as she deflected an attack from one of the warriors, and causing her mace to glow with light. She countered the savage's attacks by bringing her blessed weapon down upon his head, a mild impact that caused a flash of light to blast the man as he was smote with her righteous fury.

The melee was furious, and though Aiden and the others were injured and weary from their travels, they gave as good as they got, striking down one Akoran warrior after another, mostly from Colt's massive blade, but also from Sayana, her dwarf-crafted axe splitting the warrior's shields with ease, and severing limbs at every opportunity. The big ranger was sporting many wounds, but he shrugged them off and kept fighting, knowing that to fall was to die.

Nellise was fighting as well as he'd seen anyone swing a sword, despite her earlier protests that she hadn't really been trained for this. Her blessed mace was breaking arms

and crushing limbs, and for a moment, Aiden thought they might even outlast their enemies, until he saw another wave of them ready to step in afterwards.

He hadn't seen Pacian in amongst the fight at all, but then, he'd started to lose track of all his friends, consumed as he was by his own struggle to stay alive. Although he'd had some experience at fighting, he was hardly an expert, and was struck over and over as his reflexes began to slow from exhaustion.

Finally, one heavy blow to his chest staggered him backwards, and time seemed to slow as he struggled to regain his footing. The last thing he remembered seeing was Nellise looking at him in despair, right before a throwing axe hurtled into his field of view, going straight for his eyes, and then everything went black.

Chapter Twenty Four

The darkness was replaced with the near-blinding light of midday, causing Aiden to squint against the sudden brightness. The young man crouched on a snowy plateau that seemed very familiar, although he couldn't place exactly where. His boots crunched over the snow as he took a few tentative steps, looking down upon a scene from his worst nightmares.

He stood amidst a great battle, surrounded by armoured men wearing the gold dragon tabard of the Kingdom clashing against hooded and robed warriors, with signs of steel armour hidden underneath their garb. The fallen from both sides of the battle littered the landscape, and the ringing of steel and the cries of the combatants threatened to overwhelm Aiden's shocked senses.

One of the Kingdom soldiers suddenly bumped into him, giving him a dirty look as he yelled in Aiden's face to get back on the line, or be tried for cowardice. Gaping with surprise, Aiden looked down at his body, wondering what had happened, when he noticed he was wearing the armour and uniform of an Aielund soldier. His mind raced, trying to remember how he had come to be in the middle of this fight, rubbing his head trying to figure out why it hurt so much.

The black-robed assailants, as if responding to an order, disengaged from the fight and pulled back down the road to Aiden's left. They quickly disappeared below the horizon, apparently down the side of this mountainous terrain to regroup. Some of the defenders gave a weak cheer, but most of them appeared to be steeling themselves for something else, something... *worse*. Aiden knew what was coming, but he didn't know *how* he knew, and he staggered about as if in a dream.

There was a large fort to his right, with stone walls fifteen feet high that stretched across the field behind the defenders. These walls were lined with archers as well as large siege engines that were loaded with massive bolts of wood and steel. One man in particular stood out among the others, dressed in shining armour and appeared to be in command of the Kingdom forces. He pointed across the field to where the attackers had fled, and as if on queue, the ground started to shake from heavy footsteps. Aiden felt every tremor of the ground, and could practically smell the fear of the soldiers around him.

The shaking of the ground grew more intense until the head of some armoured creature appeared, revealing more of its body as it closed the distance. It was easily over twelve feet in height, with shoulders eight feet across and completely encased in ornate

armour. It gleamed with the appearance of burnished steel, and the face etched onto the front of the helmet was forged into an expression of haughty superiority – as if those it was about to crush were beneath its notice.

The defenders held their swords and pikes nervously, and it appeared that their morale was about to break when a rallying cry came from one of their number - a huge man nearly seven feet tall, dressed in black armour topped with a great horned helm leaped to the front, bellowing out a challenge to the monsters that approached.

Unafraid of the approaching monster that loomed over him, the warrior swung his weapon and sheared off one of its legs as if the axe had cut through paper. The deafening sound of tortured metal echoing over the field and the great armoured foe, unsupported, crashed to the ground, where the mighty axe wielding warrior swept its head off in one stroke. Aiden was grimly pleased to see one of these monstrosities fall, but knew it was a futile effort – the outcome of this battle was inevitable.

With the fall of the first of these behemoths, the rest of the defenders rallied behind the warrior, calling out their battle cries as he charged into the fray. The black-armoured warrior was the only one that was truly effective against these fearsome opponents, however, and the other men could only delay the massive armoured creatures at the cost of their lives. Yet they did so, without question or complaint.

After a few minutes of untold bloodshed, only the black warrior remained to defend the castle, while Aiden stumbled backwards, sure that this was some kind of nightmare, but unable to wake up. Then the final opponent came over the rise, with its glowing blade ready to strike down the black warrior, and the two of them clashed, as Aiden had seen countless times before. He suddenly remembered where he had seen this, and he was right, it *was* a dream, but he still couldn't understand why it felt so real.

A shadow grew over the battlefield as something immense obscured the sun. Aiden squinted against the light to see what was happening, and was staggered by the appearance of an immense gold dragon, descending onto the battlefield. Its fine scales gleamed in the cold light, the majestic creature both immensely beautiful and terrifying beyond measure.

Then, as expected, the dragon turned its great head to look directly at Aiden. The young man froze, his eyes locked with that of the dragon, certain that he was going to be its next meal. He could feel his heart beat slowly within his chest as time passed slowly on the brink of his own death. The moment passed, however, and the great beast turned its attention to the combatants before it. Suddenly, there was a white flash, and a blast of wind sucked Aiden off his feet, causing him to fall forward and crash into the ground.

A stillness came over the field before him as Aiden slowly looked up, almost reluctantly, to see a massive hole carved out of the ground, easily a hundred feet across and just as deep. It was almost a perfect hemisphere, and even went inside the bailey of the castle itself, its gate and part of its walls cleanly sheared off where the hemisphere met them.

Aiden slowly stood, looking at the devastation before him, and felt... at peace. It was an odd feeling, considering what he had just witnessed, but there it was, regardless. The scene around him began to fade, becoming dim, and kind of... purple. Then it was all swept away in a swirling sea of blue and violet light, a sight that seemed flat and almost featureless, yet seemed to stretch on to infinity at the same time.

He could no longer see his body in the dimness, and felt as though he were floating in the sea, but with no need to breathe, he simply drifted with the flow, pushed about by the eddies and currents of the great ocean of colours. After an interminable amount of time, a form began to take shape from the formlessness of this place – a piece of rocky ground, beneath what he could now see were his booted feet.

Aiden touched down lightly upon the surface, and watched as the fog of violet and blue slowly receded before him, to reveal an immense creature, crouched upon what appeared to be an island of solid ground in amongst the mist.

The creature turned slowly, and Aiden could see it was the dragon from his nightmare, manifest before him in all its terrifying size. But there were subtle differences to his vision; the great wings were wasted away to mere skeletal frames, aged and worn skin stretched across them. The golden scales adorning its hide were lacklustre, and most of all, the eye that was now looking down at Aiden from the great head was bleary, and dull. The young man, confused as he was, felt no fear of this creature, and instead was filled with a sense of pity.

Welcome, Aiden, a powerful voice intoned, although the mouth of the dragon had not moved.

“Where...*what* is this place?” Aiden replied, his voice small in the vast emptiness around him.

You are standing on a small pocket of reality, amidst the Aether, a dimension adjacent to what you know of as Aeos, your world. Do not be alarmed, you are quite safe.

“How can you talk without moving your mouth?”

Dragon jaws are not capable of reproducing mortal speech patterns, the dragon replied patiently. *I am communicating directly with your mind.*

“I see,” Aiden said timidly, struggling to comprehend everything that was happening. He took a few steps, noting that the great eye of the dragon, only yards away, followed his every move. The dragon's bulk took up most of the space on the small pocket of land, but there was a structure of some sort behind it. Peering closer, Aiden could see that it was a castle gate, and part of a stone wall, with crumbling edges that stopped just short of the edge of the ground. Chains were lashed across the front of the gate, which appeared to be locked tight.

Do not go too close to the edge, the dragon advised. *It was quite an effort to catch you in the first place, and I do not wish to expend such energy, should you again fall into the Aether.*

“Is that a castle I see behind you?” Aiden asked, trying to put all the pieces of this puzzle together in his mind.

Yes, I brought it with me, the dragon said cryptically. *Pay no heed to such things for now, your needs are more pressing. What is the last thing you remember?*

“I... was on a battlefield, watching great iron monsters attacking Aielund soldiers at the battle of Fort Highmarch,” Aiden breathed, his memory distant and difficult to fathom. “But I have dreamt of that over and over for years, and never before has this happened.” He looked at the dragon, its expression cryptic and its eye locked upon him, but no answer was forthcoming.

“I recall Sayana saying something to me... something about it not being a dream,” Aiden mused aloud, his memories slowly clearing. “In the... vision... she screamed when

you looked at her. Why? She had done nothing to you-". He was cut off by the dragon's voice, and was startled to see the reaction by the massive creature.

They are not your dreams, Aiden. They are mine, it informed him, its voice betraying a powerful emotion within his mind. *She was not invited*. Aiden looked at the dragon before him, incredulous.

"If they're your dreams, how is it that I see them every few nights? What is going on?"

I sleep infrequently, as my duty makes great demands of me, the dragon explained, *but every few days, I walk in my memories of that last battle, and wonder with regret whether or not I made the right choices. You dream of it because you were there, Aiden. We are connected*.

"How?" Aiden asked simply, for no other words came to mind. The dragon shifted its weight slightly, and brought forth one of its great claws, clenched tight around an object. Aiden took an involuntary step backwards, but the claw stopped before it reached him. It slowly opened, and within its palm was a glass orb, ridiculously small for the dragon to be holding, but about the right size for a human.

You recognise this, the dragon stated, observing Aiden's reaction. *It is the result of unequalled artifice, beyond the talents of even my own kind. They came in pairs, and allowed for communication across any distance, even across time*.

"The glass sphere," Aiden breathed, realising that the dragon was saying that the one he had held in that cave years ago was the partner to the sphere being held before him now. He unconsciously reached for the shard hanging around his neck, but to his surprise, it wasn't there.

Your possessions remain with your body, the dragon remarked, confusing Aiden more than he already was.

"But... I'm standing right here," he insisted, looking down at his body, noting that it was actually there.

You are seeing what I want you to see, the dragon explained. *Your real body is not here, unfortunately, as it was too damaged to hold your mind any longer*. Aiden thought about that for a moment, and then came to a shocking realisation.

"Do you mean that I'm dead?" he stated dumbly.

After a fashion, yes. An unfortunate accident separated you from your body. You were wise to keep the shard of the scrying device with you, Aiden, for it was through that I was able to witness your demise, and retrieve your energy from the Aether.

"You've been watching me?" Aiden inquired.

Infrequently for the past few weeks, I assure you. Prolonged interplanar observation would cause severe side effects.

"Such as?"

The weather would be affected, for one. It is complicated to explain, but-

"It's been raining for weeks," Aiden interrupted. "A druid was pestering me recently, thinking I was the cause. Apparently, I am, though in reality, it's your fault."

I seem to have made a miscalculation of the relativistic pressures involved, the dragon replied, drawing a blank look from Aiden. *The effects of my probing appear to be far more pronounced than I accounted for. I shall cease such activities immediately, though I must warn you, if I cannot see you, I may not be able to save your life next time*.

“So... I'm not really dead after all?” the young man asked, a sliver of hope in his voice.

No, I caught you on your way past. I shall return you to your body. It is a shame that you broke the sphere, Aiden; had it remained intact, we could accomplish great things together. As it happens, though, you will have to do it alone.

“Do what alone?” Aiden hedged, not liking the direction this conversation was heading, even as he was relieved to know that he was going to be all right.

You have many questions, Aiden, but your time here is nearly up. If you stay any longer, I fear your companions may not survive. Suffice to say, I serve a purpose here, and my time too, is running short. You will travel to Fairloch, and find a man named Desmond. Speak the name 'Salinder' to him, for he will have means of contacting me again.

“Wait, what do you mean-” Aiden began to say, but the scene before him was fading even as he spoke. His vision began to swim, he felt fainter as each second passed as the dragon before him and the ground upon which it lay, faded into the violet storm around him, until both vanished altogether. He felt a sensation of falling a great distance, though there was no wind here to give that impression, and then the ground began to coalesce around him once more, but this time, it was much darker, and far, far colder.

* * *

Aiden suddenly jolted awake, a throbbing pain in his head and a burning sensation upon his chest. He reached a hand up quickly and pulled away the shard that hung around his neck, for it was glowing red hot, leaving a small burn mark upon his skin. Glancing around, he was dismayed to see that it was completely dark, and only distant camp fires provided any sort of illumination. His mind was still addled from his... *experience*, but the memory of his demise was coming back to him faster than he would have liked.

Reaching a hand up to his head reflexively, Aiden felt the place where he had been struck by the axe, only to find the weapon had been removed, and the wound closed. His momentary relief was immediately overwhelmed by the realisation that he was lying down amidst a pile of broken and bloodied corpses, half-covered by the snow, and his friends were in trouble somewhere nearby. The dragon had commented that they didn't have a lot of time left, but hadn't told Aiden why, or what had happened to them.

He felt a strong measure of guilt and responsibility at their defeat, for even though they had been bickering and arguing with each other since their troubled journey to Ferrumgaard, it was Aiden who had been instrumental in bringing them along on this fateful journey. Perhaps he would still have fallen without them, but that was immaterial – they had likely been captured, and God knew what was happening to them now.

Fully understanding the dire nature of his situation, Aiden slowly began to rise, cautious of any Akoran warriors nearby whom might spot his movement, but he need not have worried – he had fallen around the corner from the cave entrance, in near total darkness, roughly eighty yards from the nearest camp fire. The young man crept along the side of the hill towards the cave, in the hopes that the guards might be busy elsewhere.

He was out of luck – the entrance was still guarded, as evidenced by the two huge warriors standing watch, but the torches were burning low. The young adventurer

wrapped his arms around his body for warmth, noticing that the temperature had plummeted dramatically after the sun had gone down. His winter cloak was keeping some of the chill at bay, but his chain shirt was like a slab of ice upon his chest. Still, it was the least of his concerns at the moment – he had to figure a way into the cave, for he was certain that his friends were in there, somewhere, as was the man responsible for their defeat.

Aiden felt around blindly, making sure his gear was still intact. The chain shirt he despised so much was rent in several places, but it would still serve as reasonable protection for the time being. His sword was gone however, which didn't come as a surprise, considering its obvious quality and value, making Aiden's task that much more difficult.

Reaching into his backpack, he frantically fished around for anything that might come in useful and pulled out a pair of lenses, fixed into a leather strap. He remembered what they were a few seconds later, the memory of the night he had gone through the treasures of Ferrumgaard clouded over by other more interesting events that had occurred later that evening with Sayana.

A feeling of dread overcame Aiden as he realised that they had captured her too, but her fate may well prove to be far worse than the others. He quickly pulled the lenses over his head and fixed the strap behind his head, and was instantly able to see across the camp that lay before him, previously obscured by darkness. His vision had no colour in it, but he was clearly able to make out the warriors standing around their camp fires in the distance, and the brightness of the sky above.

The first problem solved, Aiden then rummaged around and pulled out the heavy sceptre that he'd been lugging around in his pack this whole time. If he'd remembered it, he might have chosen to leave it behind to save weight, but now it might just turn out to be the thing that saved them, *if* he could make it work. And even if he did, it wasn't going to allow him to slay an entire army by himself... no, this was a weapon of last resort. He had to find a way to sneak into the cave and rescue the others, and only then would they have a chance at making it out of this mess alive.

Setting aside the sceptre, he retrieved the scroll cases from further down and opened one up. The lenses that allowed him to see in the dark didn't provide illumination, as such, so he couldn't make out what was written upon the scrolls. For that, he needed light, and the only light available was the torches being used by the Akorans, who wouldn't be interested in sharing with him.

Aiden stowed the scroll cases in his pack once more, and secured it to his back, then felt around under the snow for a stone that he could throw as a diversion. If he could make enough noise someplace nearby, the guards might leave their post to investigate, allowing the young man time to slip inside. His hand stumbled upon something solid, and he retrieved what appeared to be the handle of a throwing axe. Although the lenses didn't provide him with colour, Aiden could make out the dark stain of blood on the blade of the thing as he held it before him; *his* blood.

His momentary disgust was replaced with a sense of poetic justice as he glanced around, looking for the right place to throw the thing. The other side of the cave entrance, a few yards out into the night, would be adequate to distract the guards, so he readied himself to move quickly and drew the axe back, over his shoulder, and then threw it into the night as hard as he could.

Far from an expert on such weapons, his throw did not need to be accurate to achieve its aim; it landed with a 'thud' off in the distance, having the good fortune to connect with something solid. The guards at the entrance immediately looked off in that direction and took a few steps out into the darkness to scan around for any sign of what might have made that sound.

Aiden quickly crept forward, keeping tightly to the side of the hill on his left, almost certain that the guards could hear his heart hammering loudly as he moved as fast as he dared, within mere yards of the nearest warrior. It was roughly ten yards across to the cave entrance, and although it only took moments, it felt like an eternity.

The gusting wind must have helped cover any noise he had made, for he made it inside the cave without being noticed, a feat that would have impressed even Pacian. Aiden pushed aside the momentary flash of concern for his captured friend, and made a silent vow to free them or die in the attempt.

The cave extended for perhaps ten yards beyond the entrance before branching to the left and right, and there was no further sign of Akoran warriors yet, something Aiden was silently grateful for. If he was going to pull this off, he had to have a few minutes to examine those scrolls, and hope they would be useful to this situation, and not just a collection of oddities that the ancient, deceased wizard had been collecting.

Torches were placed every few yards along the length of the tunnel, making the place seem as bright as day to his enhanced sight. He crept along to the junction ahead, and after checking for signs of life, chose the right passage, hoping it was not the main thoroughfare through the complex. Aiden crouched down near to one of the torches and wrapped his arms around his chest, desperately trying to keep warm. Perhaps it was the result of the terrible cold outside, or an after effect of the near-death experience he'd gone through, but he could barely stop shaking.

Trying to put thoughts of the cold aside for the moment, he retrieved the scroll cases from his pack once more and unfurled the first one as delicately as he could, being careful not to tear the ancient parchment. Scrolls of this nature were a convenience, as far as he could tell, for they were created by capturing an incantation just before it was to be completed, and storing it to be unleashed at a later time.

The runes inscribed upon the first scroll seemed to indicate that this incantation invoked the earth element, and infused it into the caster, the idea being to increase one's strength. That seemed promising, so he put it aside and looked at the next one, hoping to collate a number of useful effects he could use to survive the next twenty minutes.

After scanning quickly through the scrolls, he was trembling even more, but from excitement instead of the cold. That ancient wizard had accumulated an assortment of incantations that would transform Aiden into a devastating combatant, for about fifteen minutes... if they worked. The problem he faced was that he was not an expert at this sort of thing – although he was able to read the cryptic language that guarded the secrets of wizards and warlocks, one tiny slip-up could have disastrous results.

Aiden glanced up and down the tunnel, thankful that it was still devoid of any life other than himself. Given the poor conditions, he surmised that only the unluckiest men were pressed into guard duty at night, while the rest of them slept within the warmer confines of the cave. With no further distractions, Aiden took a deep breath and read out the first incantation, the words sounding strange and exotic, but infused with an essence that was difficult to describe, let alone understand.

As he reached the end of the scroll, the inscribed runes vanished from the parchment, which disintegrated in his hands, falling into a pile of smouldering ash at his feet, a sign that the energy infusing the script had been correctly applied. *So far, so good*, he thought to himself, and set about reading the next one. He was halfway through reading out the arcane script when the parchment itself ignited with a flash, blinding him momentarily from the intensity of light, and causing an eruption of flame around him.

Aiden dropped the fiery parchment, and scrambled back against the wall of the cave, trying to distance himself from the unleashed energies. He had definitely mispronounced something in that convoluted incantation, and may well have given away his position to the Akorans as a result. Acting quickly, he fetched out another scroll, one that was supposed to provide some sort of protection, and read it as fast as he dare.

The runes vanished and the parchment turned to dust, a good sign that he had been successful. A few seconds later, a heavily built Akoran warrior came around the corner at the far end of the tunnel, looking around carefully as if expecting to find something unusual.

He sat still, crouched down against the wall, the enchanted sceptre in his hand, ready to strike should he need to. The guard prowled along the tunnel for half a minute, then, astonishingly, turned around and went back the way he had come from, apparently unaware of Aiden's presence. He looked down at his body, trying to see why he'd gone undetected, when he noticed that he couldn't actually *see* his body anymore. He lifted his left hand in front of his face, but it was completely transparent.

Now things were getting interesting – he dropped two more scrolls onto the ground before him, hoping that they would become visible, otherwise this was going to be a very short rescue mission. The scrolls appeared on the ground the moment he let go of them, allowing him to read the complex incantations and successfully evoke the energies within, augmenting Aiden's combat prowess even more with protective measures.

Finally, he gave the sceptre a closer look, hoping that he'd be able to translate the runes etched upon its surface. Fortunately, he'd encountered most of the arcane markings in his research over the years, and it proved to be an easy study. Much like the glove he had found in the mountains earlier, the sceptre was activated by a single command word, at which point *interesting things* would happen.

Gathering up his courage, Aiden moved along the tunnel in the direction the other guard had come from, and delved deeper into the cave complex. He had a distinct advantage now, for while they couldn't see him, Aiden was more than able to see everything around him as clear as day. As he moved, he couldn't help but notice that the cave did not seem natural. He'd seen more than his share of caves recently, and this one seemed more like a purpose-built underground complex, something far beyond the skills of the tribal mountain folk.

Storing this information away for later, he kept on moving down through the tunnel that was becoming thick with smoke and the smell of roasted meat the further along he walked. Turning a corner, he spied more than a handful of warriors in a large alcove, lounging around open fires in stone pits, cutting chunks of meat from a deer carcass that was hanging from a spit over the flames.

In the distance, echoing along the stone tunnel, came the sound of a screaming woman that put Aiden's neck hairs on end. Fearing the worst, he plunged past the small camp, which remained oblivious to his passage, and turned the corner, running headlong

into someone that had been crouched there. Aiden quickly recovered, picking himself up and looking down at the figure whose countenance was immediately familiar to him.

Pacian, confused and bedraggled, quickly regained his footing. He looked around in near-panic, trying to figure out what had just hit him, but because Aiden was still invisible, he couldn't figure out what was going on. His armour was torn in places where he hadn't been quick enough to dodge during the fight, and he'd discarded his white cloak so he could disappear into the darkness more effectively, though he had to be freezing cold as a result.

"Pacian, relax, it's me, Aiden," he whispered harshly, chafing at the delay. The blond rogue turned white and steadied himself against the wall.

"No, it can't be," he breathed, "I saw you die. Wait, are you a... ghost? Are you haunting me?"

"Don't be ridiculous, I'm just invisible," Aiden muttered impatiently. "Look, it's a long story; I'll have to tell you later... if there *is* a later. Where are the others?"

"Invisible? How the hell...? Never mind. Look, the rest are being held about thirty yards further down the passage," Pacian replied, fear and exhaustion evident in his voice. "I tried to break them out, but there are too many of them, Aiden." His voice cracked as he spoke, and it sounded like he was at the end of his rope.

"It's going to be all right, Pace," Aiden said in a measured tone, trying to reassure his friend – he needed his help to break out the others, and he was no good to anyone in this condition. "I'm moving down there now; follow me carefully, and when you see my signal, attack, got it?"

"What signal?"

"You'll know it when you see it," Aiden grimly assured him, invisibly tightening his grip on the enchanted sceptre. If he was correct, it was going to make quite an impression on their hosts. Another scream echoed along the tunnel, prompting the boys into immediate action. Aiden took the lead, hoping that Pacian could figure out where he was and avoid accidentally stabbing him in the back.

The passage opened out into a larger chamber, with half a dozen torches positioned around the walls, and two small cells enclosed by barred metal gates on either side. There were five warriors standing around outside one of the cells, looking inside as if watching. The cries of despair were coming from within, and Aiden's fear was suddenly replaced by blind rage.

Raising up the sceptre, he aimed for what he felt was the nearest savage, and spoke the command word. A brilliant beam of yellow light sprung forth, as bright as the sun, striking the warrior's back and cutting straight through to the other side, lighting up the chamber from the glare. The power of the weapon instantly dispelled Aiden's invisibility, but he had no further need of it anyway. The scorched and blackened body of the Akoran barbarian dropped to the ground, and the rest of his comrades stood there gaping at the grisly sight as Aiden spoke again, this time moving his arm in an arc to the left, catching all of them with the beam.

Their furs caught fire, and their howls could be heard echoing down the tunnel. One of them dropped to the ground from the devastating attack, but the rest recovered from their momentary shock, drew their axes, and charged at Aiden despite their horrible injuries. As a people, the Akorans lacked subtlety, particularly true in their tactics during

a fight, so this bold move did not come as a surprise to the novice warrior. Aiden summoned his force shield and stood ready to meet their attack.

The first warrior's axe met the shield and sent sparks dancing through the air, while the other two moved to either side and tried to flank Aiden instead, chopping at him as they did so. Both strikes would have impacted, but for the protective spectral armour he had cast upon himself, which blocked both attacks with a brief flash of blue light. Seizing the initiative, Aiden stepped to his right and brought the sceptre down upon the exposed right arm of a warrior with a satisfying 'crack'.

Aiden didn't give him time to recover, however, and smashed him across the face with tremendous force, shattering his cheekbone and dropping him to the ground. With the strengthening power of the earth incantation surging through his body, Aiden felt many times stronger than he normally would, and found his opponents to be simply outclassed.

The first savage to attack him bellowed as he struck again and again at Aiden's shield, unable to break past the practically invisible object, leaving his flanks vulnerable to attack from Pacian's daggers. The barbarian staggered backwards as he was stabbed repeatedly in the kidneys, giving Aiden a chance to cave in his skull with the enchanted sceptre.

Pacian disappeared into the shadows once more, dancing out of the way of any retaliatory strike from the remaining warrior, while Aiden discarded finesse, and simply bashed his way through any defence the outmatched barbarian could produce. Within seconds, he was on the ground, bleeding from numerous heavy injuries and unlikely to rise again.

Looking into the cell, Aiden could see two huge Akorans looking out at the scene with consternation, but once their eyes met, the bloodlust rose in their eyes and the first of them quickly unlocked the cell door, which swung outwards, to allow them to join the fight. When the two warriors stepped out, one of them tossed aside a woman, naked and bloodied, to the opposite wall. Aiden saw that it was Nellise, and he couldn't help but hurl a vile insult at the vicious thugs who had had their way with her.

"I take your woman, yes?" the largest of the two warriors said in his broken dialect, answering Aiden's challenge. "She scream like little girl, for very long time. Maybe I give her something you never did?" Aiden settled into a cold rage, and held his ground as the savage stepped out of the cell and drew a fine sword – Aiden's sword – and with a grin, he and his comrade - wielding Sayana's mithral axe - moved to flank the young adventurer.

He kept his eyes locked on the big man, making sure he had the savage's full attention, and when he was fully clear of the cell, Pacian crept up from behind and with one quick move, slit the barbarian's throat, then cracked his skull with the pommel of his other dagger. The giant staggered about, gasping for breath, while the other warrior turned and took a swing at the cunning rogue.

Pacian was too quick for him though, dodging the clumsy strike easily, but it gave Aiden a chance to smash him on the back of his head, twice, while the big savage slowly choked to death on his own blood, a few yards away.

With the sounds of their battle echoing through the tunnels, it was inevitable others would come, and they arrived only moments after the big man stopped moving. The newcomers had no idea what they were facing, however, and when half a dozen of them

charged into the room, they were met with the blazing light of Aiden's sceptre, cutting through their feeble armour, and digging into flesh and bone alike.

Three of them fell to the ground, clutching at their chests, while the others struggled to recover from the devastating strike. Aiden, however, did not hesitate, quickly snatching up his sword out of the hands of the fallen savage and continuing forward to slice and chop at the warriors before him. One of them managed to raise his wooden shield in time to stop the sword, but Aiden struck it with such force that it shattered, sending a cloud of shards and splinters into the face of the warrior who screamed in pain, not just from being cut by the wood, but from the broken arm he must have suffered from Aiden's mighty blow.

Sensing that time was of the essence, Aiden spoke the command word again and finished off the remaining warriors with another deadly blast from his sceptre, then fell back to the cells to evaluate the situation. A naked Nellise was crawling across the floor towards the remnants of her white robe, the poor young cleric trembling and sobbing uncontrollably. On the other side of the cell was the prone form of Sayana, with most of her leather armour ripped from her body as well, but with no other wounds visible, which was something to be thankful for in this mess.

Pacian dashed to Nellise's side, gently swatting aside her feeble attempts to push him away reflexively, and held her tight as her body was wracked by sobbing. In the cell next door sat Colt, stripped to the waist and tied to a wooden chair, looking like he had been beaten within an inch of his life. Aiden checked Sayana's pulse, making sure she was still alive, relieved that she groaned and stirred at his touch, then he took off his heavy winter cloak and wrapped it around her shoulders before moving to free Colt from his imprisonment.

"I don't know how you survived that blow, Aiden," he struggled to say through his broken and bloodied lips, "but you're the most beautiful sight I've ever seen."

"I wish I could say the same about you," Aiden replied distantly, raising up the sceptre, and bringing it down on the rusty lock of the big ranger's cell door. The ancient metal gave way instantly, and the door swung lazily open. He quickly stepped inside and slashed the ropes binding Colt to the chair, allowing the ranger to slump forward, wiping the blood from his face with the back of his hand.

Shrugging off Aiden's attempts to help him up, the big man managed to stand, then staggered outside and kicked one of the barbarians who had been in the cell with Nellise, right in the crotch. Colt seemed to be in reasonable shape, all things considered, so Aiden quickly went back to Sayana's side, and gently helped her sit up and lean back against the wall.

"She tried to burn them when they started to rip her armour off," Colt grunted, leaning up against the cell door as he wiped blood from his face. "Then they saw the tattoos all over her body, and said that word that means 'witch' in Akoran, and knocked her out. Wish they'd done the same to Nellise, to be honest. That's not something anyone should have to live through."

Pacian was holding the battered young woman with both arms as she cried, clutching at the holy symbol of the Church of Aielund, the halo-ringed sword of Kylaris, in amongst the torn robes on the floor. She looked at Aiden and suddenly held her breath, thunderstruck at his apparent return from the dead, but said nothing. He wanted nothing

more than to get them all out of here safely and never return, but there was only one way they were going to make it out alive – the only way out, was *through*.

“What are you going to do?” Pacian asked as Aiden rose ominously to his feet.

“End this,” he replied coldly. Aiden knew the enchantments he had invoked had a limited duration, and that time was rapidly running out. At that moment, he felt like he could take on an army, and he needed to make the most of it by cutting the head off this monster. Seeing what these men were capable of only justified this fight to him even more, for the thought of an army of these savages pillaging and raping their way through Bracksfordshire made Aiden's blood boil.

“Do you know how to get to the main chamber?” Aiden asked Pacian, to which the blond rogue shook his head.

“I know where to go,” Sayana whispered, slowly rising from the floor, grabbing some tattered cloth off the floor to tie around her chest. “I will take you there, so that I may strike down Erag myself.”

“You're in no condition to go anywhere,” Aiden stated, knowing how this argument was going to end, and reluctant to spend any time on it.

“I too, will go,” said a voice from a nearby cell, across the way. Aiden turned and saw a bald, middle-aged man behind the bars, bare-chested and with a heavy build, but a surprisingly regal demeanour, despite the rags he wore around his midriff.

“So, I take it you are Morik Far-Eagle, the deposed chief of this band of savages?” Aiden asked, the insult intentional.

“I am, though I take no pride in their actions this day,” Morik replied sadly. “I wish to see Erag dead as much as you, though I doubt you believe me at this moment.” Aiden casually glanced behind him at the rest of his companions, conceding the point. “Erag is not the real problem, however,” Morik continued, “to free my people, you must eliminate our elder shaman, Tald Black-Tiger.”

“We met him,” Colt grunted.

“Then you understand his power,” Morik remarked. “It extends beyond his command of the elements, for he carries great influence amongst my people. His word is law in this land, and for reasons unknown to me, he changed his favour to Erag, allowing him to start a war if he so chooses. Perhaps he senses the vulnerability of your lands at this time, yes? If we work together, we can eliminate them both, and I will reclaim my place as Chief. I will then disperse the war band, and we will no longer be a threat to your people.”

“How do I know I can trust you?” Aiden asked suspiciously, starting to become impressed by this man.

“I give you my word of honour,” Morik said with conviction, looking Aiden straight in the eye as he did so. “If you know anything of the Akora, you know that we never break our word.”

“Good enough for me,” Aiden agreed after only a moment's hesitation, smashing open the lock with ease and allowing Morik to walk free. From the way he moved, he was clearly an experienced warrior, and carried numerous scars on his body to prove it. He reached down and picked up a short battle spear from one of his fallen people, then looked over at the pile of bodies around them with something akin to regret in his eyes. In the cell next to him, Aiden saw much of their equipment piled up in the corner, topped off with Colt's longbow and greatsword.

“My new friend and I are going to deal with Erag, and this ‘Tald’ chap,” Aiden said to them, smashing the lock on the other cell. “Colt, you’re in no condition to fight, so grab your gear and stay here with Nellise and the others.”

“Oh, I’m coming too,” Pacian growled, speaking more to Nellise than anyone else. “I swear to you, I’m going to kill the rest of this scum and get you out of here, do you understand?” Nellise didn’t react for she was still in shock, and the look on Pacian’s face was heartbreaking. Pace gently set her aside and left the confines of the cell, daggers gripped tightly in his hands. “I owe this bastard a red hot dagger in his groin, and nothing’s going to stop me, so don’t even bother arguing, Aiden.”

“That goes for me also,” Sayana added, picking up her axe and staggering out to stand next to Pacian. “Except for the groin thing. If you think you can take on that shaman by yourselves, you’re mad.”

“Yes, I rather think I am,” Aiden muttered softly, causing her to look at him with consternation. “Fine, let’s get on with this before more warriors come. Which way do we go?”

“There are stairs down, beyond the next room,” Morik replied courteously. “But there is a garrison of guards that keep the lower floor secure.”

“Let me deal with them,” Aiden said, his voice heavy with determination and purpose. “Are there any other guards on this level?”

“Most of the warriors in the caves stay downstairs,” Morik warned. “The rest sleep in their tents out in the camp. If they have not come by now, then they cannot hear the noise you have been making.”

“Colt, you should be able to manage without us for a little while. If you get in trouble, grab Nellise and fall back down the stairs, you’ll run into us eventually.”

“Don’t worry about us, I’ll die before I let anyone else touch Nel,” Colt growled, limping into her cell with his longbow, while the young cleric huddled into a fetal position and rocked slowly back and forth. Aiden nodded in reply, and then started walking along the passageway, arriving at the stairwell down after only a few seconds. With the others right behind him, he casually descended, pulling out one of his two remaining scrolls from the scroll case as he went.

At the bottom of the stairwell was a large, open area, with several passages leading off from it. Morik pointed at the correct path to take, and they moved off in that direction, hearing the sounds of heavy, booted feet from up ahead after barely a minute of walking. Aiden had become used to the darkness they were walking in, since he could see almost as well as if it were broad daylight down there, but the others were stumbling along the corridor, struggling to see where they were going. The lights from up ahead helped, but unfortunately they were being carried by a horde of their enemies.

Once they reached the next large chamber, Aiden raised his arm to stop the others from proceeding, and then unfurled the scroll. The warriors turned at the sounds of their footsteps, and quickly readied their weapons. They never had the chance to use them, however.

Aiden began reading the scroll, and was just about to raise his other arm to point at the group when Sayana let out a cry of alarm. She was too late to stop him, however, and the incantation was completed a heartbeat later.

A massive ball of fire materialised in front of him and shot towards the assembled warriors. It detonated in the centre of their group, shaking the very foundations of the

tunnels and blasting Aiden and his companions off their feet with a wave of fire. The effect upon the barbarians, however, was far more pronounced, sending charred bodies crashing against the walls as the force of the blast shattered bones and ended lives.

Aiden picked himself up off the ground a few moments after the flames had subsided, and surveyed the effects of the ancient wizard's incantation with cold disdain before moving onwards with grim purpose.

Chapter Twenty Five

The others quickly regained their footing and pressed forward, for despite the destruction he had unleashed, the young man knew that there could be dozens more of them up ahead. Morik, slightly charred from the heat of the blast, pointed in the direction they should travel, and prompted Aiden to keep moving, carefully avoiding the blackened bodies of warriors formerly loyal to him scattered around the stone floor.

Glancing at Sayana, Aiden was momentarily concerned about her ability to keep up, but if her wounds were causing her any discomfort, she was hiding it well. Pacian, bloodied daggers at the ready, moved ahead of the group, certain that the Akorans were going to be lying in wait for them, and determined to avoid an ambush.

Aiden had his doubts – so far, they had been charged almost blindly, at every engagement, and he honestly didn't expect much in the way of tactical brilliance from such savages. The passage they travelled opened out into a chamber of some sort and was filled with an assortment of packages, wrapped in deerskin.

"What is all this?" Pacian asked when they had caught up with him. Morik didn't even take a closer look before answering.

"Dried rations, waterskins, spare axes, bandages... everything a warband needs to keep fighting in a long battle," he said. "Erag must want to reclaim the lands of our ancestors, for there are enough supplies here to feed a thousand warriors."

"We should destroy all of this!" Pacian hissed. "We'll see how well their invasion goes when their bellies are empty."

"If we destroy this food, then my people will starve before the thaw," Morik warned, a harsh edge to his voice. "They may choose to attack your town of Coldstream out of starvation, regardless of what I tell them when I become chief once more."

"We have our target already," Aiden decided, moving through the large piles of supplies. "Leave the food, it won't matter once their leadership is dead-".

The mound of deerskin packages next to him suddenly toppled over, knocking Aiden to the ground and half-burying him in dried deer meat. Before he could recover, a group of Akoran warriors burst out of their hiding places in amongst the supplies and set upon the small party. Aiden was the focus of one particularly large savage, wielding a mighty greataxe, five feet in length, which he brought down on the prone novice warrior in a massive overhead strike.

A flash of light from his spectral armour incantation illuminated the immediate area for a brief moment as it took the brunt of the blow, but there was so much force behind the swing it also cut through his chain shirt and into Aiden's shoulder. Without all of his protection, his arm would likely have been cleanly severed by the axe.

Gritting his teeth, Aiden managed to focus enough to strike back, swinging his sword at the warrior's legs. The barbarian obviously hadn't expected him to survive that blow,

and was unprepared for the riposte. With the power of a dead wizard's incantation of strength behind his sword arm, Aiden cleanly severed both of the warrior's legs off at the calves, his master-crafted blade cutting through the unarmoured flesh as would a knife through butter.

The screaming Akoran dropped to the ground, giving Aiden a chance to get back on his feet and into the fight. He ran his blade through the man's chest with cold satisfaction, and then took stock of the situation. There wasn't much light in the large chamber, a mere four torches illuminated the ferocious battle taking place, but Aiden was unaffected, and probably the only one that could see just how many they were facing.

No less than a dozen savage warriors had ambushed them, and only the narrow approaches afforded by the huge piles of stores in the chamber provided Aiden and his companions any chance of survival. Unfortunately, it also prevented him from using the powerful sceptre en masse, reducing this fight to a close-quarters brawl.

The Akorans fought without finesse, without fear. His adrenaline pumping, Aiden didn't feel any pain from his injury as he chopped and slashed at a savage, while trying to take advantage of the cluttered terrain. More often than not, his sword met the shield of his opponent, who seemed to recognise the uncanny strength behind each of Aiden's attacks, and kept his movements on the defensive. But after three rapid strikes on the wooden shield, it shattered – along with the bones in his arm - and left the man vulnerable to a swift blow to the chest.

Aiden was mobile enough to keep no more than one or two attacking him at once, but Morik fought in a similar manner to his people, standing his ground against four warriors at a time, relentlessly stabbing and chopping with the short spear, and a battle axe he had picked up from one of the fallen. His skill was formidable, and he was agile enough to stay out of reach of their weapons, dodging attacks as they came at him. More than once he wasn't quick enough, taking a slash to his bare chest or a stab to his arm, yet he hardly noticed.

In all the years he had known him, Aiden had never seen Pacian move so fast – the blond rogue was a man possessed, darting in and out of the supply piles to take random stabs at passing barbarians, who howled in rage at their inability to keep up with him. He didn't forget the rest of the group, either, taking advantage of the unguarded backs of those fighting with Morik, to slit throats and stab kidneys mercilessly.

Sayana was clearly still depleted from the battle out on the plain, for she evoked no fire magic in her battle, although her force shield shimmered in the air before her. She focused on staying alive, relying on sheer rage, and the unnatural sharpness of her mighty axe that dripped with the blood of her former people. Aiden made sure to block the passage to her position as best he could, relying on his spectral armour to completely absorb damage from the barbarians that pressed the attack.

Whether they were completely oblivious to their surroundings while under the effects of their battle-lust, or they had been ordered to fight to the death, the Akorans did not relent until every last one had been slain, and the stench of death permeated the enclosed space. Sayana and Pacian leaned against the nearest wall to recover their breath, the amount of energy they'd expended in that battle far above what they were used to. Aiden felt it too, but to a far lesser degree, no doubt due to his augmented strength. Morik was unperturbed, and immediately pressed on through the chamber, turning left at an adjoining corridor, clearly heading for a place he knew well.

“Morik, wait!” Aiden called as loudly as he dared, torn between protecting his friends and following the mighty warrior to make sure he didn't get himself killed. His decision was made moments later, when the sounds of further battle echoed from down the hallway Morik had taken. Cursing under his breath, Aiden moved as quickly as he could to support his new ally, for if he perished, the plan to bring peace to this region would surely fail.

He almost crashed straight into the back of Morik as he rounded the corner, for the man was being pushed back by three powerful adversaries. The passage was wide enough for two people to stand side by side, so Aiden took advantage of this to fight alongside the deposed chief, adding his sword to the mix. The barbarian's lack of tactical expertise continued to work against them, leaving gaps in their defences that Aiden and Morik were able to exploit.

The novice warrior stepped inside the reach of an opponent's greataxe and slashed along the inside of his arm, but it didn't stop the warrior from smashing the hilt into his face, staggering Aiden for a brief moment, even though the brunt of the blow was absorbed by his spectral armour. Fortunately he was able to recover before the savage could, and dealt a crippling slash to the man's chest.

By the time Aiden had finished off his opponent, Morik had ended the lives of the other two men, though he'd taken several severe wounds in the process.

“I will survive,” he grunted, noticing Aiden grimacing at the vicious cuts. “Erag will be just ahead on the right, and he will be ready for us, thanks to your loud entrance.”

“The loud ones are the best,” Aiden deadpanned, trying to downplay the seriousness of their situation. “Are there any other corridors that lead to his chambers from here?” Morik shook his head. “Perhaps we can force him out, and set up our own ambush,” Aiden muttered to himself. “Sy, are you there?” Sayana and Pacian had caught up, but were still catching their breaths.

“Do you feel up to blasting some fire in there?” Aiden asked, guessing that she probably wasn't.

“I can manage one more, and I'm saving it for Erag's face,” the wild girl stated, leaning against the wall to save her strength. This left Aiden to try and come up with another way to deal with the situation, but unfortunately, taking time to think about this gave the initiative to their enemies, something he came to understand a few moments later when the hair on the back of his neck stood upright.

“Take cover!” he shouted, crouching to leap aside as a stroke of lightning coursed through the charged air, hitting all four of them and knocking them to the floor, momentarily stunned. They didn't have time to recover before the terrifying visage of a giant man, his head obscured by a fearsome visored helm, roared a battle cry and leaped up before them, a six-foot long battle spear held in both hands, driving down towards Aiden's chest.

The young adventurer barely had the clarity of thought to bring his force shield across to block the attack, but he managed to do so just in time. The shield, however, was destroyed by the force of the impact, sending a shower of blue sparks into the air and leaving his spectral armour incantation to absorb the rest of the strike. Blue light illuminated the room as his armour flashed, mitigating the worst of the impact, and diverting the spear enough so that it struck near his collarbone, cutting through the remains of his chain shirt and piercing his flesh.

Aiden bellowed in shock, and rolled away as the spear was drawn back by this new assailant, giving him a moment to regain his footing. During this time, Morik had risen from the floor with a roar of rage, ignoring his wounds and stabbing at the armoured barbarian with all of his might. The warrior expertly deflected the assault with his spear, using both ends of it in the same fashion as a quarterstaff to confound and parry Morik's attacks.

The big warrior spat out some words in his native language, his voice sounding hollow from the inside of his helm, but the only word Aiden recognised was 'Morik', although he was fairly certain one of the other words was a vile epithet, leaving little doubt as to the nature of his speech. Morik replied in-between stabs with his short spear, the name 'Erag' being mentioned, and Aiden, still a little frazzled from the lightning bolt, suddenly realised who it was they were fighting. Combined with the might of the shaman, Tald, he knew they were in serious trouble.

He moved in on Erag's left flank to slash at the man, the battle too fast to risk using the sceptre, lest he strike Morik with the deadly ray. Aiden's sword connected, cutting off the left shoulder-plate of the barbarian leader's armour and tearing through chain armour and flesh. The young man was suddenly struck with a blow to the head, which seemed to come out of nowhere. He staggered backwards, only to be struck again by the sharp end of Erag's weapon, cutting him on his shoulder.

While trying to recover from the attack, Pacian, always looking to take advantage of a distracted opponent, crept around to the side of the ferocious battle and then darted in to slash and stab at the big warrior. Somehow, though, Erag was able to stay one step ahead of the quick rogue, dodging attacks that would have felled lesser opponents.

Erag kept the offensive on Morik, who was struggling to keep his younger, fitter opponent at bay. It wasn't long before Erag stabbed Morik in the left leg, then again to the side of his torso, finishing off the manoeuvre by slamming the old warrior in the side of his head with the butt of the spear, swung around to devastating effect. Morik went down on one knee and almost toppled over completely, except for sheer force of will.

For a short moment, Erag was exposed as a clear target, and Aiden seized the opportunity to invoke the sceptre's power, scorching the barbarian's torso with a blast of light, causing him to roar in pain as he burned. He lunged at Aiden blindly, stabbing and swinging with his spear, allowing the young man to step inside the weapon's reach and slash mightily at him, his empowered arms propelling his sword through Erag's chain shirt and flesh, almost severing his right arm in the process.

The barbarian leader's spear came back impossibly fast, however, and slammed into Aiden's side, pushing him back and causing his spectral armour to flash again, once more saving his life. The shaman, Tald Black-Tiger, had so far remained out of the fight, no doubt watching his champion finish his adversaries, but with Aiden's crippling attack, he spoke up for the first time.

"You are wielding borrowed power, boy," he rasped, slamming the butt of his rune-covered staff into the ground. "And I shall strip it from you, piece by piece!" Aiden felt a wave of coldness wash over him, and his supernatural strength drained out of his muscles, leaving him feeling weak and... *mortal*, once more.

Erag, nursing his right arm, was about to step in and stab at the momentarily vulnerable young man when Pacian rushed in, daggers flashing, trying to distract the big warrior from dealing a critical blow to his friend. Erag anticipated the assault and Pacian

found the back end of a spear waiting for him, slamming into his nose and spattering blood over his face, followed swiftly by a kick from Erag's armoured boot to his midriff, sending Pacian flying and effectively taking him out of the fight.

This still gave Aiden the time he needed to recover, and he made full use of it, raising his sceptre and unleashing another blast at the barbarian leader. His armour was protecting him from these attacks to some degree, but it was now blackened and charred from the searing heat, and the flesh underneath was likely to be just as burnt.

Somehow, Erag still had the strength to remain standing after the sceptre blast, and looking at the big warrior, a chill went up Aiden's spine – even as he watched, Erag's wounds were slowly healing over as a faint, misty green light danced around his body, a light that seemed to be emanating from Tald's staff.

Aiden now realised their mistake; focusing their attacks on the big warrior instead of the real danger, and while Erag was going to be fully healed within a matter of minutes, Aiden and his companions were rapidly running out of strength. The novice warrior was being pressed hard by Erag, and his spectral armour flashed again and again, taking the brunt of the assault until another cold sensation washed over him again, and the spectral armour faded from view.

This left Aiden contemplating whether his dragon ally was still watching over him, in the vain hope that he might somehow avoid death a second time, when Erag was suddenly engulfed in flames, blinding him momentarily as his howls of rage and agony echoed through the caves. It was at this moment that a bloodied and enraged Pacian appeared behind the blinded barbarian leader, driving both of his daggers into Erag's back.

"Die, you bastard, die!" Pacian roared with anger as he continued to stab Erag until the mighty barbarian crashed to the ground, scorched and bleeding from a dozen fatal wounds courtesy of Pacian.

"Insolent upstart!" Tald cried out, dismayed at the loss of his powerful ally, and he retaliated by raising his staff, which once more, had the hairs on the back of Aiden's neck standing on end. As he closed his eyes and readied himself for the killing stroke of lightning, the charged air around him suddenly felt... different. He risked a peek and noticed that aside from a few sparks around Tald's staff, nothing had happened. And then, something *did* happen – a clothyard shaft sank into Tald's shoulder, staggering the old man backwards momentarily as Colt, carrying his mighty longbow, limped into the battle.

Nellise was just behind him, clad once more in her breastplate embossed with the wings of angels, and the tattered remains of her robe tied around her waist. With tears streaming from her blackened eyes, she clutched at her crystal and whispered her prayers, stymieing Tald's attempts at summoning the elemental forces of nature. This seemed to enrage the shaman even further, who slammed his staff onto the ground once more and attempted to overpower Nellise's efforts.

"No, you... shall not," she uttered quietly, but with determination, again dispersing the build up of power that threatened to end their lives. Colt loosed arrow after arrow at the shaman, who seemed to be protected by similar spectral armour to that which Aiden had been protected by up until recently, but he had a feeling that it would offer no help against his sceptre.

Raising it one more time, Aiden spoke the command word and engulfed Tald in burning light, his screams cut off only moments later as Sayana threw her axe, which embedded into this chest, cutting straight through his protective magicks and slamming him to the ground, eyes wide open in surprise, gasping his final burbling breaths.

The near-silence of the cave was broken only by the sounds of their heavy breathing, the fight having taken all they could muster. Aiden grimaced as the adrenaline began to dissipate, and the pain from his wounds became more noticeable. He sheathed his bloodied sword and staggered over to Morik, who was lying against the wall, his breath coming in shallow gasps.

"Don't you dare die on us now," Aiden cautioned him, lifting his lenses up onto his forehead, allowing the dim light of a few nearby torches to provide the light to see by.

"You owe us for putting you back in charge of your people, do you hear me?"

"I wouldn't dream of going back on my word," Morik replied, a half-smile on his lips. "If you would be so kind as to put my blood back inside me, I would be very grateful."

"I'll see what we can do," Aiden said, hiding his true feelings as he looked down at the grievously wounded man. Turning to look over at Nellise, Aiden could see that she was sitting on the floor, her face covered by her hands as she continued to weep. He had no idea what sort of strength it took for her to do what she just did, given what was done to her only scant minutes ago.

But once again, the young cleric had saved their lives with her faith and her resolve, in spite of all obstacles. Aiden limped over and crouched down beside her, unable to think of a way to comfort the poor young woman, and feeling awkward about asking for a little more from her.

"Nel, I know you're hurting right now, but we're in pretty bad shape," Aiden whispered soothingly, not sure if she was even hearing his words. "I think Morik may be dying, and we need him to pull his people back from the brink of war. We need you to help us out, do you think you can do that?"

Nellise didn't respond immediately, but sat there clutching at the symbol of her faith with all of her strength. Slowly, she nodded, sniffing back her tears and wiping her face with a little piece of her robe. She held the crystal in her hand and began whispering her prayers. Aiden picked himself up and limped over to check on Pacian, who was sitting with his back against the wall.

"I don't think I can do any more killing today, Aiden," he remarked absently, sounding strange through his broken nose. "Can we go home now?"

"That's the plan," Aiden replied with a tired smile, clapping his old friend on the shoulder, and then sat down with him to wait for Nellise's healing prayer to take effect. The faintest hint of a summer breeze wafted through the air, and everyone present sat back to take stock of what they had just survived. Nobody seemed concerned about the possibility of more warriors coming into this section of the cave, but if it did happen, Aiden knew they'd deal with it, somehow.

A few minutes passed, and Nellise finally slumped down onto the ground as the healing was completed. Aiden hoped it was enough, for they could ask no more of her this day.

"We've really got to get Nel back to town," Pacian said, truly concerned about her. "She's been through hell down here, and she's going to need time to recover."

“Why don't you go and take care of her,” Aiden advised. “I'll go check on Morik, and if he's ready to move, we'll leave in a few minutes.” Pacian nodded, and went to look after the young cleric while Aiden, feeling somewhat less bruised and battered, went to see if the new leader of the Akoran tribal people was ready to take office.

To his satisfaction, Morik had already managed to pick himself up, although he wouldn't be doing any more fighting anytime soon.

“Your priestess is very talented,” he said as Aiden came closer. “I am truly sorry for what my people did to her, and indeed, to you all. Understand that your female companions were considered spoils of war-”

“You don't want to end that sentence,” Aiden warned, in no mood to hear any more about their evening. Morik did not take offence, inclining his head in apology.

“Enough of such things. You and your people need to leave as soon as possible, for I cannot guarantee your safety until I have solidified my position as chief.”

“Will they even accept you, considering you helped kill Erag?” The chief answered this by moving over to Erag's burned corpse, and with an axe in one hand, lifted the helmed head of his fallen enemy with the other and brought down his weapon on the exposed neck.

“Yes,” Morik said flatly, placing the head on the ground for the time being. “Now, you must take your comrades and leave, for your own safety.”

“I don't think we're going to make it out past the camps outside,” Colt grunted. “Could you talk to them before we leave?”

“No, but fear not, there is another exit you can take, in the rear of the caves. Come, I will show you.” They followed him down the corridor and through to the next chamber, a smaller area than the storage room, and with many chairs and furs lying about on the floor. Across the room, Aiden spotted two bodies, one of which he recognised. Both men had been stripped, beaten and killed, and it wasn't a pretty sight, but no-one took it worse than Colt.

“Duncan, you poor bastard,” he groaned, recognising his fellow ranger, then staggered over for a closer look at the other man. “Looks like Tom Sanders, one of our best scouts. Not much of a fighter, young Tommy, but I reckon he gave as good as he got, the poor kid.”

“I am sorry for your losses,” Morik offered. “Erag would have interrogated them for information about defences at your nearby villages, and then put them to death.” They stood in silence for a few moments while Colt stood over their bodies. Aiden had seen plenty of death lately and losing someone else he had known was the most difficult of burdens to bear. Duncan hadn't been a close friend, but he was a good man, and to see him broken and unmoving like this affected him more than he cared to say.

“We can't take them back with us, 'cause we have to move fast,” Colt said, sniffing a little. “But I want your word, Morik, that you'll give these lads a proper burial after I'm gone. Because when this is all over and done with, I'm coming back to pay my respects, got it?”

“You have my word,” Morik replied soberly.

Sayana, her face grim, continued past the fallen and into the only doorway that remained. Aiden was too tired to worry about her attitude at the moment, and they still had a long way to travel, so he kept his mouth shut and followed her in.

Inside the chamber were a large wooden table, a platter of meat and ale, and an elaborate fireplace with a metal pipe that functioned as a chimney, funnelling smoke from the roaring fire up through a square hole in the ceiling. Just visible behind the smoke was a metal ladder, embedded into the wall itself, confirming Aiden's earlier suspicions that this entire cave complex was not only artificial, but constructed from metal that did not rust.

All of this was lost on Pacian, who, upon entering, gently lowered Nellise down onto a pile of nearby cushions, and moved over to investigate a large wooden chest near the fireplace, crouching down to attempt to break its lock.

"That ladder leads to a hidden entrance, above us, on the side of the hill," Morik explained to Aiden. "From there, you can travel northwest, avoiding contact with my people and returning you to safety."

"These caves, did your people make them, long ago?" Aiden inquired, genuinely curious.

"They have always been here," the chief replied. "Akora has used them as shelter, and as a base, for many generations. I do not know who built them, but I remain grateful to them nonetheless."

"What is all this?" Sayana asked, leafing through papers upon the table. Aiden leaned forward and saw what appeared to be a crude map, drawn in charcoal, with scrawled notes written in Aielish on accompanying sheaves of parchment. The young man moved closer, and after a few moments of examination, determined that the map was a battle plan of some kind.

The mountains they were currently situated in were on the southern part of the map, with a large circle around what would be the Akoran encampment. A simple drawing of a house was sketched in where Coldstream would be, and to the left of it, another one representing Bracksford. A large arrow pointed from the Akoran base to both towns, clearly depicting their planned path of attack. From what he could discern in the notes, the battle was going to start in only a few days time, after another tribe of warriors arrived to support the effort from the north.

"If we'd left this much longer, they'd have stormed through the entire region within a few days time," Aiden muttered to himself. "If we hadn't have come when we did, there would have been countless deaths, not to mention other unspeakable atrocities."

"Those are the property of my people," Morik was saying to Pacian, the blond rogue having been successful in cracking open the lock on the chest. In his hand he held a piece of glittering gold jewellery, and gave Morik a look that might result in someone's death, probably his own.

"So, you simple mountain folk have a thriving business crafting expensive jewels?" Pacian asked caustically. "I think it more likely that this was all taken from raiding the nearby area, so I tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm going to take as much as I can carry, and you'll stand there, and like it."

"What you have in your hand was given to us by your King, nearly a century ago, as thanks for my people's assistance with the defence of this country," Morik remarked with strong words. "Erag had it moved here from our capital to show his warriors, and prove that he was chief, for only the leader of Akora may possess them."

"You're trying to steal their crown jewels, Pace," Aiden clarified dryly for his friend. "Just leave them be, we've got enough to carry out of here as it is." Pacian seemed crestfallen, and reluctantly placed the riches back into the chest.

"You should get a better lock for that thing, someone might come along and steal it all," he advised Morik, sheepishly moving over to Nellise once more.

"I think we're done here," Aiden said to Morik, rolling up the battle plans and tucking them in under his tunic. "Without your help, I doubt we would have survived this night, although some of us survived better than others. I hope you can settle your people down, because we really don't need another war right now."

"I will convince them of my legitimacy, I can assure you of that," Morik said, giving Aiden an appraising glance. "For a warlock, you seem honourable enough, though I would one day like to see your prowess without the aid of outside forces. My people have no love for your kind, but I thank you for your aid this day, and hope that our paths may cross again, in the future."

"Warlock? I'm not a..." Aiden started to protest, and then considered how he looked striking down their enemies with beams of light. "Okay, maybe I dabble in the arcane arts a little, but as Tald mentioned, it is 'borrowed power'. The only real sorcerer here is Sayana, and you should be thanking her as well, particularly since she was once one of your people." Morik look startled, and gave the red-headed girl another shrewd look, then spoke a few words to her in his native language.

"Kerik White-wolf," she replied to his question in Aielish, "though I'm sure he believes I am dead. Do you remember the elven lady he took as a wife?"

"We will never forget her, though individual reasons as to why differ from person to person," Morik answered. "Too many of us were paranoid about her abilities, and it shames me to say I was one of them. I never wanted to see her harmed, though." Sayana's eyes, though locked on the Akoran chief, showed her barely controlled emotions bubbling just below the surface. A revelation struck Morik at that moment, and he looked at her with disbelief.

"You are the child that was lost to us, years ago?" he breathed. A tear trickled down Sayana's cheek as her emotional dam burst. "I heard that you had wandered off on a hunting expedition, and was never seen again." A chill wind filled the room as Colt scaled the ladder above the fireplace, and apparently found the trapdoor that Morik had spoken of. The sounds of deep voices could be heard back in the caves, indicating that the scene of the battle had been discovered.

"One of the hunters saw me performing some minor sorcery, and he struck me over the head and left me to die," she sobbed. "He said something about 'having kept an eye on me in case I turned out like my mother'." Morik nodded slowly, and then turned his head at the sounds of the approaching warriors in the cave.

"You must go, now, but we will meet again, that I can promise. I will make this right with you, Sayana, somehow, when things are peaceful again. Please, leave before you are discovered." Aiden hastened over to Nellise, who was still lying on the cushions, barely coherent.

"I will take her up through the secret passage," Sayana declared, wiping tears from her eyes as she stepped forward to lift the exhausted cleric over her shoulder. She struggled with the weight, but with Pacian's help, managed to lift her over to the base of

the shaft, where the wild girl somehow found a hidden reserve of strength to levitate them both upwards.

Aiden and his friend quickly followed, the young man taking mental notes about the metal ladder they were climbing, and how old the structure appeared. He would have to come back and investigate this place at some point, because it had just occurred to him that maybe, just maybe, the cave he had fallen in as a boy was similar to this – an artificial construction, made by some ancient civilization, long since dead.

Although it was cold down in the cave, the freezing air was still a slap in the face as Aiden emerged from the top of the shaft, into the bleak, frigid wasteland of the High Plains. The wind had died down a great deal, and stars could be seen shining down through the cloud layer as the foul weather slowly broke up. The faint light from above provided a soft illumination that the snow on the ground reflected, allowing them just enough light to see by. Aiden put his lenses back in place over his eyes, and made it his task to watch for dangers that the others might not be able to see.

Colt gave his winter cloak to Nellise to help keep her warm, and then pressed ahead silently, with Sayana leading them out through the rocky hillside they had used to approach the camp in the first place. Pacian, his arm around Nellise, brought up the rear, moving as fast as they could manage, though she must have been dreadfully tired. Aiden was still dealing with the anger at the way she had been treated, and even the deaths of her tormentors had not alleviated those feelings. He could only hope that she was not too scarred from the experience, and would be resilient enough to recover and live her life as best she could.

They travelled for well over an hour before Aiden felt they had left the Akoran camp far enough behind them, feeling fortunate that they had encountered no more patrols on their way out. Colt called for a quick break and they gathered around the sparse trees that provided a modicum of shelter out on the plain.

“I think we should head back to Coldstream and nurse our wounds,” he advised breathlessly, leaning on his greatsword as one would a staff. “Bracksford is too far for us in this condition, and I don't think this break in the weather is likely to hold.”

“I don't know, something tells me we're going to have a stretch of fine weather for a while,” Aiden replied enigmatically. “I think we're overdue for it. I'm not really keen on going to Coldstream, if we have a choice.”

“Yes, I'd rather camp out in the woods around a nice hot fire than go back there,” Pacian muttered, neither of them mentioning the reasons for wanting to stay away.

“Are you sure?” Colt asked dubiously. “With the exception of Sayana, you lot are a bit soft for roughing it in the wild, and I'd have thought you'd jump at the chance to sleep in a warm bed.”

“It's more than that,” Aiden added, glancing at the wild girl as she tore into a chunk of bread voraciously. “If we head northwest, we'll get to Bracksford a lot faster than going up through Coldstream, and we should let Olaf and Tara know what's happened as soon as possible.”

“A fair point,” Colt conceded. “Alright, northwest it is then. We'll find a place to rest in a couple of hours, and try to catch our breath a bit.” Aiden nodded, and they headed out once more, in a slightly different direction this time, with Colt taking the lead. Aiden attempted to talk with Sayana a little as they walked, but she didn't seem interested at the moment and kept her distance, lost in her own thoughts. It was understandable, really,

considering that she had been plunged into her worst nightmare, barely surviving the experience.

With his adrenaline rush gone and the incantations dispelled, Aiden felt very, very ordinary as they continued onward, and soon, the ordeal of the past day was beginning to catch up with him, each step forward becoming a struggle to stay upright. He lost track of time as they ploughed on through the snow, but more and more trees were visible as time wore on, indicating they were emerging out of the High Plains at last, shortly confirmed by Aiden's ears popping from the lower altitude.

They found a small clearing in amongst the trees to set up their camp, and everyone except Aiden collapsed as soon as it was decided to sleep in this place, leaving the task of building a fire to him. Thanks to his night vision, he was able to quickly gather up kindling scattered on the ground and build a campfire. After nearly a minute of unsuccessfully trying to light it with flint and steel, flames suddenly sprang forth from the tinder, startling Aiden, who was quite certain it wasn't his doing.

"You might have warned me," he admonished Sayana, who was lying down on her bedroll a couple of yards away, barely visible from underneath the heavy winter cloak with one hand extended towards the fire. She didn't reply, instead closing her eyes and taking a deep breath as she drifted off to sleep. Aiden stacked some more wood on the fire as it grew, then, satisfied that it wasn't going to go out, reluctantly declared himself the sole volunteer to be on watch for the rest of the night.

* * *

It was a testament to just how tired the others were that they slept right through the most beautiful sunrise Aiden had seen in months. There wasn't a cloud in the sky, and the faint heat of the winter sun was enough to warm his face as he closed his eyes and bathed in the light, a feeling the young man thought he'd never experience again.

It had been a quiet night, without any sign of patrolling Akorans or wild animals, and Aiden was looking forward to getting some rest once they had arrived at Bracksford, which he roughly guessed they'd arrive at before dusk.

As the light increased, Aiden noticed that they had made camp next to an old graveyard, which had become overgrown with bushes and small trees and was almost unrecognisable, except for the entrance to a mausoleum in amongst the foliage. It was made of stone, and despite the cracked and weathered exterior, seemed to be mostly intact. The clearing was a curious place to camp, and given the choice, not the location Aiden would have chosen, but he couldn't deny it had been a restful night.

The young explorer noticed that Nellise was awake, and peering at him from underneath her winter cloak with an inscrutable expression. Aiden suspected that questions concerning his apparent return from the dead would be forthcoming, and he was not disappointed.

"I saw you die," Nellise said quietly, the first words she had spoken since they left Akoran lands.

"Well, you saw me knocked down, certainly," Aiden conceded, not sure about telling her about his otherworldly experience. Informing the others of his dragon-related dreams had done nothing to promote unity within the group.

"You were struck by an axe, right in the head, Aiden," Nellise pressed. "No-one survives something like that."

"I'm not going to contest that point," he shrugged, poking at the fire with a large stick. "But I have a perfectly reasonable explanation for my reappearance."

"There's no need to explain it, I already know the answer."

"You do?" he asked, looking at her with surprise.

"Yes," she nodded, "God sent you to save us." Aiden blinked, caught off guard by her answer, and unsure if he should attempt to correct her. Then he realised what the look she had given him had been – absolute faith. She thought she was looking upon an angel, or something similar, sent by God to pull them out of hell, and it was this knowledge that was allowing the young cleric to deal with her rape in the right way. Aiden couldn't take that away from her, and she probably wouldn't believe the truth if he told her anyway.

"I'm not really sure what happened," he lied, "I woke up in the snow, and I knew I had to try and save you all. It was only through the aid of the relics I'd recovered from Ferrumgaard that allowed me to pull off that rescue, though. I wonder what Clavis would have thought of that?"

"I can't speak for the dead," she mused, "but I think you certainly honoured his memory. Thank you, Aiden, I... don't want to think about what would have become of us if you hadn't..." Nellise's veneer of control crumbled, and she visibly recoiled from the memories, with a look of such pain on her face, Aiden didn't know what to do. Pacian had stirred during their conversation, and upon seeing the young cleric suffering, moved to comfort her.

"Don't touch me!" she gasped, pulling back from his outstretched hand, wrapping the cloak tightly around her and stumbling off into the nearby bushes. Pacian moved to follow her, but Colt stopped him with a look.

"Leave her be," he growled, slowly getting to his feet. "Let her work through it in her own way."

"This is exactly what I was talking about," Pacian muttered, a dark look on his face. "She went in there expecting tea and crumpets, and look what happened to her. Well, from now on, I'm doing things my way, whether she likes it or not. It's for her own good. Excuse me, nature's calling," he added, stalking off into another part of the camp to answer the call.

"That's not gonna go well," Colt remarked, unimpressed with the blond rogue's attitude. "But enough about that. How the hell did you do all that fancy sorcery last night anyway? And Nel's right, you were stone dead after that axe hit you."

"I... met an old acquaintance," Aiden replied evasively, glancing meaningfully at Sayana, who was watching the whole scene with interest from under her cloak. Her eyes widened at the implication, and she sat upright, pondering the magnitude of what had happened. "He is a master at healing, and was able to get me back on my feet. As for the sorcery, well, as I told Nel, it all came from Ferrumgaard. That old wizard saved our lives with his little stash of scrolls, not to mention this thing," he added, hefting the sceptre.

"Show me that," Sayana asked in her usual peremptory fashion. Aiden walked over and handed it to her, watching with interest as she stared at it for a long minute. "I thought as much," she whispered to herself.

"What is it?" Aiden asked cautiously.

"Its power is nearly depleted," she answered, handing the sceptre back to him. "The crystals have been damaged, and you would be lucky to get one or two more uses from it."

"Is there any way to fix it?" he asked pensively, upset at the thought of losing the mighty weapon.

"None that I know of, but my experience is limited."

"Maybe I can ask that dragon," he muttered, loud enough for only Sayana to hear. She glanced over at Colt, who was starting to cook some breakfast over the fire, then grabbed Aiden by the shoulder and pulled him closer.

"Did it speak of me?" she whispered harshly, looking him straight in the face.

"I – yes, actually," he sputtered, caught off guard by her sudden intensity. "I asked why it attacked you in the dream, and it seemed angry when I mentioned you, saying that 'you were not invited.'" Sayana continued looking at him for a long, searching moment, then reached up and touched the shard hanging from around Aiden's neck. She instantly flinched in pain, shaking her hand from what seemed to be a mild burn. He looked at her hand and indeed, saw a small red welt where she had touched the shard.

"Something is wrong," she whispered, staring in to Aiden's eyes. "You're different, somehow. I don't know what it is... something is... *missing*." The hairs on the back of Aiden's neck stood on end at this, and he didn't know how to respond. Sayana backed away from him a little, and looked coiled and ready to run away at a moment's notice.

"Sy, it's *me*," Aiden insisted, scarcely believing her reaction. "I don't feel any different, I don't *think* any different; I'm the same man I was yesterday."

"That creature has taken a part of you as payment," she hissed, "you may not feel it now, but eventually you will find out what it took. You have become its agent now, Aiden, and I'm not sure I can trust you." She turned and stormed out of the clearing, leaving Aiden to stand there confused, trying to process what he had just learned.

"What's all that about?" Colt asked from nearby.

"I wish I knew," Aiden replied, genuinely mystified as he looked off into the foliage where Sayana had vanished.

"Bloody women are all the same, am I right?" Colt grunted in reply.

Chapter Twenty Six

The morning meal of sausages and bread was eaten in silence, partly because they were hungry and tired, but also because of recent events that continued to drive them apart. Sayana ate an entire day's worth of rations in one meal, which no longer came as a surprise to Aiden. Nellise was the only one not present, and her absence was understandable, but only to a point – they were still in the wilds, and she probably wasn't in any condition to be fighting a wandering grizzly bear. Concerned about her absence, Aiden left the camp to look around for her.

After a few minutes of searching around through the bushes and sparse trees that dotted the landscape, the young adventurer was momentarily startled when he came across a wolf, sitting on its haunches and observing him quietly from roughly twenty yards away. Aiden breathed a sigh of relief, for he recognised it as Faolan, who apparently had survived last night's battle with only minor wounds.

Aiden stood still for a long moment, unsure of its intent, until the wolf casually trotted off into the undergrowth, as if it had deemed the young man to be non-threatening and hardly worthy of its attention. Even though Colt had at least partially trained it, the young man was still nervous around the beast, the memory of its jaws digging into his flesh still vivid within his mind. He continued his search and eventually found Nellise kneeling down on the other side of the mausoleum, which turned out to be the front, judging by the outline of a door in the weathered stone.

She was looking quite bedraggled, having slept in her breastplate overnight, but she gazed up at the stone structure before her with wide, red-rimmed eyes while clutching her holy symbol in one hand. Moving closer, Aiden could see she was praying, and although reluctant to disturb her, decided to stand nearby, and wait for her to finish.

It was a peaceful scene, a moment of quiet reflection after the chaotic times they'd gone through in recent days, something Nellise was certainly in need of. Aiden stood a few yards to her left, idly pondering Sayana's words and what she could have meant, until the young cleric spoke up a minute or so later.

"Why us?" she asked quietly, still looking up at the mausoleum.

"Excuse me?" Aiden blurted, having taken a moment to realise she was talking to him.

"Of all the people who could have dealt with this problem, why did it have to be us?"

"Oh," the young man said, pondering this weighty question for a moment. "Well, there's a power vacuum in this country at the moment, as we've learned in our travels. I didn't realise that the peace of the Kingdom was such a fragile thing, but there it is. Take away nearly all of the people keeping us safe, and we find out what it was they were keeping us safe *from*. Someone has to step into that gap, I suppose, it's the way of things."

"I read a saying once in my years of research," he continued after a moment's pause, "from a wise man who lived so long ago, his name has been forgotten - 'nature abhors a vacuum', he said. If we hadn't done it, maybe the Akorans would have taken over. Maybe callous noblemen like Fairchild would have divided up the kingdom for themselves. We were in the right place at the right time to make a difference, it's that simple."

"They could have sent more rangers in, or gathered up some real soldiers instead," Nellise disagreed.

"If 'they' - meaning Olaf and Tara - could have done that, I'm sure they would have," Aiden told her. "It's not like we were completely inexperienced in this sort of thing, a fact that I'm sure made us look like the answer to their manpower problems. Mind you, I'd be the first to admit that we were in way over our heads."

"That is an understatement," Nellise whispered, wiping a tear from her cheek and turning to look directly up at Aiden with knowing eyes. "The price was too high though, for all of us."

"Oh, I don't know about that," Aiden replied lightly, trying to cheer her up a little. "Pacian seemed to come through it pretty much unscathed as usual. Almost made off with their crown jewels too, as it were."

"I fear his price is yet to be paid," she predicted, her voice barely above a whisper. "I saw his face when you were fighting the men holding me captive. I have rarely seen such unbridled savagery, even from the barbarians we fought."

"Of course he was angry, he cares about you a great deal," Aiden protested. "I would have thought you'd appreciate a little righteous anger, given the situation." Nellise put her healing crystal back into its pouch, and retrieved a small selection of herbs, as well as a mortar and pestle.

"There is a difference between righteousness, and enjoying the slaughter," she admonished him, whilst grinding the herbs together. "I fear Pace has come to an important decision, and despite my best efforts to show him a better way, he has chosen a dark road to walk. Perhaps, if we hadn't come down here, he may have listened to me, but I fear it is too late for that now." Aiden remained silent, finding the bleak assessment of his closest friend a little too discomforting.

"You seemed to be praying when I arrived," he eventually said, as a way of changing the subject. "Does this place hold some special significance to you?"

"The grounds have been sanctified and blessed," Nellise breathed, "and I am attempting to cleanse my body and spirit of impurities." Colt, Pacian and Sayana walked into the small clearing at that moment, packed and ready to go.

"I don't mean to rush you or anything," Colt grunted, "but we're all pretty eager to get back to Bracksford... if you're ready to go."

"I'm just about done here," Nellise informed them, pouring her mixture into a small vial of water, and shaking it vigorously.

"What is that?" Pacian asked curiously.

"Bitter," she muttered as she drank it down, screwing her face up as she swallowed. "Now, gather around, and I shall take care of those bruises you seem to enjoy complaining about."

"You seem a little better than before," Pacian observed hopefully, sitting close to her, but wary about sitting *too* close.

"I'm trying to deal with the issue, with God's help," the young acolyte informed him tiredly. Her eyes seemed to stare at nothing for a long moment, and then she added, "I'll survive, but I think my days of adventuring are over. The images from the last day haunt me... so I shall be returning to the chapterhouse at Culdeny after I rest up a little in Bracksford, and fall back into a normal life of hard work and prayer."

"I don't think any of us would dispute your decision," Aiden said soberly, "just know that if there's anything we can do to help, you only have to ask."

"For example, I have spare pants," Sayana offered. "They couldn't find anything in my size exactly, so they're a little large. My spare ones might fit you, if you're interested."

Nellise nodded slowly, saying nothing but apparently taking her up on the offer. The two girls stepped out of view for a few minutes, and when they returned, the young cleric was clad in leather from the waist down. Despite her fatigued state, Nellise took out her crystal and began whispering her healing prayers.

When she was finished, Aiden felt almost as good as new, although in a way, as of last night, he *was* new. Colt seemed to benefit the most from the healing, and for the first time since they had left the High Plains, he was moving without a noticeable limp. Pacian seemed to be his usual self albeit no longer sporting a broken nose, and Aiden wasn't sure if Nellise's dire warning about his behaviour was accurate or not.

Sayana remained a source of troubling thoughts for Aiden, however, for she was obviously keeping her distance from him, leaving the young man to ponder her earlier words as they travelled.

Was she correct in assuming that the dragon had turned him into some kind of puppet? It had mentioned that there was some kind of important task to be done, and that Aiden would have to do it alone, but if Sayana was right, he had been altered by his experience and he had no way of telling if she was right or not.

The terrain around them gradually transformed from the snow-covered hills of the south, to the open plains of Bracksfordshire's farmlands. The sky remained clear for the rest of the day, and having the cool winter sun shining down on them made it the most enjoyable journey the young explorer had taken in recent weeks.

Bracksfordshire was renowned for remaining clear of snow, even in the depths of winter, while the surrounding lands were covered in a thick, white blanket. A quirk of the weather patterns kept the farms producing food all year round, making it one of the most important regions in the kingdom – 'Aielund's breadbasket', as it was referred to. The recent, continual bad weather had a substantial impact on that, but if Aiden was correct, the weather would now be returning to normal as the dragon's strange influence subsided.

The ground underfoot was still a swampy morass of mud however, and it slowed them down a little more than he'd anticipated. Aiden was keenly feeling the missed night of sleep, his tired muscles aching with each heavy step through the mud, his eyes leaden and bleary. It was just as the sun was beginning to sink below the horizon that they arrived at Bracksford's eastern gate, under the wary eyes of the local militia.

Clearly, Aiden and his companions had been recognised as they approached, for the gate swung wide open before they reached it, and Tara, accompanied by several of her men, waited within.

"Glad to see you made it back in one piece," she welcomed them. "Some of the lads thought you might be a pack of raiders looking for prey, and were of half a mind to shoot you. I told 'em to wait until they could see the whites of your eyes, and by that time, it was becoming obvious you weren't a bunch of Akorans looking for trouble."

"I appreciate that," Aiden replied dryly, stifling a yawn. "I'm glad to say you won't be having any further trouble with raiders. Erag Black-Tiger is dead, and Morik Far-Eagle is attempting to reclaim power. But even if he fails, they'll be so disorganised I doubt they'll be any further trouble. Also, I stole their battle plans, which might hamper them a bit." He pulled out the rolled up sheet of parchment and handed it over to the sergeant.

"This is incredible, Aiden," she breathed, not so much at the map, but the overall scale of their accomplishment. "Did you find Duncan and the other ranger well enough?" Aiden didn't answer, instead looking to Colt to tackle this one.

"The bastards got 'em before we reached them," he grated, still angry at the loss of one of his few friends, or at least the closest thing to friends he had. "Couldn't bring the bodies back, but I aim to return there in the near future to see they got a proper burial. In any case, they've been avenged, which counts for something."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Tara replied soberly, diverting her attention to the map in her hands. "This seems fairly straight forward," she mused after examining the plans for a moment. "Plunder, rape and pillage. It looks like they wanted to move in instead of destroying the town itself. Fair enough I suppose, must be hard living down there in the

mountains all year 'round. It also says something here about another group supposed to come in from the north?"

"I noticed that too," Colt added. "Damn generous of them to write it down in Aielish. I think they were going to try a flanking manoeuvre, but since they've lost their leadership, I doubt that's going to happen now."

"I'll have my people keep a sharp eye out anyway," she replied, her sharp eyes inspecting each of them closely. "God, you all look like you've been through hell."

"You have no idea," Aiden remarked dryly, finding the effort to keep standing more difficult with each passing second.

"How about we get you back to the inn, I'll go debrief the Mayor after he's finished talking with Princess Criosia," Tara continued, drawing a look of surprise from Aiden at this information.

"The Princess is here?" he asked Tara incredulously.

"Yes, didn't he mention an important personage was coming through town from Fort Highmarch soon?"

"I vaguely remember something about that being mentioned," Aiden recalled, "but I didn't realise that's whom he meant."

"Well it's a good thing we stopped the Akorans then," Pacian said. "Imagine if they'd come through here tomorrow morning, while we had bloody royalty staying in town." Everyone was silent for a moment as this hastily blurted opinion was digested. A terrible feeling welled up within Aiden as his tired mind started putting things together.

Tara stiffened suddenly, and gasped, prompting him to wonder just what had occurred to the Sergeant. She staggered forward, and his breath caught in his throat as he saw a trickle of blood escape Tara's full lips, just before she promptly dropped face first into the ground.

The horror of the moment didn't instantly register for any of the militia, but Aiden immediately noticed the crossbow bolt sticking out of her back, and quickly drew his sword, adrenaline surging through his veins. At that moment, all hell broke loose in Bracksford. Crossbow bolts started flying through the air, some of them striking the militia, and others flying off through the air, lodging in the fence nearby.

A cry of alarm went up, and the militia moved to respond to the attack. Looking around frantically for the archers, Aiden spied half a dozen men crouched down near one of the houses lining the road through town, their light crossbows sending a steady stream of bolts into the surprised defenders. The men were wearing chain mail armour, full-face helmets, and tabards emblazoned with the symbol of a great cat, possibly a tiger.

Aiden, almost paralysed with shock and fatigue, snapped himself back to reality and summoned his force shield, positioning it towards the group of archers, while Pacian and Colt took cover behind the stout wooden gate, the big man drawing his greatsword and waiting for the right moment to charge in.

The militia, devoid of their leadership, began loosing bolts back at the attacking men at random, trying to provide cover for others to move in closer and engage them with their swords. The shots of the enemy were far more accurate and deadly, and fully half of the dozen men and women stationed at the gate had already been felled by the onslaught.

Sayana, seeing the ineffectiveness of the defenders, took the initiative, stepping forward to blast a stream of fire at the archers, torching one of them and forcing the others to pull back. Aiden and Colt, thinking alike, took advantage of the diversion to join

the other militia advancing on the enemy, being careful not to slip in the dreadful conditions underfoot. As Sayana extinguished her flames, the two men were upon the enemy, the big ranger leading the way with a sweep of his mighty sword that took the burned soldier in the chest, killing him almost instantly.

Aiden did his best to keep Colt's flank clear so he could make full use of his devastating weapon, leaving the novice warrior to chop and slash at anyone who tried to get past the big man's assault. The chain mail worn by their opponents was of little protection against the heavier greatsword, but Aiden found it much more difficult to cut through with his lighter weapon.

These were clearly the most dangerous opponents they had ever faced, and did not go down easily. Sayana joined in the fight, covering Colt's other flank with her mithral axe which cut through their armour with ease. Impatient with the defensive nature of their fighting, Colt put everything he had in to each swing, shattering steel and bone with each reckless attack. With their combined assault, the three finished off the remaining soldiers with a furious exchange of steel, then paused for a moment to catch their breaths and take stock of the situation.

The sounds of women and children screaming from in the town could be heard echoing down the street, but the remaining militia nearby were locked in battle with another group of soldiers that had rushed them while Aiden and the others were occupied. Colt swapped out his greatsword for the longbow and began to string it, while Sayana sheathed her body in a shimmering layer of force armour, her tattoos glowing softly as she took advantage of this brief lull to enact several protective magicks.

Looking back at the gate, Aiden saw that Pacian was comforting Nellise, who was crouched down on the ground next to Tara with her hands over her head, clearly distraught. Aiden felt a pang of sympathy for her, knowing that she was still trying to cope with her recent trauma, understanding that the last thing she needed was another fight.

Aiden rushed back over to Tara's side, and crouched down next to the Sergeant, slowly turning her on to one side in the slim hope that she was still alive. Her eyes locked on his, but the young man could see that she was slipping away.

"Get... to the... inn," she whispered, barely audible against the sounds of battle only a dozen yards away.

"I'll take care of it," Aiden promised her, his voice cracking as he watched another good person die before him. He gently let her go, then stood up and looked down the street, daunted by the dozens of armoured men attacking the locals and the overwhelmed militia who tried to keep them at bay. Colt was loosing arrows at the most opportune targets, aiding the town defenders where he could, while Aiden's tired brain tried to formulate a plan of action.

"What the hell is going on here?" Pacian asked loudly, as if expecting the world itself to answer.

"We have to get to the inn and secure it," Aiden replied distantly. "Nel, I hate to tell you this, but we need you to focus. Innocent people are dying here, do you understand?" The distraught cleric looked up, her eyes red, and nodded silently.

"Don't worry Nel," Pacian assured her, "if anyone so much as looks at you, I'm going to shred them." Nellise gave him an unreadable look, then put on her helmet and hefted Clavis' repeating crossbow, as ready for action as she was going to be.

"I could use some support over here!" Colt yelled, evidently running low on arrows.

"Let's get to it then," Aiden ordered. "Keep together and support each other, don't let them divide us up. These are professional soldiers, not a bunch of morons."

"Don't be so sure about that," Pacian warned cynically. "They may surprise you." Aiden ignored him and pressed forward, charging into a small group of mercenaries that were cutting down twice their number in overwhelmed militia fighters. These men were using heavy wooden shields, and they knew how to position them effectively to intercept Aiden's sword almost every time. On those few swings when he was able to get through, their chain armour stopped his blade from doing any real damage.

Aiden took a few minor hits in the brief but furious engagement, but his main goal was to distract the mercenaries long enough for the militia to recover from the assault, and of course, to allow his blond companion to sneak around behind the group and make full use of his deadly blades. With two quick stabs, Pacian made short work of the unsuspecting warriors.

The other two mercenaries immediately recognised their precarious position, and started backing away from the fight, their shields held forth defensively. Pacian warily kept his distance, unable to find an easy way to strike at the cautious soldiers, but was sent sprawling into the mud when a stray crossbow bolt struck him from the right.

As if in response, an arrow thundered into the closest mercenary, taking him in the leg and causing him to fall backwards into the mud. The four militia fighters were upon them in a flash, taking advantage of the diversion to overwhelm the two wounded soldiers while they were distracted.

"Pace! Are you okay?" Aiden called as the blond rogue slowly picked himself up, his right arm held close to his side, sporting a large quarrel sticking out near the shoulder.

"I've been better," he replied, his voice tight as blood ran down his battered leathers.

"Keep moving towards the inn!" Aiden cried aloud, hoping the militia would recognise the order and assist him and his companions in reaching that goal. The main street ahead of them was a scene of chaos, with people struggling to get to safety after the initial assault of the mercenaries and the wounded defenders who had sought to aid their escape with their lives.

As much as Aiden wanted to stop every last one of them, he knew the real prize was Princess Criosia Roebec, the King's only heir. He wasn't the most learned man in the realm when it came to politics, but he knew that kidnapping a member of the royal family would have far-reaching ramifications.

They pressed on, moving down the mud-filled street as fast as they could manage, the young man trying to ignore his aching muscles. For the most part, the street was clear, the sounds of battle nearby seeming to indicate that the mercenaries were concentrating most of their attacks elsewhere.

They passed the smithy, and Aiden was dismayed to see the hulking form of Hadush the blacksmith, lying face-down upon the ground at the door to his modest business, a heavy warhammer in one hand and four dead mercenaries lying around him. Although he hadn't been part of the community here for very long, he obviously had no compunctions about giving his life in its defence.

Up ahead, a townsman who was trying to defend his wife and child from a mercenary that had burst into their home cried out for help, and received it in the form of a hail of arrows and bolts that shot through the air and into the fighter's back. Nellise and

Colt dropped him quickly enough so that Aiden didn't even have to slow down on his way past.

"Barricade the door and do *not* come out until this is over!" Aiden shouted over the din of screams and bloodshed as he slammed the front door shut and kept running for the inn. The smell of smoke started to fill the air and the glow of fires could be seen against the twilight sky as they moved onward, until they finally spotted the Bracksfordshire Arms Inn just up the street. Pacian silently motioned them to lean up against the wall of a nearby house, to provide some cover.

"That's a hell of a lot of metal," Colt growled as he looked around the corner, "they got eight men covering the front door of the inn, half with shields, and half with crossbows. Looks like they've taken out the guards from the north gate, too."

"A frontal assault would be suicide," Aiden said grimly, "maybe we could just hit them from here with bows?"

"They aren't attacking or looting," Colt pointed out. "They're just guarding the inn while another group inside are doing whatever it is they came here to do. We need to get through their line, not sit back here and slowly tap away at them. Hey, can you hit 'em with that light thing you did down in that Akoran cave?"

"The sceptre? I think it's good for one more shot, maybe two, but I'm not even sure it's going to be enough against so many armoured targets," Aiden informed him, shaking his head.

"We can't just sit around here and let them plunder the town like this," Pacian objected, more than eager to continue the fighting despite his injured arm.

"I think someone else has the same idea," Nellise observed, looking over her shoulder at the druid, Harlin, walking down the street towards them, with his huge cougar loping along by his side and an oaken staff in his hands. He glanced at Aiden's group briefly as he approached, but didn't slow down for a second.

"Wait until my signal, and then continue your advance," Harlin ordered. He continued past them, the great cat glancing up curiously, but staying with the druid as he moved towards the gathered soldiers.

"The stupid fool, he's going to get himself killed, and I'm not sure we should risk ourselves just to save him," Pacian said under his breath. The mercenaries had noticed Harlin's casual approach, four of their number breaking off from guarding the door and heading towards him with drawn swords, while the others aimed their crossbows.

The druid, unperturbed, stopped in the middle of the road, and then raised his hands toward the sky. Almost immediately, the calm winter breeze that had been drifting through the town turned into a gale. The mercenaries seemed to recognise that this robed man was more dangerous than they first thought, and hastened their approach.

"I haven't seen a signal yet, have you?" Colt asked, unsure what was supposed to be happening. The great cat by Harlin's side let out a roaring challenge to the oncoming soldiers, but instead of leaping at them as Aiden had first thought, a clap of thunder crashed through the sky above them, and a bolt of lightning blasted the oncoming soldiers from their feet with sparks of electricity dancing along their metal armour.

"There it is!" Aiden cried, readying his weapon. Colt and Nellise immediately stepped around the corner and started shooting at the enemy, their ranged weapons more suitable to dealing with their armoured foes, while Aiden, Pacian and Sayana rushed forward to join the fight. He was so focused on covering the distance to the mercenaries,

Aiden hardly paid attention to the cougar running alongside him until it leaped ahead and pounced on the closest mercenary, crashing through his feeble defences and latching its powerful jaws around the man's throat.

Bolts flew through the air, one of them bouncing off Aiden's shield, but two of them flying right past him to strike Harlin in the leg. The novice warrior couldn't spare any more time worrying about the man though, because the mercenaries that had been struck by lightning were still alive, and despite the charred smell of burnt hair, still in the fight.

Aiden swept his sword at the closest mercenary, but was deflected by his shield. He countered with his own blade, faster than Aiden anticipated, causing sparks to fly from his chain shirt as it took the brunt of the blow. It was still a very heavy impact, and Aiden winced in pain, but it was a necessary sacrifice to put the mercenary out of position. With his shield out to the left, he was vulnerable on his right side, allowing Pacian to shove his remaining dagger through his armour, ending the heavily wounded man's life in one stroke.

Colt and Nellise were focusing their attacks on one of the soldiers, whose shield was decorated with an assortment of bolts arrows sticking out at various angles. But their assault kept him on the defensive, giving their feline ally a chance to pounce on him from behind, and savage the mercenary with its vicious claws.

The archers back at the inn sent out another stream of crossbow bolts, mostly aimed at the great cat tearing up one of their comrades. Two of the bolts seemed to connect with the cougar, but instead of drawing blood, a brief flash of light illuminated the cat, revealing a protective incantation upon it. Aiden suddenly realised why Harlin had made himself such an obvious target – the druid had empowered his feline companion with an assortment of magicks, and set it loose upon the unsuspecting mercenaries. The cat was practically unstoppable as its claws rent a line of blood through the ranks of the enemy.

They were almost through the line of defending warriors, and with the cougar tearing them apart with ease, Sayana put her axe on her back and brought her hands together, sending out a shockwave of sound upon the mercenary archers in front of the inn. They screamed in agony and dropped their bows to clutch at their helmeted heads, momentarily stunned by the concussive blast.

Aiden seized the opportunity to close the distance to the enemy as fast as he could manage, but before he could get within range of his weapon, the archer's morale broke and they backed inside the inn, slamming the heavy oak door shut behind themselves.

Aiden crashed into the door shoulder-first, hoping to force it open before it was properly locked, but there were four large men on the other side preventing that from happening.

"We have to get this door open!" he called back to the others, Pacian and the cougar finishing off the last of the mercenaries while Colt and Nellise moved up from their shooting position.

"You know, axes are good at chopping into wood," the blond rogue mused, gazing at Sayana's weapon, strapped to her back.

"You're gonna need more muscle than she's got to get through that door, sharp axe or no," Colt growled, taking the axe off her back and marching up to the door. "No offence Sy, but you're a dainty little thing, and this needs a big man's touch." Sayana raised an eyebrow but said nothing, looking too tired to really complain. Nellise crouched down next to Harlin, who lay upon the ground clutching at his wounded leg.

"That was incredibly foolish," Nellise chastised the druid, "if your cat was so heavily protected, you could have just let it take on the fight by itself."

"I needed to make sure Sebastian had a clear run at them," Harlin said, wincing as Nellise pulled out the bolts one by one. "My battle prayers are not as powerful as a wizard's incantations, and four armed men might have mortally wounded him before they went down. It was a calculated risk, madam."

"These wounds are deep," she warned after a cursory examination. "You're not going to be walking around for a few days unless I enact some proper healing right now." Harlin raised his hand in protest.

"Save your strength, Nellise. I can take care of myself, and there are many more injured people to tend to. Besides, this isn't over yet. In fact, I fear it has only just begun."

"What do you mean?" Aiden asked as Colt started hacking into the door with the mithral axe.

"The attack on the town came soon after the weather started clearing," he explained through gritted teeth. "The timing is too coincidental. I believe that whoever was responsible for the artificially bad weather is also behind this assault, which means this whole thing has been planned well in advance." Aiden hesitated, unsure if he had the time to explain the real reason for the weather, especially since he hadn't told anyone of his involvement with the dragon.

"Planned by whom?" Aiden asked as Nellise bandaged the druid's leg.

"I have no idea, but the princess is clearly at the heart of their plans," he finished, with Sebastian loping back over to stand protectively near his master. "I wish I could be of more service, but I'm not going to be able to go with you. Here, take this," he said, raising his arms up to remove a thin chain from around his neck, at the end of which dangled a small gemstone. "It is a protective charm that will play upon the minds of those that would try to do you harm."

"Thank you, it must be worth a fortune," Nellise replied, accepting the charm amulet and placing it over her head.

"It is the least I can do."

"I'm nearly through here, so maybe you should all shut up and grab your weapons," Colt bellowed, grunting heavily with each swing of the axe, sending great chunks of wood flying from what remained of the door. After one more blow, it finally gave way, revealing the dimly lit interior of the entryway beyond. Colt threw the axe back over to Sayana, who caught it and held it ready, while Aiden rushed through the doorway.

What was through the door, however, was not a group of mercenaries waiting to strike down whoever came through. There were three of them on the ground, bleeding from numerous wounds, but none of them were a threat to anyone, any more. Aiden cautiously moved in to the common room, looking around at the faces of the frightened townsfolk, men and women he had come to know over the time he had spent here, clutching each other in shocked silence.

To his left, he saw Tom Ballard leaning against the wall, sporting a number of bruises on his face, and his daughter Aislin, huddled underneath a table nearby, her eyes wide with fright as she looked right at Aiden, having witnessed whatever had been done to her father and been powerless to do anything about it.

Before him, Aiden saw the Mayor sitting at a bar stool, mopping his brow with a piece of cloth. Next to him, a large, bearded man wearing heavy armour and the colours

of the Kingdom Guard sat, blood dripping down from under his helmet as he struggled to stay upright. Other armoured men lay around on the floor, some mercenaries, and some King's men, who had clearly fought hard to protect their charge and paid with their lives. Of the princess, there was no sign.

"Aiden! This is terrible... terrible!" Olaf gasped, recognising the young man as he slowly walked in, taking in the scene. "They came in here, attacking without warning, and they took her!"

"They took the princess?" Aiden asked intensely. "Where did they take her? Get a hold of yourself, man!"

"They went out the back door, just through there," Olaf sputtered, pointing at the rear entrance, while trying to regain his composure. Colt and the others had come in just after Aiden had, and were dismayed at the sight before them. Nellise set aside her crossbow and went straight for the wounded soldier sitting next to the Mayor, and slowly started removing his helmet. Aiden suddenly recognised him as Captain Marshald, the officer they had met down at Fort Highmarch many days ago.

"How is he?" he asked the young cleric.

"The Captain has suffered a serious head wound," she replied distractedly. "Give me a minute to see what I can do."

"You have to get her back," Marshald said, his voice slurred. "This whole thing... must have been planned long in advance... someone is making a move against the throne." Aiden was momentarily taken aback at the magnitude of what the captain had just stated. He glanced at his companions, and saw a similarly daunted look upon their faces.

"You need to lie down, Captain," Nellise instructed the soldier, "right away, if you please."

"While I still draw breath, it is my duty to protect the Princess," he replied stoically.

"And if you don't lie down, you won't be breathing much longer," Nellise insisted. Marshald gave her a bleary look, and then relented, lying down upon the floor. While she set about treating his injury, Harlin limped in through the front door, and made a gesture to the great cat that followed him in. Sebastian lay down just inside the front door, looking outside protectively.

"According to one of the young lads who seems to be in charge of the town's defence," he began, "the remaining mercenaries have withdrawn, but he doesn't know where they went, let alone how they got past the wall in the first place." Though Aiden's mind was slowing down from exhaustion, he knew the answer to this question.

"They dug in under the wall," he informed them, "just like they tried in Culdeny."

"Of course," Pacian groaned. "But there was no way anyone could have known they'd be trying to get into Bracksford as well. I mean the walls here aren't *that* tall, I wonder why they didn't just set up a couple of catapults and smash their way in?"

"It seems coincidental that they attacked just when the Akorans were going to, also," Sayana added. "Wait... show me that battle plan you took from Erag, Aiden." The young man took the rolled up plans from inside his tunic and handed them over to her, wondering what she wanted with them. The wild girl unfurled the parchment and took a closer look at it.

"If one of my people wrote this, it would not have been in Aielish," she said, pointing at the scrawled writing. "This plan wasn't made by Akorans, it was *given* to

them, to co-ordinate with the warriors who came here this day.” Aiden smacked his forehead for missing that little clue, the answers to the events of the past few days were starting to crystallise.

“Add to that the manipulation of the weather, and we're facing some very powerful and organised enemies,” Harlin added.

“About that,” Aiden began delicately, deciding that it was better to deal with the consequences of the truth, rather than further the belief that their enemies were capable of such vast changes in the weather on top of anything else. “You were half right, about me having something to do with the strange weather around here lately,” he continued, pulling out the small shard of crystal from around his neck. “I can't give you all the details, but someone was using this to spy on me, and for some reason, that was making it rain. I can assure you now that it has stopped, so it's no longer an issue.”

“You're all wasting time,” Marshald said from down on the floor, cutting off any further discussion of this new information, despite the looks on everyone's faces that indicated they *really* wanted to know more. “Go and rescue Princess Criosia from her captors, or their plans, whatever they are, will succeed. I'd go with you but... I don't think it's a good idea for me to try and stand up right now.”

“It certainly isn't,” Nellise muttered. “You're lucky to be alive, Captain. I have healed the wound as best as I can, but you will require days of rest before you will fully recover.”

“I will take care of him, Nel,” Harlin assured her, “you and the others need to go, now.”

“We only just returned from a harrowing mission down into Akoran territory,” Nellise protested with a trembling voice, her resolve starting to wither. “You have no idea just how bad things went for us down there...”

“I can see by the ragged nature of your attire that it must have been very difficult for you indeed,” Olaf admitted. “But this is an emergency. The town has been devastated by this attack, and if you had not returned when you did, I doubt any of us would be alive to have this conversation. I implore you, do as the Captain says and pursue Criosia's captors, or the people behind all of this might succeed in whatever nefarious plans they have in play.”

Aiden looked around at his weary friends; wounded, tired, and traumatised, but no-one disagreed with the Mayor's assessment. Reluctantly, he knew that there was only one answer he could give.

“Very well,” he sighed, “we will go, but we'll need supplies, as I suspect they have quite a lead on us and will have her guarded at all times by a small army.”

“Take what you need from here,” Tom the innkeeper offered, and as if on cue, Aislin scrambled out from under the table to start collecting bread, cheese and sausages into a basket.

“I'm going to need more crossbow bolts,” Nellise murmured absently, resigned to her fate. She started looking around at the fallen mercenaries for spare bolts, while Colt did the same, looking for arrows.

“Mister Mayor,” Pacian said formally, “I think I speak for all us when I say ‘give me all the money you have on you, right now’.” Olaf's eyes bulged a little, but he didn't protest as he handed over a pouch heavy with coin to the blond rogue. “What?” he said to

Aiden's disapproving expression. "We might need to bribe some people, or something. This is dangerous work, do you think we should do it for free?"

"I suppose not," Aiden shrugged. "It would seem to be a good opportunity to balance the books, as it were. Wouldn't you agree, sir?"

"For the sake of the Kingdom, I certainly hope so," Olaf replied soberly.

"They went out this door here, yes?" Colt called from across the room. Olaf nodded, and the big ranger responded by kicking the door off its hinges. With his sword drawn, he stepped outside into the near-darkness of early evening, with Aiden and the others quickly gathering their gear and supplies before following him outside.

"Please save her," Aislin said, looking up to Aiden as she handed him a sack full of food. "She was so nice to me, and didn't deserve to be dragged off like that."

"Don't worry," Aiden assured the little girl with a resigned sigh. "Apparently, this is what I do for a living."

Chapter Twenty Seven

As if sensing their need, Faolan awaited them just outside the rear door of the inn, sniffing around to find the scent of his prey. If Colt was pleased by the reappearance of his 'pet', he didn't show it, but with his help, it only took them a few minutes to find the concealed tunnel entrance - a covered hole in the ground, cunningly hidden near some bushes close to the north wall. Their departing enemies had carelessly left deep boot prints in the thick mud, and even the illumination provided by Nellise's prayer of light was sufficient to allow the ranger to follow them.

"They must have been in a hurry," Colt muttered, "That, or they're just stupid. Either way works for me."

"Fine, just don't go down there until I take a look," Pacian advised, waiting for Nellise to finish healing his arm, before cautiously approaching the hole for a closer look. "No sign of any tripwires at least; if they've lain in some traps, I can't see any."

"I do not find that reassuring," Sayana sighed, watching the proceedings with impatient frustration.

"Only one way to find out for sure," Pace replied with a shrug, and promptly climbed into the hole. Nearly a minute passed in tense silence before he signalled that it was clear down below.

"That's a hell of a climb, ladies, I don't recommend it," the blonde rogue's voice echoed up from below. "They've left a scaling ladder down here, though; just give me a moment to prop it up."

"I'll go first," Colt grunted. "If they've got people watching this end of the tunnel, blondie isn't going to give them much of a fight without someone to distract them. Faolan, get out of here before they close the gates," he said to the wolf, which tilted its head at the big man curiously, but then trotted off as he was bid. Aiden shook his head at the spectacle as Colt carefully stepped onto the proffered ladder, and slowly made his way down.

"Are you okay with this?" Aiden asked Nellise, who stood next to him, wrapped in the thick winter cloak that was her only real protection against the cold.

"I'm doing my best, but... I really didn't need this just now. However," she added, pre-empting Aiden's next comment, "the thought of Princess Criosia in the hands of the

men who attacked this town fills me with such anger as I have never felt before. I will not rest until she is freed, though I fear for her safety in the interim.”

“Okay, well, hang in there,” Aiden said, feeling stupid for saying so a moment later. The lack of sleep was starting to impair his thought processes, but there was no time for him to rest now.

“You too,” she replied knowingly, raising an eyebrow at his slurred words of encouragement, before lowering herself down into the hole. Sayana stepped forward and looked down, awaiting her turn to descend. Looking at her long, curly red hair and large sad eyes, Aiden felt a longing to reach out and hold her close. But his feelings for her were clouded and mixed, and he wasn't sure where he stood with her anymore. It was time for a little clarity.

“Are *we* okay?” Aiden asked her tentatively. She gave him a curious look, then her expression became harder as she realised what he was referring to.

“This is not the time or place to discuss it,” Sayana answered distantly.

“Just... give me something.”

“You *died*, Aiden,” she hissed under her breath. “No-one comes back from that without being changed somehow. I will assist you on this mission, for I sense its importance, but I... feel like you never came back from Akora,” the sorceress finished, a deep sadness replacing the distrust for a moment. “A dragon always exacts its price from those who deal with one. You will find out what it took from you someday, and only then will you understand.” Without further delay, she dropped into the hole, levitating down to the ground below.

Aiden knew she was quite insightful into such things, her abilities giving her information beyond that which could be obtained with mundane senses. But this time, it did not bode well for him, and until he could prove her wrong, their little dalliance seemed to be over. He wasn't sure there was really anything else there aside from physical attraction, but it would have been nice to find out. Pushing these thoughts to the back of his mind, he descended down the ladder to join the others.

The digging of this tunnel was quite an impressive feat, given that it was done without anyone in town ever noticing. It was easily fifteen feet deep, and wide enough for two armoured men to stand shoulder to shoulder. The smell of damp earth filled his nostrils, and the sounds of dripping water in the distance gave the tunnel an eerie atmosphere. He was eager to be through it and out the other side as quickly as possible.

“They're not that far ahead of us,” Colt grunted, crouched near the ground to read the footprints in the sodden earth. “It appears as though a whole bunch of 'em escaped from the town, though, and the Princess is being dragged, from the looks of these heavy indentations. She's not giving up without a fight.”

“Then let's keep going before we fall too far behind,” Aiden said, prompting the big man to lead them through the tunnel, with only Nellise's prayer of light to guide them.

“I don't know much about construction,” Pacian drawled, “but something tells me this tunnel wasn't built to last.” He was probably referring to the torrent of water streaming in from overhead, about twenty yards further down the tunnel. “It looks like this section goes right underneath the Stormflow river... it's just above our heads.” Nobody could avoid looking up at the ceiling, its porous dirt and sparsely placed wooden beams failing to instil them with confidence.

Aiden tried not to think about the countless tons of water just above their heads, as he jumped through a small waterfall gushing down from the ceiling in the middle of the passageway.

The tunnel continued on for nearly a hundred yards, which was simply astonishing, in terms of both the trouble the mercenaries had gone to, and the fact that it hadn't yet collapsed. Colt wasn't bothering to look for tracks anymore, for the passage was mostly straight, and did not feature any intersections or crossroads. Pacian, however, remained alert for signs of ambush and was constantly scouting ahead, just outside the lit area they travelled in.

The young man was starting to get very anxious, wondering just how long they were going to be underground, when they abruptly came to the end of the passageway. Pacian was crouched just beneath another tunnel, much like the one they had descended back in town.

"No ladder," he whispered. "They may have left a few men behind to ambush anyone coming through."

"Nel, the light," Aiden said, gesturing at the glowing radiance emanating from her helmet. She nodded, and the light faded, leaving them shrouded in darkness, aside from the thin sliver of moonlight coming down from above. "Sy, could you fly up there and check it out?"

"Good idea," Pacian added, "here, take this rope and tie it to something big." She silently took the rope and stepped forward, and began to enact her... whatever it was she did. Aiden knew a little about magic, and what she did was so far outside what he knew about the art, he wasn't even sure it was the same thing. But then, his magic shield and the little trick with his vision that she had taught him weren't exactly by the book either.

Her glowing tattoos momentarily lit up the immediate area of the tunnel, but were mostly diverted downwards by her heavy winter cloak. The writhing light faded after a few seconds, and they were returned to darkness, aware of her movement upwards through the shaft only by her shadow passing across the moonlight.

A tense silence fell across the group as they awaited the rope that would allow them to climb out. Instead, they were treated to a bright orange light, and the accompanying screams of men being burned. Colt swore loudly, and Aiden echoed his sentiments silently for as Pacian predicted, the wild girl had found enemies lying in wait, but had chosen to engage them by herself.

The sounds of crackling flames subsided and were replaced by the clash of steel, but still no cries for assistance were forthcoming. It was entirely possible that if she was outmatched, Sayana could simply float back down the tunnel, so Aiden hoped this meant she was winning the fight up above. Silence returned after nearly a minute of battle, broken only by the faint crackling of flames. Presently, the end of a rope tumbled down to them, giving Nellise a start, but it was a welcome sight for the rest of them.

Pacian was the first one up, disappearing over the lip of the tunnel in a matter of moments, while the rest of them had a little more trouble negotiating their way out. Aiden, climbing the rope last, emerged to the smell of charred flesh, something he had never experienced before meeting Sayana, and it probably wasn't the last time he'd encounter it. A few small fires crackled nearby, but the local vegetation was too damp to burn for long.

The wild girl had dispatched two men, armoured in chain mail and bearing the standard of the Steel Tigers mercenary company upon their shields. The tunnel had been perfectly placed, for with the nearby trees providing cover, the wall of Bracksford wasn't visible from this location.

"They were not expecting my silent rise from below," Sayana explained. "I had the initiative, so I took it. I apologise for taking so long with the rope, however."

"Sy, you did just fine," Pacian said viciously. "Can you see any tracks in this light?"

"Vaguely, though not with any great detail."

"Here, put these on," Aiden said, taking the lenses from his head and offering them to her. "Oh wait, you can't use them," he added, suddenly remembering the blinding effect she had experienced. "Colt, put these over your eyes, and see what you can find." The big man took the proffered device and strapped them over his eyes, as requested.

"These are bloody impressive," he grunted with amazement. "It's almost as bright as an overcast day out here." He spent a moment looking around at their surroundings, before focusing on the mess of tracks at their feet. "They're heading north-east, which I could have told you even without these things. There's a hell of a lot of 'em though, it's too messy to make out any further detail."

"What's north-east of here?" Sayana wondered.

"Within a day's travel? Nothing," Colt replied. "But roughly two days travel from here is Lachburne."

"Could they be using it as a base?" Aiden mused aloud.

"Only if the mercs attacked them first," Colt answered. "We'll just have to follow the tracks and see what we'll see."

"I don't think we'll be catching up to them tonight, though," Pacian added. "I don't know about you, but I was really looking forward to a proper meal and a night's rest before fighting an army."

"I couldn't agree more," Nellise mumbled, "but I can't stop thinking about Criosia in the hands of those mercenaries." She opened one of her pouches and produced her mortar and pestle.

"Oh no," Pacian groaned, "Not that energy tonic again."

"It's the only way we're going to keep on our feet," Nellise advised, sounding less than thrilled by the prospect of using the bitter-tasting tonic once more. "When it runs out, though, we'll want to be somewhere we can rest."

"Yes, I vividly recall what it felt like after it had run its course," Aiden sighed. "But if it must be done, so be it." The young cleric ground up the substance into a powder, then added some water and gave each of them a drink. Aiden couldn't help but spasm a little after swallowing the foul stuff.

"Guh," Pacian exclaimed, walking around in circles a few times after drinking his share.

"Quit complaining, and start jogging," Colt growled, giving Pacian a shove as he moved past him, leading them in the direction the tracks indicated.

As bad tasting as the stuff was, it certainly did the trick. They practically ran for the next hour or so, focused only on following Colt's silhouette against the clear moonlight. The trees of the forest were far behind them by the time the tonic had run its course, leaving them out in the middle of the open plains, far to the north of Coldstream, by the time they fell in a heap.

Aiden's head felt like it was going to split open, and his muscles ached like he had rarely felt before, so nobody objected to resting for a few hours. Although cold, they dared not light a fire in case it was spotted by prying eyes watching for signs of pursuit, so Aiden wrapped himself up in his winter blanket as best he could, and promptly fell into a deep sleep.

* * *

They started out again just after dawn, having downed a cold breakfast of cheese and bread with little enthusiasm before continuing their pursuit. With the foul weather of the last few weeks finally behind them, the cloudless sky above was a welcome sight, despite the cold. The distant heights of the Stonegaard Mountains were now visible and becoming noticeably closer with each passing hour. Colt paused every half-mile or so to make sure they were still on course to catch their prey, but the news wasn't good.

"If we hadn't stopped to rest, we might have caught up with the bastards," he spat, throwing in a few choice curses for good measure. "They continued through the night, and there's no chance of us catching up to them before they reach Lachburne."

"So they're definitely headed there?" Aiden asked, receiving a nod of confirmation from the big man. "And she is still with them?"

"No signs of dragging any more," Colt answered, "but one of these tracks is real deep, so I reckon she's being carried now."

"We're going to have to deal with them at Lachburne," Nellise warned. "If they had been attacked, would we not be able to see smoke by now?"

"If the town is a day's travel from here, yes, we would," Sayana stated. "We may still be too far away though."

"There are too many questions and not enough answers," Aiden said, ending the discussion. "We keep moving." They continued their pursuit throughout the rest of the day, resting only when they had to eat or drink, determined to close the distance between them and the mercenaries. It was hard going for Aiden, but of all the others, Pacian was the one having the most difficulty keeping up.

By the time the sun set that evening, Aiden's legs felt like they were made of lead, so he could only imagine what the others were feeling. The ground beneath them was covered in snow as they started moving into the foothills of the ever closer mountain range beyond.

This time, however, Colt didn't stop to make camp and Aiden knew he'd made the decision to keep moving, without even bothering to consult with the others. But deep down, Aiden didn't really want to stop, in spite of the discomfort – they'd made that mistake once before, and weren't about to repeat it.

Nellise had another dose of her tonic ready in case they needed it, but Aiden, for one, was reluctant to take any more, for the after effects were far worse than the tiredness he felt in his bones. The moon was waxing that evening, shedding enough light to travel by, especially with the reflection off the snow. Colt was concerned that it would give away their approach, but they didn't really have much choice.

It was still several hours before dawn when they came to the vineyards of Lachburne, left fallow at this time of year but still something of an obstruction to travel nonetheless.

They staggered to a halt, pausing to catch their breath for a few minutes, and to evaluate the situation.

"I guess we didn't catch them before they got to town," Aiden stated in-between ragged breaths.

"The mercs must have taken the town without a fight somehow," Colt puffed, "which means we're going to have to sneak in there to find the Princess, and probably find out what happened to the townsfolk while we're at it." All eyes turned to Pacian, who was flat on his back upon the cold ground, staring up at the clear night sky.

"Stop looking at me," he groaned knowingly, without having actually seen anyone looking at him. "I don't think I'm going to be much use for a while. Must... recover... strength."

"No time," Colt grunted. "We don't even know if the Princess is in the town, and if she ain't, well, we'll keep following the trail."

"Aiden can turn invisible, send him," Pacian pointed out, drawing all eyes to the young adventurer.

"*Could* turn invisible, just that once," he clarified hesitantly. "It was one of the incantations I found on a scroll in Ferrumgaard. I only have one of those left, and it won't help in this situation."

"Fine, I'll go," Pacian eventually muttered, sitting up and looking at Nellise. "Give me the damn tonic, and I'll go have a look around. Just don't expect too much from me after it runs out."

"I salute your sacrifice," Aiden said, glad he wasn't the one having to drink it.

"Ordinarily, I don't recommend drinking this if you're already fatigued," Nellise counselled as she handed a small vial to the blond rogue. "Unfortunately, we don't have a lot of choice here." He downed it in one shot, and then shuddered as the bitter taste hit the back of his mouth.

"Let's move in a bit closer to town so we can support Pace if he runs into trouble," Aiden instructed, then indicated to Colt that he should lead them in.

The five of them threaded their way through the neatly planted rows, unconsciously keeping low, in case they were spotted on their approach to the town proper. The vineyards were expansive, and it took them nearly ten minutes before they saw the rooves of houses in Lachburne, the town itself illuminated by lanterns hanging in the streets.

Pacian gave Aiden a pat on the back as he moved past, and disappeared into the darkness a few seconds later. The four of them remaining behind were able to take the time to rest a little more, the anticipation of a fight in their near future not enough to prevent them from sitting back to catch their breath after the long journey.

They only had a few minutes to recuperate, however, before Colt whispered "patrol," and hunkered down as low to the ground as he could. Aiden did likewise, but kept his line of sight just above the ground, so he could keep an eye on what was going on. Sure enough, less than a minute later, two armoured mercenaries strode past little more than twenty yards from Aiden's current position. They appeared to be monitoring the outskirts of town for any signs of pursuit, and from what he could tell, Aiden thought they appeared especially alert – there was no banter, no slumped posture, and their hands never strayed far from their sheathed weapons.

"There'll be a few of those patrols, I'd wager," Colt said after they were out of earshot. "Keep an eye out for Pace, I want to move in as soon as we can."

It took nearly fifteen minutes before Pacian showed up, practically landing right on top of Aiden without warning.

"Glad you weren't spotted," he began, slightly out of breath. "I need a drink, my water skin is empty." Aiden handed over his own skin, which was also starting to get low, although this didn't stop Pacian drinking every last drop within. "There are two patrols circling the town--"

"Yeah, saw them," Colt interrupted. "What about further inside town?"

"The residents have been rounded up and locked inside the town hall," he replied, throwing the empty water skin back to Aiden. "There's a dozen men keeping it under guard, but there aren't any signs that a battle was fought here. It's like the mercs walked down the main street and everyone just... *surrendered*."

"Any sign of the Princess?" Nellise asked, her voice tight with anxiety.

"She's not in the town hall, that much I could discern," Pacian whispered. "I – damn, another patrol, get down." Once more, they crouched down in the snow, hoping that they wouldn't be seen. The two mercenary warriors strolled past, oblivious to their presence.

"The only other building under heavy guard is a large manor house on the other side of town," Pacian continued when it was safe to do so. "Half a dozen men are keeping watch outside, three out front, three out back. I don't know for sure that Her Highness is inside, but given that it's a pretty luxurious house, it seems likely."

"At least that means they're treating her with respect," Nellise remarked.

"It also means they're keeping her as a hostage, not trying to assassinate her," Aiden added. "All right, we need to free the townsfolk before moving on that manor house. How far apart were they?"

"Oh, a good few hundred yards at least," Pacian said. "Why? You thinking of making some noise?"

"I'd like to avoid it, but if we just open the doors, those mercenaries might start killing them," Aiden warned. "Their behaviour in Bracksford leads me to think it's a distinct possibility."

"So we hit them hard and fast," Colt growled, "and get the people away from the manor before they retaliate."

"I don't think they will," Aiden suggested, "if Criosia *is* in that house, they won't leave it unguarded, even for a minute, especially if their force is under attack in another part of town."

"If we can gather those twelve guards in to one location, I think I might be able to vanquish them in one strike," Sayana added. This statement caused the others to pause and think of what would be required to kill a dozen men at once, and Aiden could only assume she was going to attempt to duplicate the fireball he had invoked back in the Akoran's cave.

"Are you sure you can do it?" he asked her quietly.

"Yes, I just need to get close enough," she answered with confidence.

"That makes our plan pretty simple," Pacian drawled. "We move in near the town hall, make a diversion to get them all in one place, and Sy kills them all with something really big. I'm guessing it'll be fire-related, am I right?"

"One thing I don't understand," Nellise said, completely focused on the task at hand, "if your counting is correct, then we are facing eighteen mercenaries in total, with

perhaps one or two more inside the buildings. How did they take over the town so easily with so few numbers?"

"A lot of them were killed in Bracksford," Aiden reminded her.

"She's right," Colt added, "They must have taken the town before today. Twenty men and one hostage wouldn't intimidate the town guards into submission that easily, unless they're all cowards of course. We're missing something... but we'll have to figure it out later, though, 'cause the sun is going to be up in a couple of hours, and we need to be done here before that happens."

"Right, enough talking, let's get to the town hall," Aiden agreed, looking around carefully for patrols, before leading his companions the remaining distance into Lachburne.

It was an orderly sort of place, the most recent town to be built in Aielund, and there was no shortage of money involved in its construction. The houses that lined the street were, for the most part, elaborately built, with arches, verandas, and elegant window frames. As they moved from house to house, avoiding the main street and its array of lanterns, they saw doors that had been kicked down, windows that had been smashed, but fortunately, there was no sign that anyone had been killed so far.

The hall was right in the middle of town, but Lachburne itself wasn't a huge place, so it was less than ten minutes for them to arrive at a shop just across the road from the hall, a massive, ornate building that commanded the attention of anyone passing by. The mercenaries were arranged around the front of the town hall, illuminated by lanterns hanging nearby.

If Pacian was correct, the dozen men Aiden could see from their position across the street were the only ones protecting that building. He could only assume that there was no rear entrance to the town hall, because he couldn't fathom why the mercenaries would leave another entrance unguarded.

"I hope there aren't any mercenaries inside who will harm the townsfolk as soon as we attack," Nellise whispered, crouched down next to Aiden in the shadows.

"If we do this fast enough, they may not have time," Aiden replied in equally hushed tones. "Besides, this will be quite a distraction, and we shouldn't discount the possibility that the people inside will seize the opportunity to break out. Sy, are you nearly ready?"

"Another moment or two," she replied absently, moving her arms in broad gestures as Aiden had seen her do before when the sorceress attempted to 'try something new'.

"Very well, I am prepared."

"Colt, how about you and Nellise start shooting them from here?" Aiden suggested. "I think that should draw their attention well enough."

"Not much of a plan, but sure, we can do that," the big man shrugged, drawing his longbow and taking aim at the nearby group. Nellise levelled her crossbow, and as soon as she was ready, they started peppering the mercenaries with arrows and bolts. The men reacted instantly, bringing up their shields to try and deflect the assault, with limited success.

Although momentarily startled by the assault, the Steel Tigers mercenaries quickly organised their defensive line, and started to push forward. Aiden was dismayed to notice that only half of their number were doing this, however, as the other six were holding back to use their crossbows. Half was better than nothing, and in a matter of moments,

the heavily armed warriors would be close enough to use their weapons – it had to be now.

“Sy, do it,” Aiden ordered, unconsciously moving back a step in anticipation of the fiery eruption. Sayana raised her hands, and a faint glow of light came from under her cloak as she channelled the huge amount of energy required to enact the spell.

“What’s taking so long?” Aiden whispered harshly after the ball of fire failed to appear.

“It’s not working,” she rasped, her voice tight with concentration. “I was doing it from memory, I must have-”

“We’re doing it the old-fashioned way, then!” Colt roared, dropping his bow and drawing his greatsword to meet the oncoming wave of mercenaries. Aiden cursed under his breath and drew his sword, summoning his force shield as he leapt into the fray. A burst of fire came from his left as Sayana managed to enact one of her usual battle magicks, which caught three of the warriors dead-on. They dropped to the ground and rolled, trying to put out the flames that engulfed them.

Colt made good use of the distraction, swinging his deadly blade at two of the remaining warriors, and being careful not to leave himself vulnerable to a counter attack. These men were no novices to combat, however, and were able to sneak in under the greatsword as it swung past, slashing and chopping at Colt’s torso despite the big man’s best efforts.

Aiden went one-on-one with the remaining fighter, and the two of them swung and chopped at each other for over a minute before Aiden finally landed a blow. The armour these men were wearing continued to confound the young man, and he wished he had more training in dealing with such equipment before launching into a campaign to fight a hundred such warriors.

Usually Pacian would have taken advantage of the situation to even the odds a little, but the blond rogue was nowhere to be seen. Aiden risked a brief glance behind him, and saw that Nellise was still shooting her crossbow at the mercenary archers, while Sayana was bathing the other three warriors on the ground in even more fire in an attempt to finish them off.

A cut to his leg brought Aiden’s focus fully back to the fight, and though he was slightly off-balance from the attack, he managed to recover his footing and, ignoring the pain, stabbed the warrior through his chain mail to score a nasty hit. Without waiting to see if he fell back, Aiden brought his blade across, slashing the mercenary across the neck.

The desperate move left Aiden open, however, and he was momentarily stunned when the fighter smashed the young man in the face with his shield. Both men were unable to continue the fight, and Aiden lost track of what was happening around him as his head reeled from the blow. The cacophony of noise from clashing blades and crackling flames jumbled together in his mind, until he could finally shake himself out of it and take stock of the situation.

His opponent lay on the ground, dying from the grievous wound Aiden had dealt, while Colt had managed to finish off his enemies. The sounds of people could be heard a short distance away, and looking up, Aiden saw dozens of men overpowering the mercenary archers standing outside the front of the town hall. Next to them, Pacian stood, watching the proceedings with satisfaction.

"Where the hell did you get off to?" Aiden asked his friend.

"Releasing the prisoners, of course," he replied casually, walking closer. "It was a simple matter to unlock the doors, while the guards were distracted with you lot."

"I was going to ignite the whole area in fire," Sayana explained, holding her left arm closely to her side, "it was unwise of you to be so close to the point of impact."

"Well, I figured you might not be able to do it, so I'd better come up with a backup plan... fortunately for you. A little further to the left and that crossbow would have pierced your chest, not your arm." Aiden looked closer at the wild girl, noticing that a large bolt was indeed sticking awkwardly out of her wounded arm. Of greater concern, though, was the look on her face as she stared at Pacian.

"You better get that seen to," Aiden advised cautiously, trying to divert her attention away from the glib rogue.

"All of you took a severe beating, actually," Pacian remarked, "so why don't you relax for a moment, while I talk to whoever is in charge over there."

"Okay, but just... be discreet," Aiden replied to Pacian's back. "And don't forget that there could be reinforcements coming from the manor, so keep an eye out in that direction."

"Just rest up for a moment," Nellise advised, taking a closer look at Aiden's face. "Your nose is broken, so I'm going to have to set it first."

"Is it going to hurt much?" he asked nervously.

"Quite a lot, I would imagine," she advised.

"Leave it for now, we've got too much to do," Aiden instructed, trying to sound dismissive in order to hide his reluctance to have his nose re-broken. Nellise took a closer look at his face, and then nodded in agreement.

"Perhaps you're right, it can wait until later," she said, gently touching his nose with one hand until he relaxed. A blinding, sharp pain exploded on Aiden's face a moment later, accompanied by a sickening 'crack' sound as Nellise re-set his nose. He managed to avoid shouting out extremely loud obscenities, but only through a supreme effort of will.

"Just sit down, Aiden," Nellise sighed, her hand on his shoulder, "That had to be done, though I wish it didn't have to be quite so uncomfortable for you. Relax for a minute while I call down some healing for us." Aiden simply closed his eyes and nodded, doing as he was told while his mind went over their plan.

Over the sounds of the young acolyte's healing prayers, he could hear Pacian speaking with a woman across the street. Pace fancied himself quite the ladies man, but either the gruelling journey had taken its toll on the blond rogue, or his tongue wasn't as silver as he thought, for the woman wasn't terribly impressed with him.

"You were quite specific, young man," she admonished him, "you said that twenty armed men were out here to support us, and I think you told us that just to ensure our aid, knowing full well--"

"Yes, I lied, I do that," Pacian muttered, tiring of the conversation. "But if there were twenty skilled warriors out here, we wouldn't have needed the aid of your townsfolk, would we? Honestly, if you couldn't figure that out, you deserve everything you got. But don't fret, you're all still alive, and you even saved the lives of my companions. I think you should congratulate your people, and possibly give them some money, since it looks like you have a lot of it to spare."

"Let me know when you're done here, Nel," Aiden whispered, "I need to get over there before Pace sets the whole town after us with pitchforks."

"He does have a unique way about him, doesn't he?" Nellise replied with a lingering glance at Pace as she lowered the crystal. "Your nose should be fine now, just... try to duck next time, okay?"

"I always *try*," Aiden said, giving her a quick pat on the shoulder which caused her to recoil instantly. Wincing at his mis-step, Aiden could only watch as Nellise struggled to suppress the memories that threatened to overwhelm her resolve.

"Go," she sobbed, turning away from him to try and compose herself. Aiden left her alone, as was her want, while mentally kicking himself for the slip. He couldn't admonish himself further, however, for the situation with the locals was rapidly turning into something decidedly less than friendly. Their leader was a woman, middle-aged, but attractive despite her years, with only a few streaks of grey running through her brown hair, and her sharp blue eyes spoke of an intelligent mind behind the face.

"Madam, may I know your name?" the young adventurer asked politely.

"Bethany Williams, Mayor of Lachburne," she answered sharply, pleased to see that someone was giving her some respect.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Bethany, but we're still in the middle of this fight, so I need you to take your people to the eastern edge of town while we finish up here."

"What else is going on here?" she asked suspiciously.

"The mercenaries that took over your town have Princess Criosia held captive in a large manor house just over--"

"My house?" Bethany interrupted, "they're holding her in *my house*?"

"It looks that way madam," Aiden nodded. "So, if you could take your people away to safety..."

"No wait," Pacian interjected, "Beth, do you have any... unusual ways in and out of the house?"

"You strike me as the sort of person to whom I would not normally give such information," she began with a withering look, "but under the circumstances..."

"Yes?" Aiden prompted her.

"There is a large rock leaning up against the back of the manor," Bethany told them. "On the western side, there is a loose brick, at roughly head height, although for you it would be shoulder height I suppose. Push it in, and the wall will part, allowing you access to a passage that will lead you into the study. I hope that helps."

"More than you know," Aiden said thankfully. "Okay, get your people to safety, we have this under control."

"Good luck, and God be with you," Bethany replied, turning to speak to the gathering townsfolk around her.

"Okay let's get over to the house, but keep to the darker parts of town," Aiden told Pacian as they rejoined the others. "We don't seem to have caught the attention of the other mercs over at the manor house," he told them, "so, maybe Sayana's inability to create that fireball was a blessing in disguise."

"I can do it, I just need some practice," Sayana protested, pouting a little.

"We have a secret way into the manor, so we're moving there now to see if we can sneak Criosia out of there without a fight," Aiden informed the other two.

“What about the local militia?” Colt asked. “With their help, we could just storm the place.”

“Colt, they surrendered without a fight, do you really think they're going to be much use here?” Aiden asked with only the slightest amount of condescension. “No, they're going to offer protection to the locals, and we're going to do this thing with some subtlety for a change. I'm tired of having various body parts broken and then re-broken to fix them.”

“Okay, let's just move already,” Pacian said impatiently, “that tonic is starting to wear off, and I don't think I'm going to be much use afterward.”

“Agreed,” Aiden nodded, and then indicated that his blond friend should get moving. A quick glance at Nellise prompted a quick nod in reply, indicating the poor woman was back in control once more.

Aiden retrieved his lenses from Colt as they started to follow Pacian as best they could, though he was a little too good at disappearing into the night at times. Still, they eventually wound their way through the streets to the Mayor's house, a sprawling, single-storey affair with elaborate gardens on every side. Crouched down at the low stone wall surrounding the manor, Aiden and his companions checked carefully for signs of mercenary guards patrolling the grounds.

“Three men at the rear entrance, three at the front, probably more inside,” Pacian whispered, after nearly a minute of careful observation. “They're all lit up by their lanterns too, so it wasn't exactly hard.”

“Have you seen the boulder Bethany mentioned?” Aiden asked.

“Yes, it's just around the corner from the rear entrance, in our direction, maybe twelve yards from where the guards are standing.”

“Perhaps a distraction would allow us to move inside undetected?” Sayana suggested.

“I was thinking that too,” Pacian agreed. “I'll just throw a rock over in that direction when you're ready to use the door, then follow you inside, okay?”

“Good move. Okay, let's get in close to that door,” Aiden instructed the rest, while Pace picked up a nearby rock and hefted it, testing its weight. Colt took the lead, keeping low as he moved over the wall, while Aiden followed just behind, trying to keep as quiet as possible. The chain shirts the two men wore did not make this easy, however, and even with cloaks and clothing baffling the noise a little, it seemed like every little movement was loud enough to call the attention of the guards. Fortunately, the snow underfoot was dry and soft, and muffled their footfalls quite effectively.

They arrived at the boulder without any alert going up, and crouched down next to it, ready to open the door as soon as Pacian threw the rock. They were just out of sight, around the corner, but Aiden could hear the jingling of their armour as they moved, trying to keep warm on the bitterly cold night.

The sound of something striking the wall at the other end of the yard caught their attention, moments later, and was clearly the sound of a rock hitting stone. Aiden recognised it as Pacian's diversion, so he quickly moved around the boulder and started feeling around for the loose brick. The sound of steel sliding from a scabbard sent his heart racing, but a quick glance confirmed that the guards had not yet rounded the corner to attack them.

After groping around on the brickwork for several frantic seconds, Aiden finally hit the right one, causing the wall next to him to open inwards. Thankfully, the mechanism was almost silent, aside from some minor scraping sounds as the bricks slid against one another. The passage beyond was dark, but to Aiden's augmented eyesight, it was easily navigable.

He led the way inside, hearing the light footsteps of his companions right behind him. Aiden couldn't stop to see if Pacian had caught up, or even if the guards had noticed their movements, and had to hope that everything was going as well as it seemed. The sound of the secret door closing behind them could be heard for a moment, the echoing of the stone tunnel magnifying the sound. The place stank of damp earth, and the faint dripping of water could be heard nearby. A flicker of light appeared in Sayana's palm, allowing them to see where they were going.

The passage wasn't all that long, being perhaps less than ten yards in total length, so Aiden found himself at the other hidden door within moments. Bethany hadn't mentioned how to open this one, but Sayana, standing right behind him, quickly pointed out a grimy lever on the wall next to them. Pulling it caused the wall in front of them to slide to one side, revealing a dimly lit room with plush furnishings and elegant design.

"Looks like a study, or office," Aiden whispered, stepping into the room to look around. There were three low-burning candles in the room providing the light, so Sayana let her flame vanish as she entered.

"I hear voices nearby," she said under her breath, standing cautiously with one hand on her axe handle. Aiden saw a closed door across the room, and upon taking a few steps closer, heard the faint, muffled sounds of people talking. He crept across the room and put an ear to the door, while the rest of the group moved into position around it in anticipation.

"Can you hear what they're saying?" Nellise asked. "I can't make it out."

"It's a little too muffled to understand them," Aiden replied, and was promptly shoved aside by Sayana. With her ear to the door, she began whispering what she heard, for the benefit of the others.

"...not part of the plan, Culdeny isn't important,' one man said. Another is replying... 'do you think they will just let us walk in there, with Criosia tied up, and let us board a ship? Securing Culdeny is paramount to our success, so follow your commander's orders, and this will all be over by sunset.' Oh no," Sayana added, catching Aiden's eye with her own piercing orbs.

"What is it?" Aiden hissed, sensing something amiss.

"The way that man is talking is very familiar... I *know* that voice."

"Who do you think it is?" Aiden asked in trepidation.

"That man from the Gentleman's club in Culdeny, Ronald Bartlett."

"Son of a bitch," Colt swore, a little too loudly for Aiden's liking.

"I think they heard that," Sayana gasped, pulling back from the door and preparing her protective magicks, while Aiden drew his sword and reflexively kicked the door in before anyone could come through it. He locked eyes with Bartlett, standing in the middle of the room, with five armoured men running towards them, weapons at the ready.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Aiden only caught a glimpse of the room beyond, but immediately noticed an ornate door directly across the twenty foot space, and a hallway to the right. The five mercenaries would be on them in moments, and as the novice warrior braced himself for a fight, he was suddenly pulled to the side and replaced in the doorway by Colt, or more specifically, Colt's blade.

The big ranger held it level, pointed directly at the charging warriors, who abruptly changed direction at the last moment to avoid a painful collision, parting to either side of the five-foot sword. Pacian darted through the doorway, right down the middle of the mercenaries, and charged straight past Bartlett, heading for the front door.

"Hold them!" one of the mercenaries - probably an officer - shouted to his men, then followed the startled businessman as he ran down the hallway, while the blond rogue quickly locked the front door, and started moving furniture in front of it.

Even as this was happening, Colt wasn't waiting for the closest warriors to regain their footing, instead taking the initiative and charging forward, swinging his sword only once before hurtling shoulder first into two of the men. Aiden followed him through, but ran straight in-between the disorganised mercenaries and set off in pursuit of Bartlett and his escort. Somewhere in this house, Princess Criosia was being held, and it was a fair bet to assume that the corrupt businessman was heading there as fast as possible to kill her or use her as a hostage to escape the situation - Aiden couldn't allow either to happen.

The hallway was dimly lit by candlelight, not enough to make out fine details, but more than sufficient to see the silhouettes of the men before him less than ten yards away. Slowed by heavy armour, and in Bartlett's case, age, Aiden was closing the gap, until they appeared to split up at the end of the corridor - the warrior went to the right, while Bartlett continued on down the passage on the left.

A brief moment of indecision flashed through the young adventurer's mind, but it wasn't really a tough call to make - he wanted Bartlett, the man responsible for this entire situation, and that other mercenary would get what was coming to him soon enough.

Aiden dashed around the corner in pursuit of the old businessman, and could see him at the end of the corridor, opening a heavy door. A woman's scream pierced the air, coming from somewhere behind him, bringing Aiden to a screeching halt. It was clear he'd fallen for a ruse, and he cursed under his breath at the cunning old man, who knew he'd be the primary target of any attack.

Torn between continuing after Bartlett simply out of spite and allowing him to escape, Aiden froze in the middle of the hallway, watching the door close as the old businessman slammed it shut behind him. The sounds of a desperate struggle finally snapped Aiden back to reality, and he spun around and rushed back up the passage to the door the officer had gone through, slamming his shoulder into it without slowing down, splintering the lock and throwing the door wide open.

The room itself was not large, seeming to be a small guest room with a bed at one end, and a dresser and wardrobe across from the door. His dramatic entrance hadn't surprised the mercenary officer, who was holding a slender blonde girl with one of his arms wrapped around her neck, and an arming sword in his free hand. Aiden had never seen Princess Criosia Roebec in person before, and had only heard descriptions about her from time to time, but he had no doubt he was looking upon royalty - being held captive by some degenerate mercenary.

“Hold it right there, boy,” the heavily armoured mercenary ordered him, his voice sounding hollow and metallic from behind the visored helm he wore. “The lady and I are going to leave right now, and you and your mates are going to let it happen, understood?”

“What's the matter, you afraid to fight a 'boy' like me?” Aiden chided, hoping to goad the warrior into a fight. “A real man wouldn't be hiding behind a little girl, I think.”

“In any other situation, I'd be happy to oblige you,” the man growled, “but right now, I've got places to-”. His speech was cut off by a cry of pain, and he flinched to one side, letting Crios fall away, revealing that the young lady had a bloodied piece of silverware in her right hand. The enraged officer swiped her across the side of the head with his mailed fist, sending her crashing into the wall and onto the ground, then swung his sword at Aiden in the same motion. The young man was prepared for this, and managed to parry the blade, but was instantly on the defensive against the powerful warrior's assault.

Sparks flew from his blade as he parried each attack from the mercenary, while trying not to be pushed back into a corner where there would be no escape. He ducked underneath a wild swing from the officer, and rushed around the side to get himself into a better position. Unfortunately, he met the warrior's armoured knee with his chest, propelling him sideways into the wall.

Discarding subtlety, Aiden picked himself up and lunged at the mercenary, crashing directly into him and bowling both of them over. The novice warrior slammed his sword hilt into the helmeted head with a resounding 'clang', but it seemed to have minimal impact upon the man, who responded by slamming his elbow into Aiden's head. He managed to hold on, but his head was ringing from the blow and it took him a moment to refocus on the fight.

Again the mercenary used his armoured forearms as his main weapon, punching Aiden in the gut and heaving him over onto the floor. His sword went skittering across the polished floorboards and under the nearby bed, but Aiden didn't have time to retrieve it, for the officer didn't even bother standing up – instead, he rolled over, sword held high, and brought it slamming down into the spot Aiden had been a split second before.

His adrenaline pumping, Aiden tried to scramble away from the warrior but one of his legs was held and he couldn't get away. In desperation, he reached over his shoulder and grabbed the handle of his sceptre, pulling it out and swinging it at his opponent. The weapon impacted on top of his opponent's head, connecting with his helm and leaving a sizeable dent in it.

The mercenary staggered backwards for a moment until he regained his footing, but it gave Aiden the precious time he needed to get back on his feet, for now the tables had turned. Holding the sceptre out before him, he spoke the command word and a brilliant shaft of light sprang forth, slicing the armour protecting the officer and burning the flesh underneath.

Roaring with pain, the mercenary charged, catching Aiden completely off guard. The officer crashed into the young man, slamming him into the wardrobe, which, as it turned out, was constructed of thick, hard wood. Aiden was momentarily winded, and tried to push the warrior out of the way, but he was held fast by a gauntleted hand. The mercenary stepped back, and brought his sword across in a wide slash, severing the front links of Aiden's chain shirt, and drawing blood from the wound.

Panic started to set in as the young man knew he was completely outmatched by this opponent, so he started swinging the sceptre wildly, hoping to do enough damage to

finish off his implacable foe. Aiden managed to score a few hits, but it was always an armoured part of the man, who was clever enough to position himself to avoid the worst of the damage.

Aiden was in mid-swing when the mercenary suddenly stiffened, giving him hope for a moment that he'd actually done some damage to the warrior. Aiden watched in disbelief as the mercenary officer suddenly dropped to the ground, revealing the rather battered form of Crios, standing there, looking down at her victim, her hand clutching a small but sharp carving knife.

Aiden leaned back against the wall and slid to the ground, his breath coming in short gasps as he was flooded with relief. Out in the hallway, he could hear the sounds of battle dying down, and he could only hope his companions had managed to survive. He sat there, exhausted, looking up at the young lady who was trembling like a leaf, so much so that she dropped the small knife to the ground, which clattered off the breastplate of their fallen enemy. Her elegant blue dress was torn, the lower half was in tatters, and her silky blond, shoulder-length hair was unkempt and matted with blood.

"Nice work with that knife, Princess Crios?" Aiden asked, seeking confirmation. The young lady nodded silently, her sight still focused on the body of her assailant.

"Are you injured, Highness?" Aiden continued when no other reply was forthcoming.

"I'm... a little, yes," she replied in a shaking voice. "But I am more concerned about you at the moment, sir. Your chest..." Aiden looked down and saw that the front of his tunic was soaked with blood, but strangely, he didn't feel any pain, probably because the adrenaline from the fight was still pumping through his veins.

"Yes, I'm sure that's going to hurt quite a lot in a few minutes," he remarked distantly. "But that blaggard hit you quite hard, so I think we'd better get your head wound looked at."

"Oh it's nothing, I assure you," she gushed, trying to fix up her dress in places where it was a little too revealing, even though the entire lower portion had been ripped away at some point, leaving tatters covering her thighs. "One of those cads tried to tear off my dress and... that's how my clothing came to be in such a state. Their commander stopped him, however, and even slapped him with his mailed glove, saying that I wasn't to be touched in that fashion."

"Who, this chap?" Aiden asked, looking down at the fallen officer. "He didn't seem all that honourable to me, three minutes ago."

"No, he is just one of their lieutenants," the young lady informed him. "Their commander left here a few hours ago, making for Culdeny. I'm afraid something dreadful is going to happen there!" The sounds of heavy footsteps approaching could be heard out in the hallway, and within moments, Colt stuck his head in through the shattered remains of the door.

"I guess you found her then," he grunted. "Why are you bleeding so much?"

"This young man just saved my life," the Princess retorted, her voice regaining strength with every passing moment as she recovered from the shock of her experience. "I would thank you to show some decorum, and perhaps even a little respect."

"Aiden has my respect," Colt replied gruffly, but with noticeable deference. "I was just trying to... never mind. Nel! Get down here, Aiden's hurt pretty bad."

"That's more like it," Criosia remarked. "May I confer from your attire, sir, that you are a ranger?"

"Yeah, something like that," Colt replied, staggering into the room and practically falling down onto the bed. The sound of hurried footsteps coming down the hallway could be heard, until Nellise appeared at the shattered door, and entered. She glanced around the room and as soon as she laid eyes upon Criosia, her usually calm demeanour disappeared.

"Your Highness," she breathed, offering a formal curtsy to the young princess, which looked very odd considering the armour she was wearing.

"Oh, please don't," Criosia replied, "this is hardly the time or the place. Just call me Criosia."

"Certainly, Highness," Nellise said, apparently not having heard the previous sentence. "Your dress... did those men try to--"

"Tried, yes, but I'm quite alright, I assure you," Criosia interrupted. Aiden looking warily at Nellise, seeing a familiar look in her eyes as Criosia's appearance brought back unwanted memories. She ran a gloved hand through her long hair, and looked like she was struggling to maintain her composure.

"Wait, Nellise, stay with us now," Aiden exclaimed, trying to keep her focused. The poor young cleric had been thrown into this situation with hardly any time to recover, and the constant challenges had actually done her some good, keeping her mind busy. But in all the confusion and conflict, Aiden had almost forgotten that such traumas are not so easily forgotten.

"Are you not well?" Criosia asked with uncertainty, looking back and forth between Nellise and Aiden, trying to ascertain what was going on.

"Nellise will be fine, because we're safe, and nothing will hurt her ever again," Aiden said in a soft voice. These words were aimed at Nellise, and had the desired effect of calming the acolyte and bringing her attention to the pressing needs of the moment, such as Aiden slowly bleeding to death from a chest wound. She looked at him with fond appreciation, and a little of that blind faith the young man knew was keeping her going.

"Let me take a look at that," Nellise said, wiping a stray tear from her face, and kneeling down beside him to tend to his injury. As she started to whisper her prayers, with one hand upon the injury, Pacian and Sayana entered the doorway, the blond rogue leaning heavily upon her as they slowly made their way to a nearby couch.

"When you have a moment, Pace needs tending to," she suggested, carefully depositing him onto the couch.

"Everyone just sit back and relax," Nellise instructed. "I shall enact a group healing prayer, since we're all looking rather battered at the moment. Please, your Highness, sit down, and your head wound shall be mended."

"Oh, you're that proficient?" Criosia remarked, sitting down at a small desk. "How fortunate, I didn't realise Lachburne had such clerical skill at their local chapel."

"No, I'm from Culdeny," Nellise clarified. "Perhaps Aiden can explain while I heal."

"Sure, it's not like I'm in terrible pain, or anything," he muttered, with more than a little sarcasm. "I'm sorry, your Highness, but we don't represent a large, armed force that was sent to rescue you. We're just a group of people caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, but with the right skills to make a difference. I'm Aiden Wainwright, and this

talented young lady is Nellise Sannemann. Over there is Pacian Savidge, Sayana Arai, and *Dante* Colt.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you all,” Criosia replied warmly, “and you have my deepest gratitude for your timely intervention.”

“Timely?” Colt asked politely, having glared at Aiden since his taboo first name had been mentioned.

“Yes, later today, they were going to move me to Culdery, after seizing control of the port. Heaven knows what they had planned for me.”

“It’s a shame I had to let Bartlett go,” Aiden mused, feeling more relaxed as the healing energies did their work, filling the air with a pleasant summer breeze, as always. “He probably could have told us everything we needed to know. Hey, what happened out in the main room anyway?” he asked of Colt.

“We won,” he shrugged in reply. “The ones we locked outside ran around the back, but they never came in. Not sure what happened there, but I’m guessing they probably ran off with Bartlett. Faolan showed up, so I’ve put him on guard duty in case I’m wrong. If you hear him tearing someone’s hand off, you can probably assume we’ve got trouble.”

“We already do,” Criosia said ominously. “I overheard the cads who kidnapped me, who are even now heading to Culdery with the intention of laying siege to the town.”

“I appreciate your concern,” Aiden replied tiredly. “But what do you expect us to do about it? They’ve got a full company of a hundred men or more, and we’re just five people.”

“I’m certain that Mayor Bethany would contribute some of the local militia to the fight,” she corrected him. “And of course, I would be going along as well.”

“You?” Aiden exclaimed, suddenly fully awake. “We just went to a great deal of trouble to get you out of harm’s way, and you want to head straight back into it?”

“Given the choice, I would, of course, prefer to remain some place safe,” she explained, “but I will not sit idly by while treasonous men like Ronald Bartlett plot to take my father’s kingdom away from him!”

“I like her,” Sayana remarked. “You have spirit, and conviction, but can you fight?”

“Well, I’d certainly be dead without her help,” Aiden commented. “And I’ll never look at cutlery in quite the same way again.” Criosia beamed at him, buoyed by his support for her position.

“I have been trained by experts in swordsmanship, magic, and... a few *other* skills for most of my life, so I assure you, I can hold my own,” Criosia said.

“Much better,” Nellise murmured absently, checking Aiden’s chest wound as she completed the healing. “How is your head, Princess?”

“Much better, thank you,” Criosia replied.

“Good, then you should be escorted back to Bracksford, where you will be safe,” she told her firmly. “I have seen more than my share of battle in these last few weeks, and I would not wish it upon anyone, especially for someone so young.”

“I’m nearly eighteen!” Criosia protested, managing to sound a little like a spoilt twelve year-old in the process. “And that is precisely the attitude my father had, leaving me at Fort Highmarch for months, while he went off to wage war.”

“And look what happened when you decided to leave,” Colt grunted. “At the first opportunity, you get kidnapped by an enemy of the Crown. Nice work there, I’d love to have you on the front line with us.”

"Sarcasm is the refuge of the simple mind," Criosia replied archly, clearly not knowing who she was talking to. The sound of the front door opening, closely followed by screams, and the snarl of a wolf interrupted the conversation.

"Shit, he can't tell the difference between our allies and the enemy," Colt exclaimed, leaping off the bed, and rushing through the doorway to diffuse the situation out front.

"Did I just hear a wild animal?" Criosia asked with trepidation.

"Yes, he's kind of Colt's pet," Aiden assured her. The people outside had calmed down somewhat, and soon the sounds of hurried footsteps could be heard approaching. Bethany, along with three other young ladies appeared at the doorway, looking relieved.

"Your Highness, I am so glad to see you safe," she exclaimed, stepping inside the room and taking stock of the situation. "Sarah, go and fetch some warm clothes for these people," she instructed one of the young women. "A blouse and tunic for the red-headed lady and this gentleman on the floor, and a new dress for the Princess. Carol, bring some hot food, and if you can't find any, make some!"

"Sarah, fetch me a pair of trousers and a tunic instead, if you would?" Criosia corrected. "Bethany, I require some of your militia to accompany us to Culdeny, so please instruct your ranking officer to have them ready to march in fifteen minutes," she added, framed in such a way as to expect automatic acquiescence.

"Wait a minute," Pacian croaked, sitting upright for the first time since being deposited upon the couch. "We didn't agree to anything, yet. Culdeny is over forty miles from here, and we practically *ran* from Bracksford to get here and save you."

"And now, I need you to run with me to save Culdeny," Criosia said coolly. "If they haven't been attacked already, then they soon will be. They don't have the manpower or the defences to withstand a concerted assault."

"Funny, neither do we," Pacian mumbled tiredly.

"All we need to do is remove their leadership," Criosia persisted. "They are mercenaries - without their command structure, the attack will falter, and they will scatter to the winds."

"She's right about that," Colt remarked, leaning against the doorway. "Once they lose the man paying their wage, they're likely to bugger off. We'd have to hit them from behind, of course, but if we go straight there, and make sure the attack is under way before we strike... you know, we could probably do it." Aiden picked himself up off the floor and dusted himself off.

"Beth, do you have any horses in town?"

"I did have my own beloved mounts that I refused to give up when the King's quartermaster came through," the Mayor replied hesitantly, "but the fleeing mercenaries have taken them."

"Yeah, I was expecting something like that," Aiden sighed. "I'm not asking anyone to run forty miles until we've rested up a bit. I'm sorry, Highness, but if we run into a battle in this condition, we're not going to last long."

"I understand," she nodded. "The sun is about to rise, and we've all had a long night. Let us rest for a few hours, and then march in strength."

"If we time it right, we could hit them just after dawn tomorrow," Colt mused, rubbing his unshaven stubble thoughtfully. "We'll be coming in from the east, and they'll have the sun in their faces." Aiden sighed and lowered his head, thinking of the

incredible effort every one of his companions had already given for this country, and wondering if he dare ask one more task of them.

He looked at each of them in turn, and saw only patience, awaiting his decision. That they would defer to him in this, of all things, was remarkable, considering the problems they'd had in the recent past.

"I'm going," Aiden finally stated, "but I can't speak for any of you. This is a big task, no matter which way you look at it, and we might not all make it through to the end this time. Have a meal and get some sleep, and let me know what your decision is when you're rested."

"No need," Colt grunted. "It's my duty to do as the Crown bids, and she bids that I go save Culdery. So that's what I'm gonna do."

"Culdery is my home," Nellise said quietly. "I will do my part to defend it, and if that requires me to give my life, then I do so gladly, that others might be saved." Aiden smiled back at her, seeing the strength within her slowly reassert itself.

"You will need me," Sayana stated. "How else do you expect to slay so many warriors with so few of your own?"

"I was rather hoping you'd say that," Aiden replied, genuinely pleased that she chose to come along. Though she still seemed wary about him, she was at least prepared to fight alongside him one more time, despite whatever risk she thought he posed to her. Finally, Aiden looked to Pacian expectantly.

"Need you ask?" he replied, barely awake.

"Of course not, in fact, I was just about to volunteer you for the job."

"Just so long as I get paid," he mumbled back.

"Well, I guess you have your answer, Highness," Aiden told Criosia with a smile.

"Smashing," she remarked with satisfaction, as servants reappeared with clothes and a warm stew, presented in small wooden bowls. It only took the hungry adventurers a couple of minutes to finish that off, so more was brought in.

After they had eaten their fill, Criosia ushered the ladies off into another room to change, while Pacian dozed off on the couch and Colt fell asleep on the bed. Aiden didn't really feel like sleeping on the floor, so he heaved himself upright and slowly went off in search of another bedroom. Bethany's house had been turned into an impromptu base of operations, where the Mayor was directing her staff and local businesses to tend to their wounded, and ready their soldiers for the coming battle.

A group of four such men, clad in chain mail, were standing near the back door to the manor, and seemed to be comforting one of their number. Curious, Aiden walked down to see what was going on, and to find out if the men he was essentially going to be leading into this fight were actually up to the challenge.

"It's a war, mate, these things are gonna happen," a man wearing Sergeant's insignia was saying, "What this bloke was doing in the middle of a fight is anyone's guess."

"What happened here?" Aiden asked as he approached. The soldier they were talking to was younger than Aiden, and was clearly distraught.

"Oh, Mister Wainwright isn't it?" the Sergeant queried as they turned. He was an older man with a grey moustache and close-cropped hair, probably brought out of retirement to fill the ranks out a little. "Dreadful business here, sir, one of the tragedies of war. Young Corporal Medwin here, in diligent pursuit of his duty, has unfortunately attacked and killed a civilian caught in the midst of this unpleasantness, sir."

"This happened within the last hour, Corporal?" Aiden asked of the young lad.

"Yes, it... *he* just came out of nowhere, sir," Medwin replied, his face a picture of remorse. "It was dark, I could hardly see the ground in front of me, and I thought he was one of them mercs, trying to get away. So, I swung me sword and he went down without a fight, God forgive me!"

"Where exactly did this happen?" Aiden inquired, an interesting notion forming in his mind.

"Out in the back yard of the Manor, Mister Wainwright," the Sergeant supplied.

"Excuse me for a minute," Aiden said, opening the back door and stepping outside. He put his lenses back over his eyes so that he could see clearly, and quickly spotted the body in question, less than fifty yards from the door. The young man walked over there, noting that the squad of militia were following him some distance behind, bringing with them a lantern.

When he reached the body, Aiden could barely hold back a grim smile. Lying face-down in the snow was Ronald Bartlett, who had met his untimely end by the actions of a local lad. The young adventurer could hardly think of a more appropriate punishment for his crimes. Aiden leaned over and quickly went through the man's pockets, hoping there might be something of value on him. What he produced was a short note on a folded piece of paper.

He read through it by the light of the lantern, and instantly knew he had stumbled across an important piece of information.

"You can breathe easy, Medwin," Aiden told the young man as they caught up with him. "By a quirk of fate, what you've done here isn't an atrocity, but in actual fact a service to the kingdom."

* * *

Aiden's dreams were a tumult of nightmares that night, but thankfully the only one he could remember upon waking was the image of a man, obscured by a steel helm, choking him to death. He shuddered as he disentangled himself from the blankets, subconsciously clawing at his throat with the memory of that nightmare still vivid in his mind.

The sun was well and truly up by now, the light seeping in around the thick curtains from Bethany's guest room, providing dim illumination. Aiden estimated that it was roughly two hours before noon, giving them little time to prepare before marching on Culdeny, if they wanted to be in position for their strike.

He could still hardly believe they were going to attempt this, especially with a member of the royal family in tow, but no matter which way he looked at it, their only other choice was to let Culdeny burn, and that was no choice at all. Aiden had met many of the people in that town, and the thought of an army tearing apart those paved streets was more than he could bear.

The young man climbed out of bed and dressed himself, noting the amount of rust evident on his blade as he strapped it to his hip, and lamenting the fact that they just hadn't had the time to maintain their equipment in the desperate rush across the countryside.

Aiden picked up the sceptre and examined it closely, noting that it was bearing several minor dents from impacting with the mercenary officer's armour last night. But more than that, one of the crystals had shattered, too. He focused upon it, using the visualisation technique that Sayana had taught him a week or so back which allowed him to see the aura of energy surrounding empowered relics. Either he was doing it incorrectly, or the ancient sceptre had fought its last battle.

Aiden was fully dressed and ready to leave within ten minutes, though it was an exercise in willpower to move his sore muscles around that fast. Upon entering the common room of the manor, he saw that the others were in a similar state of readiness, though Pacian was sprawled on a nearby couch, clearly in need of more than half a night's sleep to recover from the aftermath of yesterday's strenuous action. Sayana and Colt were looking the worse for wear too, but not as much as Nellise, who seemed like she'd hardly slept at all.

At the other end of the room, Princess Criosia sat, finishing off a late breakfast of eggs, toast and bacon. She was looking radiant, even wearing the simple utilitarian clothes she had chosen for today's journey, and Aiden found himself gazing at her silky blond hair and bright blue eyes for a long moment before he snapped himself out of it. He hadn't acted this way around a woman since he had first met Nellise, and he'd hoped that he was finally past his innate shyness. Then again, she was a princess, after all, and perhaps it was normal to feel a little overwhelmed in her presence.

"Ah, the hero of the day is finally awake," she declared, spotting Aiden across the room. "Come, eat your fill while you can, we'll be covering a lot of ground before we reach our destination, and you'll need your strength."

"Hero of the day, eh?" Aiden remarked, walking across the room to find a hot bowl of stew being served to him by one of Bethany's staff. "Need I remind you, Highness, that it was you, in fact, who saved *me* last night?"

"I could not have done it without you," she smiled up at him, "so we'll call it even, shall we?"

"Sounds good to me," Aiden replied clumsily, feeling a blush covering his cheeks. If Criosia noticed, she had the good grace not to mention it.

"Your Highness, I'm a little concerned about your safety," Aiden said, as he dabbed at his stew with some fresh bread.

"Not this again," Criosia sighed, sitting back in her chair and looking defiant. "I assure you, the matter of my accompanying you to Culdeny is settled, and no amount of persuasion will convince me otherwise."

"I wasn't talking about that, as such," Aiden added quickly. "Simply that you're wearing... *clothes*, and not armour. Just ask Sayana, the red-headed young woman over there; she'll tell you how useful clothes are in a fight. At least you've secured a sword for yourself, although I hope you're not planning on fighting on the front line."

"It's a rapier, not a sword," Criosia corrected him, "and I will make myself as useful as the situation warrants. I only wish those thieving mercenaries hadn't stolen my spellbooks, then I'd show them what's what." Aiden had heard her mention something about her magical talents last night, but he found it hard to believe.

She was only seventeen, a few months younger than him, and even the most ardent of students usually required a decade or more to gain some control over the dangerous primordial energies which manifest during incantation.

Sergeant Evans, The old soldier Aiden had met last night, was leading the squad of six men that would accompany them on their journey. Bethany made it clear that the princess was to be kept out of harm's way, although the slightly smug look on Her Highness's face suggested she was probably going to order them to let her do what she wanted anyway. Aiden was rather impressed with her attitude – this was no spoilt little girl trying to get her way, and despite the sheltered life she must have led, Criosia seemed to have a grasp on just what was going on around her.

They left via the rear door of the manor, attempting to keep a low profile in case the Steel Tigers had left scouts behind to watch for pursuit. By the time they had left Lachburne, it was almost noon, giving them eighteen hours to get to Culdeny.

Colt found the trail left in the snow by the departing mercenaries easily enough, and followed their course as they headed directly for Culdeny. The big man stressed that they should move in along the eastern highway, instead of taking a direct route, which reduced the chances of them encountering ambushes as they approached the town. Sergeant Evans politely took his advice, although he clearly thought himself in charge of the operation.

The men under his command were a mix of young lads just out of training, and some older men just on the edge of retirement from active duty. The King's army had swept through all of Lachburnshire too, leaving the garrison of many smaller towns dangerously low. Nevertheless, they seemed eager and willing to pitch in, and the presence of the attractive young princess certainly had a positive effect on their morale too.

Colt stayed in the lead, keeping the Stonegaard Mountains to their right as he moved briskly across the snow-covered plains of north-central Aielund, the air crisp and cold as the ground slowly began to incline. As the light began to wane, Pacian spied something on the horizon that sent a cold chill down Aiden's spine – a plume of dark smoke was rising into the leaden sky ahead of them, which meant that Culdeny was already under attack.

"I can't imagine why they're on the offensive already," Colt growled, clearly angry with himself for making assumptions about the enemy's plans. "It doesn't make sense to attack on an evening; they won't be able to see what the hell they're doing in about two hours."

"Well, something's burning down that city, and I don't think there are a lot of other armies out there," Pacian replied sharply. Colt held his tongue, and pushed on even faster than before, knowing that answers would lie ahead, and now they were even more pressed for time. Aiden's legs ached with each step as they sank deep into the snow, but he pushed thoughts of discomfort from his mind, as the image of smoke rising from Culdeny was vivid within his mind.

Shortly thereafter, Colt steered them to the right, taking them away from the tracks that they had been following for most of the day, which meant they were only hours away from the besieged town. They'd be in the foothills very soon, but as soon as the cliffs of the northern coast were in sight, they'd be turning west towards Culdeny, instead of east, into the mountains.

The days were still short at this time of year, though Aiden was certain they'd passed the winter solstice by now. With only a short break to nibble on some trail rations, they travelled uninterrupted as the sun sank below the western horizon, and into the night. A dull red glow lit the sky to their north-west, an ominous sign of the destruction that was being unleashed upon the town.

There was a crescent moon peeking through the thin layer of clouds that evening, providing enough light to see by. Sayana and Aiden took the lead, her natural vision, combined with his enhanced sight, allowed them to see any obstructions that would impair their progress. The dull roar of the sea could be heard somewhere up ahead, but it was a different sound that caught Sayana's sharp hearing, and caused her to stop dead in her tracks.

"Did you hear that?" she asked with a trembling voice. Aiden listened carefully, but couldn't hear anything other than their companions footsteps through the snow, and the distant sound of the sea.

"I hear nothing out of the ordinary," he replied.

"It was the growl of a large beast, far in the distance," she explained. "I- there it is again!"

"Okay, that time I heard it," Aiden uttered in fear, having heard exactly what she described this time. Though they probably couldn't see each other's expressions in the darkness, his lenses allowed Aiden to see the uncertainty on their faces. "Anyone care to venture a guess as to what that was?"

"You hear all sorts of things during a war," Sergeant Evans volunteered between heavy breaths. "That could have been the groan of a siege engine, or the collapse of a building."

"This far away from Culdeny?" Nellise queried.

"We're wasting time," Colt growled. "Evans is right, it was probably something big falling over. We need to get there as soon as possible, or there ain't gonna be a town left to save." Too tired to argue, Aiden pressed on, with a reluctant Sayana by his side.

Nearly half an hour later, his legs practically numb from the exertion, Aiden finally stepped out onto the eastern highway, a long, straight stretch of road that followed the cliffs of northern Aielund all the way through the Stonegaard mountains, and through to the capital, Fairloch, nearly a week's travel from their current location.

Nobody had heard any more of the sounds similar to the deep growling noise they had encountered earlier, but one of the first things Aiden saw when he stepped out of the brush was a scene of devastation.

The smell of charred flesh and burnt wood wafted through the air, and the smouldering remains of a large fire could be seen just up the road a little. Fearing the worst, Aiden cautiously led the others closer, sensing that whatever happened here was long since over. There were a dozen bodies lying upon the ground, clad in metal armour that had partially melted from the heat. Nearby trees were blackened and charred, as if the entire area had been blasted with fire of incredible intensity.

"What could have done this?" Criosia asked with a trembling voice as they searched amongst the wreckage. The Princess suddenly retched, and dashed off into the bushes to throw up, closely followed by two of the younger soldiers who had yet to see death up close, who could also be heard retching in the nearby bushes.

"I've got tracks over here," Colt said grimly. "Mostly theirs, I think, judging by the boot prints. They were running from the east as fast as they could... running from something, I reckon. Whatever hit them, it happened while they were moving... there's no sign of a fight, they just... burned."

"Help, I've found someone!" came Criosia's sudden cry from the side of the road. Aiden and the others immediately rushed over to her position, to see a terribly burned

man lying in the snow, just beneath a large bush. He was alive, though only just, and as Nellise brought forth a prayer of light, they could see that he was covered in burned skin, and must have been in terrible pain.

"You're going to be okay," Nellise told him gently as she knelt down beside the man, her crystal in one hand as she started healing his extensive wounds.

"I've never heard a cleric lie like that before," the burned man managed to choke out, exhibiting remarkable bravado considering his condition.

"She's the finest healer in these parts, friend," Colt told the man, "she's gonna have you on your feet, and back in the fight in no time."

"No thanks," he gasped, "I don't want to fight that thing."

"You saw what attacked you?" Pacian asked.

"Dragon," came the dreaded reply, "it was a dragon. Size of a house..." Aiden felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up, and a deathly silence fell over the assembled people as they digested this information.

"There hasn't been a dragon in these parts for nearly two hundred years," Sergeant Evans said. "Where the hell did it come from?" Aiden kept his silence, hoping that somehow, the dragon in his dreams hadn't somehow come back to the real world.

"I'll ask it next time," the burned soldier replied, claspng onto Colt's hand as he struggled to breathe. "My squad was patrolling the highway, and we came across the monster in the mountains, watching the road. We managed to make it back here before it caught us. Just, stay away from the mountains!"

"He's too far gone," Nellise whispered sadly, looking down on the man with regret as he stiffened, then relaxed for the last time. Colt gently lay his hand back down on his chest, then stood, looking at the carnage the dragon had wrought.

"It must have attacked Culdery," he grated, "that's why we saw it on fire, well before the Steel Tigers could have made it there."

"Maybe the dragon attacked them as well?" Criosia asked with a trembling voice, sounding like she was starting to regret her decision to come along.

"We'll find out when we get closer to town," Aiden surmised. "If the army is still there, then it means the dragon has to be working with them."

"Is that even possible?" Pacian asked, incredulously. "How do you deal with something that could turn you into a pile of ash in seconds?"

"It has been done in the past," Sayana pointed out. "There are dragons in the mountains where the Akora live, and they have had dealings with my people, though the price is always too high." Though she hadn't looked at Aiden directly, he knew she was speaking to him when she said that.

"If they *are* working together, then there is nothing we can do to help Culdery," Criosia whispered soberly. "How can we fight something that powerful?"

"We don't," Aiden surmised. "We're going to engage the Steel Tigers, and if that dragon shows up, we pull back. But it can't be everywhere at once, and this poor man said that it was back on the highway in the mountains."

"And if we're going to help, we better get a move on," Sergeant Evans remarked. "These lads gave their lives in defence of the realm, and I, for one, ain't going to let them die in vain."

"Okay, we head west, and do some scouting," Aiden agreed, tossing his lenses to Colt, who caught them in one hand. The big man strode out front, Sayana by his side, as

they jogged down the highway. After fifteen minutes, a flash of light could be seen rising up from the treeline, to disappear into the distant glow still rising from the town.

"They've set up siege engines," Evans advised. "I guess that means they *are* working with the dragon."

"No sign of it yet, though," Aiden said hopefully. "Colt would have said something if he'd seen it. Let's get closer and find out exactly what we're up against." It was another half an hour of travel before they started to hear the sounds of distant fighting, the screams and cries of battling warriors echoing faintly along the frigid landscape. Balls of fire rose up from somewhere just ahead, flying over the ground into the distance to land somewhere inside Culdeny.

When they had come as close as they'd dared, Aiden called for everyone to stop so that Colt could move ahead and investigate the scene. It was a tense five minute wait, but it gave them precious time to catch their breath from the long journey. Aiden drank from his waterskin and rested his eyes for a minute, letting the distant sounds of war wash over him. Whatever was going on over in Culdeny, the defenders there were at least putting up a fight, and that gave Aiden and his companions time to do what they came here to do.

When he opened his eyes again, Colt had returned, crouching down in the snow to let them know the situation.

"They're just over the rise, about two hundred yards away," he started, speaking to the gathered assortment of soldiers, civilians and royalty. "Got themselves a couple of big siege engines, trebuchets I think."

"We're still half a mile from Culdeny," the Sergeant remarked. "How many men are they holding in reserve this far back?"

"About two dozen, not including their engineers," Colt grunted. "There are a few mounted warriors, too, including their commander, from what I can tell."

"Robert Black is there?" Aiden asked, suddenly very interested. "How could you tell?"

"They've got a few runners ferrying orders back and forth from the front lines, and they were always meeting up with this one bloke in heavy armour. Has himself a nice big stallion to ride, too, so I think it's a safe bet that he's in charge."

"How much light was there?" Nellise asked. "We had planned a dawn attack, but if my guess is correct, we're still over an hour from first light."

"I saw some lanterns here and there, but it's not quite enough to fight in. I had an idea, though – they're using burning pitch in those siege engines, so if we set those on fire..."

"I can do that," Sayana said confidently. "I believe I know what I did wrong with my last attempt at creating the fireball."

"Yeah, how about you just get closer and light it up with one of your other tricks," Pacian advised, somewhat caustically. "This isn't the time to be experimenting."

"I told you, I can do it," Sayana restated darkly. The two of them started to squabble, as their frayed tempers and exhaustion set in. Colt added to the mix with his usual lack of finesse, before Aiden finally snapped.

"Enough! If she says she can do it, then I trust her. But more than that, *we* need to start trusting each other, or this isn't going to work." He had their undivided attention now, and he didn't hold back on saying what needed to be said. "Look, I know you're tired, and I know you're hurt, in more ways than one. Getting into a fight this dangerous

after a journey that long isn't exactly ideal, and if I felt we had a choice here, I'd be staying out of this fight altogether. This isn't my war, and for most of you, it isn't yours either."

"Well, the people who should be fighting this one aren't here, so it falls to us to step forward and hold the line. We've heard about the King fighting a war in another country, and didn't think we were part of it. But now the war has come right to our doorstep, and if we walk away, we may not have a home left to go back to."

"Things have come between us in recent weeks," he continued sombrely, speaking directly to his companions, and more specifically, to Sayana. "Personality conflicts, hard choices, stressful situations... under ordinary circumstances, we probably would have gone our separate ways. But remember when we first started working together? We were a cohesive unit, and we were *unstoppable*. That's what we need to be here, if we want to survive the next hour. So we need to put aside our perceived conflicts, and *trust each other*."

They looked amongst themselves for a long moment, and in the dim light of the nearby burning town, appeared to be ashamed of the way they had been behaving of late. Pacian was the first to speak, and for the first time in many days, Aiden heard his cocky old friend once more.

"I think I speak for all of us, when I say that the Steel Tigers are in for a *very bad day*."

[Chapter Twenty Nine](#)

A chill wind blew mournfully over the landscape as Aiden, his companions, and the men of the Lachburnshire militia moved westward, keeping off the road and remaining vigilant for any scouts that Colt may have missed on his way through earlier. The sides of the road were moderately well covered in trees and small bushes, offering plenty of places for hiding, should the need arise. There was still no sign of the dragon, however, and the young man fervently hoped it stayed that way.

As they crested a rise, Aiden was able to see Culdery itself in the distance, glowing red in many places from buildings that had been touched by dragonfire. More immediately, the entire scope of the battle could be seen from this position, which is probably why Robert Black, commander of the Steel Tigers, had chosen it for his command post.

Nearby, less than fifty yards away, two massive siege engines could be seen, their crews winding back the massive wooden arms and placing large barrels of pitch into position, setting them on fire and launching them into the town.

Positioned to the left of the trebuchets a group of mercenary soldiers stood, calmly watching the battle take place in the distance, awaiting orders. Of that battle, Aiden could see little, but he knew the defenders, led by Sergeant Ariel, would put up a good fight. It would go a lot easier on them, however, once the trebuchets were out of commission, which is precisely what Aiden intended to achieve.

"Can you hit them from here?" he quietly asked Sayana, crouched down in the snow next to him.

"Yes," she assured him. "The blast will be considerable, so it is well that we stay back from the intended area."

"I'm moving into position now," Pacian said to Aiden as he crept past. "As soon as you've created your diversion, I'll go in and make sure those engines never work again."

"I won't disappoint you," Sayana told him earnestly, drawing a brief nod from the blond rogue, just before he disappeared into the bushes.

"Corporal Medwin, your job is to stick to the princess like glue, understood?" Aiden instructed the young soldier. "I don't think I need to tell you all that if she dies, it doesn't really matter if we win here or not."

"He's a good lad, and a fine young fighter," Sergeant Evans informed him. "I'd still feel better if I was personally defending her, sir."

"I need you on the front line, sarge," Aiden told him. "Your experience is going to count for a lot in this fight."

"I shall endeavour to do my utmost not to disappoint you, Mister Wainwright," he answered laconically. Aiden was glad he had come along; the man was a solid, seasoned fighter who would keep the younger lads in line.

"Shall I bestow the favour of God upon us now?" Nellise asked, drawing a faint smile from Aiden.

"I wish you'd say that every time we go into a fight," he replied. "I can't think of a situation where I *wouldn't* want God on my side, to be honest."

"I *always* bless us before a challenge," Nellise corrected him, reaching for her crystal. "I was simply asking if now was a good time."

"Go ahead," Aiden told her, turning to check with Colt that everyone was ready. When he nodded back, his longbow in hand ready to strike, Aiden repeated the gesture to Sayana, who raised herself up on one knee, and began to move her arms arrhythmically about, attempting to channel the vast energy required to invoke the fireball.

"It's not working," she gasped in exasperation after a long moment where nothing happened. Sayana threw out a few choice curse words, no doubt learned from Colt, which shocked both Nellise and Criosia.

"Try again," Aiden coaxed her, "if you can't get it this time, we'll have to improvise."

"I can do it," Sayana replied stubbornly, "I just need to throw more energy into it." Again, she concentrated, drawing in power, focusing it in one place, and this time, a roaring ball of fire materialised between her outstretched hands, that she promptly tossed at the nearby siege engines. The fireball blazed through the air and struck the ground near the closer of the two, detonating with considerable force, and sending the bodies of the engineers working at the engine flying through the air.

The barrels of pitch, stacked neatly in-between the two engines, ignited with a flourish, sending a plume of fire fifteen feet into the air. The suddenness of the strike sent the mercenaries into disarray, the few horses they had tethered nearby in the darkness pulling free of their ropes and bolting into the night.

"Commence shooting!" Aiden barked to Colt and the militia, who immediately sent arrows and crossbow bolts into the disorganised soldiers, dropping three of them in quick order. The primary goal of the archers was to pull defenders away from the second trebuchet, which stood at the edge of the flames so that Pacian could get in closer.

It was a perfectly executed opening move, but their advantage wasn't going to last long. Even now, the officers of the Steel Tigers, including Robert Black himself, were shouting out orders to control the flames, and to start the counter-attack. A dozen

mercenaries led by a brash and loud sergeant formed up beyond the flames, and moved around the lit area towards Aiden's position.

"This is probably the time, then," Aiden muttered to himself, pulling out the last scroll he had left over from the deceased wizard's collection. The young adventurer had held off using it back in the Akoran lands, because it benefited more than just him – everyone nearby was going to feel the effects of this one, and it might just tip the odds in their favour. By the light of the flaming pitch nearby, he quickly read through the incantation before intoning the words aloud, unleashing the energies that had been stored many decades before.

A brief tingling sensation covered his body as the scroll disintegrated in his hands. Aiden looked ahead, and saw that the mercenaries seemed to slow in their advance. But it wasn't them, as such; the incantation was a powerful one, and in fact, it had altered the flow of time immediately around him, giving his allies an advantage in speed and reflexes over their adversaries. Unfortunately, it wasn't going to last very long, and that was one aspect of the text he had been unable to translate accurately.

"Here they come," he said grimly, drawing his sword from its sheath and speaking the word that would bring his force shield into being. The feelings of tiredness and doubt had fled from his mind and body, no doubt the work of Nellise, who was holding her shield and mace in hand, ready to fight. To his right, Sayana stood with her ancient dwarven axe in both hands, her clothing faintly glowing with protective magicks. When the mercenaries had come in close enough, Aiden gave the signal to charge forward and fight.

"Now!" he roared, scrambling to his feet and leading the way forward. Nellise lifted her mace above her head, pointing at the sky, and it flashed with power.

"For God, and the King!" she cried. Criosia, who had been told to stay out of the fight, had her rapier out as she stood in front of the militia, men who had sworn service to the Crown, and would follow her no matter what.

"Aielund forever!" she called in challenge to the mercenaries, which was answered with a similar battle cry from the militia as they charged forwards, crashing into the enemy ranks.

Aiden was in amongst the enemy first, stabbing with his sword to pierce the armour of the mercenary warrior he had engaged. The speed advantage from the incantation was invaluable, making their opponents seem like they were moving through molasses. Again and again, Aiden's blade struck true, cutting through chain mail and flesh with equal precision. His allies were having similar success in the opening battle, outmatching the greater numbers of their adversaries with speed, tactics, and high morale.

Aiden and Nellise worked side by side, the cleric scorching her enemies with holy fire with each strike of her mace, but the mercenaries were slowly beginning to match their speed. As the novice warrior had feared, the effects of the incantation were woefully short, and soon enough, it was gone completely. Sergeant Evans was finishing off the last of the enemy, having smacked his shield into the armoured helm of his opponent, causing a loud 'clang' to echo over the landscape.

"If the rest of them move that slow, we'll win this one for sure!" he called to Aiden.

"Sorry sarge, that was my doing and it won't be happening again," he advised, looking around at the scene before them. Their diversion had worked, for the second trebuchet had its ropes cut, and the fires were slowly making their way toward it, thanks

to a trail of pitch left on the ground by Pacian. The remaining engineers were in disarray, trying to put out the fires and save the trebuchets from total destruction, while a good number of the mercenaries had been ordered to attack the newcomers.

"The siege engines are down, press on to the officers!" Aiden called. Evans pointed forward with his blade, and the rest of the militia moved onward, flanked by Nellise and Aiden. Sayana was looking around with a perplexed expression on her face, prompting the young explorer to ask if there was a problem.

"I could have sworn I heard something moving around," she replied nervously.

"You don't think it's that dragon, do you?" Aiden asked hesitantly.

"No, I—" she was suddenly bowled over into the snow by an unknown assailant, wearing dark grey leathers, who had been practically invisible amongst the foliage. Sayana screamed in pain, for the shadowy figure had stabbed at her with a dagger at the same time, and the two of them wrestled on the ground for their lives. Aiden couldn't help her, tangled up and rolling around as they were, but a moment later, flames erupted from her position, engulfing the mercenary agent and forcing what appeared to be a short, athletic woman, back into the snow.

As the sounds of fighting sprung up again nearby from the courageous militia and their opponents, three more of these agents came out of hiding and struck at Aiden and Sayana, using specialised flanking tactics to disorient them and take advantage of the gaps in their defences. The novice warrior was struck from behind, his back searing with pain, and when he whirled around to strike back, he was hit on the back of his leg from some other attacker.

With Aiden in close quarters combat with her, Sayana was forced to rely on her melee skills, chopping and slashing with her deadly axe to beat back their attackers. Help came a few moments later in the form of Faolan, who sprung out of the trees and latched onto the back of one agent's leg, giving the two companions a better chance at fighting these expert warriors.

Sayana didn't waste any time, leaping forward to strike down the stealthy warrior Faolan was mauling with one swing of her axe. Aiden was about to move to support her exposed flank, when he was hit on the side of the head by the hilt of a weapon. He staggered to one side, trying to pull back from the unknown assailant. As luck would have it, he was not hit again, for Pacian had finally re-emerged from the undergrowth to aid them, stabbing and slashing at the agents with fury and precision.

A flash of light from behind Aiden's position caught his attention. Seeing that his allies had the agents under control, he risked a quick look and saw a robed woman with lightning coming out of the tip of her extended fingers. The electricity arced along the armoured men of the militia, shocking them and dropping them to the ground, momentarily dazed.

"Nel, wizard!" Aiden called, to which she responded with a quick nod, and pulled the crystal out of her belt pouch. The robed woman weaved her hands and fingers in intricate patterns, and chunks of snow and ice rose up off the ground to hover before her. The pieces spun around, ice chips flying off them until the points became sharp, and then all eight shards of ice launched at Nellise.

The cleric raised her shield, protecting her from some of icy projectiles, but three of them tore into her leather pants, drawing blood and making her stumble backwards from the onslaught. Nellise still had the crystal raised in her other hand, and this time, as the

wizard attempted to unleash another assault against her, it failed, drawing a string of curses from the woman.

Aiden wanted nothing more than to charge the mercenary wizard at that moment, easily the most dangerous combatant on the field, but a wall of warriors were in the way. The militia were doing their best to keep Nellise protected, but they were sorely outnumbered, and Sergeant Evan's steely resolve was the only thing preventing his inexperienced men's morale from breaking.

"You got this handled?" Aiden asked Pacian, who was busy fighting alongside Sayana and Faolan against the remaining mercenary agents.

"Go!" the blond rogue cried, smashing his opponent across the face with the hilt of a dagger, then bringing his knee up hard and fast, shattering his nose, giving Faolan the opportunity to dive in and finish the wounded man off. Aiden turned and left them to it, charging along the road to crash into the flank of a mercenary that was trying to work his way past one of the militia, and stabbing him in the leg with his blade.

Before he could finish the man off, an arrow caught Aiden in the shoulder, glancing off his chain shirt and distracting him for a moment. He brought his shield up to deflect any further arrows, and concentrated on engaging the warrior before him. The brief distraction had allowed the mercenary to recover from the blow, and Aiden was hard-pressed to get past his defences.

The battle surged around him and for a few minutes he couldn't tell if they were winning or losing. Half of the militia had fallen, but a greater number of the mercenaries had been beaten as well, many of them with clothyard shafts sticking out of their bodies from Colt's unrelenting assault. Without his expert archery, they would have been well and truly finished off by the sheer number of their adversaries.

A crackle of lightning suddenly surged through the militiamen once more and caught Aiden as well, this time. His muscles were wracked with pain for a brief moment, and he fell to the ground, twitching involuntarily as he tried to regain control of his body.

"She's too strong," Nellise stated with exasperation, her prayers faltering as the expert wizard found a way past her protective influence. "You need to finish her off; I can't keep this up for much longer!"

"There's too many of them to break through," Evans cried, nursing a broken arm from the furious battle. Even now, he was holding off two mercenaries on his own, for only three of his men remained standing in the sea of bodies. An arrow flew past their heads, heading for the wizard, but hit some sort of barrier surrounding her body, and was blown aside. The sound of Colt's cursing could be heard in the distance, as each successive arrow met the same fate.

Aiden struggled back to his feet, and looked around for someone who might be able to get in close and attack that damned wizard. Pacian was finishing off the last of the agents, and Sayana had a free moment to evaluate the situation. Seeing no alternative, she brought her arms up and invoked another fireball, this time without fault, which surged towards the mercenary wizard. Aiden knew it was a futile attack, for it would hit the barrier and be deflected away.

He had underestimated Sayana, however, for the path of the fireball was slightly off target, landing near the feet of the woman, who didn't appear to be immune to the explosive effects of the blast that ensued. Her charred body flew back through the air, leaving a trail of flame and smoke.

Aiden let out a cry of triumph, but then held his breath as Sayana staggered to one side, as if too tired to stand, and fell unmoving into the snow. He was about to go to her aid when the ominous sound of hooves pounding on the ground could be heard, growing louder with each passing moment. Turning toward the noise, his heart almost stopped when he saw Robert Black, astride a massive stallion, finally joining the battle.

The four remaining mercenary warriors pulled back, and the warhorse ploughed through the three militiamen, crushing two of them to death, while Robert swung a massive ball-and-chain and sundered Sergeant Evan's shield, leaving him broken and bleeding upon the ground..

Steel met steel as their weapons clashed, Nellise making full use of her armour to absorb and deflect blows, while Aiden managed to parry and riposte, as if he were a fencer. At this moment, the young adventurer sorely missed the immense power he had wielded back in Akora, knowing that with it, he'd be winning this fight. Instead, he felt the fatigue in his muscles that ached with each swing of his weapon, and hoped that he had the endurance to keep this up for a while longer.

Nellise was much more effective than he was, smashing armour and crushing bone with her mace, pushing the mercenaries back towards the flames with the intensity of her attacks, her face etched with a firm resolve that was startling to behold. When Pacian finally joined them, Aiden knew they were going to make it. The blond rogue stabbed one of the warriors in the side of the throat, practically dropping him instantly.

"Aiden, behind you!" Pacian cried a moment later, prompting the novice warrior to leap to one side without hesitation, knowing that if he'd turned to look, he might have met whatever was coming head-first. The black stallion thundered past, barely missing Aiden as he stumbled to the side, trampling one unfortunate mercenary warrior they had been fighting to an instant death.

Pacian was clipped on the shoulder by the commander's weapon as he rode past, and it was only the agile rogue's reflexes that prevented him from sustaining a mortal injury. Two arrows flew past them in quick succession, striking the last remaining warrior in the chest, leaving the field almost empty, aside from the unstoppable visage of Robert Black.

The stallion turned and started charging for their position once more, and Aiden didn't know how to deal with it. Exhaustion was catching up with him, slowing his mind and body, while facing the premier military power of their time – the mounted warrior. He stood there, watching the advance of the warhorse as if in a dream, when he was suddenly pushed to the ground from behind, and landed in the snow a few feet away.

Looking up, he saw that it was Colt who had shoved him aside. By his side, Faolan stood, snarling at the oncoming horse, which, upon catching the wolf's scent, immediately halted, rearing up and screaming, with Commander Black desperately trying to keep control of the beast.

"Let me handle this one mate," Colt growled as he charged past and swung his sword at the saddle, severing the straps that held it on the horse's back, and throwing Robert down into the snow. The horse, wounded from the strike, bolted into the night, while the armoured form of the mercenary commander ominously rose to his feet, discarding his ball-and-chain in favour of a massive sword that he drew from over his shoulder.

"You?" he roared, looking directly at Aiden, Colt and the others from behind his visored helm. "We're fighting a bunch of civilians and a disgraced ranger? And here I was, thinking I was in trouble."

“Oh, I got plenty of that for ya, right here,” Colt shouted back, stepping forward to engage the commander directly. Black was armed with a hand-and-a-half blade, and carried a heavy, steel-rimmed shield in his other hand. His black-enamelled infantry plate armour covered his body in steel from head to toe.

Colt didn't hesitate further, bringing his sword across in a massive arc, to be met not by Robert's shield, but his armoured back, the mercenary twisting his torso to take the full impact on his armour. The sound of the impact was deafening, forcing Black to steady himself after the blow, but it left Colt unbalanced and vulnerable.

He smacked aside the greatsword with his shield, and brought his heavy blade across, slashing the big ranger's chest armour, rending it and cutting through the flesh underneath. The motion of his blade continued, coming around and over the top to descend towards Colt's exposed head. The big ranger had already started to dodge, however, and the sword hit only bare snow.

Colt recovered and attacked again, but this time with more caution. Their weapons weren't suitable for fencing, or subtlety, and each swing had the potential to take off a limb if they weren't fast enough to get out of the way. Black continued to use his armour and shield to deflect the greatsword's sweeping arc, avoiding any direct hits where it could do some real damage.

“We need to get in there and help,” he whispered to Nellise, who was also bent over trying to catch her breath after the intense fighting.

“You and Pace can do that, I need to check on the wounded,” she whispered, slowly making her way over to Sayana's last position. Pacian was in the snow nearby, on his knees, struggling to get back on his feet. He had given all he had just to get to this point, for the normally laid-back young man was adverse to prolonged physical activity, and from the look on his face, Aiden could see Pace was just about done for.

Turning back to the duel taking place before him, the novice warrior could see that his fears were well-founded, as Commander Black hadn't really slowed down at all, but the big ranger had taken a number of hits and was fighting defensively. If Aiden didn't get back in there, Colt was finished.

Gritting his teeth, Aiden heaved himself back to his feet with an effort of pure willpower, and readied his sword. There was no point announcing his approach, for the expert mercenary looked more than capable of taking both of them on without difficulty. Instead, Aiden crept around behind him, hoping that Colt could see what he was up to, and keep Black distracted.

Moving as quickly and quietly as he could manage, Aiden moved within range of his opponent, and, spying a place on his armour where the steel plating separated, stabbed with all of his remaining strength.

The blade struck true, driving into his left thigh and staggering the surprised warrior enough so that Colt was able to strike the helm with his greatsword. Black struggled to regain his balance after that swing, but still had the presence of mind to spin with the blow and bring his sword around at Aiden.

His force shield took the brunt of the impact, deflecting the sword above his body so that he wasn't struck directly. What Aiden didn't see coming was Robert's shield, which he combined with a lunge, smashing into the young man's side with all the weight of the heavily armoured man behind it.

Aiden felt his right arm break from the brutal blow, and his sword fell from his hand into the blood-tinged snow at his feet. He crashed into the ground a moment later, screaming in pain from his shattered arm, all the while knowing that he was vulnerable to a follow-up attack from the mercenary. Turning his head to check, he was somewhat relieved to see Colt pressing the attack, keeping the man busy so he couldn't finish off what he'd started.

It had all been worth it, however, for the two blows that had been struck against Black had slowed him considerably, and given the big ranger a fighting chance. He grunted with each swing of his greatsword, and fought as if he were trying to bash his way through the heavy plate armour of his opponent. Despite protecting him from the deadly cuts the sword would have inflicted, Aiden was sure Black was covered in bruises underneath.

Two successive hits against Colt quickly turned the tide of the fight however, and each swing was slower than the last. Black brought his weapon in high, but Colt managed to block it with his weapon, a near-fatal mistake, as his slowing reflexes couldn't bring up any defence against Robert's shield. It smashed him right in the face, dazing him momentarily and giving the mercenary commander an opening to drive his sword straight down into Colt's foot, passing right through into the snow beneath.

The big ranger roared in pain and fell back onto the ground. Black withdrew the bloodied sword as he went down and paused to catch his breath, ambivalent to the screams of his fallen foe.

"Hell of a fight, mate," Black said to Colt between breaths, "but you never really had a chance. Still, you've almost ruined my whole plan here, and you've got my respect for that, at least."

"Are you planning to talk me to death?" Colt grated back laconically.

"Nope, sword to the head," Black replied evenly. "I just like to gloat a bit sometimes. Sorry to bore-." He was interrupted by a diminutive form who attempted to stab him from behind, having crept up close while he had been speaking to Colt. Black whirled around, sword first, but met only empty air as it passed over the top of the crouching person behind him.

The faint light of dawn was beginning to lighten the sky, but with the fires nearby starting to dim, it still wasn't enough to see exactly what was going on until Black's assailant darted into the firelight to escape a swing of his blade. Aiden was astonished to see Princess Criosia, rapier in hand, attempting to fight the big mercenary.

"Criosia?" he asked, as startled as Aiden had been. "I don't believe it, you fools *brought her along*? This changes everything... I'll be able to salvage this entire situation and hold her for ransom."

"You'll have to catch me first," she replied defiantly. Robert set about doing just that, swinging his heavy blade around, side on, to try and subdue her. Criosia was extremely nimble, however, and easily dodged the attack, tapping on Robert's armour with her rapier for good measure, in the process. Three more people approached from different angles, and Aiden could easily recognise the shining breastplate of Nellise, the chain armour of Corporal Medwin, and the sharp axe of Sayana, on her feet once more and pressing the attack.

With Robert's injuries, Aiden figured the four of them might just stand a chance, and he held his broken arm close to his body as he watched from a snow bank, only ten yards

from the battle. As Nellise approached to strike at the mercenary with her mace, she was met by Robert's shield, which smashed her in the face, impacting with her helmet and sending her falling back into the snow.

Sayana roared loudly, always a surprising sound coming from her diminutive form, bringing her axe above her head and lunging at the mercenary, chopping with what strength she had left directly onto Robert's shield arm. The mithral axe held an edge sharper than any steel weapon, and managed to shear through the plate armour, severing the straps that held it in place, and cutting deep into Robert's arm.

The mercenary reflexively spun around to protect his vulnerable flank, dropping his shield in the process, for his wounded arm could no longer carry it. Sayana tried to follow through with another attack, but received an unexpected kick to the stomach from Black that knocked her backwards. Criosia stabbed at Robert's arm, skewering it and wounding him further, but left herself vulnerable to a backhand blow from Robert's armoured fist, sending her sprawling into the snow.

"You bastard!" Medwin cried, rushing to stand between the Princess and Black, brandishing his sword. The mercenary wasn't impressed, and pressed the attack against the militiaman, putting him completely on the defensive. He tried to strike back, bringing his weapon in low to try and hit Black's leg, but it bounced off his armour ineffectively. Robert placed his left boot over the tip of the sword and drove it into the ground, then brought his own blade down upon it, sundering the simple weapon into several pieces.

Corporal Medwin froze, staring in horror at his broken weapon, right before the mercenary's sword swept his head from his body, which fell to the ground in a bloody heap. Criosia screamed, having witnessed this gruesome action first-hand, and she scrambled backwards, trying to put some space between her and the powerful mercenary.

Robert was too busy to pursue her though, for Nellise had regained her footing, and pressed the attack. He met each swing of her mace with his blade, no doubt damaging the edge in the process, but the mercenary was in a desperate position now. Aiden couldn't believe the man was still standing, let alone fighting, and could only watch and hope that his allies were able to finish him off.

The light from the oncoming dawn was still increasing, accompanied by a heavy fog that was rolling in off the sea, reducing his vision down to roughly twenty yards. Nellise and Black continued fighting regardless, the cleric focusing her fear and anger from her experiences onto the mercenary with each strike. Her mace managed to connect with Black's body several times, with limited results, but she kept at it, nonetheless, her face set in a determined snarl.

Criosia steeled herself and stepped back into the fight, trying to poke her rapier through a gap in the joints of the plate armour, but Black kept moving around, making her task all the more difficult.

The Princess finally made a mistake, dodging left when she should have gone right, and receiving an unexpected kick to her midriff which sprawled her out in the snow, winded. Nellise stood alone against the powerful mercenary, and appeared to have given up all hope of trying to take him down herself, instead choosing to slowly step backwards, keeping her guard up to prevent Black from hitting her.

She had moved back about three yards when Aiden noticed a form descending from above, immediately assuming that the dragon had silently approached them, but as it emerged from the fog, he could see that it was, in fact, Sayana.

She silently floated down through the mist, axe raised above her head, coming in right behind the mercenary. Nellise looked up briefly, and whether or not it was intended, her reaction alerted Black to the presence of a threat from behind. He whirled around at the last minute, but wasn't prepared for what was coming. Sayana ceased her casual descent and dropped like a stone, bringing her axe down on his head with all of the force she had built up from the fall.

Only Robert's honed reflexes prevented the axe from splitting him in two, for he managed to pull back as the axe struck his helm, but it still cleaved through the front of his head, destroying the helm gashing his face terribly. The devastating blow finally dropped the powerful man, who fell backward onto the ground amongst his fallen comrades.

Aiden silently exulted in his friend's victory, and slowly picked himself up off the ground to make his way over. Sayana, Nellise and Criosia gathered around the grievously wounded mercenary, who was clutching at his wounded face, the dark stain of his life's blood flowing through his fingers.

"Yield or die!" Nellise declared, standing over him with her mace ready to strike, her chest heaving from the exertion of the fight. The mercenary didn't respond at first, but Aiden couldn't believe for a moment that the man was still prepared to fight, even if his opponents were barely able to stand.

"I yield," Black croaked, looking up at them with his right eye, the left one having been destroyed by Sayana's final stroke. "You've fought well for a bunch of untrained civilians. I'm pretty impressed, actually, though the shame of my defeat to such people will haunt me for the rest of my days."

"You shall have plenty of time to think of your mistakes, during your impending imprisonment," Criosia informed him archly. Black actually managed a macabre laugh, not exactly the sort of sound one should be hearing from a defeated enemy.

"I don't think I'll be going to prison, Your Highness, as there isn't going to be much left of Culdeny in a few minutes."

"What are you talking about?" Aiden asked, a feeling of dread descending over him.

"I've made arrangements," the mercenary replied cryptically.

"Enough of this nonsense," Criosia ordered impatiently. "We're taking you into town, and anything that befalls it, happens to you as well." Robert looked up at the sky, as did Aiden, noticing that the sun was just about to peak over the horizon.

"The dragon," he breathed. "It's going to strike at dawn, isn't it?"

"Azurefang might be a little crazy, but she does what she's paid to," Robert confirmed, seeming to be more relaxed with every passing moment. "So, here's what's going to happen. I--"

Pacian appeared next to Robert at that moment, and interrupted his speech by plunging a dagger into the man's throat, sending a torrent of blood out onto the snow. He clutched at the wound in a futile attempt to staunch the flow, gasping for breath. Aiden was stunned, and could only stand and stare at the blond rogue in disbelief.

"Don't just stand there, *run!*" Pacian roared, grabbing an equally shocked Nellise by the wrist and pulling her in the direction of town. In the opposite direction coming in from the mountains an ominous dull roar could be heard in the distance, a sound that had the hairs on the back of Aiden's neck standing on end. He felt a burst of adrenaline surge

through his body, and all thoughts of yelling at Pacian's amoral behaviour fled from his mind.

Aiden had the presence of mind to look around and make sure the others were also moving, and could see that Colt was still down on the ground, grievously wounded. The young adventurer rushed over to his side, and offered a hand from his uninjured arm.

"Get out of here, I'll just slow you down," Colt grunted, but Aiden was in no mood to deal with his death wish.

"Get on your feet, mister," he shouted, kneeling down to reach around the ranger's shoulder, to heave him up out of the snow. Realising that Aiden wasn't going to give up on him so easily, Colt accepted his help and did what he could to carry his own weight. The man weighed a ton, and Aiden was forced to use every ounce of his strength to move him.

With one last check of the area, the young man saw that Criosia and Sayana were helping the equally wounded Sergeant Evans to his feet, despite meeting similar protests from the tough old soldier. The distinctive beating of wings could now be heard, somewhere up in the fog, as the dragon Robert Black had called Azurefang headed towards Culdeny.

The real danger, however, was that it was going to pass right overhead and see them struggling towards town, and attack them right on the spot. If that happened, there would be nothing that they could do about it, however, for even at their best, they would be no match for such a foe. Aiden didn't know what else to do though, except rush to the city gate and warn them of the returning monster.

It was a quarter of a mile to the gate of Culdeny, and the group was struggling to move along as fast as they could, considering that half of them were barely even able to stand. Aiden briefly considered diving into the trees that grew just off the highway, in the hopes that they could hide from the dragon as it flew past, but ultimately decided that he couldn't just sit by and watch Culdeny burn.

A deafening bellow cut through the air, and Aiden realised that *of course* the town would know that the dragon was about to return. It was pointless continuing on only to be burned alive, so Aiden changed his plans. The sounds of Culdeny could be heard through the fog up ahead, a combination of cries for help, shouted orders for soldiers to follow, and the clash of weapons as the main force of the Steel Tigers kept on fighting, not realising that their leader was already dead.

"Get off the road!" Aiden called out to the others nearby, changing direction to head into the trees. This close to the town, and with the fog about them, he hoped that it was enough cover to protect them from being spotted. The young man set Colt down next to some bushes, and hit the ground himself, wincing from the pain of his broken arm as he slid to a halt.

Pacian and Nellise came in next, the exhausted rogue collapsing onto the ground as he came to a stop. Sayana and Criosia managed to get Evans into the copse as well, just as the sound of wings passed overhead, and the dark silhouette of the dragon could be seen wheeling through the misty sky.

It roared again, and the fog was illuminated by the blast of fire that erupted from the monster as it doused part of the town in flames. Cries of panic emanated from the other side of the wall as Aiden and his companions sat there helplessly, listening to the destruction of Culdeny.

For several minutes, it circled over the town, sending down torrents of fire at its leisure, but its path through the air was uneven and erratic, and sounds of inspirational battle-cries coming from the eastern wall brought Aiden to a realisation – the men on that wall should have been occupied by mercenaries, but since their reinforcements had been eliminated by Aiden and his companions, the defenders were free to rain bolts and arrows upon the hide of their nightmarish foe, something it hadn't planned on.

Presently, a strange noise came from the dragon, which sounded more like a startled yelp than a roar. Unable to see through the fog clearly, Aiden could only guess what was happening in the skies above, until a small explosion of fire lit up the massive beast for a brief instant as something impacted its hide. It was accompanied by a shriek of pain and surprise from the dragon, and it circled away from the town as another small explosion impacted its hindquarters.

"What the hell is hitting it?" Colt asked nobody in particular.

"Is there a wizard in town I wasn't aware of?" Nellise wondered aloud. Azurefang was manoeuvring through the skies in a random pattern, blasting fire down upon the town as more explosions hit its massive bulk. Its pattern brought it out past the wall where it loomed above the trees where Aiden and the others were hiding.

The dragon snarled and something dropped out of the sky, landing heavily near the road roughly twenty yards away. A brief glimpse of a massive, serpentine body with dozens of arrows sticking out of its hide could be seen as it flew into the clear for a moment, before disappearing back into the fog again. If Azurefang saw them at all, it didn't pay any attention to them as it sped away from the town as fast as it could, back to the east and the safety of the mountains. For the first time in hours, Aiden finally relaxed, and as his adrenaline ebbed, he felt all the pains and exhaustion of the past day hit him all at once.

"I guess it bit off a little more than it could chew," he muttered in amazement.

"Go and see what fell on the road," Pacian prompted him. Despite his broken body, curiosity got the better of Aiden, and he slowly hobbled out onto the road to take a look. Lying in the snow was a metal spear, eight feet in length, and with a barbed tip covered in blood. Part of the shaft was charred black from the explosion, but there was no indication as to why the ordinary looking spear had caused it. They would find their answers in town, Aiden concluded, and having reported what he had seen, hobbled back over to the others.

"What the hell is the matter with you, anyway?" Colt growled at Pacian as the young man approached. "Robert Black had surrendered, and you go and stick a knife in his throat?"

"We had to run, and he was going to do everything in his power to be difficult," Pacian explained. "I couldn't just leave him there, knowing he might survive and come back to get revenge upon us another day."

"You're a bloody monster," Colt stated flatly. "He wasn't going anywhere, anytime soon, and we could have questioned him about this plot to kidnap the Princess. If I had any strength left in my body, I'd beat the tar out of you."

"Like he'd tell us," Pacian shot back. "We've been over this before, Dante, he-"

"Shut up, the both of you," Aiden sighed. "We get it, already. Just... be quiet for a while."

“You’re such a problem for us, sometimes,” Nellise mumbled, disappointed. “He didn’t need to die.”

“Hey, remember what happened back in that Akoran cave?” Pacian reminded her rather callously. “That’s what happens when you let bad people get away with bad things. And I’m not ever, *ever* going to let that happen to us, or to you, again.” Nellise looked directly into the blond rogue’s eyes, and fondly ran a hand through his shoulder-length hair.

“Oh Pacian, how can you be such a monster and be so endearing at the same time?” she breathed. “Whatever am I going to do with you?” He didn’t have a reply for that, and simply leaned his head tiredly against her shoulder.

Nellise had enough strength to enact a short healing prayer, which helped relieve them of their more pressing injuries. Princess Criosia was quiet, apparently in shock at what she had witnessed in the past hour. Despite her earlier bravado, she had clearly never been in a real fight before, and the horrors of war must be weighing heavily upon her mind as Aiden led them to the town gates, illuminated by the glow of fires as Culdenny burned.

Epilogue

Militia archers stationed behind the wall opened the gate as Aiden and his companions before they reached it, allowing Aiden to see first-hand the result of the attack against the town. Many of the buildings were on fire, with citizens rushing through the streets with buckets of water attempting to control the blaze. The sounds of fighting could still be heard off in the distance on the southern side of Culdenny, lending a grim ambience to the devastated surroundings.

They headed towards the church, which was filled with wounded soldiers and civilians alike. A dozen young clerics were doing their utmost to tend to the injured. Although they were moving as quickly as they could, unmoving bodies covered in blankets nearby indicated they were not always successful.

Aiden slowly sat against the wall with the others, his mind barely active as the rush of the situation surrounding them breezed past. Nellise set about setting his broken arm in a splint and bandaging up the worst of their injuries, then practically collapsed alongside Aiden, her own injuries getting the better of her.

Nearly an hour later, the sounds of fighting subsided and subdued cheering could be heard coming from the streets outside. It seemed that the forces of the Crown had been victorious at last, and Aiden managed a faint smile, sensing that the long crisis was nearing a conclusion.

“It’s over.” he whispered, drawing a brief nod of acknowledgement from Criosia, who had sat down next to him. It seemed a hollow victory, considering the town had been severely damaged and many people wounded and killed, but it was a victory nonetheless.

Shortly afterwards, the blood-stained form of Sergeant Ariel entered through the large double-doors, helped along by one of her Corporals who followed her directions and half-carried her to one of the pews just in front of Aiden. He carefully helped her to sit, and then the Sergeant waved him away, leaning upon her bloodied sword as one would a cane.

“Good morning, Mister Wainwright,” she said, the strain evident in her raspy voice, undoubtedly from shouting orders all night long. “I’m sorry the town is such a mess, we’ve had a few problems crop up over the past twelve hours; about a hundred of them, to be exact. But my men tell me you and your friends had a hand in taking the pressure off our eastern flank?”

“We needed to get the princess back into town, and they were in the way,” Aiden explained with a weak voice. Ariel blinked in surprise, and glanced around at the others until she laid eyes upon Crios, who smiled wanly back at the sergeant.

“Good God, is that you, Highness? I’m sorry, I didn’t recognise you looking so…”

“Tattered? It’s all right, Sergeant, I feel better than I look, thanks to Aiden and his companions,” Crios dismissed.

“Glad I was able to assist,” Aiden whispered modestly.

“And so self-effacing, too,” Crios remarked with a tired smile. “I might have use for you in Fairloch, if you’re interested.” Aiden’s tired brain didn’t quite grasp what she was saying for a few seconds, but the implications were far-reaching.

“I’ll have to think about it,” he mumbled, somewhat dumbfounded.

“Aiden, the Princess just asked you to serve the crown,” Colt pointed out. “The appropriate response is ‘yes, Your Highness, I would be honoured!’”

“I think he’s waiting to hear how much he’s going to get paid,” Pacian added, earning a jab to his ribs from the big ranger.

“There’s something else of relevance I found,” Aiden interrupted, pulling out the folded note he had retrieved from Bartlett’s body. “Ronald Bartlett had this on him when he met an unfortunate end, and it’s something you should read.” Ariel took the proffered note and read aloud from the elegant script upon it.

“It says, ‘Find Commander Black and convey my displeasure to him concerning the handling of his duties thus far. I expect my money’s worth from this deal, and if he and his band of half-wits are unable to perform as expected, I shall have them join the King in his bloody campaign in the west.’ It is signed ‘Number One’. How cryptic.”

“Captain Marshald said that someone was making a move against the Crown, and your kidnapping was probably the first step,” Aiden said to Crios. “Bartlett was a big name locally, but he was taking orders from someone else. Have you made any enemies of late?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” she replied, her eyes wide at the thought of a conspiracy against her.

“The script is very elegant,” Ariel noted, handing it to Crios. “Do you recognise the handwriting?”

“No, it doesn’t seem familiar, but that doesn’t really say much,” she mused after a brief examination. “It does resemble the writing of a well educated individual, certainly. Perhaps one of the lords hired the Steel Tigers to kidnap me, and used Bartlett as a liaison?”

“It’d cost a hell of a lot of money to hire a mercenary army,” Colt grunted. “But none of this explains why they attacked the town. And who in his right mind would bring in a bloody dragon to help, anyway?”

“Maybe they got greedy, and wanted to loot the place on the way through,” Pacian remarked cynically.

"This is an outrage," Criosa breathed. "The scale of this entire operation... it's bad enough to attempt to kidnap a member of the royal family, but to slaughter innocents in the process? I must go to Fairloch and get to the bottom of this and hold the culprits accountable."

"That would be extremely dangerous, Highness," Aiden warned.

"Not with you and your stalwart companions there to protect me, it wouldn't," Criosa replied with a wink. "And you'll be suitably rewarded for your efforts here today, and in the future, I assure you."

"We accept," Pacian answered for him.

"I... yes, I suppose so," Aiden managed to agree. "Before we get to that however, I have one question, Sarge. I saw what looked like a large metal spear drop from the dragon's body on the way past, but we saw something explode against its hide as well. What weapon could cause such a devastating impact?"

"We can thank Captain Sir Denholm Sherrard, of His Majesty's Ship *Redoubtable* for that," Ariel explained. "The ship arrived yesterday morning, stopping by for supplies and repairs on its way back to Fairloch from the warzone, and they have some sort of special ordnance that catches fire on impact. I doubt the flames did anything to a monster like that, but the ballista bolts they use have very sharp tips and are propelled at great speed. I think two or three such hits, combined with the efforts of thirty of our finest archers was enough to show that beast that we're not to be trifled with. If you hadn't cleared our eastern flank of enemies, I doubt we would have been able to repel that damned monster."

"Excuse me a moment, I think the Archioness wants to speak with me," Nellise said as soon as Ariel had finished, getting up off the floor and making her way over to speak with the head of the local Church, whose white robe was stained with blood and ash.

"Good thing that dragon didn't get close enough to see the ship, I suppose," Aiden mused. "One blast of fire would have been the end of it."

"Which leads me to another issue," Ariel continued. "That dragon was reported heading for the Stonegaard mountains, and until I can confirm that the road is safe, I'm going to have to prohibit travel along the highway until further notice."

"But I need to get to Fairloch, as soon as possible," Criosa protested.

"I'm sure Captain Sir Denholm will be happy to provide you with transportation. I will advise him to travel north for a day or two before heading east, in order to ensure you do not pass too closely to the coast in the area I suspect the dragon to be."

"A sea voyage would be acceptable," Criosa agreed, standing up. "I wish to speak to Mayor Buchanan at his earliest convenience, so if you could send word to him, I would be most grateful."

"I'm afraid he didn't make it, your Highness," Ariel hedged, shifting uncomfortably on her seat. "His office caught fire when it was struck by a barrel of burning pitch, and he perished in the flames. I'm very sorry."

"I see," Criosa remarked in a very small voice, slowly sitting back down again.

"With your leave, Highness, I will speak with the Captain, and make arrangements for you and your entourage to be taken aboard the *Redoubtable*."

"Of course, I will be here when you have news," Criosa replied absently. Ariel nodded, then slowly limped out of the church, glaring at a soldier who threatened to offer her help. Aiden turned to Sayana, who had been silent through all of this.

"You haven't said a word since we arrived," Aiden observed.

"Tonic withdrawal," she replied in a whisper. "To get me back on my feet, Nellise gave me the last of that horrible concoction. It worked, but I feel terrible, now."

"Yes, that'd do it," Aiden remarked, wondering how to approach the next subject. "I was curious what your next move was. I know you have your doubts about me, but you've been invaluable help over the past few weeks, and I, for one, would be sorry to see you leave."

"Where else would I go?" she asked simply. "I have enough coin to stay here for years if I wanted, but I do not feel comfortable in a town with so many people. I have no desire to return to my previous... *existence* either, and until Morik Far-Eagle asserts his authority and makes some changes, I can't go back there either."

"Please come with us," Criosia asked earnestly. "You're such a fascinating person, and I'd like to pick your brain about your magical training."

"She doesn't mean that literally," Aiden explained, seeing the slightly alarmed expression on Sayana's face. "And how can you refuse such a sweet young lady?"

"I will come, if you wish it," Sayana said cautiously, her eyes darting back and forth between Aiden and Criosia. "I feel things may be strained between us, Aiden, and I do not wish it to be so. Though I cannot trust you completely, I will do so until I see signs that you have been corrupted, at which point I shall offer you a swift death, for old time's sake."

"Thanks, I appreciate that," Aiden muttered dryly, ignoring Criosia's curious expression. Fortunately, Nellise was approaching them, providing a suitable distraction from this uncomfortable conversation.

"Aiden, you may recall that I said that I was going to stay in Culdeny after this was over," Nellise said as she sat on the pew recently vacated by Ariel. Her voice was flat and emotionless.

"Yes, and I understand perfectly your reasons for doing so," he replied.

"I spoke with Archioness Celeste about my decision, and she was perfectly willing to have me stay in Culdeny for an extended period of time, until she learned that the Princess had requested that we accompany her to Fairloch, at which point she practically ordered me to go."

"So you'll be coming with us then?" Criosia asked, her eyes lighting up, like a small child about to receive a gift.

"It certainly seems that way," Nellise nodded emotionlessly, too tired to react.

"Splendid," the Princess remarked victoriously.

"Just promise me that there will be much less excitement when we get there."

"A conspiracy is afoot to topple the royal family, and all our lives could be at risk," Pacian summarised. "I'm sure it'll be boring and uneventful."

"Part of the reason for this is that my novitiate is officially over, and I have been granted the title of Sariant of the order of the Resolute Herald, and this must be ratified at the Cathedral in Fairloch by Archeiros Cormac," the cleric continued, her voice showing no strong feelings for any of it.

"Congratulations," Aiden offered, "you earned it, though I have the feeling most acolytes don't have such an arduous education." Nellise said nothing, and merely bowed her head and wrapped her arms around herself, sobbing quietly. Aiden's attention was caught by an influx of people through the main door to the already crowded Church.

Several men and women, wearing the colours of the Royal Rangers, were bringing in wounded. After they had set them down on the pews – the only empty space left – they turned and left again, all except for one man, who was heading their way.

“Once more, we meet again,” Commander Armin greeted them, his heavy, reinforced leathers practically devoid of blood, although his quiver seemed to be devoid of arrows.

“Morning, Sir,” Colt replied, standing up as quickly as he could manage, as did Aiden, though at a more leisurely rate.

“What is it about you lot, that we always meet under the worst of circumstances,” the Commander observed. “If you ask me, you’re just a bunch of troublemakers.”

“Trouble is as trouble does, Sir,” Colt replied, drawing a chuckle from the laconic Armin.

“Well, from what I’ve heard, you had a hand in defeating these bloody mercenaries, facing off against several times your number in an effort to save the town. That took guts, no doubt about it, and... is that Princess Criosia?”

“I should start wearing my tiara more,” Criosia mused aloud. “Nobody seems to know who I am around here.” Armin blushed furiously and tried to salvage his little speech.

“I’m dreadfully sorry for my banter, your Highness,” he apologised. “It’s been a rough morning.”

“You were in the fight too?” Colt asked, receiving a nod of confirmation from the Commander.

“Came in and hit them on the south flank just after dawn,” he answered. “They had some reinforcements waiting to move forward, but the Rangers took care of them without a single casualty on our side.”

“Duncan and young Tommy Sanders didn’t make it out of Akora, sir,” Colt told him soberly. “I just thought you oughta know.” Armin closed his eyes for a moment, clearly hit hard by the bad news.

“It always hurts, losing good men,” he said quietly. “But they died in service to the Crown, and that’s a good way to go in my book. Look, I have to get back out there and provide some leadership, since I’m the highest ranking member of the military in the region now. But I just wanted you to know, you’ve got a place in the Rangers, should you want to work with us again.”

“That’s real big of you sir, and for what it’s worth, I’m sorry about the ‘incident’,” Colt explained. “I let my feelings get the better of me, and it won’t happen again. As for rejoining the Rangers, well, I think it might be a bit hard on me, seeing you and Mona on a daily basis.”

“What are you referring to?” Armin asked, confused.

“You know, how you’re... *together*. You’ll make a fine couple, sir.”

“We’re not together, where did you get that impression?” Armin pressed. Colt was about to reply when Sayana nudged him in the ribs and gave him a meaningful look.

“Sorry sir, I think I misheard a rumour,” he grunted, covering up as best as he could.

“I should say that you did. Well, since that’s all cleared up, I’m getting back out there, and if you’re going to join up, Colt, I want your help out there too.”

“Yeah, just give me a minute here,” the big man answered. Armin nodded, and headed towards the door, turning to say one last thing before he left.

“What are you all doing sitting around in here, taking up valuable space? This place is for the *wounded*, not the heroes of Culdery.”

“He’s right, we should head out to the ship,” Aiden said after a few seconds of silence, as the reality of the commander’s statement hit home.

“I’ll walk you out and then I’ve got plenty of other work to do around here,” Colt said, drawing an exchange of looks among Aiden’s companions.

“You’re not coming with us to Fairloch?” Aiden asked.

“Ships and I don’t get along Aiden,” Colt explained as they walked outside, the smoke from recently doused flames permeating the streets on the still-foggy morning. “I don’t fancy spending the better half of this week with my head over the side. Besides, it looks like I might still have a shot with Mona after all.”

“How do you deduce that?” Aiden exclaimed. “She lied to you about being with Armin!”

“Yep, and that means she’s still single, so I’ve got a chance.” Aiden shook his head in silent disbelief at Colt’s single-mindedness.

“So I guess this is goodbye,” the young explorer told him, feeling strange about this rude, offensive man who had somehow, over the course of the past month, become one of his friends.

“Don’t start crying, Aiden, you’ll look weak in front of the women.”

“I wasn’t…”

“I’m just joking, mate,” Colt grinned, offering Aiden his hand, which the young man took. “You’ve done alright, kid. If you’re ever in the area, stop by and we’ll have a beer together.”

“Wait… did I hear a compliment?” Aiden asked in fake surprise. “You all heard that, right?”

“Bah, don’t make a big deal of it,” Colt growled.

“You know something Dante?” Aiden said, “You’re all right.”

“Yes, I might even miss making clever remarks about your smell,” Nellise added wistfully, calm once more. “Take care of yourself, Dante. I’ve never embraced anyone while wearing armour before, so I’ll spare you the pain.”

“I appreciate that,” Colt grunted. “You got anything to say to me, Sy? You look like you do, but you’re keeping quiet.”

“I’m not burdened by armour,” she replied softly, coming forward to embrace Colt fondly, the big man’s bulk all but obscuring the tiny girl in the process.

“I’ll pass on the hug,” Pacian said to Colt, dryly. “Unless you *really* can’t help yourself.”

“None of that for you,” Colt growled at him. “I think I’ve gotten to know you pretty well, these past few weeks, and I don’t like what I see.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Pacian replied defensively.

“You’re a hard man, Pace. You’ve killed more than one man in cold blood right in front of my eyes. Maybe that’s what the situation demanded, and maybe it ain’t, but to me, you’re almost as bad as the bastards we fought.”

“I can’t believe I’m hearing this,” the blond rogue remarked, looking around at the others in disbelief. “I killed murderers and traitors, I did it really well, and I’m not apologising for it.” Colt leaned in close, and the next words he spoke were barely above a whisper.

“The others may not see who you really are, but you’re not fooling me. If I hear that you’ve hurt Nellise in any way, I’ll hunt ya down, and I’ll kill ya myself.”

“I would never hurt her,” Pacian growled back in a harsh whisper, “but if it came to it, one way or another, you’re welcome to try.”

“Enough bluster, we can hear you, you know,” Criosia interrupted, her arms crossed, a stern expression on her face that Aiden thought was surprisingly cute.

“We’re done here,” Colt replied, as if nothing had happened. “I hope your trip to the capital is smooth, but at this time of year, I think you might be regretting the decision to go by sea. Farewell.”

They waved goodbye to the big ranger as he headed over to a nearby damaged house, and set about assisting a small group of people pulling valuables out of the wreckage. Culdery had been hit hard by the attack, but Aiden knew they’d rebuild and life would go on. It was the instigators of this destruction that had his interest now and soon they would find out who was responsible, and bring them to account.

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About the Author

Stephen L. Nowland resides in Melbourne, Australia, where he pursues his twin interests of art and writing with all diligence.

Further information on this novel and upcoming titles in the Aielund saga can be found at my website, you can follow my progress on Facebook.

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The Aielund Saga

Nature Abhors a Vacuum
In Defence of the Crown
Ruins of Legend
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