



SOLITUDES AND SILENCE

VOLUME 1 OF THE ORPHAN CHRONICLES

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This book is dedicated to my parents for all of their support

Table of Contents

[Chapter 1 - Peace and Pall](#)
[Chapter 2 - Smack and Tear](#)
[Chapter 3 - Drab and Rags](#)
[Chapter 4 - Smooth and Loam](#)
[Chapter 5 - Ferocity and Fury](#)
[Chapter 6 - Rasp and Clutch](#)
[Chapter 7 - Solitudes and Silence](#)
[Chapter 8 - Clang and Clash](#)
[Chapter 9 - Thrash and Swirl](#)
[Chapter 10 - Wail and Warble](#)
[Chapter 11 - Wound and Balm](#)
[Chapter 12 - Echo and Boom](#)
[Chapter 13 - Crawl and Claw](#)
[Chapter 14 - Found and Unfound](#)
[Open Setting License](#)

Chapter 1

Peace and Pall

His first soul was a woman who worked in the monastery where he lived and trained.

Waimbrill guessed it was time for his initiation when he was summoned from the deprivation room, an unlit stone chamber, scrupulously clean, clear of scents, silent and smooth-walled. Its contemplative atmosphere conferred satisfaction and complacency under the tutelage of an elder monk with dreary eyes and a doddering grin.

He was met by high-ranking priests of his church and followed them through the winding halls of the temple. Waimbrill wanted to ask whom his first soul would be, hoping for a high priest or visiting dignitary, but an almost palpable quiet filled the air, and he didn't dare speak, afraid to breach decorum, to stutter and stammer like some dullard, to shatter the silence and solitude that permeated the monastery. Modrobenians were not known for speaking well, or much, and Waimbrill's years among them had ingrained in him a love of seclusion and laconism.

Covering his mouth with one hand to suppress a grin and hide his smile, Waimbrill nodded, presenting the most solemn face he could muster. He was relieved his life as a Soulclaine was starting. He'd been preparing since his parents sent him away as a boy of barely twelve years old, to the monastery where he'd been ever since, training for this day. He learned the tongues and customs of far-off lands, practiced his meditation, calming techniques and the defensive dance-like martial arts of the church, alongside lessons on self-sufficient living: gardening, trapping and hunting, carpentry and tanning and a thousand and one crafts and bits of lore.

After descending a flight of stone stairs, they came to a storage room, wherein were three sobbing women. He clasped his hands in front of him and awkwardly avoided their gaze, trying to conceal his eager excitement, not realizing how obvious his sweaty palms and pale face were.

The dead woman laying on the smooth, polished table in the center of the room was a cook named Zendra. Shelves with pots and crates of root vegetables lined the walls. The smell of earthy tubers and musty soil pervaded the room. His heart booming, beads of sweat breaking out on his face, Waimbrill beheld her worn skin, beset with wrinkles and a disturbingly slight smile. Her eyes were closed, and he closed his too. He recalled his training and pushed away the sights, smells and sounds of his surroundings. The small sobs of the survivors grew faint. He was dimly aware of one woman choking out encouragement to him on this, the first soul he would cleave on a long journey of service.

He recited the High Prayer in his mind. At first he couldn't think of the words, the enormity of the moment overwhelming him with worries and wonder about the future, about whether soulcleaving a lowly cook was an auspicious start or not, about whether Modroben would judge him unworthy or if he would fail as spectacularly as he imagined. He focused on his body, the relentless in and out of his lungs, the rise and fall of his chest, the incessant pounding of his heart which he felt in his temple and heard echoing in his skull. His brain was buffeted by ideas and images: a hoarse caw, a flurry of feathers in flight, a sallow beak, long-winged silhouettes circling in the light of a setting sun, the stench of decay, the red and brown of meat torn from a carcass.

Master of life and death

Let us thy servants give thanks in thy name

For it is through thy gifts of glory and grace

And our fidelity grown great,

That thy way bringeth rest in the end

And not turmoil and grief.

Through thy gentle tapping of time's relentless beat

Dost thou pound the march of our lives, and the rhythm of our deaths.

In thy name, we thus give thanks

For the mercy thou dost grant in death

Even unto the meekest of us, the least, the lost, the lame,

Even unto our most terrible foes, who shall find redemption at last.

Thy works give serenity to evil and good the same, and man and elf

And paupers and princes, and all of them alike.

Though our hearts may ache despite thy words which bear truth

It is through thy will that, with the strengths of our souls and the songs of thy spirit,

We shall find peace amid the pall of death

His head bent into the rough stubble-skinned, cruelly regal visage of a vulture, and, leaning forward, he snapped his crooked beak deep into the center of the woman's forehead. Her skull splintered, and he tasted her oily, fatty brain, leaving behind a small hole above her brow.

Waimbrill stood, his face returning to itself, regaining his composure though his mind remained in a thick fog. Someone clapped him on the shoulder, congratulating him, and the other cooks smiled, cheeks drying. They addressed him as "*Mortiss* Waimbrill", emphasizing the title he was now due.

But their words of praise and thanks failed to sink into his still-dazed mind, and he was given the rest of the afternoon to meditate. He sat crosslegged, recalling countless hours of practice coping with his cleaved. Grief rushed through his body and coalesced into a dull, dense stone weighing on his heart and mind. A part of him wanted to leave it there, pushing on his viscera and pulling him away from his god. That would be easy for now, but there

would be other souls to cleave, and the stones would multiply and he would become unable to control them. And that was why he had prepared so long for this day.

The rock of grief at the base of his spine cracked, and emotions bubbled within him. Tears welled before he could identify their cause: the pain of Zendra's bereaved. Messengers must have already told her family, Waimbrill thought, as their sadness suffused his mind and body. The sensation was not as he had expected. They say it never was, but still, he was surprised. He didn't know what dreams she regretted not fulfilling, or what words she regretted not saying; he didn't know why her kin and neighbors felt remorse and guilt over her death; he knew only that their melancholy and sorrow was his, and his body shook with their fear of the loneliness of life without her.

The emotions of Zendra's survivors reminded him of his own family, his father and mother, his brothers and sisters, and the sun-drenched fields of his youth. Waimbrill wished he was back there again, amid his own loved ones, but he focused on his pride in service to Modroben.

After many hours, he stretched, knees letting out a satisfying pop. His ruffled dark hair was tangled, face still red from exertion and tears, his thin white training robes blending in with his pallid skin. Grief gathered in his throat and caught there, rubbing and grinding as pebbles in a gizzard, breaking down his soul like eons of water eroding caves through veins of soft stone.

Waimbrill finished his training over the next few months, soulcleaving two additional people, their pain joining that of Zendra's beloved, rubbing against the spot in his belly where his instructors said was the spleen. One was a doe-eyed girl, an initiate, dead from a sudden illness. The other was an elf who wore the gray tunic of a monasterial administrator. Waimbrill's irritation worsened with the aching loss of the young woman's parents, the sadness of her friends, the administrator's grieving widow and his son, now orphaned. That their lamentations reverberated in him rather than them gave purpose to his struggle, and he was glad that his cleaving could protect them from undeath.

He had come to the monastery because that was the traditional fate for a third son among his people. When he returned to the windswept coastal plains of his homeland, he'd be the resident Soulclaine for his family estate and village. He longed for the warm touch of his mother's hand and the jolly smile of his father, and to see again a young lady he had known, whose flowering body, glowing smile and gleaming red hair danced through his dreams atop the smooth and slippery rocks of the local streams that seemed more beautiful in his remembrance of them than they had when she and he played in their cool, flowing water as children.

But soon after his third cleaving, Waimbrill received a messenger from his homeland, who reported that the young lady of his youth, with the sparkling scarlet hair, had died of a fever. Waimbrill twinged with jealousy that someone else had cleaved her, as though she was his by right, and he wondered if the Soulclaine serving his home followed the dictates of Modroben and practiced his work soundly. His lachrymosity at the loss of his long ago love was lessened by the sacrifice of another Soulclaine, but he mourned nonetheless, and promised to visit her grave when he could.

The established priests said he would be given his choice of first assignment. Subsequent placements could be all around the world, but generally each Soulclaine chose his first and every third or fourth assignment after that. This reassured him as he completed his training in ceremonies and rituals, meditation and contemplative exercises,

fasting and artistic projects, all hollow to him, designed to cope with a torrent of emotions he didn't feel, having cleaved but three souls.

Waimbrill knew he was going to be an exception as soon as he was called to receive his orders. He saw it on the pained, sympathetic face of the waiting monk. His first assignment was a place called Crikland, a rural province far to the east and south of the monastery, and even farther from the home and family he missed so much.

He journeyed to Crikland across tall mountains, dark bogs thick with shadows and muck, and lush valleys teeming with wildlife. Waimbrill traveled with a church caravan of carriages carrying cargo and relics, guarded by an elite force of paladins. Aside from a few chores and a three hour watch each day, he had little to do. The one time a threat approached the camp - a small brown bear - while Waimbrill was on duty, he failed to notice until it was eating scraps of food scattered around a smoldering fire. Brigands and robbers ignored or even offered aid to the procession when they saw it marked with symbols of Modroben. Beasts and monsters stayed away due to its size and its legion of well armed warriors, so the trip was uneventful, though long and rough.

By the time they neared his destination, his dread had transformed into relief and joy. His back and shoulders ached, and his head throbbed to the steady rhythm of a horse's gait.

Crikland was a remote part of a civilized land, a small plateau nestled amongst five mountains. The provincial capital, Crikburg, sat in the center on the shore of a large lake that drained into a river flowing south. Most travelers came that way, approaching along the river from the large and warlike kingdoms that spread from its fertile floodplains. But the caravan came from the north instead, winding through the mountains and emerging straight onto the plateau.

The northernmost mountain, Mt. Rekkerkem, peaked higher than any mountain Waimbrill had ever seen, reaching well into the clouds, so large and overwhelming looking at it sent waves of dizziness washing across his mind, which reeled with the thought of being at the top and seeing the rocky forests beneath, trees like little green moss and boulders like dirt.

He separated from the caravan a few miles outside the city, and walked through farmland towards his new home. He chanced along a farmer's wife, small in stature but with an impressively round figure, who insisted he come in for a meal. After some pleading on her part, he did so, and the rustic stew with bits of mutton and a heaping pile of mashed beets filled his belly with warmth. The farmer's wife and a pair of rotund daughters stared, nibbling on their own portions. It was not every day they entertained a novice Soulclaine. But they didn't seem to know what to say, perhaps sensing the dark cloud of his cleaved, or his ongoing ache for the girl with the red hair, whose face lingered in his memory, more beautiful than he had remembered, more delicate and fine than he would have thought possible when he had known her.

Before he left the farm, they asked him to soulcleave a kitten. *Those who disturb death value sentience more than lesser life, so thou needst not cleave animals unless asked or if there be a risk of undeath.* It had been a favorite of the youngest daughter, who wasn't present. Her sisters asked him amid fits of nervous stuttering, their mother nudging them along.

Waimbrill wished he knew words whose truth would bear comfort to the daughters, but he could only pray and cleave, biting into its fragile skull with his vulture head, swallowing its little brain and a few bits of cartilaginous

bone that rubbed against his throat like rocks. The girls clutched each other while he cleaved, and the youngest, who had been hiding since his arrival, leapt down the stairs to watch, teary-eyed, hugging her sisters and hiding her face.

He left the farmhouse and arrived in Crikburg in the early evening. It was a bustling little city, with a wide main thoroughfare lined with shops selling simple clothes, farm tools and traveling supplies. Stalls and carts filled the streets, vendors shouting their wares and prices, shoppers haggling and inspecting the produce and meats. A crowded fish market was near the lake, and beyond that was a ramshackle assortment of houses suspended over the water on sturdy stilts, connected by planks.

People inquisitively stared at him until his eyes met theirs. *Thou art a constant reminder of the regret and loss due to man and elf alike. Thou shalt serve a flock who loveth thy sacrifice, but whose visage is filled with fear, and whose words and glances offend thee.* The memorized mantra didn't help much. Knowing that their fear hid respect and awe did not reduce his desire for acceptance.

Searching for someone, maybe a child, to guide him to his new home, Waimbrill passed by a rough, grizzled man with a thick belly and wide beard, standing behind a cart laden with horseshoes and other ironwork.

"Aye, Mortiss," said the man, "Do ye but travel through this land? We have need for your kind to live."

Waimbrill's mind raced as he realized his career had really begun. "Greetings, good sir," he said, "My name is Mortiss Waimbrill, and I am newly assigned to your fair town."

Expecting a handshake and an expression of welcome, Waimbrill forced himself to smile enthusiastically, but the man only frowned and drawled, "Been waitin' a few days, reckon. My 'pprentice did die some time ago. Ye ready now?"

"Uh, certainly," Waimbrill said, following the blacksmith to his smithy.

"I done bury him in the yard. If I shows ye where, can ye dig him up? I must return to the market," the blacksmith asked.

Waimbrill nodded, and they walked to the grassy yard behind the smithy. The blacksmith showed him the spot, and Waimbrill started digging into the soil, which was rich and loamy, and heavy with the weight of recent rain.

Before he left, the blacksmith promised to send a boy as a guide. By the time he arrived, Waimbrill was dripping with sweat and his muscles ached. He turned out to be older than Waimbrill had expected. The blacksmith must have had difficulty finding a child willing to show a Soulclaine to his cottage, and had settled on a boy of at least eleven. *Though adults understand and respect our position, children can not comprehend death, and thus fear our grace and solitude.*

The boy was a skinny skeleton wrapped in mismatched scraps of crumbling cloth caked with discolored mud. The wide nostrils of his crooked nose flared beneath deep-set dark brown eyes. He was breathing heavily, as though recently running or swimming, and he carried a package wrapped in white paper and smelling of fish.

"Greetings, M'rtiss," said the peculiarly accented boy, "I be Terredor Delver. Me clan do sprawl atop this city and b'yond. Right loyal we be to yon lord, be praised."

Waimbrill was at a loss for words, unable to understand the boy's singsong words. He heard tumultuous shouts, and saw a trio of plump women running with flowery hats in their hands.

Terredor seemed about to flee, but stopped, whether deciding he had no chance of escaping or not wishing to abandon him, Waimbrill didn't know. The women stopped shouting when they saw Waimbrill.

"Hand back the fish," said one.

"We always say," said another, "Delves are not as bad in spirit as gentle folk see them."

"But thee, young man," said the third, "Dost threaten to prove us wrong." "Don't force us to take drastic action in front of..." said the first, nodding in Waimbrill's direction.

"Fine," Terredor said, "I shall eat sand and lake water this eve'."

The ladies grumbled to each other, uncomfortable now about taking it, but one of them grabbed the package.

"We need nourishment as well, Delver," she said, and turned to leave, followed by the other two.

"Wait," Waimbrill said, "I'll pay for the fish."

The women thanked him, introduced themselves and promised to send all the respectable households with welcoming gifts. One, her fat lips pursed in a sour, flat line, said, "The Delves are wont to lie and steal, Mortiss Waimbrill. Don't let them trick you into being an unwarranted hero."

Waimbrill nodded awkwardly as they maligned Terredor, who dug into the ground nearby. When the women were gone, Terredor thanked Waimbrill and pledged to pay him back.

The coffin contained the worm-ridden corpse of the skinny young apprentice. Waimbrill doubted he could have become a blacksmith with that thin frame. But perhaps his muscles had rotted away, Waimbrill thought. Bones were visible under wisps of brown meat and flaps of skin. Desiccated flesh stank like overripe fruit, and Waimbrill gagged. He took a deep breath through his mouth, cleared his mind and prayed over the apprentice. He felt that now familiar transformation, saw the vulture beak extend from his face, and tasted the must of decaying brain. The experience left behind a spoiled, mealy taste that lingered even after gulping from the waterskin his mother had packed for him so many years ago.

It wasn't until later that Waimbrill realized he hadn't stopped to meditate, or even to simply ponder the apprentice's death. He attributed this to his impatience in finding his new home, and decided that this compromise of his training meant he was no longer a novice slavishly imitating his teachers. But he worried that he was losing competence already, having only soulcleaved four people and a kitten. Or maybe, he thought, no one grieved for the death of the lowly blacksmith's apprentice.

Chapter 2

Smack and Tear

Waimbrill quickly came to know the entire province. Most of the population lived in the city, with the remainder scattered on the plateau in the shadow of the five mountains that loomed like lumbering giants over the region. Villages dotted the plains between the mountains and the lake. The people in these habitations were mostly human, with a smattering of elves and other races.

A few hundred dwarves and gnomes, insular and clannish folk who brought their dead to Waimbrill rather than invite an outsider into their homes, lived in the mountains. Rainids - frog-like humanoids who stood taller than humans, but leaner, and longer-limbed by far - were a large part of Crikland's population. The lake itself was home to tribes of green-skinned pond rainids, and their blue-skinned mountain-dwelling cousins populated the peaks, their

battle prowess and barbarism making them legend among the town-dwellers, so Waimbrill heard much about them before he ever met any. Their skin was the color of a cloudless summer sky, and they were shorter and huskier than other rainids. They had wide eyes, thick nostrils with no nose, and a broad toothless mouth. Three of them came to him one day, dressed in thick furs and carrying spears outfitted with dangling bits of bone and colorful stones. The leader of the trio, who introduced himself as Sharradrir, wore armor of tanned bearskin, intricately stitched with arcane symbols.

An elder woman had died in her sleep, and they needed Waimbrill to come with them. He sighed and nodded, and prepared for a hike.

The rainids walked quickly, Waimbrill struggling to keep up. When they came to the base of Mt. Rekkerkem, Sharradrir said, “Mortiss Waimbrill, it would take you many hours or days to climb to where we must go, but I can carry you there swiftly.”

The chief warrior saw that Waimbrill was hesitant and assured him he would be safe. “Leaping is a particular skill of the warriors of my tribe,” Sharradrir said, his pride evident in his voice.

Waimbrill agreed, and climbed onto the back of the rainid, clutching his rough, leather-armored shoulders.

The first jump was so flabbergasting Waimbrill almost let go. They were under a ledge, and he assumed that was where Sharradrir would jump. But instead he leapt some seventy feet straight up, and landed on a sheer rock wall, clinging to, it seemed, nothing. Waimbrill gasped, his heart dropping as he saw that he was supported only by the grunting Sharradrir’s long toes and fingers, which gripped the smooth stone surface. They were stationary for a moment, but Waimbrill fell in his own mind a hundred times in that second, and then Sharradrir leapt again, landing on a high shelf.

“Hold on tight,” Sharradrir said, and Waimbrill could hear the grin in his voice.

He leapt again, and they stayed aloft so long Waimbrill felt like he was flying. They landed this time on an upwardly sloping surface, and Waimbrill had to wrap his legs around Sharradrir’s torso to keep from dangling feet first, suspended hundreds of feet above a rocky cliff wall. Waimbrill felt sure he would vomit from fear, intestines churning as his muscles screamed that he was imminently plummeting to a splattering death. Sharradrir leapt from face to face, chortling and reassuring Waimbrill as he went. He didn’t stop, jumping instantly after each landing. Waimbrill became dizzy and disoriented from the constant jostling and bouncing.

His tightly clenched, bone-white fingers tingled with tension by the time he dismounted. It was cold this high, and Waimbrill had never gathered his breath from his initial exhilaration. He stumbled, and Sharradrir supported him as he panted and leaned forward to rest against a boulder.

Catching a glimpse of the view from his location, Waimbrill’s breath caught in his throat, and panic welled in his mind. He precariously teetered, dropped to his knees and held onto the rock beneath him like a child clutching at its mother. A field of green lay in front of him, crisscrossed with azure ribbons of rivers meandering from the mountains to the lake, where they gathered and mixed with its deep, dark waters before flowing south, off the edge of the plateau into the kingdoms beyond. The landmarks he could have most easily recognized, the trees and roads, clusters of farmhouses, and creeks and ponds, were smoothed over with distance and invisibly small. The wind roared and ripped across his face, so strong it drained his breath as the air fled from his throat faster than his lungs

could inflate. He wondered if he never felt wind like this before because he had been sheltered in his family's estate and the monastery, or if there simply was no wind that paralleled the gusts that smacked and tore at him now.

When he realized the rainids were waiting for him, Waimbrill wobbled to his feet. His knees felt like the jellied berries his family made for the winter months, and he couldn't catch his breath.

Sharradrir placed a leathery-skinned hand on his shoulder and said, "Relax. Humans have trouble breathing the air this high. We shall walk slowly." He turned to the other rainids and said, "Go on yourselves, and I will bring him."

They stretched their wide lipless mouths into what Waimbrill could only assume was a sneer, then hurried ahead. Sharradrir walked with Waimbrill and offered support when the trail grew rough.

They soon reached a large hut, sheltered from the wind by a high wall. Heavily armed and brightly adorned guards stood outside. Sharradrir motioned for him to enter.

Inside, it smelled of musty incense and melted snow. Mounted bear skins and feathered, painted drums decorated the smooth wooden walls. Waimbrill shivered as his chill dwindled in the fire-heated hut, and he bowed nervously in greeting to the elder rainids, their skin wrinkled beneath thick robes and crowns.

The dead woman, her belly fat and mouth wide, lay on a bed, four supplicants praying around her body. They rose and gestured for Waimbrill to approach. He heard them chitter in their own language. He stood before the deceased rainid, took a deep breath and recited the High Prayer. His head reared back, nose elongating and hardening into a vulture beak, and then it was done, and the rainid cleaved. Her brain was thinner, more watery and saltier than the human brains he was used to, but her grief assaulted his body like an avalanche just the same. Waimbrill awkwardly noted that the rainids were ignoring him and acting out a mourning ritual he didn't know. Part of his training was in understanding, observing and respecting the funerary arts, but he was not versed in the practices of these tribes.

A rainid woman entered, covered in thick furs and bejeweled with large sapphires, pale periwinkle skin marked with regal wrinkles and cold eyes. The other rainids stopped chanting, and prostrated before her.

"Greetings, Mortiss..." she said, resonant contralto trailing off, waiting for him to supply his name.

He stood in awe at her majesty, then stammered, "W-Waimbrill."

"I thank you, Mortiss Waimbrill, for serving our lord. I am Temendra, the *Rowager* of all the rainids of these mountains, and I have come to pay my respects to the woman thou hast graciously cleaved. She was Denaavi of Ethena, mother of Chief Randannasto, daughter of Lady-Mother Ellabora and Chief Vintadiim of the Gannasha tribe of Mt. Sedge--"

She continued listing the decedent's lineage, and Waimbrill smiled and nodded politely.

"A feast hath begun, Mortiss Waimbrill, as is customary after the death of such an elder among us. All of our tribesmen shall attend, to mourn her death and celebrate her life. As her claine, ye are invited to be our guest of honor," she said.

Waimbrill agreed, and she smiled a comforting grin that warmed his bones and cleared the waves of doubt and grief that lapped at his mind. She turned to the bowing rainids, and spoke in their language, its booming clicks and

guttural grunts alien and discordant. He groaned inwardly as he realized he had agreed to a feast, and he wondered what snow rainids ate.

Snow rainids ate salted and dried meats, berries, vegetables and pine needles. A time of scarcity resulted in a meager feast. There was no fresh meat due to storms that had made hunting fruitless for weeks. The funeral itself was a low-key affair, with little talking. Rainids filtered in and out, proclaiming their thoughts in their own tongue, accompanied by a loud rhythmic song whose primal sadness and pervading loss echoed off the rock walls of Mt. Rekkerkem. The mourning took place deep in the gorge, on wide platforms extending out from both sides.

As he nibbled on a salad of pine needles and nuts, Waimbrill wondered if his sadness and pain was inordinate, considering the low number of people he had cleaved. He listened to the baritone warbling and keening of the mourners, saw their tears at the loss of one who had been a beloved part of the community. She was known, respected and now missed by so many people that he must have gathered a lot of pain from her cleaving, he thought. But, examining his heart, he felt essentially content, a feeling that worried him even more as he wondered if he had done something wrong, if her and her loved one's pain had not transferred to him as it should. Then, every few seconds, something would happen - a man would speak, a child would drop a plate, a woman would laugh - and for a moment, he felt positive that that was the trigger that would set off a cascade of emotions. It never did though, and he remained sure that he was not experiencing the full range of pathos he should. Whether this was due to his own competence or incompetence he didn't know.

The mourning ceremony was complete, and the rainids ululated, dispersing in a merry frenzy of activity. They jumped over and on each other as they bounced around the gorge in which they lived.

Waimbrill wondered if he would be able to find someone to take him home. If not, it would be a long and perilous descent, and a lengthy journey all the way back to his cottage.

Still lightheaded, he stopped on a narrow ledge, below which was a sheer, snowy slope. The clouds above his head floated so near he thought he might be able to jump onto them if only he dared.

The mountain rumbled beneath his feet. The celebrating rainids in the village quieted. He heard a crash, and felt more vibrations, then great cracks appeared in the white ground below. Swathes of snow went tumbling away, and he both saw and felt the very mountain shake, as though waking from an ancient slumber. He lost his balance and collapsed to his knees, lungs heaving, heart pounding. He was sure he would be tossed into the deluge of snow that crashed down the mountainside, uprooting trees and knocking over boulders like sticks and pebbles. But he clung tightly to the ledge beneath him, holding his breath while he wondered how he would die in an avalanche: the fall? the suffocation? the cold?

The thrashing beneath him stopped, and sepulchral silence filled the air. The mountainside was white, broken only with the tips of trees poking out at odd angles, and he was partially blinded by the sun reflecting off the sheen of snow. It was a beautiful sight, he thought, after catching his breath and shielding his eyes with his hands. Rainids whooped and hollered, leaping around him. They jumped and tumbled down the side of the mountain, burrowing into and out of the snow like moles, laughing as they cavorted atop the remains of the avalanche.

A burst of snow beneath him settled to reveal a pair of rainids, grins wide and smeared with blood, carrying a moose carcass up the mountain. He saw more rainids pop out of the loose, powdery snow, laden with the bodies of deer and moose, and armloads of rabbits, squirrels and opossums. He crept to the edge of the boulder to better see the goings-on, and a loose rock came out from under him. He fell forward, head first, and slid on the slippery mat of ice-slick snow.

He frantically grabbed around him but found only handfuls of loose powder. All he saw was white, whether clouds or snow, or both, he couldn't tell, and he felt the biting chill of wind. Time seemed to stop; up and down were the same and he wondered if he was still falling, or if he had landed and his mind hadn't yet comprehended its end. He was in free fall, hundreds of feet above a carpet of snow in which he landed, belly down.

The lightly compacted snow beneath him cracked under his weight, and he plummeted into it, sliding through a tunnel burrowed by rainids. It slowed his fall enough that he remained unhurt, but not enough that he could stop himself.

He collided with a hard, pale blue shape. As he tumbled, limb over limb, he realized it was Sharradrir. They landed in a pile in a flat spot in the tunnel, and Waimbrill separated himself from the rainid, wincing and shaking his bruised bones.

Sharradrir snarled, but stopped when he saw that it was only the Soulelaine and not a rival come to steal the two dead rabbits he carried. He sheepishly offered Waimbrill one of them

"I apologize," Waimbrill said, putting the rabbit in his pack, "I fell all the way from the top of your mountain."

"Ye should be more careful, Mortiss. Your kind are not suited to mountains. I will accompany you the rest of the way to the ground."

Occasionally losing control and slipping, Waimbrill descended with the help of Sharradrir. They passed a quartet of dead wolves, sharp teeth sticking out of their fierce faces, silver and black fur matted with melted snow, lugged up a steep tunnel by rainids, who stared with a mixture of hostility and surprise at Waimbrill.

They crawled out of the snow into the bright light of the noontime sun near the bottom of the slope. Waimbrill stopped and cocked his head to the side. He heard a low rumble, and the ground vibrated beneath his feet.

"What was that?" Waimbrill asked, "Another avalanche?"

"It sounds like a grellpir," Sharradrir said, "A destructive spirit created by the power of an avalanche. They only exist for a few minutes, so we must hide from it if we can; it is a stupid beast, and not hard to fool. It will dissolve quickly on its own."

The slope shook violently and the snow underfoot rose, almost knocking Waimbrill off his feet. He dropped to his hands and knees as a deep guttural growl emanated from the ground itself, which ascended to twice the height of a man, and all he could do was hold on. The mountain of upraised powder on which both Waimbrill and Sharradrir struggled to keep their grip shook violently, revealing a large humanoid-shaped creature made of pure white snow.

The grellpir roared, its hands reaching for its back, where Waimbrill and Sharradrir clutched tightly to its shoulders, out of the reach of its thick snowy arms.

"Jump into one of the trees!" Sharradrir shouted, pointing at the tall fir and spruce trees protruding from the freshly laid snow. Most of the trees had tumbled down the mountain and were splintered, laying at odd angles, but

several stuck out well above the grellpir's height. Sharradrir jumped and landed nimbly on the thick branch of a fir tree high above the snow.

Waimbrill tried to climb onto the beast's shoulder so he would be in position to jump when he got close enough to a tree, but the icy snow that constituted the grellpir was slippery and jagged, and he could barely maintain his grip as his bloody hands shrieked pain.

It stopped and shook again, like a dog, and Waimbrill's grip slipped. He flew through the air, smacking against the pointed needles of a spruce. The sharp smell of sap slapped his senses, and he struggled to his feet, gasping.

The grellpir darted across the rock and ice towards him. He saw its black eyes and wide circular mouth, no jaw or lips or tongue, only an empty hole out of which came a hollow bellow, echoing and reverberating against the sunlit snowscape. He made it to his feet in time to see it reach out for him with one thick snowy paw. Waimbrill screamed and scampered away.

Sharradrir leapt to the ground in front of the monster. "Leave the Soulclaine alone!" he shouted, then yelled at Waimbrill, "Run!"

Waimbrill sprinted away faster than he ever thought he could. Dodging its massive paw, Sharradrir threw a knife through the grellpir's neck, but it was unfazed. Waimbrill turned and saw the monster wrap Sharradrir in one fist, then pop the struggling rainid into his mouth. Waimbrill screamed and the monster faced him.

They both paused, Waimbrill shrieking for the death of the warrior who had saved him, and the monster stared, suddenly silent, the empty hole of its maw dark and deep.

Waimbrill's heart raced so fast he thought it might burst out of his chest, and he couldn't tell if he was still screaming or not. The monster roared.

A few chunks of snow fell off its back. This was followed by more, in larger and larger clumps, the creature groaning as it dissolved into loose powder in a matter of seconds. Waimbrill fell to his knees and clutched his head in his hands while he regained his composure.

He stepped towards the pile of snow where the grellpir had fallen apart, and saw a flash of blue. He gasped and dug through it, pulling out Sharradrir's body. He had a moment of hope that the rainid might have survived the encounter after all.

But Sharradrir was dead, frozen solid like a chunk of ice. Waimbrill mourned his sacrifice, meditating over the warrior's body, then said the High Prayer and soulcleaved him. Since no one knew of the rainid's death except for him, Sharradrir was the only possible source for the deluging bitterness that nipped at his heart like astringent mosquito bites. It was accompanied by swelling pride and righteousness, for sacrificing oneself to save a Mortiss was as honorable a fate as any warrior could hope for. But the negative emotions were more demanding of his consciousness, more compelling and constant, and he wearily walked away, guilt mounting.

Waimbrill limped down the mountainside alone, stopping at a small farmhouse where he told the inhabitants what had happened so they could inform the rainids.

Limbs aching, joints screaming, he returned to his humble cottage. Bursts of sadness in his spleen signaled Sharradrir's bereaved discovering his death in fits and spurts: a few people who barely knew him one moment, little

spots of angst that melted into a miasma of pain, followed by a cluster of the grievously dolorous, their loss striking a bass bell of melancholy whose tone vibrated his innards for hours.

He thought of the joyous grinning rainids as they dragged their meaty bounty through the snow up the harsh mountain they loved. It must have been a sort of holiday for them, he decided, and he was sad that he would not participate again. He realized that this regret was not his, that he had no connection to this avalanche feast, no nostalgia for it, but still the wistful wanting filled his heart and mind. This, he thought, must be the regret of the two rainids he had cleaved today.

Unable to sleep, he called to mind his training. *Sleep is the first tool of a Soulclaine. It is the truest rest and the source of all healing. Value it, make time for it, make a place for it. If sleep cometh not in that place, leave it, thus it shall remain a place for thy heart to sleep. Examine thy wakefulness in a place for thy mind to meditate.*

He covered himself in blankets. The visceral chill of Mt. Rekkerkem soaked into his flesh like the flavors of a marinade, remaining despite the inviting warmth of the coals, wrapping around his skin and sinking into his body in thin tendrils, leaving a cold core and a frozen face, his nose still numb, his ears so frigid they burned.

The totality of a person's beliefs is called a Paradigm, each of which is unique. These beliefs are notions about the world, like "People conspire to harm me", or about others, like "My mother loveth me", or about ourselves, like "I can never win in rambleball". When thou cleavest a person, thou absorbest his Paradigm. Thine own beliefs shall remain, interspersed among those for whom thou art claine, whose souls sometimes bubble forth, and for a moment, thou shalt perceive the world through a Paradigm of thy cleaved.

He finally warmed, and his ears and nose thawed despite the chill at his back. He removed the heavy blankets draped over him, and closed his eyes, focusing on the pores of his chest and arms, examining the feeling of perspiration and the inexorable in and out of heated air seeping into his lungs.

To overcome this, thou must first identify the beliefs of the Paradigm that controleth thee. Thou must ponder with depth and detail the ideas filling thy mind; thou must theorize and process, search heartily for words that bear the truth for which thy choir of cleaved cry out - not a universal truth, but rather the opposite: words whose truth is borne only to he whose Paradigm thou hast identified, a truth so personal it could only be articulated in poems on parchment, songs of sweet soul, or pictures in pigment and paint.

Waimbrill moved away from the uncomfortably warm stove. His muscles and joints relaxed. He examined the potent feelings washing through his mind, and tried to imagine who might be its source.

Identify with absolute specificity the Paradigm that aileth thee. Examine all the feelings perfusing thy soul, hypothesize a hundred Paradigms until thou discoverest the one that congrueth with the racing chaotic cognition of thy cleaved, now no longer discordantly cacophonous, no more weeds in the garden, but rather a garden of weeds. Thou shalt see the world then as the one whose Paradigm affecteth thee, and thou shalt feel that person's heart and soul as truly as thou feelest thine own; thy body shall ring with righteousness, and thine understanding of this Paradigm shall be so great thou controlest it, rather than it controleth thee.

He realized why the heat of the burning coals felt so intense: he was controlled by the Paradigm of a snow rainid, one of whose core beliefs was that bitterly cold air was comfortable. His cottage was cozier, more like a true home than the temporary abode he thought of it as, and he felt a greater familiarity with every object and every nook

and cranny in the house. Nothing was visibly different, but everything was *palpably* different, like an aura of motherly welcome permeated it all. He wanted desperately to share this home, to show someone the graceful comfort that gleamed like fresh-fallen snow, giving even the dustiest and dimmest of surfaces a loving glow. He longed for a family, a longing that must have been the Paradigm of a tribeswoman, perhaps a close friend of either the woman or Sharradrir. No, he thought, he felt no ringing righteousness about a friend. But a mother, yes, a mother, he decided, and confidence flowed through him. Surety swept across his mind that Sharradrir's mother wept for his loss. Waimbrill wept too, and despondency washed over him, leaving a crushing loneliness.

He didn't realize his meditations had taken all night until sunlight crept through his window, and now that he was sleepy, the morning interrupted his rest. He had no sooner begun dozing when footsteps approached his hut. He groaned and heard gentle knocking.

"Mortiss Waimbrill," said a quiet voice that he recognized as dwarven, "We have need of your kind to live."

Waimbrill wearily dragged himself to the door. His frustration at being woken so early abated when he saw the ashy, tear-streaked faces of four dwarven men and an elder woman. The men, short and squat with bushy beards and long braided hair, rolls of fat bulging out of their thick coveralls and coarse tunics, carried a litter on which was a sheet-shrouded body.

"My husband passed away," the woman said, her lip quivering, voice wavering, "I know it's late, but I always promised him I would brook no delay in his soulcleaving. A sorcerer corrupted his brother into a creature of unending torment," she said, then let out a hoarse, stifled cry, "Please..."

At least, Waimbrill thought, I don't have to travel anywhere.

The soulcleaving took only a moment, and the dwarves left him with a chunk of gold from their mine, shuffling towards the road as the woman sniffled and sobbed gently. Waimbrill wondered how long it would be before her grief kept him up all night.

He tried to go back to sleep, but by then the sun was up, and he found no rest for his tired muscles or mind.

Chapter 3

Drab and Rags

Waimbrill walked to town, intent on buying fresh fish and perhaps even meat if he found cheap cuts or some of the tastier organs. He hoped to find everything to make a recipe for lamb kidney stew he had gathered from his cleaved.

Picturing the succulent stew as he set out that morning, Waimbrill became ravenous and planned a huge meal in his mind, with a heaping bowl of Crekkish mashed beets and a bramble pie. He had made this plan before, but always his pains sapped his appetite before he could whet it. Today, he resolved to feast no matter what. *The second tool against the pains of thy cleaved is food. A mind can not pursue higher needs while base hungers remain unfilled, so fill them first with sound nutrition.*

So focused was he on the increasingly elaborate but still theoretical meal that he almost didn't notice a fisherman, whom Waimbrill knew as Egglebrod, with a dour face, sunburnt and scarred, running towards him on the path. He was out of breath, chest heaving, and he stammered wildly before giving up and taking a minute to regain his composure.

Waimbrill shuffled his feet, wondering what had the fisherman so upset: a monster, perhaps, or an army invading the land. He was glad he was essentially safe from marauders, soldiers and slavers, since few men would dare attack a Soulclaine. But monsters were a different story. They attacked indiscriminately, slaughtering whatever was within reach, and while the church has several martial orders, some of whom were quite potent in combat, Waimbrill did not belong to any of them. His was a simple monastic clan who trained in meditation and horticulture, not combat and war.

“’Twas that great... beast of... Chamballa’s... bosom,” said the fisherman, lungs lurching for breath, spasming violently, “A long monster... like a snake with... rows of red-tipped fins on her back, but the beast’s head... Mortiss Waimbrill, ‘twas just an end to her body, an open maw lined with fangs.”

“I was told this happens from time to time,” Waimbrill said. Chamballa was a local goddess, associated with storms, destruction and the deepest reaches of Lake Crikmere, whence came a monster said to be her child.

“Aye,” Egglebrod said, “Every few years, Chamballa sends her wrath upon the land from the lake.”

Waimbrill walked alongside Egglebrod, whose haggard eyes welled with tears as he listed those he hadn’t accounted for after the attack. He twice stopped to beg Waimbrill to find their bodies. But he could only promise to try. If a monster devoured the corpses, there was nothing he could do.

The wreckage of the fishing boats had washed up on the shores of Lake Crikmere: bits of flotsam, chunks of wood, line and nets, and here and there a hat or an old boot soaked in blood. Waimbrill could soulcleave any piece of brain or spinal cord, but there was not a single bit of either to be found.

The monster had destroyed every boat on the lake, and swallowed its passengers whole, and then, Egglebrod said, it dived back into the water.

“Ye know the rainids down there, right?” Egglebrod asked, and Waimbrill nodded.

“Only because their Soulclaine position is vacant,” he said, “They have to bring their dead to me. I have no way to summon them. If they found the bodies of the other men, or if they themselves had bodies to be cleaved, they would have come ashore to find me by now.”

“That means...” Egglebrod said, his voice stiff and timid, “The beast must have swallowed them all.”

Waimbrill tried to think of a more sensitive way to explain it, but he was at a loss for words, and merely nodded, a lump rising in his throat.

“To be ever a tortured ghost...” Egglebrod said, quoting a famous line from a local ballad.

Waimbrill said, “Not everyone who is uncleaved becomes a ghost.”

But his reassurances sounded hollow even to his own ears. Waimbrill knew that the fishermen who had not been soulcleaved - and now, lacking a body, never would be - remained forever at risk for becoming a ghost or ghoul, or even one of the worse kinds of restless dead.

“Why doth Modroben allow her to do this?” Egglebrod asked, “Why doth Chamballa not allow her victims to be cleaved?”

“I can not answer that,” Waimbrill said, “I can only enforce my lord’s rules against mortals, not the gods. It is for him to stop her, and I’m sure he will send a champion in his time.”

One vibrant spring day, a solemn procession of mourners interrupted his meditations. Attended by grim guards, an elven nobleman and his wife brought the body of their daughter, who had recently been betrothed to a foreign prince. The wedding was to have been a grand affair come autumn. News of the engagement spread even to the reclusive Waimbrill.

The family said she died falling off her horse, and the bruises and breaks on her delicate body seemed to confirm that. But Waimbrill was left with guilt around her death, and he had a strong suspicion that this was the baleful Paradigm of her murderer, echoing in his gut with such potency he heard it even before the cleaving was complete.

He considered telling the nobleman and his wife, but didn't know how, or what they might do in response. He had no way of discovering the murderer, and for all he knew, it was one of the parents. The thought struck him suddenly and he knew it bore truth by the pangs of heartbreak that rang deep within him: the young elven woman, whose pale blonde hair was soft and downy even in death, framing her bruised face, gentle slanted eyes and narrow, regal nose, had died knowing a parent's betrayal. The emotion he cleaved from her was unmistakable, and it was followed by more: intense and loyal love, persisting beyond boundaries, love which Waimbrill could feel in his bones had been illicit.

Adrenaline pounding through his veins, he ran towards them with no preparation or plan, wondering whether his passion was truly his desire to see justice or her need for retribution, or if it mattered.

He caught up to the slow-moving carriages, pulled by white horses and accompanied by guards and servants. One carriage held the noble couple; the other was empty of life, containing only the beautiful, untimely corpse of the elven maiden.

"Wait!" he shouted, and the carriages stopped. The guards turned toward him, initially with hostility, then recognition and awkward politeness. One of them, a tall man, slender but bulging with ropy muscles and sporting a gritty glare in his eyes that belied the soft features common to elves, opened the curtain that blocked the carriage door.

The nobleman spoke to his retinue in elven, a lilting, sibilant tongue, and made eye contact with Waimbrill, then looked away, muttering under his breath. During that moment when their gazes met, interlocking like shaking hands, Waimbrill knew that he was right, that the nobleman had killed his daughter because she had taken a lover, and that a tiny part of him was ashamed.

"Wait!" he shouted, "What was her name?"

The nobleman wrinkled his face, squinting. "Countess Othallassah Verrabirrin," he said, with a strong - but obviously forced, at least to Waimbrill - sense of grief.

After a long silence, the chief guard said, "Mortiss Waimbrill, if there is nothing else we can do for you-"

"Did you love her?" Waimbrill asked.

He scoffed, and said, "Of course. Mortiss Waimbrill, please leave me to mourn the death of my daughter, as I shall leave you to attend to your needs."

The nobleman turned to enter the carriage, and Waimbrill shouted, "I know what you did."

Silence filled the forest, and Waimbrill saw on the averted faces of the guards and servants that they had known, or at least suspected, as much. A sudden thrashing came from inside the carriage, and the noblewoman stepped out. She pushed her husband, and he stumbled. She spoke through clenched teeth, "What didst *thou* do?"

She hadn't spoken, which wasn't surprising to Waimbrill. Parents were often silent, still in shock, or not accepting their child's passing. *Mourners do bereave, and bereave again, and cycle, spinning through a spectrum, from comprehension refused, a stubborn rejection of borne truth, to an outpouring of rage, blame and frustration, blind, blanket hatred, overwhelming and unfocused, a compulsion to bargain or barter for continuance, even with us who can make no deals for death, and finally a deep despondency and dark depression which may remain, or return to earlier arcs, or perhaps, conclude with forbearant acceptance.*

The noblewoman had watched the soulcleaving, as though perhaps in that first part of the cycle, still denying the truth of her daughter's death despite her breathless body laying before her. The mother's heavily made-up face concealed any emotions that might have been apparent on her bare skin. Her cheeks were delicately rouged, eyes lined with green that continued their slant all the way to her temples. Her raven hair hung in rivulets around her face and bosom, which was covered by an ornate white dress decorated with loops and circles of lace and soft fabric. Elven women rarely spoke much outside their home, or even left their home under ordinary circumstances. Only disreputable elven women would show emotion in front of outsiders, especially a human, so Waimbrill was surprised at the sudden shattering of her stony visage.

"I did not-" said the nobleman.

"Do not lie to me! I can see it on thy face," the woman shouted, "What didst thou do to my little girl?"

"You act improper in front of commoners!" he said, slapping her face.

"Don't forget who hath the title in this family," she said, "I demand thou tellest me what happened."

"Fine!" the nobleman said, "She was not a virgin. *Your* daughter was a harlot. We would have been humiliated after the wedding. This was the only way to preserve the family."

"Thou hast killed her!" she screamed, and her hoarse voice cracked through tears. She rained down blows upon her husband, who pushed her roughly.

She fell backwards, knocking over one of the guards. They both tumbled to the ground near the yoked horses, who whinnied and nervously stamped their hooves. The guard grabbed her and rolled away before they were trampled. The other guards returned to their master, who gasped for air, yellow bruises blooming on his cheeks.

He stood, and turned away from his wife. "Mortiss Waimbrill, ye have acted in a manner most unbecoming-" His words stopped suddenly, blood dripping from his mouth. He fell to his knees, then collapsed to the leaf-littered ground, a knife protruding from his back. Behind him stood his wife, scarlet spatter sprayed on her pristine white dress.

The guards and Waimbrill looked at each other for a long time, not sure what to do. Waimbrill walked forward, knowing at least that his first step needed to be the cleaving of the elven lord.

When he got close to the body, she grimaced and blocked him. "Mortiss Waimbrill, he deserveth not your ministrations. Let him suffer for eternity, I beg you."

Waimbrill sputtered, shocked, trying to think of a response. One of the guards said, "Lady Ballardrine, ye know we can not do that."

She grabbed the knife - which she had taken from the hilt of the guard she had fallen to the ground with - and pulled it out of her husband's body. She snarled at Waimbrill.

"I can not let him merely die after what he hath done to my daughter. Our daughter," she said, turning to the guards, "And our title hath always been in my lineage, not his. Ye are loyal to *me*. We shall leave his body here for the vermin, and none of you shall speak of this day again."

"Lady Ballardrine," Waimbrill said, "If he is raised as a zombie or wight, it shan't undo his evil, nor prevent any more. It would only ensure that his malefaction continues its march, in the murder and mayhem he would make as an undead beast, and in the hearts of all of us here, who would allow our spite and malice for one man to lead to an even greater evil than a mere man could ever accomplish. No, my good lady, I can not stand aside. As is my duty, I will soulcleave your husband. What you do with his body after that is of no concern to me, so show your contempt for him then, not now. Every moment we palaver is a moment that a necromancer may find his uncleaved soul and raise it for some nefarious end."

She nodded, tears leaking out of her shut eyelids, and a servant stepped forward to lead her back to the carriage. Waimbrill mumbled through his prayer. This was the first person he genuinely did not want to cleave, even counting the unpleasantly rotten blacksmith's apprentice. He knew that the Paradigm he was about to gain would be acidic and bitter like vinegar.

And it was. Rejection and hatred overwhelmed him. He couldn't articulate his fears into coherence, but paranoia thundered through him. The rustling of the leaves of the oaks around him was a sign from some terrible god, the chirping of crickets was a sonorous threat, and conspiracies cavorted in the eyes of the elven guards. Images of blood, offal and gore, and intense lust washed through his body. He forced himself to meditate, searching for serenity over the cavalcading urges that flooded his mind.

By the time Waimbrill came out of his trance, the moon had risen, and his stomach was empty, heaving with discomfort. He wretched and gagged before making his way to his hut, where he collapsed in bed, assuring himself that tomorrow he would have his lamb kidney stew.

The monster came back twice in the next year, first devouring three small farming towns and then swallowing an entire tribe of snow rainids. The people of Crikland begged him to do something, but Waimbrill had no solutions, and felt useless, as if all the cleaving of his career mattered not as long as unprotected souls cried out for relief.

Patently mixing the crushed leaves of the senuthorn plant with a few drops of distilled spirits, Waimbrill watched it bubble, releasing a foul odor like rotten eggs. He was making a concoction called *senuthi*, an oily substance that could be soaked into scraps of cloth pressed on aching limbs and joints. The poultice would remain cool for hours. Its biting chill grounded him in reality despite the inner turbulence assaulting his mind, and diminished the pain of arthritis, which bothered him despite his young age. He wondered if the pain was real, or if it was pathos from his cleaved affecting his body. He learned of this possibility in his training, but knowing it was possible didn't help him at the moment.

He had grown skinnier since beginning his career as a Soulclaine, as he no longer had the likes of Zendra to cook for him, and he survived on the meager rations he provided for himself, supplemented with generous donations from his flock. His hair was a little longer, a little more brittle and thin, and had a narrow strip of steel-gray on the left side, a legacy of a fire that left four children and two adults dead. Onlookers gasped at the sight of the change after cleaving the last child, but he was so overwhelmed by loss that he fled from the scene. He didn't notice his newly silver-striped hair until the next day.

Waimbrill tried to eat, but his appetite had been nonexistent for days. He laid in bed, drinking a nourishing, flavorless tea while the poultice cleared the ache in his knees.

He heard the snap of twigs outside his hut. Waimbrill went to the door, where stood a familiar young man, skin ruddy and smudged with dust, dirt-tangled hair dun and damp, his dismal eyes dreary and dark, skinny crooked limbs draped under drab and rags. He was Terredor, the local Delver boy who had escorted Waimbrill to his cottage on his first day in Crikland.

"Mortiss Waimbrill," Terredor said, bowing, over-enunciating to obfuscate his Delver accent, "I have need of your kind to live. My father..." The boy choked over his words and stopped.

Waimbrill wanted to console him. He knew the boy was hurting, and alone, but he had never been good at succor. Terredor beat back a sob, and Waimbrill stepped forward, placing an arm around his shoulders.

They walked in silence towards the road, and Waimbrill wondered what became of the boy's father, Jaxoll. He suspected it was a nefarious end for the man, who was known as a cheat and scoundrel even among his own notoriously unscrupulous kind. As they traveled, Terredor watched Waimbrill, who, not knowing what to say, only smiled lamely and stumbled on the rough road. The awkward silence was shattered by the clip-clop of horses behind him.

Four horsemen trotted in their direction. Waimbrill doffed the hood of his cloak, seeing the coat-of-arms of a noble family, the Elderlings. They stopped, armor clanking as the horses whinnied and stamped their hooves. One of the horsemen pulled back on the reins, and directed his mount towards Waimbrill, while the other three glared at Terredor. All four had ornate armor and neatly trimmed hair with thick mustaches that stretched to their dense sideburns.

"Hark, Mortiss," the leader said.

"Captain Herwiliger," Waimbrill said.

"We shan't let death run late, good sir, for the end be as cruel denied when proper as dispensed when not," the Captain said, his voice grave and sincere. He gestured for Waimbrill to sit astride the horse with him.

"Thank you, Captain, and do tell your master your behavior was proper. I humbly beseech you allow both I and the lad to ride with you," Waimbrill said.

Captain Herwiliger recoiled at the suggestion. He sneered and said, "My men are noble men, and these horses be of noble breeding. We can not sully them with the likes of him. My master shall have my head if one of these horses be returned smelling of Delver."

"I do not tell you your station, Captain. You should do as your lord commands. We shall do likewise, and walk." Waimbrill said, "Let us hope your men do not die far from my cottage."

The Captain and his men exchanged wary glances. One, the eldest it looked, his mustache shot through with gray, turned to his comrades and tossed them a purse of coins and a few bags of trinkets and tools.

“Thou mayest share a saddle with me, Delver, but hold on only to me. If thy hand doth touch this horse, I will cut it off,” the knight said, grimacing as the boy climbed on, grubby hands clenching the chain mail around his torso.

Waimbrill climbed onto Captain Herwiliger’s horse, and they set off down the road, galloping towards Crikburg.

Horseback, it was a quick trip. Not wanting to be seen with a Delver, the knights separated a few minutes from the city gates. Waimbrill was embarrassed for the boy, but Terredor didn’t seem ashamed of his treatment.

After they rode away, Terredor reached into the pocket of his dingy brown trousers, pulled out a gold plated piece of barding, and showed it to Waimbrill.

“You stole that?” Waimbrill said incredulously.

Terredor nodded, grinning. “Me pa a’ways say I ken steal anythin’ not nail down,” he said, “But this be nail to the horse.” His fingertips were bloody and torn, and he grimaced, ripping off a hunk of broken fingernail.

“Eh, boy,” Waimbrill said, and stopped himself, “Terredor, I mean, have you stolen anything from me?”

Terredor shook his head. “We ne’er do steal from a M’dr’benian. ‘Tis like st’ling from past Delver, and ye don’t steal from kin. Beside’,” he said, “Your kind ne’er has anythin’ worth stealin’.”

Walking through the crowded streets towards Delverton, Waimbrill tried not to notice Terredor’s small hands darting into baskets and pockets. The busy market square teemed with humans alongside clusters of elves, dwarves and rainids, all of whom greeted Waimbrill respectfully, and almost all of whom turned their nose with scorn at Terredor.

The Delvers lived in wooden huts atop the chilly waters of Lake Crikmere. Thick boards ran between the buildings at odd angles, interspersed with steps and doors and platforms, all with no order or logic, homes on top of homes and under stairs, rickety, loudly creaking as the Delvers bounced along the beams. They were a happy folk, Waimbrill always thought when visiting them. Despite their poverty and the scorn of outsiders, they danced and sang in small groups, nimbly walking across the elevated town, jumping across houses and obstacles, laughing as they went. Brilliantly colored bottles of burgundy beet-mead flashed, omnipresent, and the cloyingly sweet odor, which he always associated with scarlet vomit due to some earlier misadventures of his own, was so strong he breathed through his mouth. He refused to internalize the harsh words said about the Delvers. *Aside from the smell,* he thought, *they’re really very nice people. Well, and the stealing.*

When they saw Waimbrill trudging along in his distinctive robes, the Delvers’ joy ended; they grew somber and bowed their heads, scrutinizing the young clansman who led Waimbrill past their homes. They whispered to each other. Children ran to parents and siblings at the sight of the Soulclaine, whose appearance could only mean that someone had died.

Waimbrill didn’t let their reaction bother him. He was used to spoiling any party he attended. *Thou shalt serve a flock who love thy sacrifice, but whose visage is filled with fear.*

By the time they arrived at Terredor's hut, a small band of Delvers had gathered, watching Waimbrill open the door, revealing a filthy bed, overturned wooden cups, tattered clothing and a few battered toys. Waimbrill stepped inside, blinking, sure that some Delver trick made him miss the corpse he was expecting.

Terredor poked his head in and looked at the floor by Waimbrill's feet. He pointed and said softly, "He was right there. I seen him ere I was sittin' yonder, and he start a talkin' funny, then fell and he wasn't breathin'. He was right there."

Waimbrill hushed Terredor, and stepped outside, beholding an assembled crowd of mangy Delvers.

"Where is he?" Waimbrill asked. An ominous thought entered his mind as he saw the guilt-stricken faces of the crowd: they had burned the body, or thrown it into the deepest part of the lake. That was what people did when they despised a person: without a body to cleave, his soul would never be at rest, nor would the hearts of his kin.

He asked again, more insistent. "Where is the man whom my lord has claimed? None of you had the right to his body or soul." Still no response, and his heart started pounding. This was not the kind of affront he could ignore.

"Speak now, or you can be sure your own life will end too far from my kind," Waimbrill said, his body shaking.

A man leaning against a shack, bare chest covered with tufts of coarse hair and ropy muscles, spoke with a gritty, rasping voice, "The boy was tryin' a shirk his ob'ig'tion to the clan, M'triss W'mbrill. He woulda fled. We move the body to ensure his continuin' coop'tion. Ye shall not be kept from ye duty. Follow me, and send that soul a-rest."

Terredor shuddered in the autumn air, shrinking towards the door of his ramshackle hut. He turned his gaze away from Waimbrill when their eyes met. The crowd parted and Waimbrill stepped toward the bare-chested man, then waited for Terredor.

"He don't need a-come," said the man.

"I must do as my faith requires me," Waimbrill said, bowing to the man, "And it is a tenet of my faith that a boy should witness the soulcleaving of his father." That wasn't technically true, but the impertinence of these people bothered him. No one interfered with soulcleaving to satisfy worldly concerns.

The bare-chested Delver scowled and backed away. Terredor scampered to Waimbrill and stayed close as they pressed through the crowd milling quietly about on rickety boards suspended over water. The man had to stop and wait for Waimbrill to catch up, as he was slow and deliberate on the walkways, which grew narrower and more precarious farther from land.

"He will not be given an honorable burial," the man said firmly, glaring at Terredor.

Waimbrill asked, "And why not? Was he not a part of your family?"

"Aye, but a sh'meful part indeed. Jaxoll did stole from his own clan, and gambled away his take. He did not tithe, and we did allow his hut 'nly because Father Delver doth command us not abandon our kith, no matter their b'tr'yal," the bare-chested man said, scowling at Terredor.

"Perhaps so," Waimbrill said, "But yet, the man is dead, and the boy is not of age to commit such acts on his own."

“We allow you to cleave our dead, M’rtiss, and we r’spect you for that. Howe’er, ye must let we p’lice our own. Jaxoll did own a debt to an outs’der that will d’mand r’p’yment from all Delvers if we do not make the boy ‘old to his father’s word. He be sent to Lord P’rthos this eve to work off his debt.”

Though he didn’t look, Waimbrill could sense Terredor’s muscles tighten, and his mind wandered to the cruel, aquiline face of Lord Porthos Elderling, one of the least pleasant noble lords he had ever met.

Clearing his throat, he said, “You may tell Lord Porthos that I claim the boy, and his father’s debt. He may collect it from me, and I will pay it as I shall. I’ll not pay his usury, and if Lord Pothos dislikes my terms, he may discuss the matter with whomever in his household expects to die.”

Waimbrill had never made this threat before, or even heard of it outside of folktales. The potent oath implied that all were beholden to enforce his word or risk remaining uncleaved. He hadn’t planned on saying it until it came out. He wasn’t sure Modroben would approve of this interference, but he knew Porthos’ desire for the boy stemmed from more than a mere need for another squire or serving boy, and Waimbrill couldn’t stomach the thought of allowing that to happen when he could stop it.

The bare-chested man stuttered, while Waimbrill gathered his thoughts, not sure if Modroben would allow him to use his position in this way, but deciding that, having done the deed, he might as well follow through.

The man nodded, gesturing towards the hut. Waimbrill pushed the door open, and motioned for Terredor to follow.

Jaxoll, was lean and swarthy of skin and hair. He slumped on the floor of the hut, sitting against a wall. Waimbrill leaned down to pull the corpse to the ground.

“Not in here,” said the bare-chested man, “Me mum would kill me, right would.”

Waimbrill wrapped his arms around Jaxoll’s shoulders and pulled the corpse onto the plank of wood that served as patio for the run-down home. He recited the High Prayer and surged with power, black and white, pulsating and pumping through his body as his nose bent and reshaped into a vulture beak. His mouth filled with the salty taste and oily texture of brain, followed by a rush of sharp, stabbing sadness. He felt Jaxoll’s guilt at the position he was leaving his son in, and he felt the inner, divided pain of Terredor, the love for his father who had never abandoned him, and the hate and bitterness toward the man whose carelessness had almost condemned him to a terrible fate.

Focusing on his meditative and soothing techniques, Waimbrill visualized his emotions, not as the barely controlled boiling maelstrom he felt, but as an ever-mounting pile of pebbles grinding against his own soul. He forced himself to ignore his ignoble feelings and imagine tossing the pebbles off the stilted platforms of Delverton into the dark lake waters, where they would float, bobbing and weaving under waves as they wandered away from Waimbrill’s spleen and sank into the shadowy depths.

Chapter 4

Smooth and Loam

A messenger came to say that Lord Porthos would negotiate the loan in person. Waimbrill’s only response, his voice wavering and weak, was, “My terms of repayment have been stated. Lord Porthos can accept them or forgive the debt, as he wishes.”

On the appointed day, Waimbrill sent Terredor to gather mushrooms. The lake-dwelling Delver lad had little experience with them, so he gathered all that he could find, and Waimbrill planned to separate them into toxic and tasty later. His cleaved were restless that morning, and his appetite vanished in a sudden rush of grief. He meditated, recalling images of pebbles worn ever-smaller by the cleansing flow of his fortitude and faith. His anxiety remained, however, no matter his attempts at self-calming

Porthos arrived around noon with a retinue of attendants and armored knights. He dismounted in front of the cottage. Waimbrill came to the doorway. One of the guards stepped forward and nervously cleared his throat.

“Mortiss Waimbrill,” said the guard, his voice muffled behind a shining helm, “Lord Porthos is here to see you.”

Waimbrill said, “Captain Herwiliger, it is good to see your face again. I trust you told your lord that you and your men assisted me yesterday when my duties beckoned more forcefully than my muscles had spirit.”

“That’s wonderful,” Porthos said through gritted teeth. He had a long, thin mustache that stretched to his bushy sideburns, and his harsh features quivered with anger as he peered into the humble cottage. He turned his nose up at the dusty furniture and cobwebbed corners, then stayed in the threshold.

“Mortiss Waimbrill,” Porthos said, “I have been told you are assuming the debt of Jaxoll Delver.”

Waimbrill nodded, squeezed past Lord Porthos and walked out of the cottage to the other guards, who stood by their horses.

“There’s a stream out back,” Waimbrill told them, “The water is cool and clean.”

“Stay your posts,” Lord Porthos said, “Mortiss Waimbrill, I am a busy man. We must discuss the terms of this loan.”

“Captain Omeos,” he said, facing one of the knights, “A few days ago, your manservant Solledin suffered a great loss-“

“Silence, Mortiss!” shouted Porthos, “Come here. It is time for your first payment.”

Waimbrill said, “There is a hen out back, my lord. She shall be your first payment.”

Porthos sneered. “A hen? A hen is not worth my time to appraise.”

“A hen,” Waimbrill said, “Produces life, every day without fail if you treat her right. How much would you pay to live another day, Lord Porthos? A hen is worth that, each day of each month, and so every morn she shall give you another day of life, to use for yourself, or one in your household, or one of your subjects or prisoners, as you see fit. You are a wise lord, and I trust you will give that day of life to he who would cherish it the most. It is well-worth a slab of gold to a starving man, each day, and there are many starving men on your lands. Feed them eggs, and their joy shall be worth more than anything Jaxoll Delver would have paid you in a thousand lifetimes.”

The Elderling clan continued to send messages requesting payment. Waimbrill offered the increasingly uncomfortable messengers a smile and kind words. They had apparently been instructed to make demands and threats, but none did, no doubt having heard of the oath Waimbrill made in Delverton. Eventually they stopped asking, and instead offered Waimbrill a morsel or a few coins.

One day a messenger brought Waimbrill a note from Porthos, reading “Mortiss Waimbrill, you are hereby invited to a general council meeting in one fortnight, at my home. There are matters we must speak of, you and I, and the other lords and ladies of Crikland.”

Waimbrill had an honorary spot in the general council of Crikland, as Modrobenians generally did. But he had never attended a meeting before, as was also typical of Modrobenians.

On the way to the Elderling estate outside of Crikburg, Waimbrill walked with an elderly Delver who hobbled along slowly, her tan face lined with kindly curving wrinkles. Her name was Helga, and she was the eldest living Delver besides Father Delver himself.

She thanked him for keeping “that poor bo” away from Lord Porthos. While she talked, she chewed on a salted and aged turtle leg, a delicacy of the Delvers. Known as *iggther*, the legs were a hard chunk of chewy meat that could be eaten all day, scraping off tiny bits with one’s teeth, or gnawing on it continuously, as was the custom among the elders of the clan. Waimbrill had hated its biting astringency the first time he tried it. The flavor grew on him though, perhaps a taste he had acquired soulcleaving Delvers, some of whom ate so much *iggther* their brains tasted of musty turtle flesh.

“He didna have no right ‘spir’tions ‘pon that lad,” she said several times, shaking her head, “Not what I see, jes’ as I hear.”

Waimbrill still only barely understood the fluid speech of the Delver dialect, which had an entrancing mellifluous tone.

“That bo’...” Helga said, “’Tis a shame he be not among his kind, but Father Delver ne’er compl’tely abandon one o’ his own, e’en if’n we do, be please. Ye raisin’ him right, yessir, M’rtiss W’mbrill,” she said.

“Oh, yes, ma’am,” Waimbrill said, “The best I can. Though I do worry, for I can teach him only what I know, which is limited in scope. A boy his age should be with others that age, and do as they do.”

She chuckled and patted him on the back, shaking her head. “Good M’rtiss W’mbrill, ye know much o’ life, at its end. But I do know Delver men, and gentle Terredor is na’t but a wee one o’ that. The Delver child today is rotten ‘ll the ways. The likes of ye be more r’spectable than any Delver, so jest be kind as ye be, and natural as a M’rtiss, and he shall do fine.”

They were met at the gate to the Elderling manor by a trio of guards, who brought them to a meeting chamber, in the center of which was a thick wooden table. Each attendee’s name and likeness was printed on paper in front of each seat. Waimbrill found his spot next to the head of the table. His throat closed as he realized he would be sitting next to Porthos himself. To his right was to be Lady Ballardrine, the elven woman who had murdered her husband outside his cottage. She represented the most prosperous elven merchant and noble houses. Second-to-last to arrive, excepting Lord Porthos himself, she ignored everyone, including Waimbrill, which was typical for an elven lady among outsiders. He couldn’t decide if she was angry with him for exposing her husband’s misdeeds in front of her guards, or perhaps for cleaving him against her will. He wanted to talk to her, but he was distracted by a kind-wrinkled, silver-bearded man named Milo, who sat across from him; Milo represented Bryndoth, a prosperous resort in the south of Crikland, a major source of income and prestige for the region. He was a jolly man, but also loquacious, and he kept Waimbrill deep in conversation that Ballardrine studiously avoided.

“I believe you know the lady Shezanne?” Milo asked, “She sends her warmest regards.”

Her name gave Waimbrill a fluttery heartwarming glow that turned and sang in his stomach like his nostalgia for the red-haired girl from his childhood, whose face he now barely remembered. All he recalled was Shezanne, whose skin was smooth and loamy brown, her smile gentle and curved at the edges. Her beauty made her one of the resort’s most renowned attractions, but she made time to stay with Waimbrill and comfort him when his cleaving brought him to the resort.

The other attendees were a somber-faced lot of elders, there on behalf of their various villages and guilds. The dwarven and gnomish clans, elven families, and both the snow and pond rainid tribes sent leaders as well, along with each of the major churches in the area.

Lord Porthos entered, his stern face aloof and rigid. Waimbrill had an urge to stand and salute him, but no one else did, so he forced himself to stay still.

After a formal greeting, Porthos said, “We have several matters to discuss. The miners strike, the goblins of Havrin, certainly some other topics-” Porthos pointedly turned his glare to Waimbrill, whose blood turned to ice so cold it felt like the skin of Sharradrir’s frozen corpse.

“Those goblins are a menace!” shouted a human representative.

“The strike,” said a gravelly-voiced dwarf, his words ringing out and echoing in the high-ceilinged chamber, “Is a temporary aberration. It is already moribund. It is of no concern to any of you.”

“I depend on a stable source of iron, Thaxtrum,” Porthos said, “It is of the utmost concern to me. The price hath almost doubled in the last six months.”

“We are ignoring the real reason thou hast called us here,” said a human man, whom Waimbrill recognized as Egglebrod, the same fisherman who had come to fetch him the first time the monster attacked after Waimbrill’s arrival in Crikland, “It is not to discuss the price of iron. It is that monster they call *Petromyza*.”

The table erupted in frenzied talk. Each attendee shared experiences and rumors about the wingless flying monster. The only silence came from Waimbrill and Lady Ballardine, who had scarcely moved a muscle since arriving. Porthos cleared his throat, then shouted for attention.

“Please, please, we do, of course, need to discuss *Petromyza*. I intended to wait until the end, so we could finish all other business first. Please, before we get there, there is but one topic I feel I must bring up.”

“Ah yes, the *real* reason ye called this convocation,” Lady Ballardine muttered, her voice quiet but contrasting so starkly with her demeanor that everyone stared, and even Porthos stumbled over his words.

“I... I’m sure ye shall agree with me, Lady Ballardine,” Porthos said, then turned to Milo, “And thee, my good man, as the both of you are prosperous merchants. It is important we standardize rules on contracts and debts, especially in thorny situations like when a debt-holder dies with only a single child as an heir. Lady Ballardine, I know your family is much involved in moneylending, and I beg you share some insight-”

“Lord Porthos,” she said, her voice even in tone, lips pressed tightly together, “Ye are lucky that there is also a monster to discuss, because if ye had insisted I depart from my home for a meeting solely about your least noble of pursuits, I would have required compensation from you for my time.”

“I’m sorry, Lady Ballardine?” Porthos said.

“Your servants are not as tight-lipped as ye might think, Lord Porthos. Ye remain upset that Mortiss Waimbrill hath assumed the debt of Jaxoll Delver, not because he repayeth you with but a hen, rather because ye never wanted to be paid in gold or eggs or anything else but that Delver boy. I may not spend much time among humans or other barbarians, but even I can plainly see ye loaned that money to buy the boy in a roundabout fashion. Ye never had any intention of collecting on the debt.”

A shocked silence spread around the table. Nobody was surprised by the accusation, only by her boldness as an elven woman to speak of it in front of all and sundry.

“Thank you, Lady Ballardrine,” said another elf, a man with gray hair and deep violet eyes, “I did not come all this way to negotiate the finer points of contract law to fulfill your prurient interests, Lord Porthos.”

Porthos was pale and slouched. Waimbrill avoided his glare. He felt that he should speak, and he looked towards Lady Ballardrine, who listened attentively with a stony forward-facing stare. He knew how reticent and eccentric he must have seemed, remaining solely silent despite the conversation occurring around and about him.

Helga pointed at Porthos and said, “He give we Delvers contract’ he know we ken not m’stly read, and he doth lie ‘bout what is in them. ‘Tis a trick doth shape the life o’ that gentle boy.”

Lady Ballardrine shook her head mournfully, glaring at Porthos, and muttered, “Shameful...”

“Lord Porthos, I thank thee for calling this meeting, but I am also not interested in discussing thy concerns,” said Egglebrod, who turned to Waimbrill and continued, “Petromyza takes our dead and leaves nothing to be cleaved. What is your church going to do?”

Waimbrill thought for a moment, trying to think of something new to say. In the end, all he could do was repeat what he had told so many others over the last few months. “They promise to send a champion as soon as possible.”

“We nee’ Hapcort,” Helga said at the other side of the table, referring to a fabled Delver hero and Mortiss.

“Silence, Delver, we need not hear of thy people’s idiotic ramblings. Thou art here only as a courtesy,” Porthos muttered.

“There be a thousand Delver’ for each o’ *thy* knights,” Helga said, “*Thou* art here only as a courtesy.”

“Priestess Alaura,” Egglebrod said to the representative of the Chamballine Church, “Petromyza is said to be thy goddess’ child. What say thee?”

Alaura was a pond rainid, shorter and squatter than their mountain-dwelling cousins. Her skin was a warty dark green, her face rough and lined with wrinkles, her mouth a long thin lipless smile.

“Petromyza hath long visited our land to test us,” she said.

“Yes,” Egglebrod said, “But only every several years. Now it is many times a year. What hath changed?”

“We don’t know, but obviously we, or someone in this land, has greatly displeased our Lady,” she croaked.

“And why does your Lady’s child not leave the head for me to soulcleave?” Waimbrill asked.

“It is not for you to question,” she said.

“Priestess Alaura, it most certainly is his place to question,” Lady Ballardrine said, “All of us are obligated to facilitate proper soulcleaving. It is easy to forget that in times of passion, but we must protect the dead, lest we all join them.”

Alaurea's dark green eyes flashed with anger, and she said, "I apologize, Mortiss Waimbrill. In truth, she causeth not the attacks, rather, she preventeth them from occurring more often."

"So why doth the monster come several times a year now?" Egglebrod asked, more insistent.

"I do not know. I am sure my Lady is cooperating with Modroben the best she can. We do not know the affairs of the gods, and should not pretend we do." Egglebrod said, "I hardly find that a sufficient explanation."

"My goddess needn't justify her actions to any fisherman," she said, "And if Modroben thought she was keeping souls from being cleaved, he would have interfered by now."

Egglebrod turned to Waimbrill and pleaded, "Tell your church to hurry, Mortiss Waimbrill. We need a champion."

Alaurea said, "Chamballa hath long prevented Petromyza from more frequent depravations. She is an intelligent sorceress, magically enchanted into the stupid beast that haunteth us now. Chamballa preventeth her intelligence and body from reuniting and wreaking havoc on us all. Rather than blame my lady for monsters, we should create a plan to deal with those blasted goblins."

Waimbrill stopped listening as the conversation turned back to the goblins of Havrin. But there was nothing he could do to help, with that or any other problem. He was feeling useless today, his inability to think quickly enough to participate in the council meeting shaming him, and he worried he had offended the Church of Chamballa. Still, he was glad that Lady Ballardrine and the other rulers of Crikland supported his right to take on Jaxoll's debt.

Porthos barely spoke until the meeting was complete, then he adjourned and scurried away. Waimbrill walked home, as the sun was setting and an early evening chill had already set over the land.

Terredor was a quiet lad, bored and uncomfortable in the presence of Waimbrill and his rather dreary hut. There were no decorations, no colorful flowers, no toys or balls, only a bare house, vegetable garden and a few essential tools. *An excess of things crowdeth the mind, and a crowded mind comprehendeth not its own feelings.* Soulclaine were highly respected, but more than a little feared as well, and Terredor did not overcome that inhibition easily. Young men like him wouldn't ordinarily approach Waimbrill's hut, except perhaps on a dare. In fact, Waimbrill occasionally saw small shapes flitting about in the woods near his home, but calling out to them provoked a flurry of feet stampeding away from the cottage, and a chorus of scattered giggles.

Unless someone died, Waimbrill would have remained at his cottage forever. But death continued its inexorable march across the land. The ogres and goblins who preyed on the locals, the poor townsfolk, serving wenches, knights and squires, lords and ladies, merchants and vendors, the mysterious elves, and the clannish dwarves and gnomes of the mountains, the rainids of Lake Crikmere, and their snow rainid cousins, all utilized his services. Nearly every day, someone requested his ministrations, and with a sigh, Waimbrill would stand, his turbulent heart demanding that he stay to calm his cleaved and pray, but his even wearier mind forcing him on. People soon stopped seeking him out, and instead told Terredor, who remained by the cottage and found Waimbrill when needed. This freed him up to meditate further away from home, and he even created a small deprivation chamber, a simple hole in the ground lined with plain white cloth. Another cloth could be draped across the top, making a ceiling. It was not a perfect deprivation room, but he had no way of achieving one like there had been back

at the monastery. He ignored the smells and the humidity, the most obvious sensations, and he found that it was reasonably effective at aiding his concentration.

He had felt righteous when freeing the boy from a terrible fate, but great responsibility came with raising a boy on the cusp of manhood. He prayed for guidance, but this was outside Modroben's purview, and his prayers were fruitless.

Terredor grew even shyer, more silentious, sometimes remaining mute for hours and communicating through gestures. He tried to engage him, but found small talk difficult. They had little in common, as Waimbrill spent much of his time meditating.

He decided then that he must take matters into his own hands. He could at least bring Terredor with him on soulcleaving trips.

"When you come with me to go soulcleaving," Waimbrill said, "You musn't steal. Do you understand?"

"Not even if'n I know I ken get away with it?" Terredor said.

"Not even if you know you can get away with it."

Terredor's Delver dialect had rapidly dwindled, and he spoke increasingly in the manner of Lommia, Waimbrill's own accent, which the locals saw as absurdly formal and overly respectful to his lessers, while Waimbrill saw their accent as rural and old-fashioned. Terredor mixed all three dialects, but the Lommian tongue was becoming more and more prominent.

The next day, an unmarried farmhand passed a few miles north. Terredor and Waimbrill rode on the back of a horse that one of the farmer's sons brought. He had died in a stable, kicked in the head by an angry horse. Waimbrill soulcleaved the burly farmhand while Terredor watched, smiling when he heard Waimbrill introduce him as "my assistant". Referring to him that way didn't prevent the hostile stares from the farmers, for they did not like Delvers any more than they liked the wolves that occasionally exacted tribute from their livestock.

The farming household included four boys about Terredor's age, but they stared at him with undisguised disgust. Waimbrill talked to the boys' parents, hoping that the children would get bored and play together. But the farming children ignored the outsiders, and Terredor shuffled his feet awkwardly behind Waimbrill, who found that the farmers were uncomfortable chatting with a Soulclaine. He soon gathered up Terredor and left.

On the way back to the cottage, Waimbrill said, "You could have talked to those children."

"They din't want that," Terredor said quietly.

"How do you know?"

"C'rse they didn't," Terredor said, "They are no Delvers."

"You are barely a Delver in their eyes anymore," Waimbrill said, "You could have talked to them."

"I will always be Delver in they eyes," Terredor said, shrugging his shoulders, "And e'en if not, being your assistant is no better."

"They think you are eccentric and deranged?" Waimbrill said, "Because you live with me?"

Terredor nodded. "When I go to market without you," he said quietly, "Nobody want a-talk to me. They think I am crazy like..."

“Like me,” Waimbrill said, realizing he was falling into the trap he had been trained to avoid and fulfilling a common stereotype of Modrobenians: forced to spend much of their focus and energy in processing their inner emotional maelstrom, they become estranged, aloof, and unable to fit into normal society.

The thought was depressing, and it cascaded with other feelings that he recognized were not his own. Waimbrill spent the rest of the evening glumly meditating while Terredor set snares to catch rabbits.

Waimbrill’s reverie was interrupted by a bewildered Terredor leading a herd of small humanoids. They were about two feet tall, with black fur and white markings, short, stubby arms and hands with thumbs and sharp claws. They were humanoid-shaped skunks, primitive and barely civilized, called *bofro* by the locals. Their pungent smell was equally as potent and debilitating as ordinary skunks, and it wafted across the area.

The bofro jabbered in their own tongue, breaking intermittently into a barely intelligible form of English, and Waimbrill deciphered enough to know his services were needed. The bofro were a curious and excitable people. Waimbrill had been trained in communicating his lord’s word to species like these, but he was too tired for that this evening, so he quietly followed them to their home.

They lived in a dense little spot in a wooded valley, surrounded by hills and shaded by luscious boughs of cypress and willow trees. Hundreds of bofro laughed and played there, climbing between the branches and vines connecting their treetop homes. The stench was overpowering, and it brought a few beads of tears to Waimbrill’s eyes. His nose burned with the odor, even as their antics brought a smile to his face. A small band of bofro in one corner stood morosely, shuffling in a shady spot under the thick forest canopy.

He walked to the cluster of mourners hugging each other around the prone body of a silver-tinged bofro whose closed eyes were lined with wrinkles. Waimbrill held his shirt against his nose to guard against the smell. A portly female with wide, black eyes brimming with tears, let out a keening wail that hurt Waimbrill’s ears, and he winced. She hugged his legs, chirping mournfully.

Waimbrill’s stomach churned, and he caught a mouthful of bofro stink and gagged. He closed his eyes, ignoring his watering eyes and wrenching throat.

Shallowly breathing through his mouth, he regained enough composure to recite the High Prayer. The bofro fell silent, more gathering to watch the magical transformation. When his face became a shining, vulturine beak, they ululated exuberantly. He bit into the primitive brain of the elderly bofro, tasting its rank, unctuous bitterness. He heard excited pounding and chanting as his cleaving ended and waves of pain and loneliness wafted into his spleen. Bofro emotions were equally passionate as other races, but more vague: intense but basic - sad, angry, lonely, and not higher feelings like guilt, regret or angst.

Resuming their boisterous play, some bofro acquired a few handfuls of berries, which they stuffed into their mouths. The juice dripped across their faces and bellies, staining the white of their fur a brilliant lavender. By the time he was done meditating over the newly cleaved soul, Waimbrill was laughing at the living bofro despite the protean sadness and pain he had gathered.

A young female offered a handful of berries to Waimbrill and Terredor in her little paw, but the smell remained too nauseating to eat, so they politely declined. The bofro pulled on their pants legs, begging in broken English for the “big people”, as they called all humans, to stay for supper. Waimbrill refused that invitation as well,

though they stayed as long as their noses could handle the stench, playing with the younger bofro and letting them climb atop their shoulders. They thought furless skin was funny, and stroked Waimbrill and Terredor, screaming peals of laughter. It brought a few chuckles to Terredor's stony face too, and for a moment, all the stress of Waimbrill's actions went away, and his decision to take in Terredor seemed perfectly right. But when they left the playful bofro, and Terredor's terse silence returned, so did Waimbrill's wavering anxiety, and they walked home without speaking.

Chapter 5

Ferocity and Fury

Waimbrill was meditating when he heard the spiritual outcry of simultaneous voices, each bemoaning a life insufficiently lived. Though he hadn't cleaved their souls, and so their grief was not yet a part of him, he was witness to their pain, and had an urgent need to end it.

He stood, sighing, bones creaking, imagining the myriad tragedies that could have occurred. He went to Terredor, who was tending the vegetable garden.

"My lord has been busy," Waimbrill said, "But I don't know where. It must have been another attack. I could use your help, but there may be much death and gore. If you'd rather not see that..."

Terredor shook his head, smiling, and gathered their traveling supplies. They walked to the main road, and found small groups coming to tell Waimbrill about the monster's attack. Townsfolk and Delvers alike, they marched, a grimacing caravan of crag-faced survivors, avoiding each other's gaze, eschewing conversation, looking instead at their tired feet pounding against the dusty road. The monster had come, destroyed, and then it had left, and that was all there was to say. The ragtag refugees lurched onward with a bedraggled stagger, every step weary and heavy, eyes staring haggard daggers dully, each word strenuous, a jagged shard of glass slicing like a sickle through the solitudinous silence. The monster had done its part: it had devastated, it had devoured and demolished, and it had done so with such ferocity and fury that it left a mark on Waimbrill's soul even now, having not cleaved a single victim. The survivors filled their role as well, sulking home with the sullen slouch of the perennial victim, and even the Delvers were somber and solemn.

The town was destroyed, timber protruding like splintered bone from the mangled corpses of homes and shops, chunks of hair and flesh on signs and rocks like demonic droppings, and here and there, puddles of blood congealing coldly into the color of aged wine. Wailing echoed off the exposed walls, arcing, amplified, from survivor to survivor, reaching deep into Waimbrill's bones as he walked through the city. Messengers reported that the monster had attacked every village and the larger households, including the Elderling estate.

The people who remained, some of the boldest of whom now milled about, stared as Waimbrill passed by, and he felt an incredible urge to do *something*, anything at all, just so his words might bear hope for that legion of sad-eyed faces. But he had no hope to give. Their loved one's bodies were gone. The only person he cleaved was a Delver who had hit his head and fallen into the water, drowning. He died, but at least his soul was safe, Waimbrill thought as he recited the High Prayer.

His words were still echoing against the ramshackle stilted huts of Delverton when Waimbrill heard frenzied shouting, screams and the rumble of a running mob.

Bursting from Mt. Rekkerkem, the monster returned. It was long and iridescent, scales reflecting the dying day's light, starry, twinkling, flashing blue and green in the bright sun like a brilliant butterfly. It had gone through the mountain and come out the side, and Waimbrill saw parts of the dwarven town built into the interior of the stone now revealed. He realized that the destruction there had been as complete as here in Crikburg.

Petromyza was a mile long or more, finned, its head circular and jawless, primitive, and ringed with rows of sharp teeth. It closed the distance from the top of Mt. Rekkerkem to the lake in seconds, and Waimbrill was frozen in fear, standing above a corpse in the tattered remains of Delverton. Many of the stilts supporting the town had collapsed, and the dilapidated huts were partially submerged.

Waimbrill heard a shriek from Terredor, snapping him out of his paralysis, and they both leapt, diving between two overturned homes. Amid the debris of the Delvers' lives, Waimbrill swam under water as the monster crashed through the remaining structures and swallowed an elderly woman hobbling away. Petromyza splashed into the lake, its long body still trailing out of the mountain. Waimbrill held his breath as long as he could, then surfaced and gasped for air, coughing. He opened his eyes in time to see the tail of the great worm disappear beneath the waters of the very same lake whose ancient waters he was now treading.

Waimbrill spent his time corralling and controlling the emotions that pounded through him. Every once in awhile, shame and regret would deluge his mind, caused by somebody learning that a loved one he had cleaved had passed on. Those days were the most upsetting, when he both cleaved someone anew and dealt with waves of woe from an old soul.

Meditating, trying to turn the icy chill in his veins into the warm, calm pounding of well controlled blood, Waimbrill saw Terredor's gentle face, upturned and wide-eyed, fearful and tender, as though waiting for Waimbrill to either begin beating him or giving him gifts. But Terredor was never disobedient; Waimbrill thought that he couldn't have hit the lad even if it were necessary, and didn't know what sort of gift to get him, except, perhaps, a new father.

Petromyza returned every few months, and each time a messenger came running. Terredor tagged along silently while Waimbrill went to whatever corner of Crikland the monster had attacked and soulcleaved anyone he could, accepting even a tiny scrap of brain tissue. But there were few corpses left.

Inevitably, a crowd would follow Waimbrill as he surveyed the damage, waiting for him to do something. Soulclaine were supposed to secure bodies, protect the souls of the deceased, counsel the living and, in general, understand death. But there was nothing to do here: no bodies to cleave, no relief for the living, and no rest for the dead.

He prayed to Modroben, but his lord did not often intervene in the affairs of men, especially in such rural backwaters as Crikland. Messages sent to the church garnered only instructions to counsel survivors the best he could and promises to send a champion as soon as one became available.

One grisly day in early winter, the sun shone bright, and brighter still as it reflected off the thick layer of snow deposited the night before. The light did not come with much in the way of heat, however, and Waimbrill shivered, breathing blissfully warm air into his cupped hands. The snow piled on branches and glistened like delicate frosting

of spun sugar. He felt peace spilling forth from the stillness and serenity of the forest beyond his cottage. The ambient heat that emanated from his stove kept him content and contemplative. He found the wintry weather a welcome distraction from the dizzying emotions that consumed much of his time these days.

Waimbrill hoped to relax in front of the stove all day, perhaps digging into the strawberry and rhubarb jam he had received from a woman after the soulcleaving of her youngest granddaughter. It was ironic how those who live the least cause the most grief upon their passing, Waimbrill thought. This poor girl had taken only a few breaths before she died, and he spent a day and a half sitting in a dark corner, rocking and taking occasional sips of broth that Terredor forced upon him. It was the Paradigm of the girl's mother, Waimbrill decided, that made his homespun cottage take on the air of loneliness and arbitrary, capricious cruelty. The worn black stove was ominous, its heat stultifying; distances seemed greater; his very limbs were so heavy he could barely lift them. Terredor's presence on that day was comforting, reminding Waimbrill that he was not alone.

The beliefs that constitute a Paradigm, whether thine own or not, create thoughts in thy mind. Thou wilt apply those beliefs to everything around thee: if thou look at a teapot, thou shalt look at it through the prism of thy Paradigm; if thou stab a rival, or kiss a lover, thou shalt understand and interpret reality using the beliefs that constitute thy Paradigm. Thou mayest possess a belief that thee be worth more than anyone or anything, and thou wilt look at that teapot as something that should be thine to do with as thou please; thou wilt think nothing of stabbing a man worth so much less than thee as to become thine enemy, and thou wilt demand thy lover sing the praises of thy kisses. If thy Paradigm include the belief that thee be worthless, thou may look at that teapot and bemoan that thee should never be so valuable as to own one like that, conclude that stabbing a man only confirms thy lack of worth and kiss trembling with fear thy lover will discover thy faults and leave.

Thinking now of that overwhelming sadness, Waimbrill lost his appetite for jam. The remains of his good day were soon shattered by a contingent of boisterous Delvers, who came to say, in typically overwrought fashion, that a pair of young men had stabbed each other the night before. Their friends acted out the double murder for his benefit, but Waimbrill only scowled and walked towards Delverton. When he sensed their sudden awkwardness, he was upset with himself, for that was the very sort of detachment and alienation that made so many people frightened of Soulclaine. He knew that the young men were celebrating the life of their friends, as was their custom. But his mood was what it was, the grieving mother's pain welled from within his spleen, and Waimbrill couldn't think of any way to reestablish rapport. So they simply walked in silence, Terredor tagging along and ignoring the hostile stares from the other Delvers. Going to live with a Modrobenian was probably the only way to leave the Delvers alive, Waimbrill thought, but Terredor was oblivious to their blatant derision, or at least pretended to be.

Even in thy hours of deepest gloom, remember thy Paradigm awaits thy return. It layeth among the cobwebby recesses of thy cleaved, dormant and paused, but ever-present. To activate it, force thoughts upon thyself, thoughts that are of thy Paradigm. If thou look upon that teapot, look upon it as thou wilt, and stand as thou wilt, breathe and listen and tap thy toes as thou wilt. Think as the Paradigm thou wishest to inhabit, for that is the surest way to make it so.

Their mothers wailed. Their stone-faced fathers watched. Neighbors laughed and cheered as witnesses reenacted the fatal fight. Waimbrill departed unobtrusively after refusing a salted turtle leg from Helga, who had

attended the cleaving, chewing on her own iggther all the while. He thought perhaps the mantras he had been using all day were working, for his feeling of deep barren doom dwindled to a dull ache. But still his mood was poor, and the Delvers who both mourned and celebrated did nothing to ease his pain.

As frost doth overrun summer's warmth, so shalt thy cleaved invade thine own Paradigm, and thou wilt wonder what is thine and what is theirs, and it is then that it is most vital thou lookest upon that teapot as only thou wouldst, to strike a blow for thy true nature, which shineth like raw brilliance itself in the world of dim and gray through which we, withered be, do wander.

A few knights were waiting for him when he returned to his cottage. With the usual warnings to Terredor about stealing, they gave the pair a horse to ride to their lord's manor. A servant had died, but more importantly for the knights, so had their lord's mother-in-law, visiting from a distant land. The servant had waited in the root cellar for a convenient time for Waimbrill to be fetched, a delay that bristled Waimbrill's morals. He resolved to insist on cleaving the servant first, regardless of social class. *The longer a person layeth in wait of cleaving, the higher the likelihood of undeath occurring, so, all other factors being equal, he who hath been dead the longest must be cleaved first.*

Waimbrill felt he had little choice in confronting the knights. He wavered and considered taking the coward's way out. After all, the chances of the servant being raised by some nefarious necromancer or through random luck were minuscule in the time it would take him to cleave the noblewoman and make his way to the root cellar. But he thought of how guilty he would feel if it happened. He realized later that he would feel the same guilt if the noblewoman suffered the same fate in the time it took him to cleave the servant and travel to her resting spot.

"But Mortiss Waimbrill, the good Lady Tanagra requireth your ministrations. She is the matriarch of her clan," protested one of the knights, "She is of noble breeding."

"Perhaps her nobility will stave off undeath," Waimbrill said, "But a root cellar surely shall not. The sooner you bring me to your manservant, the sooner I can see to Lady Tanagra."

The knights grumbled, but took Waimbrill to the root cellar, where he quickly cleaved the man with tired wrinkles who laid cold against the ground.

Three soulcleavings in one day left Waimbrill exhausted, far too drained to care about the visiting family's complaints. Through an interpreter, they complained about the delay, and then complained further that using a vulture beak to "destroy" the Lady Tanagra's face was barbaric. In their culture, soulcleaving was done via sprouting mushrooms, a fact that Waimbrill found interesting. He had learned about many alternative methods of cleaving, though his own technique, Velteris, the vulture, was the most common. He knew that crabs, maggots and other creatures formed the basis for the Church of Modroben in different parts of the world, but he had never heard of a fungus before.

He was unable to ask for any details, however, before being hustled away by another contingent of knights from the same manor. One of their own had been mauled and killed by a bear. Now on his fifth cleaving of the day, Waimbrill was feeling numb. A flurry of feelings filled his mind as he finished with the knight, and walked in a daze back to his cottage, Terredor still following close behind, his presence reassuring.

They walked wordlessly through the woods, Waimbrill wondering whether he would ever rest his weary, weighted bones, or if, perhaps, they would disintegrate into powder as his flapping mouth faithfully chanted the High Prayer. He wondered if this day was being sent to test him, to see if his spirit lived up to his lord's expectations. The thought filled him with bitterness until he recalled the words of a monk: *Death doth come in fits and spurts, and at times opportune and disastrous. Sometimes thou shalt be called upon to persevere against hardship more frequently than thou supposest thou can handle. Those days that are hardest may seem daunting and cruel, but never forget that death doth not occur to spite thee.*

The sun was setting, its rays dwindling and twinkling, drifting through the dense woods of leafless trees. The snow turned to sleet so cold it stabbed the lungs with each breath. The wet and the biting wind settled into his veins as Waimbrill trudged along, his boots caked with mud.

So intent was he on his own misery, Waimbrill didn't notice Terredor stop walking until the young man whistled for his attention. Terredor stood to the side of the path, watching a group of riders come closer.

Waimbrill heard a booming voice, "Stand aside, commoners! Stand aside!"

The riders guarded a carriage whose whiteness remained somehow immaculate even with the sleet and the mud. Lacy sheets and blankets decorated the walls with lavender lilacs and pristine lilies hand-stitched in complex geometric patterns and fringed with gold lace.

"Mortiss, I apologize," called the head rider after he saw the black robes and pendant dangling from Waimbrill's neck. The leader slowed to a halt, and Waimbrill saw the decorated uniform of a private officer. He doffed his cap but didn't acknowledge Terredor, who stood a few feet further from the road, hands thrust firmly at his side.

There was a rustle at the carriage, and the white sheets parted. A woman stepped out. She had delicate features on an oval face, with hair of white tinged with a faint cast of gold, and a wide smile framing straight teeth. She stood, in a diaphanous cotton dress wrapped loosely around her waist, revealing petite pale shoulders that gleamed in the last vestiges of the daytime sun. She didn't shiver, despite wearing only the revealing dress, so Waimbrill deduced that either she or the carriage, or both, were magical.

"Greetings, Mortiss," she said, "My name is Lady Sendralya. May we escort you and your companion to your destination?"

Waimbrill almost refused, worried that he and Terredor would embarrass themselves before a lady of such class and grace. He envisioned them tracking mud over those pure white sheets and the kind lady's smile screwing into a hateful sneer as she demanded payment for their ruination.

But he was tired and cold. He agreed, and two of the guards helped them into the heated carriage. Waimbrill sat on a pile of pillows, and saw that the carriage inside was much larger than it appeared from the outside, and was divided into two luxuriously appointed rooms. Lady Sendralya stretched out on a sofa of soft crushed purple velvet. Waimbrill sat in an overstuffed chair built into the wall, and found it so comfortable he instantly became sleepy. The mud from his boots fell in chunks but vanished when it touched the carriage floor.

Lady Sendralya's chin quivered and she smiled. "Are the people of this country as charming as its woods are vibrant?"

Waimbrill, not sure how to respond, only nodded, and she chuckled softly.

He managed to croak out a question, feeling like a frog that found itself at the head of a royal table. “What brings you to Crikland?”

She smiled. “I am a Lyrimilian, a singer of some note. I have an engagement at the resort of Bryndoth to the south of here. I would so love to see ye attend. My men allow soulcleavers in without charge. There are those who sayeth that my song can cleanse a troubled mind and calm a tortured soul.”

“I should enjoy that very much, Lady Sendralya,” Waimbrill said.

She turned to Terredor and whispered. “If silence be the wise man’s chatter, young man, thou must possess the greatest of lore.”

Terredor opened his mouth, but only stammered. She cocked her head to the side as he spat out a few syllables and then blushed, his eyes downcast.

Waimbrill broke the awkward silence by asking, “You came through the mountains, did you not, Lady Sendralya?”

She nodded, “It was a long and arduous journey. I am glad to be nearing our destination.”

“The mountains are very dangerous,” Waimbrill said, “I have only traveled them with a caravan of my church, and we remained naturally unmolested. Your guards must be very brave and strong in battle.”

“Oh, they are,” she said, and smiled, “But I have little need of guarding from ordinary bandits. I am a Lyrimilian. A song dragon.”

Waimbrill and Terredor stared at her blankly.

“Yes, we are rare indeed, and we spend so much of our time in human form we sometimes forget we are truly draconic. Rather than breathe flame or ice, I sing, and my song can soothe hearts or shatter them. But do not worry, good Mortiss Waimbrill, for my people are great lovers of humanity; I would never create undue labor for you. We are outcasts from dragonkind because of our loyalty to humans.”

Terredor stared at her, still blushing, his mouth agape, eyes flush with passion, flitting downward in an occasional glance at her cleavage. “I believe we are nearing thy destination, Terredor,” she said, “I do hope to see thee again. I pray my nature does not turn thee from me. Thou hast the most darling human eyes. Please come visit, and see me perform, gentle Terredor.”

The carriage slowed to a stop in front of Waimbrill’s cottage. “Good Mortiss Waimbrill, may our paths not cross for many years,” she said, bowing her head, “But do come to see my show as well.”

Chapter 6

Rasp and Clutch

Waimbrill looked into others who could take Terredor in, but he was growing too old to even be considered an orphan anymore, and besides, only a Soulclaine had the political clout to prevent the Elderling estate from collecting on Jaxoll’s debt. The Delves normally took care of their own, but Terredor’s father had ruined his relations with them. They even told Terredor not to use the surname *Delver* anymore. Waimbrill’s own surname was *DoLommis*, but Terredor was not from Lommia, and could not logically use that name. So Terredor remained just plain Terredor, and he never once complained or even indicated he was aware of what a surname was.

By the time Waimbrill's first five years of service were complete, Terredor had matured a great deal, and became a competent gardener and cook. He remained short, scarcely rising to Waimbrill's shoulders, and slim as Delvers were. His skin was pockmarked with small, round scars, the remnants of sores from a less nutritive time. *An empty soul doth cry that the stomach is full, and food bland.* Soulcleavers were prone to appetite loss, but even when Waimbrill refused to eat, he ensured that Terredor had a few pieces of bread and some vegetables.

One evening, while Terredor stayed at the cabin to fix a supper of braised leeks with leftover bits of mutton that a gnomish butcher had given the pair, Waimbrill attended to the death of Helga, his elder Delver friend. She was a beloved woman whose grandchildren gathered by the dozen along the wobbling stilted planks of Delverton. Waimbrill weaved through the crowd, teetering on the narrower walkways. Delvers parted from him, their conversation stopping as he passed.

After cleaving Helga, her family invited Waimbrill to dinner. He politely refused, and pretended not to notice the grateful sighs. He knew no one would want him at a Delver wake, which were joyous, raucous affairs. They gave him a few gifts, including the largest iggther he had ever seen.

Waimbrill returned to his humble cottage and gave the iggther to Terredor, who valued them more than he. As they ate the supper Terredor had prepared, Waimbrill described a recipe he acquired from cleaving Helga. Terredor listened intently and promised to catch an opossum to roast.

"I am coming up on my five year assignment. I'm going to request my homeland," Waimbrill said, "I'll pay the remainder of your debt in a few months with some gold I received from the moneylender Berollos Verrabirrin, so you shall be free."

"Why are you leaving?" Terredor asked, his voice almost accent-free.

"When we cleave people who knew each other, who were part of the same family or village, we find it hard to be around the survivors. I feel like I know everyone's personal tragedy around here, but the worst part is that I don't actually know. My heart rages for reasons I can't decipher," he said, "I've always been planning on going back to my home. It's traditional in my land for the third son to become a Soulclaine and return to tend to the family and neighbors. That's what it is. It's not you. I miss my parents, and my brothers and sisters and friends. I miss them so much, Terredor. Sometimes I forget. I get so caught up in the griefs of others, I forget about my own family."

Terredor's increasingly pallid face was downturned. He stood, looking at Waimbrill as though about to speak, then ran out of the cottage.

Waimbrill called out Terredor's name, following him into the woods, but he quickly lost sight of him. He didn't hear any reply to his calls, and soon enough lost his trail.

His back against a rock, Waimbrill slumped to the ground. One moment, he wondered why Terredor was angry, or if he wanted to come with him, the next, he remembered the melancholy of the daughter of the Delver grandmother he had just cleaved, and the next, some long ago misery, the loneliness of a widower, and even flashes of the aimless, wandering regret of Terredor's long-dead father. He grounded himself in reality by narrating his thoughts, describing the roughness of each tree trunk, its brownness, its sturdy shape, the trilling of each bird that lived in its spreading boughs. He rose and paced, repeating comforting mantras until the pains of his cleaved faded.

He was so lost in thought that the goblins were nearly upon him before he realized they were there.

Of course, the goblins weren't robbing him. Instead, they jabbed crude blades at a family, a sturdy farmer with a sunburnt face and broad shoulders, and a pretty young wife with a terror-stricken face, accompanied by four wild-eyed children.

The goblins were short, skinny creatures with long, spindly limbs and dark green skin, pockmarked with sores, warts and knobs. They wore only a tattered rag wrapped around their waist, and their wide, broken-toothed mouths jabbered in their own tongue. They demanded the family's valuables. Like typical goblins, they didn't realize most humans did not have huge caches of gold and jewels.

The farmer and his family were begging for mercy, but the confrontation stopped as the goblins noticed Waimbrill.

"We hath nah quarrel with ye, Mortiss Waimbrill," one of the goblins hissed at him, "On ye way, be pleased."

Waimbrill saw in the eyes of the family the same look of earnest good-heartedness and honest gentility that twinkled in Terredor's sad brown eyes. He stepped forward, raising his hands to stop the goblin bandits. The children, clinging to their parent's legs, begged for help.

"Stop," Waimbrill said to the goblins, "These humans have nothing of value to you. Their worth is in their life, not belongings. Your lives, and mine, shall be poorer for their death. If you are hungry, you may eat of the vegetables in my garden."

The goblins grumbled but agreed. They dared not defy a Modrobenian, though Waimbrill had no illusions they would not attack the next group of defenseless humans they happened upon.

"Thankee sire," the farmer said, shaking Waimbrill's hand, smiling nervously, "Ye be a right kind one, sure 'nough."

After escorting the family to their own home, Waimbrill returned to his cottage, where he noticed a few vegetables picked, a tomato plant trampled, stems snapped, and pits and seeds tossed carelessly to the side. The moist earth of the garden revealed a few long-toed goblin footprints, and Waimbrill sighed, repairing the damage the best he could.

He meditated, hoping to take his mind off Terredor and quell the cascading emotions that rumbled deep in his belly, a thundercloud darkening his lungs, pinching each breath tight with bitterness and frustration, sheets of sadness like sleet assaulting his stomach and intestines, which quivered with terror and trembled in shame. His head ached, his eyes ached, his cheeks and jaw, his shoulders and knees. He knew that the pain was in his head, and somehow, that made it worse.

Meditation gave him no satisfaction. He practiced a series of choreographed motions that often cleared his mind. But on this day his distracted ruminations lead to mistakes in the routine, and an onslaught of potent feelings invaded his thoughts despite his best efforts.

Finally, depressed and pessimistic, he moved to the deprivation chamber. Certain sensory isolation wouldn't work, he cynically mumbled excuses as he pulled the sheet ceiling over his head, relaxing onto the cold cloth covering the ground. He recited a prayer in his mind, and his consciousness drifted away.

Dark feathers, flapping. A rush of wind, a bite of chilly air. A loud squawk, both protean and civilized, echoing and reverberating. The cold, craggy grip of bare talons, strong and dry, rasping, clutching. The musty smell of down mixed with aged meat and the freshness of night air, and the brilliant flare of a full moon.

Waimbrill perched on the dark wood of a thick branch in a forest he didn't recognize, kneeling before a great man with the wings and head of a vulture, Modroben, here in the form of Velteris, his most common avatar.

"Greetings, Mortiss Waimbrill of Crikland. Do ye feel ye have served me well in your first assignment?"

Waimbrill was at a loss for words, in awe of the majesty of the great winged man before him and his commanding shadow cast by moonlight. He felt pangs of inadequacy, and he knew that Velteris felt his every thought.

"Ye be unhappy in your current position, Mortiss Waimbrill of Crikland... Ah, I see. Ye be not Waimbrill of Crikland in your mind. Ye be Waimbrill of Lommia, or ye wish ye was.

"But your parents, great and noble to be sure, and your brothers and sisters, glorious though they are indeed, are your past. Love them, remember them, cherish them always, but know that a home is not a distant, theoretical notion, it is the place wherein those who live accepteth you unconditionally; your neighbors are the people ye know best, not those ye remember most fondly.

"Ye last left Lommia as a lad far younger than Terredor is now, and ye last saw it with the wide-eyed innocence of youth. It is not unlike Crikland, and your pains would ring as potent there as here. Ye must not forsake words that bear truth because they contradict memories most keenly desired.

"Our reputation for neutrality is a tool like any other, a tool we can use for good. None can feel the grief of a thousand new widows and orphans while ignoring the strife that causeth it. I have watched you struggle for what is right over these last few years, and ye have struggled mightily. I know ye wish for a calmer life, assigned to your homeland. But I have come to offer more struggle and strife, more doubt and pain, and also more glory, more honor, more grace. Ye can be a powerful force for good as a champion, fighting in my name against any who would defy me, to corrupt their own souls, and defile the dead in a vain pursuit of mortal power. Ye have all the weaponry ye need. Ye are as strong as needed, as brave as necessary, and as good and just, carrying words that bear truth. Ye are all that you need be to accept this charge, and I hope ye decide ye shall."

Waimbrill wanted to say that he did, but Velteris saw in his heart that it was not so, that he ached for the rolling hills and warm castles of Lommia.

Velteris was disappointed, Waimbrill knew, but such was the nature of giving mortals a chance to choose.

"Ye feel bitterness towards me. Ye think if ye had not been assigned here, your grief would not ring with such resonance. Perhaps so, or perhaps if ye had not, your world would be much worse indeed. Perhaps ye would have discovered that your home is not as grand as ye recall. Perhaps your remembrances grow fonder with time, and to meet again the incidents of an earlier age would only sour those memories that strengthen your soul."

[Chapter 7](#)

Solitudes and Silence

Terredor kept to himself that night, in the woods near the cottage. He slept restlessly, anxiety anchored to his spine, unable to find a comfortable position. He rehearsed arguments to convince Waimbrill to stay, but none seemed likely to work, and he didn't want to reduce himself to begging.

He considered becoming a Soulclaine himself, but doubt deluged his mind. He had never known a Delver to join the church, except for the legendary Mortiss Hapcort. Soulcleaving was not easy, this he knew even before living with Waimbrill, and he was unsure he could handle it. He had heard most Modrobenians commit suicide before finishing their training, though Waimbrill said that wasn't true.

Soulcleaving never ceased to amaze him. As a boy, growing up in the sparse vagrant lifestyle of his clan, priests of Modroben were regarded with an intense emotion between awe and panic. Terredor remembered his first experience with cleaving, after the death of a neighbor when he was young. She had fed him often, comforted him when his father was cruel, and Terredor remembered sharp pangs of sadness at her loss. His grief was offset by the Soulclaine who absorbed the brunt of his pain.

The first time he witnessed a cleaving was when a neighbor, an old man with a wispy silver mustache and haggard brown cheeks, one eye fogged with the milk crust of cataracts, passed away in the night, and Terredor awoke to hear the bustle outside. The local Modrobenian then was Mortiss Panthrull, a stocky man of middle age with deep wrinkles, deeper eyes and a flat nose against brown skin. Terredor remembered most clearly the gleaming of his vulture beak in morning sunlight, the sharp crack of the man's skull, the relief that washed over him, and the Soulclaine's thick, callused hand, which he laid upon Terredor's shoulder. He smiled, opened his mouth as though about to speak but then didn't, and walked away, likely overcome by the intense emotions that came with soulcleaving an elder from a populous clan, leaving behind numerous bereaved relatives.

The next morning, Terredor returned to the cottage, rehearsing the words he had planned. But when he got there, he saw Waimbrill sitting alone, eyes closed, meditating, and Terredor's mind blanked. He suspected Waimbrill heard him approach and chose to ignore him, and Terredor stormed away, filled with mounting, burning bitterness.

Terredor didn't see him again until the early evening, after roasting an opossum caught in one of his snares. They ate together and Waimbrill spoke only to laconically compliment him on the opossum. Terredor wanted to break the silence, but the words had flown from his mind.

The next morning, Terredor was interrupted while cleaning up. A trio of vultures landed in the front of the cottage, and Terredor watched in awe as the great beasts cawed in unison from their crooked beaks. The burnt smell of lightning strikes filled the air and the vultures turned into three men, dressed in a bizarre formal suit Terredor had never seen before. It was dark burgundy, open at the front, with a plain black shirt and ebony pants that ended at the ankles. They wore brilliant yellow sashes adorned with embroidered symbols.

"Mortiss Waimbrill, lad," said one of the men, but Terredor stood motionless, surprised at the transformation.

"I think he might be dull," another said, and the first one stepped forward to look into the cottage.

Terredor ran to the back, where Waimbrill sat crosslegged before a small statue, his eyes closed in meditation.

"Men from the church are here to see you," Terredor said.

Waimbrill didn't react at first, but then his eyes flashed with excitement. He jumped to his feet. He had already passed Terredor and was trotting through the vegetable garden when he turned around and let out a dismissive thanks.

Terredor walked slowly, stopping to brush off the soil and rocks Waimbrill had absentmindedly kicked onto the fruiting tomato plants, snapping some stems. Terredor expected that this was it, that Waimbrill would be leaving now, without him. It was funny, he thought, because he had never realized Waimbrill was a normal person, with parents, and brothers and sisters, and a real home.

But when he saw Waimbrill, rushing back into the vegetable garden as the trio of vultures squawked and flew into the sky, Terredor knew that the message was not what Waimbrill wanted.

Waimbrill stomped towards the meditation garden with the statue of Velteris behind the rows of tomatoes. He said, through tightly pursed lips and grinding teeth, "They assigned me here again. Another five years. Then maybe I can go home."

Terredor's blood pulsed with anger as Waimbrill kneeled before the statue, clenching his hands into fists, his face flushing. A succession of thoughts crowded into Terredor's mind so quickly he couldn't process them all. He wanted to shout that Waimbrill shouldn't see Crikland as a punishment, that he shouldn't see Terredor as a punishment, that there were a thousand reasons to stay. He screamed in his mind that he didn't need Waimbrill, he could run from the Elderlings and survive on his own in the Northern Kingdoms, change his name and tell everyone he was from a distant land. He wanted to reject Waimbrill so badly the words danced on the tips of his teeth, but his tongue only tossed and turned in his mouth as his throat choked and he spat gobs of spittle onto his chin and the ground at his feet. The part that made him angriest was that he knew he had no leverage: Waimbrill had no reason to stay with him, no reason to have ever saved him from Lord Porthos. He had risked nothing to gain everything for Terredor, and now he was trying to abandon him.

Terredor choked and stammered, grabbing Waimbrill's attention, his eyes flowing with tears as Terredor screamed at him. "You know, people like you here! They like you better than the last Soulclaine. Everyone hated him. I thought we had a home, you and me. But you were just using me to keep you company while you wait for your real home, and as long as you get to leave so you don't have to see what happens to me, you don't care, do you? You don't care about anything but seeing your stupid parents! Well, I didn't ask you to pay my debt. Lots of us Delvers work for the lords. But that's it, right? I'm too much of a Delver to be your real family!"

Before Waimbrill could respond, Terredor turned and fled into the woods.

He wasn't sure if he was awake or dreaming when he saw Velteris himself before him, but the raw power emanating from the shadowy, vulture-headed silhouette was overwhelming. Terredor's attention was solely on the debilitatingly powerful creature in front of him while the relentless wind and chorus of crickets faded.

"Thy master is my dedicated servant, dear Terredor. He doth struggle against himself, and against his heart of good, which told him to save you at his own personal risk, for let no man tell you otherwise, my followers are always in danger from those who would do unto them the greatest of harms.

“Thy sweet Mortiss Waimbrill doth wish he were the hero thou so fervently thoughtest he was until very recently. But what he doesn’t yet know, and what thou servest me by teaching him, is that he is already that hero, in his fortitude and grace in my service, and in his bravery against the beasts that devour men’s souls. Evil approacheth, and that right soon, and he is key in its destruction. His heart is strong and solid, and will inspire thee, even in thy solitudes and silence. Mortiss Waimbrill has a purpose, but only thou canst harness it to fight against the deep and vile darkness that is ascending into Crikland.”

From his perch on the mountain cliff, Terredor saw ripples in the lake before him, concentric rings of waves radiating outward and lapping against the shores. He saw the water rocking and pushing against Crikburg’s wharf and the raised stilts of Delverton, and then he heard a loud roar and saw the monster emerge from the lake. Its head came first, only there was no real head, just a cylindrical body ending in a jawless mouth with a double-ring of teeth, dripping with foulness, body undulating and rotating as the monster flew into the air. It let out a loud bellow, a high-pitched screech that shook Terredor’s bones and caused small rocks to fall off the mountain beneath his feet. The creature extended as high as Terredor and Velteris, and still its body was coming out of the lake, showing no signs of finity.

The monster shuddered, twisted and gagged, its scaly skin bulging. Dark shapes tumbled from its mouth, and Terredor squinted to see what they were, little blobby corpses, some splashing into the lake, others landing on hard ground. There, they stood, flesh barely hanging on to shattered bones that poked through their skin like jumbled sticks. They shambled forward through forest and farm towards Crikburg.

There were thousands of them, human, dwarf, rainid and more, and they swarmed into Crikburg, and into Delverton, and Terredor saw them approaching the village at the base of Mt. Rekkerkem, and encroaching on the resort at Creklynn Falls, the gnomish and dwarven caves, the bofro encampments and more, extending outward in a wave of creeping death. He looked to Velteris, whose lonesome eyes were bearing straight down to the center of the lake, whence the monster had come.

Terredor awoke on a high rock ledge as the earliest rays of sunlight poured over the horizon and the mountainside below him. He was refreshed and energetic, despite the horrid scene in his vision. He climbed down the ledge and walked home, hopeful and proud.

Waimbrill was scrubbing his clothes in a large pail of water. He stood when he saw Terredor approach, and his excitement and elation evaporated in the penetrating stare of Waimbrill’s dark eyes.

The eloquent words of his mind vanished before they hit his tongue. Amid stuttering and false starts, Terredor stumbled through what had happened and what he had seen. Repeating it robbed the vision of its power, and the undead horde sounded like a fantastic tale told to frighten children on dark nights. Waimbrill’s credulous impression indicated he didn’t believe Modroben would appear to someone who was not Mortiss.

“He said I was a hero?” Waimbrill asked, “Sometimes, the words of the gods don’t mean what they seem to mean. I’ll be a hero in glorious - but quiet, neutral - service to him. And the monster ascending upon Crikland... that was probably symbolic-“

“No!” Terredor shouted, “I know what he meant. I could tell what he was saying, Waimbrill, I... I mean, Mortiss Waimbrill.”

Terredor blushed, looking at his feet while Waimbrill was agape at the boy's suddenly confrontational tone.

"We... We Soulclaine have a curious place in society, Terredor. We don't do heroism. We are but tenders of the dead, not slayers of evil." Waimbrill said, "And Petromyza is neither the first nor the last monster. Evil is not a thing that can be vanquished in battle, Terredor, but only with compassion. Our compassion for the deceased is how-"

"But your lord told you to do this. He said you were a hero. He said you deny it, but you are a hero, and you... we need to destroy the monster, find out where it's coming from and kill it," Terredor said, "Petromyza must have a reason to disallow the cleaving of her victims. There was a time when you couldn't bear to see something terrible happen to me. But there are countless others who are going to suffer a terrible fate, and your own lord said that we could stop it."

After a long pause, spent deep in concentration, Waimbrill looked into Terredor's eyes. The young Delver wasn't sure what he saw, wanted to avert his glance, afraid Waimbrill would see something there he objected to, a reason to abandon him and the church, perhaps, or a reason to flee to Lommia for his mother's soothing caress, something Terredor longed for as well. But instead Waimbrill smiled, closed his eyes and said, "I thought I was going to be a Soulclaine like any other, assigned near my home, living out my life in quiet service. But it seems neither I nor my lord can let well enough alone. He assigned me to a distant land, and now he assigns me to monster-slaying. He wants me to be a warrior in his name, though I am no warrior in any name. Then I shall go be killed by this monster. I shall be a hero in my martyrdom, and at least then, Modroben can torture me no longer."

Lake Crikmere drained into a river that flowed south to the edge of the plateau, where it became a waterfall, at the bottom of which was a high-end resort, spa and market, Bryndoth, operated by the god Festyval, patron of relaxation and luxury. It was an open market day, and so Waimbrill and Terredor traveled there to find the lake's fishermen, who were selling their catch.

A system of gears powered the lift that brought them to the resort at the bottom of the waterfall, near a market. Though large and bustling, it was too controlled to be chaotic like most markets. Festyval was a god of relaxation and luxury, but he was only an avatar for a much larger deity, Maraki, whose other spheres of patience and preparation were reflected in the busy but organized atmosphere of the resort's market. Not just any goods were for sale. The wealthy and the elite from all over the Northern Kingdoms, and even beyond, came to Bryndoth, so only the freshest and most delightful of local fruit and fish were on sale there, and a few stalls carried high-priced goods from Monsoquec, Stoneroot Gorge and other exotic lands.

Terredor and Waimbrill stopped at a large fish stall with four wooden counters in a square, covered by a brilliantly colored tarp with yellow tassels hanging almost halfway to the ground. Fishermen, obviously uncomfortable in formal clothing, stood behind the counter, watching servants peruse the day's catch. Shelves adorned with shells showcased fish with shimmering scales of gray and green, and shrimp, oysters and clams, alongside barrels of large lake frogs, a Crekkish specialty. Waimbrill approached a fisherman, standing behind a counter.

"Mortiss Waimbrill," he said, "No one has need of your ministrations here."

"I am thankful that my work does not call me here today, Egglebrod," said Waimbrill, "I need information on the monster of the lake, Petromyza."

Egglebrod's eyes darted toward Terredor, and he turned around. "Maybe ye can meet me next week," he said, "I really must be continuing with my work."

Waimbrill whispered, "Go on," gesturing towards the sumptuously appointed restaurant visible on the far end of the market square. "I know these men. They'll talk to me. Go have a meal fit for a king. If I am to be a hero, let me do the work."

He dropped a gold coin in Terredor's pocket and disappeared into the crowd, arm in arm with Egglebrod. Terredor shrugged and ignored the passersby who peered suspiciously at his dusty, mended clothes. Inside the restaurant, flickering torches cast a dim light, and the polite murmuring of elegant patrons filled the air. Terredor walked to the bar, behind which stood a gray-bearded man with an easy grin and soft brown eyes, lined with wrinkles.

Terredor realized with a cold shock of humiliation that he had no idea what people drank in a restaurant such as this. He couldn't even hazard a guess. He glanced at the tables around him, but saw nothing he recognized. He saw the bartender squint, scrutinizing Terredor.

"We don't generally serve locals, young man," the bartender said, eyeing the rough, faded fabric of Terredor's clothes. "Our prices are higher than thou wouldst find in Crikburg. A lot higher."

"I just... wanted to live it up today," Terredor said, blushing as he pulled out the gold coin, "I can afford it."

The bartender smiled. "Why don't we start with a hellionberry cocktail?"

Beautiful young women in vibrantly colored, low-cut dresses strutted from table to table, whether they were waitresses or customers, Terredor didn't know. One of the women caught his eye, her own eyes sparkling a deep, luscious brown that matched her chestnut-colored skin and a tan dress that formed a revealing diagonal across her bosom, hanging loosely from her shoulder. She sat next to Terredor at the bar.

"Good afternoon," she said, the straight white teeth of her smile glowing, "My name is Shezanne."

Terredor tried to speak, stuttering, awkwardly grasping for words. The bartender rescued him, saying, "Your hellionberry cocktail, sir."

Deep violet drops floated in the cloudy white drink in a tall glass, the stem of which was wrapped in interwoven pink reeds.

The bartender smiled at him. "He's a local, Shezanne. He's out for a night of luxury."

She sighed, and leaned toward Terredor. "I suppose that shouldn't surprise me. I never get to meet the cute ones. 'Tis a pity. Ye seem nice, and I'd have enjoyed doing my job for one night at least," she said, "Make sure ye have a glass of that parsnip cider."

Shezanne turned to leave, and Terredor took a deep breath as his furiously pumping heart calmed.

The bartender, Milo, chuckled, and said, "The propensity of the tongue to inconveniently lay still correlates with the age of the man whose tongue would wag, and the beauty of the woman whose ears would hear. But drink your cocktail. I'll make sure ye get your money's worth this evening. She is here to loosen the purse-strings of

princes from faraway lands. She can't be spending time with the likes of you, no matter how much she might wish it."

Terredor took a sip of the sweet drink, savoring its tangy notes punctuated by hellionberries bursting with briny bitterness, reminding him of the capers that were an omnipresent part of Delver cuisine.

Milo said, "Those hellionberries are the eggs of a fish. They come from the caves under Lake Crikmere, I believe."

His watery eyes were blurry from the strong, biting aftertaste of the cocktail.

"But let me pour you some of that cider she suggested," Milo said, "And I'll tell the cook to begin a meal."

Milo said a show was about to start, but Terredor didn't realize the performer was none other than Sendralya until she walked on, with a smile aimed directly at him. Her hair was a different color now, a rich umber tinged with highlights of brilliant crimson that flared like blazing coals in the flickering torchlight of the restaurant. Her skin was like melted cotton, her body thick and curving, and her voice rang with dulcet tones that encompassed all the harmony of an orchestra of bells. The entire restaurant fell silent, as the patrons watched and listened in rapt attention to her song.

She sang about a proud hero whose powerful swordarm saved a beautiful maiden. Terredor couldn't turn his eyes away, not that he tried; his latest drink, a shot of aged beet liquor known as *verimi* sat untouched on the bar. His heart swelled, and he felt pangs of desire and love in his heart.

Sendralya finished her song and strode offstage to enthusiastic applause. Terredor returned to the drink in front of him, his head swimming from the alcohol.

"Hello," she said, and though Terredor could not see her behind him, he knew that no one save the beautiful Sendralya could have a voice as smooth and sweet as flowing honey. He turned to face her.

"We don't see many local men in here," she said, "Nor many Modrobenian's assistants."

Terredor's tongue was too big for his mouth, his mind racing, but he choked out, "H-Hello."

She said, "It's wonderful to see thee again, Terredor. I trust Milo is treating thee well."

"I did not know thou wast Mortiss Waimbrill's lad," Milo said, "He is a wise and gentle man. Hath he received word of his five year assignment? I believe it hath been that long since he first cleaveth in Crikland."

"Aye," he said, "He has been assigned here again."

"Oh, wonderful," Sendralya said, "He is such a lovely man. And Shezanne will be pleased as well."

Terredor said, his words now slightly slurred from the alcohol, "I would be glad if he is never assigned anywhere else. He is a part of Crikland, as much as this resort, or the lake itself. But he is angry with his church, and wishes he could leave this land and never return."

Sendralya danced her soft fingertips across his shoulders, then said, "I am sorry for Mortiss Waimbrill that he hath not received his choice of assignments. But I am glad that this presumably means thou hast no intention of leaving Crikland, which means thou and I might continue to see each other."

Terredor blushed under the kind but intense stare of Sendralya. He stammered, "We are g-going to investigate Petromyza."

“The monster of the Deepdark?” Sendralya said, then seeing Terredor’s blank stare, explained, “Lake Crikmere is home to a mysterious underground cave system. It is called the Deepdark, and I know little about it aside from the story of its creation during a battle between Petromyza and the hero Hapcort. She flew across the world then, raining death on distant lands, and swallowing her victims whole, threatening to attack with an army of undead if those whom she wished to control did not do her bidding. In this way she had kings and empires supplying her with treasure, slaves and souls to devour. He created a spell, a long chant, that limited her to occasional unfocused depravations, turning her into little more than a dull beast. It is said that she needs to swallow one thousand and one uncleaved Mortiss in order to regain her intellect.”

“Hapcort?” Terredor said, “He is a hero among my people.”

“Prepare yourself well,” Milo said, shaking his head, “I would come with you were I twenty years younger.”

“I will worry for your safety, and will pray for all the gods I know to protect you. And I should like to give thee a gift,” she said, producing an object from a hidden pocket in her gauzy crimson dress. It was a cube, made of white metal carved into thin lacy arcs and whorls. Inside the box, one face of which was hinged, was a tiny glowing dot of green. She handed the box to him, and he felt its surprising weight and the warmth emanating from it.

“I produce these as part of my business here,” she said, “It is a *cantallion*. It storeth my song, that my audiences can hear me even when I am far away. I give you one because I fear thou goest to a dark and silent place where thou wilt be alone among all manner of monsters and villains, somewhere so deep my voice can not reach. Use it wisely, gentle Terredor, to calm the bones and quiet the cries of scoundrels and fiends, or friends and allies, and know that thy pretty human eyes shall haunt my dreams the entire time thou art away. But now I must prepare for my next show. I do hope I will see thee again, and Mortiss Waimbrill as well.”

Then she left, and Terredor watched every step until she disappeared backstage. He turned to the shot of verimi in front of him. He swallowed it, coughing in pain and grimacing at its burning astringency. It didn’t taste of beets at all, he thought.

Later, Terredor stumbled out of the restaurant, his head swimming, his world spinning. He leaned against a wall to regain his balance. Her lilting, harmonic voice still echoed in his ear, radiating inner calm and peace. For as long as he stood there with her words haunting his mind, he forgot about Waimbrill leaving, about his fear for his future, his worries about their current quest and his own inadequacies. He remembered what she had told him, that her song was powerful draconic magic, and could have a deep and abiding impact on its listeners.

His reverie was interrupted by Waimbrill, who returned with information from Egglebrod. He had given a story similar to the one Sendralya told, but Terredor barely listened, so enraptured was he with the fresh memory of the beautiful singer. When he told Waimbrill about it, the older Mortiss fell quiet.

“Why didn’t you tell her how you felt?” Waimbrill asked, subtle smile twitching.

“I... I don’t know. I couldn’t think of anything to say in front of her. She was beautiful.”

“So,” Waimbrill said, “I’m a hero, and I’m supposed to be brave enough to go kill a monster, but you are too scared even to talk to a woman?”

“I have decided I wish to become a Soulclaine like you. I will not have time for a woman.”

“What’s this? You wish to be Mortiss?”

Terredor shuffled his feet. "What else can I do? I'm an outsider to the Delvers, and to everyone else, I'm a Delver."

"It is a difficult path, Terredor. Don't make a decision you will later regret."

"I won't. It is of no matter, right now," Terredor said, "Let us go to Lake Crikmere and begin the journey."

Waimbrill said. "Terredor..."

"I know what you will say. You do not want me coming with you. Well, you are going to have to deal with me a little longer."

"This will be dangerous," Waimbrill said, "And your vision said that I would be a hero. Not you."

"Velteris didn't say I should stay home. You can't just take me in and then kick me out whenever it's convenient."

Waimbrill said, "That's not what I'm doing, Terredor. I'm trying to protect you. I was trying to protect you then, from Lord Porthos. But you are a young man. You will need to strike out on your own soon enough."

"Fine, but not yet, Mortiss Waimbrill," Terredor said, "Please? I don't care how dangerous this is. Let's do this together. You don't really want to go down there alone, do you? Well, I don't want to stay up here alone. So let us risk loneliness together."

Chapter 8

Clang and Clash

They had no way of staying underwater for longer than they could hold their breath, so Waimbrill planned on attracting the attention of the pond rainids who lived in the lake to see if they had any magical means to allow them to stay under.

As they approached the shore, Terredor's mind wandered to the first time he stole from a pond rainid. The victim was a young female priestess of Maraki, god of patience and preparation. Terredor was hungry and bored, waiting patiently for a perfect opportunity like this one. He snuck behind her and cut out the bottom of her pack. A few coins and a small white pouch fell out. Terredor caught them, scampering into a darkened alley to examine his prize.

The coins were copper, and the pouch was made of soft white felt. Inside were a written note and two rings with the same powerful aura that reminded Terredor of the magical trinkets his father would steal. He was excited, thinking he would be able to sell them at a fantastic profit.

But Terredor had heard the folktales and knew well the dangers of magical rings of unknown provenance, so he took the note and pouch to an elder woman of his clan. Her name was Helga, a stout woman with a warm, comforting smile, always ready with a kind word and a stern scolding.

"Ah yes," Helga said, "It say 'I am a priestess of Maraki, Lord of Patience and Preparation, as was my mother, and her mother before her, who hath received a vision from Maraki when she was but a girl, and this pouch and rings, and Maraki bade her be patient, and pass the pouch and rings on to her daughter, and then again to her daughter's daughter, that I might carry them into Crikburg on this very day that a cunning young Delver might steal them. These rings will prepare gentle Delver for a journey into the deepest of darks. As life must begin at its moment, and must death arrive rightly, so must these rings be donned and doffed when borne truth dictates."

He had hidden the rings from his father, who would have sold them regardless of the note. Terredor fingered the soft felt pouch and told Waimbrill the story of the rainid priestess. He rarely thought about the rings anymore, but he kept them with him always, to be prepared for the journey the note referred to.

Terredor slipped the ring on his finger, and felt his throat close. His shoulder blades became warm and itched terribly. Under the rough cloth of his tunic he saw a row of feathery gills along the top of his shoulders. Though it wasn't immediately apparent because the sun was shining, the ring glowed when worn as well.

Waimbrill and Terredor walked into the lake with trepidation. It was a curious sensation, Terredor thought, the rushing of water through his gills, which pumped cold into his blood. It was a deep chill, a bitter, stabbing cold, like the painful icy sensation on the roof of the mouth when eating snow too quickly, but on his shoulder and not his palate.

Terredor found that he could swim, not like a fish, but more a levitating dancer, striding in every direction effortlessly. He and Waimbrill cavorted in the water, thickly green with algae, laughing as they brushed past the fish and turtles and small shrimps that dominated coastal Lake Crikmere.

Entranced by their newfound grace in three dimensions, they didn't notice at first that they spoke a curious, guttural language that resonated in the heavy blanket of water around them. Even though his brain understood the words, they sounded alien, like staccato bursts of bombastic, stabbing sounds, wrapped in silky vowels that stuck in his head. The tongue brought to the forefront of his mind that they were barging headstrong into a dangerous place they knew nothing about. Terredor wondered what kind of people would have a language so harsh, so booming, so crazed and incessant, with the clash and clang of consonant-choked syllables, crawling with protean cruelty like primordial crustaceans scuttling across a cave floor.

A black shape drifted overhead, and they waited, heads upturned in awe. Seven feet long from head to tail, the huge beast swam slowly. Terredor had seen giant lake turtles before, but only the head and the top of a shell, and once, he saw men bring home a hunted specimen. But here, in the green murk and mire of the lake, it was a whole different beast, a prehistoric predator whose snapping snout could rip off a limb without missing a gentle stroke of its legs. It passed by without so much as a glance in their direction, and they continued swimming toward the center of the lake, where the fishermen had told Waimbrill they would find the Fissure.

The Fissure was a jagged crack in the lake floor that stretched some half a mile, and was a hundred feet at its widest. They floated above the ground, at its southern tip, where it was only a few feet from edge to edge.

"This is where we should descend. The fishermen said to go to this spot and swim straight down."

The water in the Fissure was cold, its chill emanating from the darkness. The life that teemed in the lake thinned as they approached it. Judging from the greater distance the light from his ring traveled into the Fissure than through the algae-clouded lake, Terredor guessed that the water there, in that abyssal blackness, must be mostly dead.

"What do you suppose the people down there live on?" Terredor asked, "There can't be any food growing so deep."

"Perhaps they eat only each other," Waimbrill said, stroking his chin as he peered into the darkness, reaching his illuminated hand down to see if there were any features to be seen. But there were none.

The pair huddled together. The inky ebony of the Fissure oozed out, infecting the water around it with a penetrating cold. And its name now made more sense: the Deepdark. His voice changed it to a cluttered gutter of consonants and clicks, its very tone making his gills shudder and flutter anxiously.

“Is this what it’s like to be a hero?” Terredor asked, peering into the darkness.

“You need not come with me. You should not come with me,” Waimbrill said, “This journey will be my end.”

“Maraki gave me two rings, Mortiss Waimbrill. Surely a god of preparation would not have overprepared me.”

“Point well-taken, lad,” Waimbrill said and grinned.

“So we stick together, and we’ll both be heroes,” Terredor said.

“I suppose so. But I don’t see you bravely diving in.”

“A pair of true heroes will surely face foes more dangerous than a hole in the ground.”

“It’s no good trivializing our fears,” Waimbrill said, “The shame in fear is in its denial. You wish to worship Modroben? You will have much to learn about overcoming emotions. Let me teach you.”

They sat crosslegged, facing each other next to the lip of the Fissure, or what Terredor was beginning to think of as the entrance to the Deepdark.

“Clear your mind,” Waimbrill said, “And let your fears flow away.”

Terredor closed his eyes as he had seen Waimbrill do so many times over the years.

“Visualize your fear,” Waimbrill said, “Visualize it as a pile of pebbles you carry. Think about every possibility that frightens you now. Maybe the ground will collapse, sealing us in the Deepdark. Perhaps we will descend countless fathoms only to be captured by villains, or maybe I shall take this ring off my finger and let myself drown, leaving you alone to battle great evil. Now-”

“This is not helping,” Terredor said, opening his eyes.

“Hush!” Waimbrill said, “The risk is real, but the fears are a beast of your mind, a stupid, ravenous beast that will rip and rend your sanity if you let it. We shall use our minds to reject terror and face risk. Think of each of those fears and picture each one as a rock you hold in your hand. Go on, close your eyes and do it. Focus on your breathing - or rather, the flow of water through your gills, I suppose - and meditate, praying to Modroben while you focus on each rock. Those fears constitute part of your Paradigm. As you examine each rock and each fear, assign it a new thought. Change ‘I could be crushed by tons of rock’ to ‘I will be able to escape even if there is a cave-in’. The fears that haunt your mind now haunt the rocks. Remember what that rock looked like in thy mind, and every time you fear again the crushing weight of stone, respond with thoughts of the new meaning, and picture the rock whose fear you have mastered. When you finish with each rock, throw it into the Fissure, so it will be down there when you need it.”

He focused on the darkness, pictured himself throwing a handful of pebbles one by one into the Fissure. He prayed, and the tension and anxiety streamed out of his muscles into the flowing water around him. His shoulders drooped, his biceps relaxed, his gills quavered gently.

Terredor and Waimbrill stood, looked each other in the eye and smiled. They peered into the dark, cold waters beneath them, linked arms, and swam over the crack, then slowly descended.

A few moments in, they laughed. Though the water was mysterious and black outside their little spheres of light, the silent, slow descent was anticlimactic in the face of all their fears. Terredor shivered and his skin puckered in the icy water. Eventually they floated to the cave floor. Except for the rock wall they had followed the whole way down, there were no landmarks within their limited field of vision.

The terse silence was ominously lit by their bubbles of brilliant light, illuminating the seemingly uninhabited depths. The only signs of life they'd seen so far were a few pockets of bizarre white algae, sprouting in clumps from cracks in the stone, and a handful of tiny blind fish, none bigger than a fingernail.

Perhaps Waimbrill was lost in thought as well, for both were surprised and overwhelmed when they saw a dozen spears poking out of the darkness around them. A group of lightly armored rainids swam into the light.

Unlike the pale blue rainids of the mountains or the warty green rainids of the lake, these were yellow-white, their bodies almost entirely featureless, except for a wide mouth and a pair of nostrils on their face.

"Drop your weapons!" they shouted, and Waimbrill and Terredor raised their arms.

"We bear peace," Waimbrill shouted, "I am a servant of Modroben. My name is Mortiss Waimbrill."

The eyeless cave rainids reacted to his words. Modroben was the only god in the world whose worship was universal. *For whom among you shall not die, thee shall be free from the lord of the remainder.* Terredor's gill slits flapped nervously. He was glad to be in the company of a Soulclaine - terrible traveling companions though they certainly were, their social status afforded significant benefits.

"Come with us," bellowed one of the guards.

The rainids led them away, through a narrow corridor of rough-hewn rock. Emerging from a particularly narrow twist, Terredor was awestruck at the sudden explosion of life. The algae here were thick bushes, waving slowly in the gently flowing water, organized colonies of algae forming bizarre shapes: conical, pyramidal, tubular, and twisted into loops and spirals that extended several feet from the rocks. These algal structures swarmed with small fish who gathered in schools. Almost everything was white, and all of the animals were eyeless, including an array of solitary fish, ranging from tiny to huge, silently gliding and wriggling in and out of the radius of light. They passed white-shelled crabs up to ten feet from leg to leg, darting away from the party of rainids around Waimbrill and Terredor.

Descending past a shelf, Terredor saw pods fashioned out of thin, smooth fabric. They ranged from man-sized units to family-sized dwellings affixed to the rock wall with line. The pods were pure white, with a flap that could be tied shut from the inside. Terredor later learned they were spun from the webbing that a creature called the *silkfish* used to encase its eggs.

They passed pods that seemed to be shops, with signs out front, upraised symbols carved on a bone-like substance. Through openings in the pod walls, Terredor caught glimpses of myriad objects, most of which were unrecognizable, others appeared to be stone weapons, white vegetables and clothing woven from the same material that made the pods.

Terredor heard the rainids jabbering a greeting in their own language before a new person swam into the area lit by their rings. He was a tall, gangly rainid, skin of white and yellow, and a face well-worn with wrinkles.

"Greetings in death," croaked the newcomer.

Waimbrill replied in kind, then said, “My name is Mortiss Waimbrill, and this is my apprentice, Terredor. We’re from Crikland.”

“And I am Mortiss Gelvid. Welcome to Helmarthonn.”

Chapter 9

Thrash and Swirl

The kingdom of Helmarthonn sprawled over a complex of caves inhabited by rainids like Gelvid: yellow-white, lanky and slender, with bass voices and shallow eye sockets. Most wore plain white clothes fringed with tassels and strings, and embroidered with geometric designs. Small fish swam through the stone corridors of the kingdom, feeding on clumps of algae attached to the walls and clustered around rocky protuberances, alongside a column of long white eels, schools of albino seahorses and large fish lurking with the fearsome teeth of a predator.

A few of the buildings, the fancier and higher-class ones, it seemed, were adorned with networks of tubes which altered the flow of water. This was apparently akin to architecture down here, Terredor surmised. The varying qualities of water from each tube combined to create a sensation that was, in an indescribable way, aesthetically pleasing to his newfound ability to perceive minute differences in flow and quality.

As they swam, Gelvid introduced them to Helmarthonn and the Deepdark, greeting the rainids who came when they heard of the arrival of outsiders. The locals whispered among themselves, remaining in small groups in sheltered alcoves.

Terredor asked, “Are they looking at us?” but as he said it, he realized that the word he used for “looking” referred not to vision, but to the sensation of shifts in water currents and an energy field surrounding all living creatures.

“Yes,” Gelvid said, “Few upworlders come to the Deepdark. Ye are quite an oddity around here.”

“As I’m sure your people would be above,” Waimbrill said.

“But please, tell me what brings you to Helmarthonn,” Gelvid said.

Waimbrill then told of the monster, Petromyza, whose periodic ravagings had stolen bodies and souls by the score. Gelvid nodded while he talked, and then said, “Yes, we have grown worried of this beast as well. Petromyza hath attacked us many times, swallowing our people whole. We fear it is part of a devious plot to create a legion of uncleaved corpses. It cometh from below, goeth above to your land, and then returneth to attack once more before going to its home, beneath us.”

“What is below us?” Waimbrill asked.

“Fathoms down layeth a great dragon-god named Argon, whose scales themselves emit the mana of our civilization, which nourisheth our crops and our animals. For eons, his monsters have culled the weak and unfaithful from our number, but it is only over the last year that Petromyza hath come more frequently than Argon’s children ever have before,” Gelvid whispered, turning his head as he spoke to avoid being overheard.

“So you think Argon is behind the monster?” Waimbrill asked.

“Hush! Argon is the source of life here. Outsiders can not make such suggestions, not in a crowded market like this.” Gelvid leaned closer and whispered, “However, I have long suspected Argon. There are few gods powerful enough to create a plot such as this. The only other universal god in the Deepdark is Chamballa.”

Terredor said, "She is worshiped as well on the Surface. We consider her the goddess of storms and destruction. On the Surface, we have always called the monster her child."

Gelvid frowned, the wrinkles around his mouth flattening. "She is a goddess of growth and fertility here. So I do not think she would be so destructive."

Waimbrill said, "We must seek answers, and a solution, at the source. We must descend. Will you give us a map?"

"Aye, I will do one better," Gelvid said, "I do not think it is a coincidence that Modroben has sent you to me. I shall come with you, and show you the way. The descent will be dangerous, and having a local will help you immensely. Come, let us buy supplies for the journey."

Gelvid led the upworlders through the city, stopping to make a few purchases. Mortiss Gelvid received the goods for little or no cost, just as Modrobenians on the surface generally did.

Terredor and Waimbrill each received a small sac of supplies and a trident from Gelvid, and they followed the rainid to his home, a narrow, shallow cave with a few plain furnishings. Gelvid provided a meal of fish meat and leafy white vegetables with a peculiar, almost metallic taste. Afterwards, Gelvid joined Waimbrill in meditation, the rainid emitting a deep hum and swimming in vertical circles in a way that aided his concentration.

While his elders prepared mentally for the journey, Terredor floated outside Gelvid's home. They planned on meditating for a long time because they might not have time to do so in the near future. That was why Soulclaine were not known as good adventurers: they must meditate or otherwise improve their mental state for several hours a day, and even then, many a Soulclaine has been undone by his own emotions getting the better of him at an inopportune time. Terredor's people told tales of a great clansman, Hapcort Delver, who became the highest-ranking Modrobenian in the Northern Kingdoms. One ballad told of Hapcort's reaction when a rival bandit clan banned soulcleavers from entering Delverton, hoping to force the inhabitants to emigrate or risk undeath. Hapcort eschewed raising an army, famously declaring, "It is my homeland. It is my people. It is my battle," which remains a popular Delver war cry. Hapcort arrived with a fleet of draconic vultures, circling the bandit encampment and demanding that all who properly serve Modroben leave at once. Thieves and cutpurses fled en masse, but the cruel bandit king had a loyal cadre of followers who readied their blades and bows. They were wholly unprepared for an army of vulture-dragons who swept in swiftly and rended bandits with beak and claw. Hapcort cleaved the villains as they died. At the height of the battle, he became wracked with a sudden onslaught of emotions from the newly cleaved souls, and his distraction led to his murder at the hands of the bandit king himself. Hapcort's vultures won the battle in the end, and the bandits who had not fled were killed, and the camp leveled, but thus was the end of the greatest hero of Delver folklore.

As he watched his compatriots meditate, Terredor wondered if traveling with them had been a mistake. Soulclaine were not heroes. They could be overwhelmed by emotion at any time. They were prone to suicide, to obsession, mania and hysteria, even to episodes of random violence, slaughtering innocents indiscriminately. It was a gruesome thought, and Terredor shivered, casting his fears as pebbles to be tossed aside, as Waimbrill had taught him. His mind refused to cooperate, instead imagining blood-beaked vultures, white fish with sharp teeth, and the crushing weight of millions of tons of stone and water. He fell into a restless sleep, and dozed and dreamed of

devastating monsters that lurked in the hidden corners of cavernous caves, of murderous bandits with weapons bladed and blunt, and of giant dragon-gods that breathed waves of uncleaved death.

They departed the next morning, and crossed a bone-colored coral reef, consisting of skeletal mounds of cold calcium, peaks towering above the cave floor in a multitude of twisting whorls. The coral reef teemed with fish, many with sharp teeth and predaceous faces, long undulating slugs and even a giant starfish that laid flat against a wall, its white skin layered with rough warts.

The first creature Gelvid said was worthy of fear was a jellyfish, though not like the delicious creatures that swarmed beneath the stilts of Delverton for one week every spring.

They were swimming single file through a narrow part of a corridor when Gelvid stopped. "Quick!" he snapped, "Behind that boulder. A hookworm jellyfish is coming."

The travelers floated behind a large rock, waiting in silence. Terredor saw his vicinity using the light from the ring, which still made him nervous though Gelvid had assured them that no creature in the Deepdark could see. Terredor's pulse raced while he imagined huge man-eating jellyfish and watched a pair of small salamanders swim by.

Terredor had improved at feeling changes in currents and perceiving how and where they were created. He and Waimbrill discovered that, when they closed their eyes, their other senses became more acute to compensate. In hiding, they remained as motionless as possible, and hid behind a boulder as to avoid interrupting the flow of water around them. Terredor felt a few fish upstream, but nothing especially large, and when he saw them pass through the light, they were far from frightening.

He wondered if Gelvid had been mistaken, or if whatever he had sensed had gone down a side corridor. Terredor and Waimbrill exchanged questioning glances, but neither wanted to disrupt the silence, or move just yet.

Finally, Terredor saw the jellyfish. Its body was less than an inch long. A few tentacles extending a bit more than a fingernail's length wiggled, pushing it through the water.

"There it is," Gelvid croaked loudly, then smiled at Terredor and Waimbrill, who jumped in surprise when the quiet was broken, "No worries, it is a stupid beast. It can not hear."

"It's so tiny," Terredor said, "It must be poisonous, right?"

Gelvid's lipless, toothless frog mouth turned up in a strange smile. "I suspect we are talking past each other, my Surface-dwelling friends. This is one of the largest creatures you will find down here. It is a full-grown great hookworm jellyfish."

"Look closely, Terredor," Waimbrill said, gasping.

Terredor squinted, and saw thin tentacles twitching as they glided slowly through the water. Hundreds of them were attached to the main body, dangling behind it like tiny bits of string.

"Don't touch," Gelvid said, "I forgot ye can't sense very thin objects. Your species' ability to perceive seems lacking, no offense intended."

"It works better on land," Waimbrill said apologetically.

“Those tentacles are at least a hundred yards long. Don’t worry, as long as we stay away, it won’t harm us. They have thousands of tiny hooks. If one touches you, the other tentacles will wrap around you too, and if ye let that happen, it will have you digested in minutes.”

They sat in silence for a moment, Terredor not sure if he should be more afraid of a dangerous, if benign-looking, animal, or less afraid given that there was nothing else to do to defend himself from it.

The water was still freezing cold, and had been getting colder the further they descended, but Terredor was growing used to the temperature, only noticing it during the rest periods, such as now, when he had nothing to focus on besides the ever-mounting tension as they waited for the jellyfish to pass.

“I apologize,” Gelvid said, “I can tell ye are both frightened. I wasn’t trying to scare you. Hookworm jellyfish eat almost entirely small fish. There will be one being eaten passing by you in a few moments, so ye should point your eyes toward that, or whatever it is ye do with them. The injured and the infirm are the only people killed by something like this. I’ve seen them strike while I soulcleaved following a battle. The hooks picked up dead bodies and the injured alike, and the sudden movement of the tentacles caught many of us, but no healthy man got more than a bit of flesh ripped out.”

Terredor saw the fish being digested. It was the size of a rambleball, covered in tiny thin filaments that writhed and pulsed, a few bits of flesh and bone escaping into the open water around it.

After the last of the tentacles passed, Gelvid motioned for them to depart, and they resumed their swim, stopping again just a few minutes later, when they saw the head of a pink-skinned, thin-faced creature on the ground.

“I was worried about this,” Gelvid said, shaking his head sadly, “This isn’t the kind of corridor those hookworm jellyfish frequent. That’s why I took you this way. I didn’t say anything before... But this is the head of an olmian, and around here, most olmians are involved in some unsavory activities. This poor man was probably executed by rivals by tying him up and attracting the hookworm jellyfish to come devour him. It’s said to be an extraordinarily painful way to die. They usually coat the head with a substance the jellyfish finds repellent, so luckily the victim remains cleavable.”

Gelvid was a Soulclaine just like Waimbrill was, but rather than worshiping Modroben as Velteris, god of vultures, Gelvid worshiped him as Nelktor, god of crabs. While Gelvid talked, Terredor pictured what his cleaving might look like; rather than his face turning to a vulture beak like a surface Modrobenian, he would instead have a hand turn to a crab pincer, and cleave using that.

The magical ring did not give Terredor the power to understand the language Gelvid used to intone the High Prayer, but it was smooth and sybillant. His hand turned into a white crab claw, smashing through the olmian’s skin and skull to reveal the orange-pink brain matter underneath.

Gelvid took a moment to meditate, performing the same circular swimming motion Terredor saw him use in Helmarthonn. Afterwards, the rainid’s face seemed a little more wrinkled, his blank, expressionless head sagging sadly, heavily. He said nothing as they set out again on their journey.

They continued for the remainder of what apparently passed for a day in the Deepdark. He and Waimbrill had discussed it, but neither had any conception of time anymore. They just knew they were tired, and it conveniently coincided with Gelvid announcing it was time to rest.

When Waimbrill woke him to keep watch, Terredor sat still and silent against the rock wall. While a part of him wanted to conceal the rings to sleep in darkness and thought the light was a beacon for danger, he and Waimbrill agreed that blindness made the water feel like a suffocating frozen blanket, so they kept the light on and endured the feeling of vulnerability it gave them. Every few minutes while Waimbrill slept, Terredor would change his mind for a second and place the ringed hand in his pocket, which made the water feel colder, his gills flap excitedly, and his brain reel at the thought of the sea of water sitting atop his head.

He saw a fish swim by, and the idle thought that it was a harbinger of great doom popped unbidden into his mind. After the encounter with the hookworm jellyfish, he now saw every animal, no matter how seemingly benign and harmless, as a potential threat. He had never really considered that going to a place where he knew nothing meant that he might not even recognize danger until it was too late.

A series of changes in the current from upstream washed across him, minute differentials in pressure on different parts of his body, one right after another. His sleepy mind took a moment to comprehend what he was sensing: a series of individuals changing direction to head towards him. He swam to the sleeping bodies of Waimbrill and Gelvid, shaking them awake.

"It feels like merovens," Gelvid said, pulling them against the wall with him, "Ready your tridents. If they sense us, they might attack. So stay still."

Terredor wanted to ask what a meroven was, but he remained quiet, peering down the corridor. He squinted, despite having told himself countless times that doing so was useless, for the light from the ring didn't extend far, and no amount of squinting would increase its range.

The first meroven swam into the illuminated area. It was a dolphin, an animal Terredor knew because it was sometimes sold for food as far north as Crikland. But this dolphin had unusual teeth, long, sharp and in two rows, the outer one curving over the lower jaw of the elongated snout. It was about two feet long, its head scanning as it swam. It was followed by another, then another, and soon there were a dozen more visible within the light.

They meandered along, clustered in the center of the cave, fins flapping. When the merovens passed the illuminated area around Terredor, his gill flaps quivered in relief, and his blood froze as he wondered if that was enough movement for the merovens to sense.

One of them turned, aiming its snout in their direction and letting out a growl that echoed against the stone walls of the cave.

"They're on us," Gelvid said, swimming forward and pointing his trident outward, "Keep your back to each other. Each of us face a different direction. Their snout has thick skin, so stab them in the face."

The pod of merovens darted towards the trio, snarling, and swam in circles around them. The thrash and swirl of the water blinded Terredor, and all was only flashes of white meroven flesh, hard and blubbery, and sharp teeth gnashing. Deep chilling panic spread from the cold water filtering through his gills into his blood and deep into his belly.

Waimbrill shouted, "Use the senses of the ring!"

Terredor closed his eyes, clearing his mind from the torrent of rushing water and snapping snouts that threatened to overwhelm him. He sensed the merovens swimming in three rows around him. One broke from the pack, interrupting its steady circle and sending a wave of weakly flowing water towards him.

Gelvid nimbly swam up and down, left and right, keeping his back to Terredor and Waimbrill, who defensively jabbed his own trident toward the circling merovens. Terredor opened his eyes briefly, but could see only a confusing circling maelstrom of bodies and teeth. With his eyes closed, his underwater senses took over, and he could distinguish each meroven, and feel Gelvid swimming and stabbing his trident towards them.

The meroven that broke off from the pack was coming towards Terredor, who resisted the urge to open his eyes even as the mounting danger grew so great he thought his eyelids would burst from the pressure. Finally, he could resist no longer, and Terredor blinked his eyes, jumping backwards when he saw the meroven well into the radius of light, grimacing and baring its double rows of teeth.

"It's right in front of you!" Waimbrill screamed, "Now is the time for heroism!"

Terredor scrunched his eyes tight and thrust forward blindly. He heard a squeal of pain and the trident slammed against something hard, then a sudden rush of warm, iron-rich water flooded his gills.

After that, the battle was over in moments. Water whirled, and Terredor heard himself and Waimbrill shout while Gelvid barked orders. He tasted blood, and saw bits of flesh and chunks of dolphin bodies when he peered through his shut eyes.

Four merovens were floating, dead, tongues dangling limply from their toothed snouts. The rest had swam away.

"They swim in circles to confuse slower creatures," Gelvid said, gills twisting and contorting in exertion and excitement, "And devour them so quickly they scarcely have a chance to react."

"The Deepdark is a dangerous place," Waimbrill said, shaking his head. "We should find a place to rest shortly," Gelvid said, "For we are only a day's travel from Al'hirrizad."

They found a small alcove in the rock wall, and rested there while Gelvid prepared a meal, mixing fish bits with raw juice in a bladder. The mixture was strongly acidic, but filling and fortifying to Terredor's exhausted muscles. Gelvid told them about their next destination, Al'hirrizad, a thriving metropolis about halfway between the Surface and the bottom of the Deepdark, a requisite stop on the journey downward. All three slept restlessly, barely needing to awaken each other to keep watch.

Chapter 10

Wail and Warble

They entered the city through a gate that spanned the end of a corridor, where it opened on a large cavern, in the center of which were Al'hirrizad's oldest and most important institutions, built into a colossal coral reef. Thin metal latticework supported the coral, and shaped it into buildings. Further up were structures made of silkfish webbing, ranging from tiny pods to spired mansions, interconnected with each other through narrow tunnel pods.

The people of Al'hirrizad were mostly cave rainids like Gelvid, but there were others: pale, pink, skinny humanoids with long limbs and a narrow head ringed by feathery fronds - the olmians; man-sized millipedes with

legs that flapped as fins, a single pair of arms, and no apparent facial features, the vagramines; and human-bodied men with duck-like heads, the derrador. The locals regarded Waimbrill and Terredor with unabashed hostility.

Gelvid said he'd arrange passage the rest of the way down, and would meet up with them in the morning. He brought them to an inn, a small building that bobbed and floated, tethered to another nearby pod.

In their small room, Terredor floated while Waimbrill meditated and prayed to his god. Terredor didn't listen to these prayers anymore.

"Some of the goods available at the market in Bryndoth come from down here," Terredor said when Waimbrill finished praying.

"That's not surprising," Waimbrill said, nodding his head, "There must be some remarkable things down here."

"There was this drink I had. It was amazing, like nothing I ever tasted. The best part was these little briny things called hellionberries. They said they were the eggs of a fish. But I wonder what fish. I should ask Gelvid."

"Yes, he would know," Waimbrill said, "Perhaps you could bring some with you when we leave... assuming we survive. You could take the proceeds and go on a trip before becoming Soulclaine."

"We could both go," Terredor said.

"Well..." Waimbrill said awkwardly, "I was thinking about your vision. Perhaps Modroben wanted you to convince me to go on this quest because when it is complete, he will reward me with an assignment at home. I can feel it in my gut. I miss my family, Terredor."

"You think he's using me to to give you the chance to abandon me?" Terredor said, "I don't understand why your mother and father are so wonderful anyway. I used to have both, and I wouldn't leave you for them."

"It's not just them. It's my whole family. That's my home. That's where I'm from. There, I'll feel at peace. I could cleave a thousand souls a day there, Terredor. I just need to get back home...."

"I don't understand. You are supposed to be a hero. You are supposed to be a champion for all of us in Crikland!"

"Let's be reasonable. I never became Soulclaine to be a hero. I have a home. I have people who love me back at my home. I was always going to go back there. It's my home, Terredor, maybe you wouldn't understand."

He pushed away from Waimbrill, and swam to the flap that served as a door, which Terredor ripped angrily from the wall, exposing the dark hallway pod.

"I guess I'm just as dull as everyone always said!" Terredor turned around to Waimbrill, who stared, flabagast at the outburst. "I thought I did understand. I thought I had a home, with you. I thought I loved you like a father. I thought maybe you cared for me too!"

"Terredor, stop!" Waimbrill shouted as Terredor swam away.

He darted downwards, between a few floating pods, and then hid in a small cave, his gills heaving, heart pounding, his red face flashing anger as Waimbrill swam by. He was so furious he clenched his hands into fists and ruminated on the encounter, rehearsing in his mind all the things he should have said. He imagined himself a million times seeking out Waimbrill and throttling him, shouting vituperation, but in the end, Terredor stayed in the cave, stewing in rage.

After a few hours, he decided to explore the city without Waimbrill to prove he didn't need anyone. Closing his eyes, Terredor focused on discerning the complex network of pods that marked central Al'hirrizad.

He swam towards a gathering crowd of olmians, their spindly bodies spinning as they danced to a throbbing bass beat pounded on white drums by burly rainids who wailed and warbled, booming bombast and dissonant melodies. Dancers swam in complex shapes, synchronizing shifts in direction and speed in rhythmic ways, the waves of water pressure massaging and stimulating Terredor. A few cave rainids joined in as well, while the vagramines - the menacing millipede-men - were clustered on the ground a few meters below.

He was about to give thanks to Modroben for keeping the vagramines away from him when he realized there were three swimming in his direction.

They had long bodies, some seven feet from head to tail, divided into a few hundred segments. A pair of short, jointed legs protruded from each side of each segment, except for one extra large segment, from which came a pair of arms with large hands. Another elongated segment constituted their head, with tiny thin black holes for nostrils and a mouth, barely visible against the black carapace.

"Oy!" shouted a vagramine, shrilly sneering, "What munkcud art thou?"

The other two vagramines, who floated behind the one that spoke, laughed a dull, guttural chuckle. They flexed their arms, their long bodies waving through the water. Their faces floated in and out of the sphere of illumination around Terredor.

The leader leaned forward, chitinous face hissing just inches from Terredor, whose heart sank as his gills flapped desperately.

"Thou art a freak, and I don't like freaks hanging around my city," said the vagramine.

"I, uh, I wasn't going to stay," Terredor said, "I was just passing through."

"Ah, then thou needst only pay the toll," said the vagramine, his voice creaking with snaps and clicks, hundreds of little legs undulating in the gently flowing current of lower Al-hirrizad.

"The toll?"

"It is exactly equal to the value of everything thou ownest," the vagramine said and the others chittered, bodies flapping excitedly, "Plus one."

The vagramines let out a crashing chortle, carapace plates cracking against each other as they contorted in what Terredor assumed was the vagramine equivalent of a guffaw.

"I serve Mortiss Waimbrill of Crikland. He is a Soulclaine, and you can't harm a Modrobenian."

"If the good Mortiss Waimbrill were before us," said the leader, "He would be on his way."

"But thou art not Mortiss Munkcud," said one, "Just plain Munkcud."

The chief vagramine's arm snapped forward, latching onto Terredor's shoulder, its hardened exoskeleton digging into his flesh.

Terredor's gills flapped and flitted, his heart racing as the tall vagramines surrounded him, faceless, silhouetted by the light emanating from his ring. They hooted and clicked, a clattering choir echoed by the clang of their carapace, which gleamed a brilliant black so shiny Terredor could see his wide-eyed face twisting in terror. His mind raced with plans others could have implemented: Waimbrill would have reasoned with them; Gelvid would

have rebuffed them; Jaxoll would have tricked them; Helga would have befriended them; Porthos would have bought them off. But he was only Terredor, and could do nothing but quiver and shake as he floated before them.

He sensed a person swimming towards him. It was a derrador, a human-like creature with the head and face of a duck, complete with a long beak. He was dressed in armor like fish scales, and wielded a long hooked harpoon.

“Unhand the poor beast,” said the derrador, “In the name of the Knights of the Noble Fin!”

The three vagramines hissed at him, but swam back a few feet.

“Mind thy business, knight,” said one.

“My business is the safety of travelers throughout the Deepdark,” intoned the derrador, “And I will be forced to slay you if ye do not desist from your scoundrelry.”

The vagramines spoke to each other in a language of resonating clicks and whoops. Without another word, they turned and swam away, ignoring the stern face the derrador presented in their direction.

“Good traveling, sir,” the derrador said, “What manner of man art thou?”

“I am human. My name is Terredor. I’m from the Surface. I’m here with Mortiss Waimbrill of Crikland.”

“I know of this place called Serrfass,” said the derrador, “I have heard there are all manner of monsters and villains there.”

“We have some of that,” Terredor said.

“Perhaps one day I shall voyage to the Serrfass, and together we will free thy home from the oppressive yoke of villainy!” he said triumphantly, “My name, gentle Terredor, is Sir Esterhund, a Knight of the Noble Fin.”

Terredor told him about the adventure he was on as they swam through the city, and Sir Esterhund nodded sagely, his face betraying intense sadness on soft white down. He said, “I have experienced Petromyza as well. She is an atrocious evil indeed. I wish thee the best of luck on thy voyage. Perhaps before we separate, thou wouldst lead me to thy master, Mortiss Waimbrill? I do not like to see a Soulclaine without aiding him the best I can, for one never knows when one will need the ministrations of his art,” Sir Esterhund said.

“He’s... resting.”

“Ah, then I will let him rest, for his kind doth need it,” said Sir Esterhund, “I am sure thou wilt learn much from thy master in thine apprenticeship.”

Terredor shook his head, “I’m not his apprentice. Mortiss Waimbrill is hoping to leave me. He has a real home to go to.”

Sir Esterhund laughed, and clapped Terredor on the back. “Most young men thine age worry that their fathers and masters will never let them go. They are bitter that they are ordered about at every moment, and yearn for freedom. Thou shouldst have pride that thine own master, especially one so wise as a Soulclaine, shows his confidence in thee by granting independence.”

And with that, Sir Esterhund bade him good day. Terredor wanted to stop him, to explain that Waimbrill was trying to get rid of him, not encouraging him to venture into the world. But he didn’t. He just watched the knight swim away, and felt his current diminish into the flow of water.

He swam towards the inn, his head down, no longer interested in experiencing Al’hirrizad. Given his lack of success in dealing with the first creatures he came across, he considered it unlikely that he would survive the

Deepdark. The possibility of dying had seemed possible earlier, but somehow never quite real. The experience with the merovens and then the vagramines had shook him, and now the thought of dying wouldn't leave his mind. He wondered what it would be like to be stabbed, drowned or eaten alive. He wondered what he would feel when he was soulcleaved, or if he was not, when he was raised from the dead as a tortured zombie. He shuddered.

Terredor returned to the inn, and kept his head down as he entered. He and Waimbrill floated silently.

Finally, Waimbrill spoke, "You could come with me. No one would know you are a Delver."

"I guess, but... it's not my home."

"Then you know how I feel in Crikland," Waimbrill said, and smiled.

"Aye," Terredor said, "And now we are both in a place as alien as can be." Waimbrill said, "My lord will assign me where to go. If he wishes me to go to Lommia, then to Lommia I shall go. If he wants me to stay in the Deepdark, I shall stay in the Deepdark forever. And I suppose we will likely both perish down here regardless." Waimbrill said, and for a moment, illuminated in the tiny field of light that emanated from their rings, Terredor could see the weight of a thousand dead souls in his eyes, and he knew then that a part of Waimbrill only wanted to go home so he could lay in some familiar place and rest for eternity.

Chapter 11

Wound and Balm

Gelvid said he tried to arrange passage with a trade caravan and was told the merchants did not allow Surface-dwellers among them, due to a reputation for thievery and murder. When Gelvid said the name Mortiss Waimbrill, however, one of the merchants intervened. "I trade closely with a woman of the Surface, one Lady Ballardrine. Her household hath sent out a general order to assist Mortiss Waimbrill. She voucheth for him, and will pay any costs."

On the way to meet with the merchants, Terredor asked Waimbrill, "What's going on with Lady Ballardrine?"

"She has great respect for words that bear truth," Waimbrill said.

"What does that mean?" Terredor asked, "Every time we went to her estate to soulcleave, you were treated as though everyone there knew you and thought highly of you, but elves never respect humans. Did you two have an affair?"

"What? Terredor, no!" Waimbrill said, "It is none of your business. I once helped her make a good decision. That is all."

"What-"

"That is all, Terredor," Waimbrill said firmly.

Olmians, the lithe pink salamander-creatures who constituted most of the Deepdark's merchant corps, led the caravan. They traveled in pods propelled by very small fish trapped in the layers of fabric and controlled using thin strings attached to the sides. This was a safe way to travel, as few beasts would attack a large group, and each person spent several hours a day on watch or acting as a scout. Terredor and Waimbrill were exempt from this, because the olmians didn't trust them to sense their surroundings sufficiently.

On the first evening, Waimbrill was quietly meditating while the restless Terredor wandered through the maze of pods lashed together with thin lines.

A short olmian with a protruding belly sidled up to Terredor and whispered, "Thou seemest like the kind of man who enjoys a good fight, love."

Terredor said, "I'm not sure I understand, sir..."

"I know thou comest from the Surface. I been there, love, once when I was a lad. We have fights down here just like thee. Thou art a betting man, I can tell," the olmian said, "Now come on, I'll cut thee a deal."

"What kind of fighting?" Terredor asked.

"Olloan fish," said the olmian, "Their fights are like violent, bloody, exciting ballets. They circle and create little spirals of rushing water that dance across thy skin like the caress of a woman, and I know that's something you value on the Surface as much as we do here. Come on, love," he said, "What have thee to bet with?"

"Nothing," Terredor said.

The olmian pointed to the opalescent ring on his finger, whose light illuminated the soft pink, almost translucent flesh of the olmian.

"That's Argon's grace," the olmian said, "A rather valuable kind of pearl. Is it magical?"

"I can't bet that," Terredor said.

The olmian shrugged, "I'll take it for thy bet. Ten to one odds on the crugarric fish."

They floated around a large sphere enclosed by a translucent net. A crowd of olmians hollered encouragement and derision at a pair of large fish with three foot horns protruding from their head, which they rammed into each other as they circled swiftly, leaving spiral trails of blood.

"I'm not betting!" Terredor shouted over the chanting of the crowd, but the olmian didn't seem to hear.

One of the bloody fish twitched and went limp, floating against the side of the netting.

"Oh love," said the olmian, "Thou hast lost. So sorry indeed."

The olmian extended a hand, palm out.

Terredor said, "I never agreed to a bet." His blood ran cold as olmians surrounded him.

"Oh, but love," said the olmian, "I say thou didst. Up on the Surface, I'd listen to thee about thy ways, but down here in the Deepdark, thou knowest not our ways. And our ways, young hue-man, our ways say thou didst place that bet."

Terredor's heart pounded as the olmians moved closer, trapping him in their sphere. He thought then, as he often did around unscrupulous characters, of his father. Those years when he had wandered Crikburg with his beloved parents had been the best of his life. They were carefree. Jaxoll could always find food and shelter, and he was a successful hunter, trader and thief. But when Terredor's mother died of a fever that raged for a full week before she succumbed, Jaxoll stopped trying. He slouched and ignored his obligations. Terredor was forced to find his own way, begging or stealing food while his father drank. The one skill Jaxoll kept honed was confidence tricks. He had long ago given up on Terredor as a student of the art, but Terredor knew he retained more than a little bit of his father in him.

"Wait," Terredor said, "The fight was exhilarating. We don't have anything so vibrant and alive on the Surface... I've always been a gambling man - some would say too much, eh? - but let me keep going. I'll go double or nothing, I've got to see another one of those fights."

Alw'ys let 'em think they be connin' you, boy. Greed doth bl'nd fool'. As Father Delver doth adv'se, a man ken 'nly be tricked from a f'rtune he hath not earned, and by trickin' him, ye do earn it more justly than he. Convince him he ken con his allies, so he shall no' seek their adv'ce or tell them when he disco'er your b'trayal. A man wilt do the dumbest of things if he b'lieveth he can expl't his f'llow man, and wilt do anyth'ng if 'nly he believe he gettin' something for nothing.

“What hast thou besides that ring?” said the sneering olmian.

“I can’t tell you in front of everyone. It’s very valuable, at least on the Surface. I don’t know how valuable it is down here,” Terredor whispered.

“We have trade with the Surface,” the olmian said. He turned from his fellow thugs and swam away with Terredor, his lithe, rosy white-skinned body, lanky limbs akimbo, vibrant and brilliant when illuminated in the uncolored depths of the Deepdark.

Huddling with the olmian, Terredor opened the small pouch around his hip. Inside, he pulled out an iggther, a salted turtle leg, a very large one that Waimbrill had been given and then passed on to Terredor. Despite having been submerged for days, it was still hard and, Terredor supposed, probably still edible.

“This is called *iggther*. It’s very valuable on the Surface. Wizards use it for some of their most powerful spells, and they would pay a king’s ransom for this piece. I’ll give you a chunk now instead of the ring. I’ll bet the other half, and you can split that with your friends if I lose. Plus you will have the piece to keep for yourself either way.”

The olmian nodded, licking his lips as he cocked his head toward the other thugs, who twitched and swam in circles nervously.

“Fine,” said the olmian.

Terredor scraped off a large piece of meat with his knife and gave it to him. They returned to the fighting area, and the olmians congratulated him on rejoining the game. A few others, both olmian and cave rainid, joined in, betting on the fish, which were kept in small pods held shut by muscular uniformed derrador handlers.

The fish were released, and their delicate dance began again. The water swirled and counterswirled in mesmerizing eddies and jets, in rhythms that were comforting and relaxing to his Deepdark senses, despite the viciousness with which the fish snapped and bit at each other. Terredor lost track of how long the bout took before one of the fish tore the other to pieces, bitter blood filling the water around them.

Terredor quickly turned over the iggtherr to the olmian as the other winners and losers cheered and groaned. Then he swam away before anybody could react. He darted down a narrow tunnel and made a few other turns to make sure he was not being followed.

As he swam, he grinned. His father would have been proud, he thought, but he knew that Jaxoll would have not only escaped with his life, he would have found a way to cheat the olmians out of something valuable.

The narrow cave was overgrown with white plants and algae, swaying in the current. He saw fish and crabs scurrying amongst the plant life. He was going in a direction he thought would bring him back to the caravan’s resting spot, but the corridor came to a dead end. Terredor turned around and stopped, eyes open wide.

A pair of tentacles, pale white with a faint rosy tint, throbbing, each of them as thick as his arm, were waving in the water, passing in and out of the light. His gill slits slipped shut tightly, and his stomach twisted into knots as

he wondered what manner of beast was on the other end of those tentacles. He knew he needed to turn the light off so he could use his Deepdark senses, but the thought of being here, alone with some manner of beast and under all this water, in utter dark, was too much to bear.

He visualized his fear as a handful of pebbles in his palm, one giant pebble, a round rosy quartz, in particular gleaming, and Terredor forced his calm upon his mind, recalling Waimbrill's words. *Thy Paradigm is thy core beliefs about thyself, about the world, about thy life and truths. It is from this Paradigm that thy thoughts are born, interpreting thy perception through the lens of thy beliefs. So if a core belief be that thou canst not transform thyself, thou shalt think it impossible, and this thought shall lead thee to hopelessness and despair. To change thy Paradigm, thou must attack at the weak point: the thoughts. Force thyself to think of success to neutralize thy core belief of failure. Thy mind is a muscle, and can be trained to think the thoughts thou wishest was true, which is the first step in making them so.*

Terredor tried to pick up the rosy quartz in his mind and see himself destroying the tentacled monster beyond the light, but he could only imagine being eaten, strangled, drowned or decapitated. When he realized Waimbrill's techniques weren't working, dense despair emanated from his spleen, or the part of his belly where Waimbrill had always said was the spleen. His brain filled with a thick, encompassing dread until he could think of nothing else. He shouted and jabbed with his trident, mind flashing images of strong tentacles, growling snouts and sharp teeth.

Its skin was thick and rubbery, and the points of his trident didn't penetrate. Terredor felt its powerful muscles grab onto his leg and squeeze so hard his toes tingled. He grabbed onto a sturdy plant, ignoring the stinging pinpricks of the small crabs that inhabited the stalk, who pinched his arm and fingers with their little white claws. The tentacle pulled, and the plant stretched, a few pebbles coming loose from the rock and dispersing into the water.

Terredor shut his eyes and, for a second, he perceived nothing, and wondered, if, in that moment of total blindness, he had let go of the plant and was being devoured, and just didn't know it because none of his senses were working. All he could do was focus on squeezing the muscles in his hands, which he hoped were still clinging to the plant and his trident.

But then his Deepdark senses kicked in, as another pair of tentacles latched onto his other leg, and one around his torso. They squeezed and his gill slits gasped. He could sense it now. It had a bulbous body the size of a bull, and eight tentacles coming out of one end, where its thick, sharp beak protruded. He had seen squid in pictures and sculptures, so he recognized its shape.

The squid squeezed so hard he couldn't breathe, and he wondered if his ribs were breaking. He heard them crack, and another tentacle grabbed his leg. He saw spots of color, gills fluttering wildly. He said a quick prayer to Modroben, imagining again that rosy quartz in the palm of his hand, but his fear was so overwhelming all he could think of was his rapidly approaching death.

Panic is a Paradigm in itself, an unreasoning invasion of thy mind. To escape its grasp, thou must recall thy own truth. Force thyself to look upon it as thou wilt, and only as thou wilt. Answers abound within, but words bearing falsity shout their truth.

He pictured Waimbrill's practiced calm when meditating in his grove, and it reminded him of the awesome majesty of his vision of Modroben. Taking to heart Waimbrill's advice, he tried to think like he would, to emulate

that incredible peace and stillness. Meditative silence filled his skin, and he imagined his mind-hand picking up the rosy quartz and throwing it to the ground. A solution came to him: as Soulclaine are renowned for doing, he decided to go with the flow.

Letting go of the plant, Terredor clenched the trident, positioning his body so that he flew through the water face first. He saw thick tendrils of tentacle coiling and curling in his field of vision.

The tentacles dragged him towards the bulbous squid body he could no longer sense, because his eyes were open in shock and fear. But when it entered his radius of light, he could see it. The squid was white with the same faint rosy hue of its tentacles. Its main body was a distending orb, contorting in the rapidly swirling water. Its beak was a jagged, red snout, sharp tipped, snapping. Soft pink mucus lined the interior of its maw. The squid let out an echoing bark, and Terredor shouted back, diving downward toward it.

He landed right on the creature's snout, trident first, shattering the beak and sending jets of blood into the air. The tentacles grasping Terredor released suddenly as the squid pushed away, squealed and shrieked, writhing.

A thick tentacle whacked Terredor in the belly, knocking him against the cave wall. The water filled with blood, and his eyes burned from the sudden heat and acidity around him. He swam away quickly, despite a few more thumps from a tentacle as the creature completed its death throes.

His gills contorted as he swam, and his heart raced. He couldn't calm his nerves, and he crept along, cautiously peering behind him and around every corner. He had to hack through a thick jungle of white plants and vines that stretched across the cave, tearing a path for himself with his hands. Some of the plants had small biting mouths filled with tiny gnashing thorns, which bit through his skin and stung like nettles. As he swam, he refused to think about the little bite marks, to not let their pain hinder him. He focused instead on replaying both of the encounters in his head. He felt an emotion that was alien to him, like his heart was about to burst out of his chest, not out of fear or desperation, but out of pride. He had gotten away from the olmians losing only a scrap of meat and bone, had slaughtered a squid ten times his size, and he was proud.

Terredor perceived the caravan in the cave before him, and he skirted the edges, careful to avoid any gambling olmians this time.

He imagined himself telling Waimbrill what had happened, imagined Waimbrill's wry smile and patronizing gaze. He wouldn't really understand, Terredor thought. He'd think Terredor was exaggerating, telling tales. Even if he did believe him, Terredor could almost hear him say, "You are a brave warrior, obviously, Terredor. That's why you don't need me. I can return to my home, and you to yours, and we can each live our lives, so long as we are apart."

The thought put Terredor in a bad mood, and by the time he returned to his companions, he no longer wanted to tell Waimbrill what had happened. But only Gelvid was awake, a flat, pained grimace on his face.

"Terredor," Gelvid said when he saw the young man approach, "We were worried about thee."

"I can take care of myself."

"That is not what I meant. And in any case, no, thou canst not. Thy kind is not suited to the Deepdark. It is dangerous for thee here. Thou shouldst not go off alone."

"You should not tell me what to do," Terredor said, swimming into a pod, where Waimbrill slept, floating.

Gelvid said, "I'm sorry, Terredor. A pair of olmians killed each other in a brawl earlier tonight. Their cleaving weighs heavily on me."

Terredor called out from inside the pod, "Ah, I see that your kind has the same excuses underground as above it."

The caravan spent most of the next day passing through a very narrow corridor. It seemed inefficient, to spend so much time to go a few hundred yards, but the leaders of the caravan insisted it was the shortest and safest route.

Terredor had become bolder since the incidents with the squid and the olmian bookie. He no longer hung around Waimbrill like a rejected lapdog. He made a few acquaintances among the other traders. Sir Esterhund, the derrador whom Terredor had met earlier, was traveling with the caravan as well. Terredor sought him out and swam with him.

"My people always said that the monsters were Chamballa's children," Terredor told him, "But we found out that's not true. On the Surface, we consider her a goddess of monsters and destruction. Here--"

"Sacrilege!" Sir Esterhund exclaimed, "Thou shouldst not say that. Chamballa is the All-Mother. She giveth life. Serrfass-dwellers are barbarians indeed."

"Sir Esterhund, she's a goddess. If she didn't want to be perceived that way on the Surface, she wouldn't be. Besides, how do you know our perception of her is not more accurate than yours?"

"We are the Deepdark, a center for civilization," said Sir Esterhund, "Thou comest from a little-known and remote region, by thine own admission. She probably hasn't gotten around to punishing thy people for their lies."

"Or perhaps she has not fooled us, and has you," Terredor said, "You don't know any more than I do."

"I do know. Thou wouldst not be so flippant in thy dismissal of her virtue if thou visited one of her temples. There will be one in the next town, and I will take thee there. Thou shalt learn much, Surface-dweller."

Terredor nodded. "Excellent. I will speak with her church about Petromyza. If they are on the side of good, they will tell us what they know."

As the last few pods and travelers squeezed through the narrow part of the corridor, the vanguard began moving again. Terredor and Sir Esterhund fell silent as they swam through a cave that was still uncomfortably narrow for the large caravan. They jostled and elbowed their way through the crowd, which was too loud and busy for any real conversation to take place.

After a few hours, Terredor's arms and legs ached, a feeling that had grown since beginning this epic swim back at the Surface. He could sense people breaking off from the caravan, entering caves or stopping at small pods selling goods.

"The town of Vythdrammer," Sir Esterhund said, "I was here when I witnessed Petromyza's attack. My wife was among the victims, Terredor, and she was a high priestess in Chamballa's church. How doth thy theory explain that? Why wouldst she attack her own church?"

"The motives of mass murderers, mortal or divine, is always a mystery, Sir Esterhund."

He led Terredor through the town to a building intricately carved with rounded edges and deep furrows, encircled by complex symbols of slashing strokes marking it as their destination. Carved out of the cave floor, the

Temple of the Fecund Fraulin was an artistic sculpture in itself. Hollow pipe snaked throughout, dotted with little holes sending symmetrical blasts of flowing current and massaging waves of warmed water, rippling across Terredor's skin in pleasing patterns of concentric circles; it was an orchestra of textures that calmed and soothed him. The Temple was covered in algae and albinoid plants with wide leaves, heavy with fruit and flowers, and thick white branches and stalks, amid small timid fish with fins flapping and gills swaying as they swam among the foliage and spires. Music resounded, booming yet soft, insistent but gentle, its beats burrowing into his brain.

Sir Esterhund had to shake him out of his reverie, so entranced was Terredor by the beauty of the Temple. They swam past statues lining the walls. The sculptures depicted Chamballa in many guises. One, near the front, was obvious to him: it was the Chamballa he knew from Crikland, a fat-bodied pond rainid female, with deep wrinkles, sagging flesh and a cruel smile. The sculpture even had eyes, unlike all of the others, which included female versions of each of the major races of the Deepdark: cave rainid, derrador, vagramine and olmian. Terredor felt mounting calm and comfort, his worries about his relationship with Waimbrill dwindling; he forgot about the myriad dangers of the Deepdark they had already faced, and the myriad more they were likely to face soon. For a moment, that faint music and the pacific currents were all he sensed, and he was perfectly at ease.

A few female monks were in prayer at the front of the temple. They were rainids in simple robes, concealing their bodies. One of them swam to Terredor and Sir Esterhund. Her sallow skin was smooth and unblemished, her face round, her lipless smile wide. "Greetings, Sir Esterhund," she said, "It is a blessing to see thee in happier times than we did when last thou wast in Vythdrammer. Thou bringest a most curious-looking companion."

"This is Terredor," Sir Esterhund said, "He is from the Serrfass."

"What bringeth thee to the Deepdark?"

"I am on a quest in service to Modroben to find and destroy the monster that has been plaguing both your people and mine," Terredor said.

"Ye be Mortiss?" she asked.

"No, but I am apprenticed to one, and am here with another, Mortiss Gelvid of Helmarthonn."

"Well, I am glad to have thee in the Deepdark," she said.

Sir Esterhund said, "Terredor worrieth that Petromyza be the child of Chamballa herself."

Her mouth pursed into an offended leer. "How darest thou, Terredor?"

"On the Surface," Terredor said, "She is a goddess of destruction, and we have always said that Petromyza is her child-"

"Still thy tongue, would-be Mortiss Terredor," she snapped.

"I apologize, I didn't mean to cause offense."

"Then don't say offensive things," she said, "Thou art correct that Chamballa is a goddess of destruction on the Surface. We in the church are aware of this."

Sir Esterhund shouted, "My lady!"

"Chamballa is the lady of life, both its joys and its hurts. She is both the wound and the balm. She bringeth peace and plenty, but we would not sense our contentment without the contrast of struggle and strife. She bringeth devastation that we not suffer it from those who are more cruel." She turned to Terredor, "Our soothsayers have

concluded that Argon, the great god of the depths, is responsible for Petromyza's rise. He would usurp thy lord, Modroben, as the god of death for the Deepdark. Chamballa is loyal to Modroben, but we can not fight. It is not in our nature. Argon recently discovered how to control Petromyza's body, and he hath fed her Mortiss kidnapped from around the world."

"To what end?" Sir Esterhund asked.

"The hero Hapcort bound her with a magical chant which imprisoned her mind and body separately. He isolated and trapped her mind, but her body continueth its instinctive hunt, seeking souls. Her mind will awaken once her body devoureth one thousand and one uncleaved Mortiss. The Church of Argon hath found the Chant of Hapcort, and knoweth how to reverse it, allowing them to control her body, replacing her mind with Argon's, and if they feed her the required Mortiss, she and her undead horde will be under Argon's control."

"Argon would turn my wife into a soldier in his undead army?" Sir Esterhund asked through a tight-beaked, bitter snout, and she nodded sagely.

"Usurp Modroben?" Terredor said, "That's insane. Modroben wouldn't stand for it. He'd send someone to stop Argon."

She paused and said, "I believe, Sir Terredor, he has."

Chapter 12

Echo and Boom

Animals gave the caravan a wide berth, and they occasionally passed small bands of thieves and cutpurses, mostly thin pale pink olmians and crude carapaced vagramines, who huddled together and scowled at the heavily armed convoy guards.

Sir Esterhund wanted to raise an army, he said, to attack Argon. "Come with me, Terredor. My knighthood can raise an army the likes of which Argon hath never seen."

"We may not have time for that," Terredor said, "And anyway, armies are not the way of Modroben, who teaches that the words of war bear much but truth."

"That is most wise. But still, I must fight in my way, and thee in thine," Sir Esterhund said, and departed from the caravan.

The last day of the trip, Terredor was at the front of the procession, and saw a massive whale with translucent skin through which was visible the slow measured pumping of blood and the powerful flexing of fin muscles as it lazily drifted through a wide corridor, its mouth covered with white baleen that filtered the water. The animal was larger than any creature Terredor had seen. Three of Waimbrill's huts could have fit in the beast's cavernous belly.

A pack of merovens approached the whale, slowly, stealthily. They swam in circles around the surprised beast, which thrashed its tail fin wildly against a wall. Terredor and the olmians watched, awestruck at the bewildered whale's bellowing. The merovens pounced, and an increasingly scarlet cloud of water billowed toward him. The taste of blood filled the water.

In minutes, the whale was gone, its bones settling on the floor of the rock corridor, and the merovens pointed their nostrils and ears towards Terredor and the olmians. But backed by a slowly moving caravan of pods and warriors, the olmians weren't fearful and they taunted the merovens, who squealed and swam away.

Passing over the skeleton of impossibly large whale bones, Terredor took a moment to swim through the rib cage, through the bitter, blood-curdled water, emerging by the giant hollow skull. He rejoined the caravan as it passed overhead.

They entered a wide cavern, the walls so far away Terredor's senses couldn't feel them. He closed his eyes to sharpen his perception and felt an enormous set of buildings beneath him, tall, rectangular structures carved out of stone.

"We have descended," Gelvid said, as he and Waimbrill caught up to Terredor, "This is Ehuun. It is the most populous and civilized area of the Deepdark. It's mostly a temple complex devoted to Argon."

Ehuun also encompassed a small independent city and small aquacultural farming villages. Most of the pods in the caravan dispersed towards the temple, and Terredor and the others followed suit.

"Now what shall we do?" Terredor asked, "We can't simply swim in and ask if they are summoning Petromyza."

"They may be killing Soulclaine, but they are smart enough to do it in far-off waters. No Mortiss of the Deepdark has gone missing, I'd know about it for sure," Gelvid said, "So I should be safe if I demand an audience directly. You two should sneak in to see what information you can gather."

They agreed, and Gelvid led them around the well-guarded perimeter of the temple complex. He found a large open entrance, where a stream of delivery pods stopped and spoke with a small band of derrador knights in scale armor.

Gelvid departed, leaving them with the words, "May your death be just."

Terredor and Waimbrill waited for a break in the traffic of supply pods, then swam straight into the last pod in line. It was full of dead fish, and the smell assaulted their nose, chunks of flesh clogging their gills. Terredor grew nauseous as the line slowly moved forward.

The pod driver spoke, "I have a shipment of premium *vellkizz* for delivery to the Chamber," he said.

"Open it up," one of the guards said, "Random search."

Terredor's heart sank and his gills contorted in fear. He contemplated darting out of the pod. Waimbrill squeezed his hand, and Terredor closed his eyes, focusing on listening to the conversation, trying to ignore his fear and the reek of dead fish.

"Absolutely not," said the fish-breeder, "These fish must remain in a quality-controlled pod. I can't let unclean hands in there. Ye shall contaminate it. They are for Argon himself, who requireth very distinct qualities for which we breed and-"

"Fine," said the guard.

The pod began moving again, and Terredor heard murmuring between the breeder and his compatriots. He couldn't make out the words, but he thought one of the men sounded familiar.

An olmian voice rang out, startling Terredor. "Greetings, Mr. Chazzryn, I trust thou hast provided fish that meet our specifications?"

"Aye," said the fish-breeder, "Raised entirely on dragon carcasses for three generations."

"Good, good," said the olmian, "Come this way."

After a few minutes, they stopped. Terredor couldn't sense anything outside the pod. He strained his ears but heard only the confusing bustle of a crowded room.

Terredor motioned for Waimbrill to leave the pod. They quietly swam out and hid behind the statue of a large dragon.

Eyes closed, Terredor and Waimbrill focused their Deepdark senses on perceiving their surroundings. They were in a large chamber, the edges lined with statues and sculptures. In the center of the room, in front of and below them, was an object Terredor couldn't identify.

He focused, his gills shivering as its shape became apparent and Terredor realized it was a dragon, a sleek beast with strong crooked legs and sharp claws, overlapping sets of shark-like teeth on a long alligator snout, and a tail that curled in on itself but looked to stretch a hundred feet or more. Its scales were polished metal, a material that Terredor supposed must be what Gelvid had called *uranium*. This could only be Argon, the central god of the Deepdark pantheon.

A primitive urge to flee in terror at the majestic silhouette of the dragon filled Terredor's mind. Argon's very shape filled him with a feeling of impending doom. He sensed its massive gills slowly, rhythmically heaving, filtering the cold water that flowed through the chamber. It had wings, thin and wiry, wrapped around its massive body, and sensing their outline and size brought to mind the cruel claws and fiery breath of the dragons from Delver folktales.

Argon was being tended by a squad of olmians and derrador. Vagramines swam across his massive back, scrubbing each scale with a soft cloth. Priests bowed, praying and floating before him.

Terredor perceived a group of three derrador dressed differently than Argon's attendants, and decided they must have been the fish-breeders whose pod they had hijacked. Tearing his senses from the awe-inspiring dragon, Terredor focused on the three breeders, and he realized one of them, the one whose voice had sounded familiar, was Sir Esterhund.

A shout echoed in the chamber, followed by a flash of light, its oddity in the pitch black of the Deepdark surprising Terredor so much he opened his eyes and jumped against the wall behind him.

A sphere of light encased the three breeders, who were near Argon's sleeping head. Now that the dragon was illuminated, Terredor quivered and shook, unable to look away from it. The head was larger than three of Terredor, and its teeth were each the length of his arm. Its scales were a pale, sleet silver with a tinge of violet, like lavender-tarnished steel.

"Your followers have betrayed your vision, Argon!" the fish-breeder said, his voice magically enchanted to echo and boom, filling the chamber from all directions, "They keep you in an endless slumber so ye can be controlled."

The guards, heavily armored, wielding long spears tipped with the same violet steel of Argon's scales, attacked the sphere of light that encircled the breeder, Sir Esterhund and the third derrador, who tried to wake the sleeping dragon. The guards stabbed at the light, kicked and punched it, but nothing could penetrate its boundaries.

“Their betrayal now extends to our lord Modroben, whom they seek to usurp, in your name! They besmirch your honorable legacy!” the breeder shouted, “Even now, they plan to revive Petromyza, the great beast who vomits eddies of undeath! They are using the souls of Mortiss to awaken her, and thousands of innocents as an army!”

The door to the chamber opened, and in swam an olmian dressed in thick robes and a tall, decorated headpiece, his wrinkled, stern eyes and mouth betraying his nobility and cruelty.

“Silence, heretics!” shouted the man, “I am Lord Untegrin, the High Priest of Argon. He is fully aware of our plans. I communicate with him through dreams, and he has directed all of this.”

“Liar!” shouted the breeder, “We know the truth, and there are more than just us! We know ye keep him in a magical slumber, and ye will never get through our magical protection. We will not leave here until he is awakened and told of your betrayal.”

Sir Esterhund and the other breeder shouted and struck the sleeping dragon. The third derrador was a wizard, and presumably had created the globe of energy that protected them. He was casting spells at the sleeping dragon’s head, sending beams of light and heated water deep into its gullet, but Argon did not react.

Terredor felt a poke in his belly, and turned, his heart sinking as he saw a pair of broad-shouldered, heavily armored derrador pointing spears in their direction.

“We found intruders,” one of the guards shouted, “Freaks of a race I have never seen.”

He motioned for them to swim towards Untegrin, who shouted, “Humans! Surface-dwellers! Who are ye?”

“I am Mortiss Waimbrill,” he said, “And this is my apprentice, Terredor.” “Mortiss!” Untegrin said with a sneer.

“Terredor!” Sir Esterhund shouted in surprise.

“Ye are with them?” Untegrin said, then pointed to his guards, “Take them to the prison, and bring me my wizard. He will get through this bubble.”

They were brought to a row of cells separated by thick ivory bars. The water was cold and still, and stank of steel and coppery blood. They were in separate cells that shared a barred wall. Terredor’s cell also shared a wall with a cell in which Gelvid floated glumly. He explained that Untegrin ordered him imprisoned immediately when he demanded an audience.

Waimbrill shared what happened to them, and Gelvid nodded his head. “Aye,” he said, “The guards told me I would be the second-to-last Mortiss, and they will have fed Petromyza enough Modrobenian souls to awaken her.”

“One more would be me...” Waimbrill said, and all three fell silent as they pondered their fate.

A few minutes later, Sir Esterhund, badly beaten, limbs broken, joined them in a fourth cell which shared a wall with Waimbrill and Gelvid. He explained that an Argonite wizard had gotten through their protection and killed the heretic breeder and rebel mage.

“They were knights like me,” he said, “And they discovered Untegrin’s plot some time ago. I thought for sure we only needed time to awaken Argon, to tell him what was happening in his name. But they must have bewitched him with powerful magic.”

“And now all our efforts are for naught,” Waimbrill said, his voice tremulous, “Not only have we not succeeded, but we will be the last two souls needed for the end to come, for both the Deepdark and the Surface.”

Terredor felt useless as Waimbrill sat quietly and prayed. Esterhund suffered, bemoaning the pain of his shattered legs and the terror of his terrible fate. Gelvid whimpered, floating quietly, alone, in the most distant corner of his cell.

Waimbrill came to the bars between his cage and Terredor’s, and sat with him. “I am glad to be with you, if only for now.”

All four floated or sat quietly for a few hours, tense, but gradually the mood lifted. Terredor found Waimbrill’s presence comforting, and after an hour or so of waiting, they began talking and laughing of past memories. Esterhund and Gelvid joined in, asking questions about the Surface, and they spent the evening in lively conversation, avoiding any talk of their certain doom and undeath.

“You use your mouth instead of gills? Very unsanitary,” Sir Esterhund said.

“What do Surface-dwellers use the gills for then?” Gelvid asked.

“We don’t have gills. The rings give us these,” Terredor said, “That’s how we can survive down here.”

“How doth it work?” Sir Esterhund asked, “If there be no water, in what medium do ye move around?”

Waimbrill and Terredor were chuckling with each other, trying to describe air to their non-comprehending companions.

“Ye can’t swim up?” Gelvid asked, shocked, “So ye have to stay on the ground?”

“I don’t think I would like living in air,” Sir Esterhund said, “It seems very limiting.”

“But there’s no end to the air. It’s all around you, and it’s so ubiquitous it’s the very height of mundanity, but it’s also buffeting winds that smack and tear, and breezes that caress and soothe. It’s this endless, limitless horizon of libertine sky, an eternity of light and clouds and stars,” Waimbrill said.

“Things you two shall never see, and we’ll never see again.” Terredor regretted the gloomy words as an uncomfortable silence filled the room.

“I can’t stand this waiting. They should get it over with,” Sir Esterhund said.

“We must be patient. We should use this time to prepare for our fate. Let us pray,” Gelvid said, and he recited a mantra. Esterhund joined him.

“How are you so brave?” Terredor asked Waimbrill as the duo floated next to each other, separated only by thick bars.

“Did I ever tell you about the avalanche when I came to Crikland?”

“Of course, and the snow rainid warrior, Sharradrir. You don’t have many stories,” Terredor said, “I’ve heard them all a thousand times.”

“He was so brave and honorable. Whenever I get scared, I bring to mind his Paradigm. It comes upon me, and I think like him, and I know that I carry words that bear truth,” Waimbrill said.

“What does that mean anyway? ‘Words that bear truth’?”

“The most important truths can not be expressed in mere words. They must come, not in content, but in the minds of those who listen. Words can bear more truth than the information they impart,” Waimbrill said, “And words can bear lies despite imparting truth.”

“When you said I could come with you to Lommia, were those words bearing truth or lies?” Terredor asked, “I know your father is noble. He will not like-”

“Those words bore truth, and my father will not order me around like that, no more than Lord Porthos did. But my father does not know what a Delver is, and would not prejudice you in any event,” Waimbrill said.

“He sounds nice. I suppose it doesn’t matter anymore,” Terredor said, “I just wanted to know.”

“I know it seemed to you that I was treating you as a punishment, as though my lord had assigned me to Crikland, and you, to absolve me of a grievous sin. It is a Paradigm many Soulclaine, and many men of any kind, take on, to see in every unfortunate event an ordeal or punishment. I had in my head the idea that all would be solved, and my cleaved would calm and the turmoil in my heart would cease, if only I could return home. I was not thinking of you, for I was filled with bitterness towards my lord for not satisfying my desires. But I now see why he did so, for it is not my needs that need fulfilling. If words shall bear truth, his capricious cruelty is a cold calculation to benefit his entire flock, not those who tend it, for even shepherds must suffer.”

Chapter 13

Crawl and Claw

Terredor was alone in the silence and darkness of the jail. Keeping his eyes shut to sharpen his Deepdark senses, he could only perceive the cage bars and the flapping gills of his companions as they slept. All was still and black, suffocating in its deprivation. Terredor wondered if he was conscious at all; he couldn’t tell if he was sitting on the floor, or floating, or dead. He had to grab himself physically, digging his water-softened nails into his skin. The pain reminded him of his continued life, and oriented him to his environment.

He sensed guards swimming toward the cell. His heart pounded, gills trembling, as he woke his companions, who groggily came to and then fell silent when they sensed the serious mood of Terredor and the guards.

“You can’t do this,” Gelvid said, “We are Soulclaine.”

“We are loyal to Argon,” said a guard.

Terredor wanted to panic, attack like a crazed beast and flee from this place. He knew they faced no ordinary execution, no painless beheading followed by a civilized soulcleaving. His mind obsessively listed every painful way to die. Terredor wanted to battle the guards but he knew that, even if they succeeded, there was no way they’d get all the way out of Ehuun.

“But will Argon cleave your soul?” Waimbrill asked, “Will Argon comfort your family?”

“Argon hath promised us eternal life-“

“That’s a false promise!” Waimbrill shouted, “It is neither possible nor desirable.”

“Don’t bother,” Sir Esterhund said, “They are brainwashed.”

“Argon hath not the power to give you eternal life,” Gelvid said, while a guard wrenched Terredor’s arms behind his back, tying them to each other with a tough string made from sinew.

“When you die, you will join his army just like the victims of the monster you release!” Waimbrill said, “Don’t you see that?”

The guards bound the wrists of Gelvid, Sir Esterhund and Waimbrill, leaving them unable to swim effectively. They could only kick and writhe their way out of the cell, as the guards beckoned them to follow.

They came to a wide chamber decorated with delicate sculptures, lined with dangling fringes alongside ornate tubes twisting and turning in a lacy pattern that ran the length of the room. Hundreds of people were gathered, swimming up and drifting down, in unison, their regular movements rhythmically lulling. They wore scalloped metal armor of *uranium*.

Terredor and the other prisoners stopped over a wide platform, contorting to keep water flowing over their gills despite their bound arms. Sir Esterhund, stifling moans of pain, made demands in the name of the Knights of the Noble Fin. Waimbrill and Gelvid only floated, their faces tense and still. A guard swam to the foursome and tied heavy rocks to their feet.

A man spoke, and Terredor recognized him as Untegrin, his voice ringing and echoing in the high-ceilinged chamber. “Greetings, fellow faithful,” he said, thrusting his hands upwards. The crowd roared in response.

“Today is the culmination, the reckoning, the day when all that we have worked so hard to prepare for will come true. A few short years ago, any man or beast in the Deepdark would have said that none could hope to challenge the great Modroben. Argon? They would have laughed at the possibility.”

The crowd rumbled in agreement, murmuring to each other and repeating his words.

“Those very same wise men laughed at all of us, didn’t they? They always do. Those who think they know what is best for everyone, they tell us what is and is not possible, and the followfish among us always believe them. But we know the truth, don’t we? What they call impossible is merely difficult, merely inconvenient for them, merely unbalancing to the status quo. Well, I say the status quo has had the church of Argon sharing and suffering with a thousand kinds of refuse, and I swim here before you today to say never more!”

The mob’s screams echoed off the rock walls, generating waves that washed through the room and almost knocked Terredor down. He heard the cultists near him whispering insults and threats, promising that he would suffer as an undead peon in Argon’s service. The thought sent a chill through Terredor’s stomach, and his gills twisted into knots.

“I’m sorry, Terredor. I am no hero. I should not have brought you here,” Waimbrill whispered, the tears apparent in his voice. Terredor tasted their saltiness in the water that flowed through his mouth while the crowd cheered and chanted for their deaths.

“For years we have suffered in solitary silence, and seen our enemies flourish, and we could do nothing. Why?”

Gelvid, his voice hoarse and ragged, screamed to be heard over the roaring din of the crowd, “Modroben is not responsible for your suffering. It is a part of life. Listen not to pretty words, for Argon can not abolish death!”

“Silence, heretic!” shouted Untegrin, “Thy lies are of no matter here. Thy god created death so mortals would worship him. Argon will grant us life, everlasting!”

The crowd cheered again, stopping when Untegrin held his hand up.

Terredor said, “No, I pushed you to let me come. I’m sorry. I just wanted a reason for us to stay together. And I’m glad we did. I can’t think of anyone I’d rather spend eternity as a tortured ghost with.”

“Me too,” Waimbrill said, smiling.

“Your hard work pays off on this day, my friends. As ye well know, our army can not be activated without one thousand and one Mortiss-” The crowd hissed, and Untegrin had to raise his voice to be heard. “And today we have acquired our last two, ahead of schedule. They brought a pair of ordinary souls along as well. More fodder, I suppose.”

Guards swam forward and dragged the foursome to an upraised platform carved with arcane symbols.

“Ye will see an era most glorious, as soon Petromyza shall rise and use all her power to serve Argon,” Untegrin said, “Begin the Chant!”

The crowd began a ritualized chant in an unfamiliar, unearthly-toned tongue, which emanated throbbing insistence and cruel detachment, an entrancing baritone that shook his bones. The chamber filled with palpable potentiality, like prior to a thunderstorm on the Surface.

As the chanting grew in speed and potency, it became louder and more insistent, more menacing and grim. The chanters paused momentarily, and in that period of penetrating silence, Terredor saw that the platform beneath him was spreading, dividing into two plates and revealing a chute underneath. The smell of rotten flesh spread into the room, and Terredor screamed.

In the chute was a wide mouth ringed with sharp teeth, oozing fetid yellow ichor. Terredor and the others realized that the tall lip of the platform would push them into its mouth when the plates finished retracting, so they swam upward. The weights attached to their ankles made it a difficult proposition for the Deepdark-dwellers. Terredor and Waimbrill, however, floated magically regardless of their weight, encumbered only because their arms were still bound, keeping them from swimming, so they could do nothing but tread water.

His mangled arms and legs flapping, Esterhund was unable to ascend at all, and he frantically flopped straight into Petromyza’s gullet, which filled the whole of the platform, some fifteen feet in diameter. The plates retracted far enough that Terredor saw into the beast’s mouth. The maw was circular and jawless, double rows of teeth undulating. The large open maw was not empty, corpses and loose body parts writhed within it, a pile of limbs and heads and gnashing fangs, contorting and screeching, hands reaching and pulling the screaming Sir Esterhund into the center of the mass. Terredor closed his eyes, wished he could close his ears as well, so he wouldn’t hear Sir Esterhund’s screams as the snarling zombies tore him limb from limb.

Waimbrill and Terredor were treading above the platform, barely rising despite their exertion because they could use only their feet and contorting bodies to gain momentum. Gelvid was sinking despite his frantic efforts.

“I guess this is it, friends,” Gelvid croaked, lurching downward a few inches then struggling to regain some altitude.

Terredor shouted, tears streaming from his eyes into the water, which filled with the warm stench of decay wafting from Petromyza’s mouth. He wished for it to be over, but he knew that might never happen once he was swallowed.

A bony hand clasped Gelvid's thin slick ankle, and he screeched, sinking into the teeming mass of death thronging in that wide maw. Terredor saw the flashing white of teeth and a burst of blood as a dozen zombies sank their jaws and claws into Gelvid's soft flesh, ripping limbs and organs apart.

"Terredor," Waimbrill shouted through tears and clenched teeth, "If my soul is cleaved, she shall not be permanently freed, her mind shall remain dull, and Argon shall not control her. I am sure in circumstances such as these, Modroben will let you cleave even without the proper training. You have seen me do it. You must time it perfectly so I am cleaved before they grab me."

Waimbrill finished talking and winked, his weary eyes glimmering with faint droplets of hope for the first time since leaving Crikland. He pushed the ring off his finger, and its gleaming brilliance vanished in the shadowy mess of bodies beneath them, leaving Terredor alone in his own bubble, the last light in the Deepdark. Waimbrill began drowning and frantically treading water, struggling to keep himself above the undead horde. He opened his mouth, shuddering violently. The crowd of cultists continued, entranced by the chant, failing to notice the events unfolding before them.

Pale skin shriveled from relentless moisture, Waimbrill smiled faintly, calm spreading across his face. Terredor rubbed his bound hands together, heart pounding, mind screaming to save Waimbrill. He felt a deep pit of longing, let out a small sob and forced himself to concentrate.

Terredor cleared his mind and focused on the water flowing through his gills as his muscles relaxed. He attempted to recite the High Prayer in his mind, but he blanked, unable to look away from Waimbrill's drowning body.

An object in his pocket gleamed in the remaining light of Terredor's ring. It was the cantallion Sendralya had given him. He leaned his hips to the side, hoping it would tumble into his hand, so her song would calm his heart and mind as she had promised, or at least that he would die hearing her sweet voice.

The cantallion fell out of his pocket and sank, then stopped, its hinged face swinging open. It was a small cube, carved out of metal as white as Deepdark flora, arranged in a delicate feligree, a symmetrical, fractal prison that housed a tiny green spot of glowing magical power. The green orb floated out of the cube, and there was a flash of light. The sound of a woman clearing her throat echoed. Even the fish stopped, their head darting to and fro as though searching for the sound.

The female voice, Sendralya's, that came out of the box was somehow even more beautiful than it had seemed on the Surface. Maybe, Terredor thought, it was the acoustics of this room, filled with pure, clean water and entombed by hard rock. Her voice was dulcet and gilded, the high notes warmly spreading like the first rays of dawn; the low notes lingered like the echoing crash and clash of thunder, and Terredor wondered if the tortured souls beneath him understood the feelings of her song. Her voice was so clearly evocative of those Surface phenomena that he thought surely no denizen of the Deepdark, even a living one, could understand it. But he saw that even these undead beasts did. The creatures who crawled and clawed at each other beneath him fell still and silent in waves as her song spread over them. Waimbrill shivered and perished, his inert body descending slowly towards the great mass of monsters who, were it not for the soothing song of the cantallion attracting their attention, would have reached his ankle and pulled him to uncleaved doom.

As Waimbrill had taught him, Terredor concentrated on visualizing his fears: the fear that Modroben would judge him unworthy, that he would make a mistake in the words, that he would fail calamitously. He pictured them as pebbles floating out of his hand one by one, dissolving away to nothing. His mind cleared, and he focused on the incessant, rhythmic quivering of his gills and the sharp chill they imparted to his blood as it traveled close to the icy cold water of the Deepdark. The only sound he allowed himself to hear was the relentless thump of his heart, which echoed from his head to his toes. His voice filled the dark chamber of Argon's church over the pulsating volume of the chant.

Master of life and death

Let us thy servants give thanks in thy name,

For it is through thy gifts of glory and grace

And our fidelity grown great,

That thy way bringeth rest in the end

And not turmoil and grief.

Through thy gentle tapping of time's relentless beat

Dost thou pound the march of our lives, and the rhythm of our deaths.

In thy name, we thus give thanks

For the mercy thou dost grant in death

Even unto the meekest of us, the least, the lost, the lame,

Even unto our most terrible foes, who shall find redemption at last.

Thy works give serenity to evil and good the same, and man and elf

And paupers and princes, and all of them alike.

Though our hearts may ache despite thy words which bear truth

It is through thy will that, with the strengths of our souls and the songs of thy spirit,

We shall find peace amid the pall of death

Terredor's left hand tingled, skin stretching, hardening, fingers fusing into the bone-white pincer of a Deepdark crab. His mind was assaulted by an armada of thoughts that were not his own: flashes of crustacean shells, crabs, crawling atop each other on piles of carrion; a primordial mind entered his own, just for a moment, and a million years of gently flowing water filled his gills, as he heard a deep boom like the sound of a god being born.

Waimbrill's eyes rolled into the back of his head, the whites flashing like snow as Terredor's crab claw burst through his sinew bindings and smashed into the Modrobenian's skull. Terredor felt the pincer crack into Waimbrill's brain. As the cantallion finished its song, emotions flooded Terredor's mind, a confusing torrent of feelings washing over him: grief at a life ended too soon, regret at words unspoken and deeds undone, guilt at wrongs unrighted and waves of sadness and loneliness.

The transformation into the crab claw tore his bindings, so Terredor easily glided to the edge of the platform, forcing himself to turn away as Waimbrill's body floated into the pile of undead, torn to shreds in seconds, amid shrieks with glee.

Chapter 14

Found and Unfound

He was floating in a body of water whose chill seeped through his skin like stinging sleet. The water around him was limitless, no walls or buildings or fish that he could sense, just a giant crab looming above him. It was illuminated by soft light that suffused the water, its white exoskeleton smooth and unblemished like polished bone. It was frightening but not menacing, alien but radiating compassion. This could only be Modroben, here in his guise as Nelktor.

“Your bitterness is understandable. Mortiss Waimbrill found that my plans for him did not coincide with his own. Do ye wish to know why? I must fight the entire war, and I can not win every battle, so I choose when to fight, and when to withdraw. This battle with the Church of Argon is one that I must win.

“I told you before that Mortiss Waimbrill would inspire you, and he shall, for he sacrificed himself for you, that ye would have a chance to seek glory in my name.

“He cared greatly for you. My followers have grave difficulty with those they love. This is in the nature of man and elf alike: soulcleaving concentrates pain and grief in the hearts of my servants, and this tears at their minds. It is not my design, for I but transfer bits of knowledge into the minds of claine and care for the affairs of the dead; the lessening of grief is all in the minds of those who are so affected.

“And it is that that makes my servants heroes, for they do choose to take the pain of others, without mine insistence.

“Mortiss Waimbrill was a brave hero in my service, who died in fulfilling his purpose, but that purpose was not the slaughter of Petromyza and the Argonite army. Nay, his purpose was in inspiring the goodness and bravery inherent in another, in someone who will take Mortiss Waimbrill’s memory and use it to achieve great glory in my name.

“That person shall be one who is brave, and gentle, and strong of arm and heart, one who has survived all manner of loss even as a youth, and one who braved the dangers of the Deepdark solely to prove his loyalty and love.”

Terredor was shocked into alertness by the sudden silence that filled the room when the chant ended. He heard Untegrin’s voice echo in the chamber. “Something’s wrong!” he shouted, “It didn’t work.”

The beast started ascending slowly, then gathered speed, shaking the walls of the temple as it blasted into a tunnel in the ceiling. Terredor tore the weight off his ankle and swam to its scaly body, ringed with thick fins every few feet and covered with thin yellowish scales that gleamed in the light of the ring.

The cold layers of its scales wrinkled and writhed at his touch. He grasped Petromyza’s body, which was bucking wildly now, slamming into the hard rock wall. The beast was moving faster than any horse Terredor had ever seen. Doubt filled his heart when he realized he was not armed and could not conceive of a means of harming Petromyza.

Terredor climbed forward on the beast’s body, reaching out with one arm to grab the next fin even while using his other arm to keep a hold on the first. He got close enough to its head that he saw its jawless circular mouth swallowing a community of olmians. They were screaming and swimming towards the cave walls, but Petromyza

moved quickly, and one by one, each olmian tumbled into its open mouth, some helped by ghoulish hands and claws reaching out of her gullet to grab victims.

In minutes, they entered Al'hirrizar. Armored warriors attacked, throwing spears at the monster to no avail. Their weapons had no impact, and few were able to avoid being swallowed. Terredor wept for all the souls who would be restless and uncleaved this day, and prayed to Modroben to protect their souls.

Petromyza stopped its relentless journey to cycle from the top to the bottom of the large cavern filled with the pods and coral buildings that constituted Al'hirrizar. Then, at its apogee, Petromyza paused. Terredor was shocked at the sudden stillness, forcing his contorting gills to calm, and saw the monster bulge and squirm.

A hand, pink like rotten meat, appeared on the edge of the monster's mouth. A derrador pulled himself out of the monster, chunks of flesh falling away as it tumbled into the open water. A living cave rainid with a long spear swam close and bellowed a warcry in an archaic dialect Terredor couldn't understand. The zombie derrador floundered in the water, ignoring the repeated spear jabs of the rainid warrior. The decomposing derrador regained control of his muscles, and grasped the warrior's arm. The rainid pushed the derrador into the light of Terredor's ring, and he saw the rotten, partially devoured face of the creature. Terredor's heart sank as he realized the derrador was Esterhund, his once-familiar features contorting with rage and bloodlust. The cave rainid warrior thrust his spear through Esterhund's chest, and blood bubbled out, streaming into the water. The rainid turned in time for an undead vagramine to wrap his tattered arms around the warrior's neck, squeezing until he fell limp. The vagramine let go of the body, purulent-cracked carapace oozing, hundreds of decayed and dessicated little millipede legs swaying uselessly in the water, which now thrashed with activity. Terredor glanced at the mouth of the monster beneath him. Hundreds of them were climbing out of its jaw, rotting-fleshed zombies, bits of exposed bone and shattered exoskeleton gleaming as they streamed into the caverns and corridors of Al'hirrizar.

The vagramine snarled and darted towards Terredor, who screamed again and kicked at the creature. Its toothless mouth dripped with bits of blood and flesh. Terredor hit its head with a flailing foot, and almost let go of Petromyza who continued to vomit forth the zombie army. Terredor, still panicking as his mind raced, stomped his feet down on the millipede-man's head.

Amid the clangs and shouts and the smell of iron-rich blood filling the water, Petromyza moved again, and the vagramine grabbed onto its body just a few yards behind Terredor. It snarled at him and began slowly crawling up her body.

Petromyza swam through the rest of the Deepdark in a matter of minutes, swallowing the people they passed as well as animals Terredor barely had a chance to perceive before the monster devoured them whole. He moved closer to its head, trying to escape the vagramine zombie, but it caught up to him as Terredor realized they were about to squeeze through the Fissure. He let himself drop to the side of the great beast so he wouldn't scraped against the rock wall, but the zombie stayed and was torn off by the edge of the Fissure.

Thick green algae filled the water again, and Terredor was blinded. He removed the ring and held on tight until finally, lungs about to burst, the chill of autumn air shocked him, and he opened his mouth to scream. Lungs inflating, he gasped, as though out of the practice of breathing. The air in his chest felt impossibly cold. He choked and coughed, struggling to hold on to the monster, ascending with him still clutching its fins.

Clouds hung just a few hundred feet above him. He saw snow rainids, pale blue dots on the snowy slope of Mt. Rekkerkem, gathering and pointing at the flying beast. Below Terredor was the entire region of Crikland, and, sitting on the edge of the lake, was his people's ramshackle stilt-town, buildings like smooth, slippery pebbles in a stream surrounded by fields and forests like tiny clumps of moss.

His mind was dizzy and clouded, and Terredor tried to meditate despite the great scaly beast beneath him. He realized what he had to do. The monster stopped moving, floating in the air just like it had right before the undead poured out of its mouth in Al'hirizad.

He held tightly to the top fin as Petromyza pulsed, and rolled, leaving Terredor suspended upside-down and desperately clutching the monster's slippery fins before it stopped with him on top again. Bulges moved along the length of its body, and Terredor felt the zombies beneath its scales and skin climbing on top of each other to get to the top. A human hand, blackened with rot, with one arm hanging on by a flap of flesh, grabbed the edge of the creature's mouth, ignoring the teeth that penetrated the hand cleanly.

Unable to think of anything other than his rapidly approaching doom, Terredor attempted to meditate, trying in vain to ignore the mind-boggling height, and the massive beast and throng of undead beneath him. He told himself to visualize a handful of pebbles, to picture himself throwing them away, to force his lungs and heart to calm themselves. He closed his eyes, but still, his mind endlessly warned him that he was about to fall, that he'd soon plummet through the air and splatter on the ground, spraying like a raindrop in every direction.

The human zombie, covered in blood and grime, fell out of the monster's mouth, flailing as it landed on the ground. Despite the fall, the creature was unfazed and it crept towards a small farming town at the base of Mt. Rekkerkem. It was followed by a bevy of others: humans with eyes dangling from their sockets and toothless grins peeking through decomposing cheeks, skeletal elves with flayed flesh, rainids whose patchy green and blue skin peeled in ribbons to reveal rivers of pus that dripped into the air, putrid bofo with matted fur and the reek of rot, dwarves with black eyes soullessly screeching, spindly ghoulish goblins with a gray and ashy hue, and gnomes whose tiny bodies curled into little bony balls tumbling through the air.

As they fell out of Petromyza's mouth, many of the zombies saw Terredor on its back, but none did more than futilely grasp in his direction before tumbling to the ground. Then one of them, an armored human stinking of rust and rot, hissed and growled at Terredor. It pulled itself up, and Terredor's heart pounded as he frantically searched his memory for the words he needed. He couldn't tear himself away from the zombie, whom he realized was none other than Lord Porthos himself, empty eye sockets crawling with maggots, skin pockmarked with seeping sores, swollen purple tongue dangling from his useless mouth. The zombie Porthos thrashed and struggled to pull himself out of the monster's gullet.

Terredor gritted his teeth, and managed to recall the prayer he needed. He recited it, and his mouth and face transformed as he had seen Mortiss Waimbrill's do so many times.

Master of life and death

Let us thy servants give thanks in thy name,

For it is through thy gifts of glory and grace

And our fidelity grown great,
That thy way bringeth rest in the end
And not turmoil and grief.
Through thy gentle tapping of time's relentless beat
Dost thou pound the march of our lives, and the rhythm of our deaths.
In thy name, we thus give thanks
For the mercy thou dost grant in death
Even unto the meekest of us, the least, the lost, the lame,
Even unto our most terrible foes, who shall find redemption at last.
Thy works give serenity to evil and good the same, and man and elf
And paupers and princes, and all of them alike.
Though our hearts may ache despite thy words which bear truth
It is through thy will that, with the strengths of our souls and the songs of thy spirit,
We shall find peace amid the pall of death

His nose lengthened and twisted into the crooked beak of a vulture. His sharp snout smashed through the creature's scales, and Terredor inserted his entire head into its flesh, which tasted of rotten meat and stale blood. Porthos' bony hand grasped his arm, squeezing and pulling. Terredor cracked through its tough skull and devoured a tiny bit of brain matter.

The monster shuddered as a hundred emotions hit Terredor at once: grief and fear and rage and guilt all flowed through his veins, and he knew then that he had cleaved all of the people the monster had devoured. The souls of thousands of humans and olmians and others were now free, and their emotions were so overwhelming Terredor could think of nothing else at first.

He closed his eyes and muttered a desperate prayer to Modroben, feeling the hard pit in his stomach settle to a dull, grieving ache. When he opened his eyes again, he saw that the monster was falling towards the ground. Porthos let go of Terredor's ankle, and fell off Petromyza's back, snarling.

The monster dissolved as it fell, and dead bodies collapsed out of its long belly. Terredor watched the corpses limply crash into the ground below. He thought for sure he was going to die, and a part of Terredor wondered if his death was Modroben's last gift, for he had gained the feelings of thousands of grief-stricken lovers and friends, and already the emotions pulled at his mind, demanding attention even as he flailed and plummeted towards the ground.

But he only landed in a foul-smelling pile of rotting flesh, which cushioned his landing, chunks of offal bouncing and splashing into the air around him. He gagged and pulled melted skin and muscle, shards of bone and teeth, and bits of smashed organs away from his face, and, crawling out of the filth, collapsed on the ground, unconscious.

Terredor woke and lifted his head, exhausted, seeing Milo, the bartender at the resort, standing before him.

"It seems a local has proven his worth yet again," said Milo with a grin, "I would very much like to know the story that brought you back to me under a cemetery's harvest."

Petromyza had landed on Bryndoth itself, and the weight of myriad corpses collapsed the buildings of the resort. A few women, bejeweled and adorned with fancy wraps, held their noses, gagging, while servants scuttled about, shouting for shovels and healers.

Terredor struggled, limping, to his feet. Milo led him through the decimated remains of the ruined restaurant, which already stank with the rot of decomposing flesh splattered among the rubble and shattered glasses, bone splinters scattered around piles of shattered bowls and plates. Milo found a bucket of water and dumped it unceremoniously on Terredor's head; it was cold and clean, and it felt good to get the layers of flesh off his face.

"Greetings, gentle Terredor," said a soft, delicate voice from behind him, "I suspect your victory today shall make an inspiring ballad for my repertoire." Her jet black hair was unfussed, hanging in helixes symmetrically spiralling around her face, delicate features pristine and calm despite the chaos and death that had rained down moments ago. A faint, quizzical smile spread across her smooth-skinned face, pale like ivory, contrasting with the brilliant crimson flare of her painted lips and the vermilion dress that hung on her hips and breasts, its ornately looping lace framing her beauteous figure and grace.

He stood, and found that he had the courage to speak without stutter, to scour his soul for strength and boldness, and his tongue for the elusive words that had danced away so many times before. He said, "You are more beautiful than any woman my imagination could conjure, and if you give me a chance to prove these words bear truth, I can make you happier than you ever thought you could be. Since the moment you stepped out of your carriage on that wintry day, my love has been so intense it terrified me, churning inside, but now I know-" She stopped him by throwing her lips atop his own, and uncaring of the rotten flesh that still clung to his clothes, they kissed.