Chapter I

Date: 29, Elient; The Fading, 996 of the First Age, The Year of Somber Smiles

Setting: Emelle

Healfdene stepped carefully through the brush behind Adavald. Adavald was shorter than him by an inch despite being quite a few years his senior. His bleach-blond hair had grown long since last Healfdene spent time with him—Ada had even pulled it back into a ponytail, which was swaying with each careful step he took in the forest. The guard captain looked back at Healfdene with a smile on his face, his lips curled ever so slightly in his distinctively likeable manner. His bright blue eyes were aglitter with a deep, ever-present understanding—like he always knew what people were thinking and how to please them. His face, rough with stubble, was dappled with the evening sun and the shadow of the thin leafy canopy, the leaves red and orange and yellow as the year drew colder.

The fresh smell of the forest filled Healfdene's nose as he breathed in, quietly watching Sammie clamber up the tree growing from the side of the small dirt bluff that he and his brother were standing on. She stuck her heel in a vee in the branches of the tree and slid onto an outreaching branch pointing away from the bluff. She settled herself on the branch and quickly strung her longbow. Sammie glanced quickly back at her brothers and gave them a small smile. “This'll be the last spot for today. We'll stay here for a few hours, and if there's nothing, we can head back. I think there'll be a deer along, though—I can feel it.”

Adavald came on these hunting trips simply to spend time in the forests—he didn't participate in the hunting itself. He sat down and leaned against the tree.

“And now we wait,” he chuckled. “Come, help me with my gear, Healf.” He tossed the forester his longsword. The sword was, in reality, their father's old blade. The sheath was made of a dark leather with intricate patterns pressed in, and, as Healfdene unsheathed the blade, the metal slid against the iron ring embossed around the top of the sheath. Adavald began work on his dagger and set out a canteen of whetting oil and a small stone.

The day had been good—Healfdene made his round through Emelle in the morning and had made a good twenty-two copper cards. Old Stephen, the carpenter who Healfdene worked for, had invited him in for the mid-day meal. The meal was good, made even better by the fact that Reinhart was there. Tryg Reinhart was an old friend of Healfdene's father and remained a close friend of the family after Cloud’s passing. The old man had been the one who convinced Adavald to take over the guard, and was one of the few veterans of the War of the White Mountain still living. He helped get the guard onto its feet, and both Healfdene and Sammie loved to hear the many stories that the grey-haired man had to tell.

Healfdene's mind wandered to the story that Reinhart had told that day: the tale of the time that he and Adavald led the first members of the reformed guard to slay the monstrous troll in the cave north of town. The troll had taken out Reinhart's left eye, leaving him permanently scarred—which the warrior feverishly claimed had no impact on his ability with a sword.

The forest grew gold and cold as the sun sank lower and lower in the sky. Adavald's breath began to cloud in front of him as he quietly plucked at his harp. He hummed the tune of “The Hero's Journey,” sitting in a bed of leaves that he had piled at the base of the tree. Sammie still lay on the bough of the tree, twanging her bowstring along with Adavald's harp. Healfdene pulled his cloak tighter about him and stretched.

Adavald set aside his small harp and stretched his arms. “Sammie, let's head back to town. Even if we leave now it'll be dark by the time we get back.”

Samitha sighed, “But we haven't gotten anything for the Harvestide tomorrow! Come on Ada, just a--”

“Sammie, I'm sure that you and Healf can go hunting in the morn. Anyway, it's getting cold.”

The girl swung down from the tree and landed softly on the ground.

“Fine. Let's head back.”

Samitha quickly unstrung her bow and nestled it over her shoulder. Adavald and Healfdene gathered their things and began to head back with their sister.

The sun glinted through the leaves, and a slight wind whispered through their hair. Healfdene felt it then: a strange feeling, almost warm, yet also like the world was stretching away from him, like he was a thousand miles away from everything—Samitha and Adavald were gone, the forest was gone, the sound was gone. The only thing left was the light…Then the feeling was gone, as soon as it had come. Samitha's hand shot up in silence—they all stopped dead. The rustling of the leaves echoed in Healfdene's ears as the silence closing in around them. Samitha turned to them with her finger to her lips and pointed off to the right: off the bluff, by a small pond, stood a deer. The animal was a buck with fur of golden white, it's antler's and hooves as white as clouds. Its antlers were as tree branches, and its eyes stared into their souls. Samitha looked at Healfdene, her lips moving not, but her eyes questioning: What is that?

Knowledge (Nature) Check: 7—An albino deer. Nothing really special besides.

10—Some kind of magic deer?

13—A godsend!

If he gets the DC 13, he can make a Knowledge (Religion) Check:

5—The Worldwaker is the goddess of nature and animals, and deers are surely animals.

9—The Maiden is the goddess of beauty, and this creature is surely beautiful.

13—A golden deer warns Edvin the Beastheart of the invading army in the church tales.

20—The golden deer appears in multiple legends to warn of danger.

The deer turned and began to trot away.

Sammie patted Healfdene on the shoulder and hissed, “We have to follow it! Come on!”

They followed the deer through the forest, making little noise. Whenever they would get too close to it, it would trot faster and prance ahead. If they fell behind, it would stop and look back. They hopped over fallen trees and splashed through a shallow stream—Healfdene knew they were heading north. As the sun finally began to dip over the horizon, the deer ran farther ahead and disappeared over a bluff bordering a clearing. “No no no! What's it doing?” Sammie ran into the clearing, breathing hard. “Why would it lead us here?”

An old, thick tree grew on top of the bluff. Its roots snaked down through the dirt, and they formed a sort of doorway to a cave in the side of the bluff. Healfdene, followed closely by Adavald, ran into the clearing. Adavald glanced around, “Strange. Have either of you been here before?”

--Nope. Investigate the cave?

Healfdene’s soft shoes padded quietly on the water-carved stone floor of the cave as he stepped inside the root-shaded mouth. He kneeled down and traced his hands over the thin layer of dirt covering the stone, searching for tracks, but finding none. He breathed deeply, his nose probing for the scent of the deer. He took in the earthy smell of the cave, the moist, cool air, and the smell of damp moss—but no smell of deer. “Healf, what do you see in there?” Adavald called to him from the clearing, “Do you see the deer?”

All Healfdene saw was the dark cave, descending into the earth, the walls and ceiling haired with protruding roots snaking down from the trunk of the huge oak.

--Into the cave!

Healfdene stepped into the darkness, pausing only to let his eyes adjust, but even then he could barely see. The walls were rough and cold, and the air was damp, sticking to his skin. The cave remained straight for a great while—he guessed he had walked for almost ten minutes. It was colder down here—he must have descended some good ways.

Healfdene, as he moved deeper into the cave, began to hear the squeaking of bats and rats and the rush of running water. The earthen smell of the mouth of the cave was replaced by the smell of fungus and rat droppings, and the floor was carpeted in a soft moss.

The wall of the cave moved out—then disappeared as the cave opened into a larger tunnel. A small river of water, black to Healfdene’s eyes, flowed perpendicular to entrance, and the smell of bats grew prominent. Healfdene crept forward and toed the ground at the entrance to the river tunnel—he drew back as his foot found no stone. He guessed there was some drop into the river—but he thought by the noise of the river that the drop couldn’t be more than two or three feet.

Healfdene turned his head in the darkness as he heard the echo of footsteps behind him. He recognized Adavald’s heavy boots, and turned back to the river. The water smelled fresh, and cold droplets spattered his cheeks.

The cave grew brighter, bathed in the red light of Adavald’s torch. He stepped beside Healfdene and peered down at the river, which Healfdene could now clearly see. The water was dark and flowing quickly, and it had multiple stone teeth pointing towards the ceiling. The river’s waterline was marked by a white salt. The ledge that Healfdene and Adavald stood on was three feet over the flow, and far enough out that a man could touch the opposite wall with an outstretched spear—if there was a wall across from the cave. The same tunnel that the two had traveled along continued on the other side of the river, outlined in white mosses.

Adavald crouched down and moved the torch to light the river tunnel. “Why would the deer lead us to this place? What’s so special about this cave?”

Healfdene peered to the left, where the stream flowed from, but he could only see the darkness beyond the torchlight—the other direction offered the same. The ceiling of the river tunnel extended a good three feet beyond Heafdene’s head, however, he saw stalactites looming down from it, dripping mineral-rich water into the stream. A family of bats roosted in the spike’s confines.

The stream itself offered little—the water was dark and flowed briskly. As Healfdene examined it, he could see flashes of white pass by the ledge—fish, catfish, by the look of them. The forester had never seen catfish so pale, however.

The tunnel opening across the stream had a similar ledge to the one that Adavald and Healfdene were standing on, however the gap was still around ten feet, Healfdene judged. That, combined with the stone spikes above, made jumping across the gap risky. Fording it, or bridging it, however, was another matter.

Healfdene pulled off his boots and rolled his trousers up, slowly lowering himself from the ledge. “Whoa, Healf!” Adavald exclaimed, “What are you thinking? That water’s got to be freezing!”

Healfdene recoiled as his toes touched the icy cold water, but he forced himself to continue. He lowered in his foot and felt for a hold, trying not to get cut by any rocks. He lowered himself completely off the ledge, and found himself standing in the stream—the icy water running just above his knees. He carefully waded into the center of the stream. The stream got no deeper, in fact, a small raised bump near the center of the stream freed his knees from the chill.

Healfdene slowly made his way towards the opposite ledge, his feet probing the stream bed for footholds and occasionally brushing against the smooth skin of a fish. He tossed his boots onto the ledge and began to clamber up.

“Ah…By the gods, you’ll be the death of me,” Adavald jested as he set down the torch to take off his heavy boots. He rolled up his cotton pants and probed the stream. “Wait up, will ya Healf?”

Adavald grabbed his boots in one hand and his torch in the other and waded slowly across the stream. Healfdene helped him clamber up onto the ledge. He slipped his boots back on and stood up, pointing his torch towards the dark tunnel ahead. The cave turned immediately to the right. The corner of the tunnel was a huge black boulder, unmoved for millennia. The two brothers walked around the corner and continued down the cave. The walls rough stone, dripping with cold condensation and pockmarked with small, deep holes left behind by some burrowing creature. After not fifty yards the tunnel narrowed, and its ceiling lowered, now only fitting one abreast. Neither of the brothers were bothered by the height, however.

Healfdene moved carefully through the narrow straight, the rough walls scuffing his shoulders and elbows. The torchlight conjured dancing shadows in the cramped space and doused the stone in hot red light. Healfdene paused momentarily, feeling the world around him.

He felt the air move by him—almost like a slight breeze moving him forward. The air smelled of moss and fungus, and he could hear a host of bats ahead of him.

Healfdene pushed forward, and the cave opened suddenly from the cramped tunnel into a cavernous scape like three domed roomed side by side. The center of the cavern was a lake fed by the dark stream, now a waterfall to Healfdene’s right. The ceiling was covered in stone spikes and roosting bats, the spikes dripping water down into the water. The lake’s water was like a rippling mirror of black glass splattered with the fiery blood of torchlight. It covered most of the cavern, its banks smooth and sloped. The lake funneled into another stream at the far side of the cavern, exiting through a small tunnel. The walls were high and rough, and there was a line of white running along them at waist level.

“Well now, that’s something you don’t see every day,” Adavald wondered.

Healfdene and his brother walked along the bank of the lake. The rocky shore was smooth, and slid evenly into the dark water. The light breeze whispered past Healfdene’s ear moving towards the tunnel on the opposite side of the cavern.

Something else whispered in Healfdene’s ears—an echo from behind him. “Ada! Healf!” It was Sammie calling, “Ada! Healf! Where are you guys? There’s a man out here, and…and he’s hurt! ADA! HEALF!” Her voice was distant, but Healfdene could still hear the urgency in it.

Healfdene began running back. He ran quickly through the tight stone tunnels, scraping his hands and legs on the rough walls. He turned the corner at the black boulder, not stopping. Behind him he could hear Adavald running to catch up, but he only focused on what was in front of him—the stream. He lept into it, breaking the water with the flat of his feet. The current stumbled him, but he steadied himself and sloshed towards the opposite ledge. As Adavald’s torchlight rounded the corner and the red light battled with the inky water Healfdene pulled himself from the water, his clothes heavy with water.

Healfdene ran. The world flickered as Adavald’s torch felt the water’s cold sting. “HEALF! ADA!” Sammie’s calling echoed through the tunnel, her voice shivering in the dark. Healfdene slipped in the dark, and his hands slammed hard on the rough stone floor. He scrambled up, and kept running. Healfdene suddenly noticed that the tunnel was pitch black—Adavald must have abandoned his torch somewhere along the way, its glow no longer present.

Then the tunnel was gone. Healfdene was in the clearing, and the last light of day was reaching through the forest like glowing arms trying desperately to hold on to the edge of a cliff. A wind swept through the clearing outside the cave, and leaves swirled in the air. In the center of the clearing Sammie knelt next to a man. As Healfdene approached she turned to him. “Healf, where’s Adavald? This man…he just tumbled down the bluff. I don’t know what to do, Healf,” she fretted, speaking quickly. “Healf, what do we do?” She had the buds of tears at the corners of her eyes.

Healfdene looked down at the man. He had short black hair and a rough bearded face. His nose looked as if it had been broken several times, and he was wearing brown padded armor. The armor, it seemed, hadn’t done much good for him, as he was stuck with two crossbow bolts—one in his shoulder and one in his gut. His blood had seeped throughout his clothes and was splattered on his face and in his beard. His hands were gloved and red with blood, and three of his fingers were freshly cut from his right hand, their stumps bandaged crudely.

“He was mumbling something about Heathtown, but I couldn’t make it out. Healf, I climbed a tree and looked to the north—there’s smoke, Healf. Something must have happened at Heathtown,” Samitha spoke quickly and loudly, and spun her fingers through a short length of her hair like she always did when she was worried.

Adavald ran into the clearing and walked quickly over to them. Healfene stared at Samitha for a few moments as he caught his breath. He knelt down to the injured man and turned his head to face him. “You want anything?”

The man blinked a few times as if he was trying to comprehend what the druid had said. “Water…I need water…” Then, as if remembering something, he reached up and grabbed Healfdene’s shoulder. “Wait…Riders...” The man coughed up blood. “Riders from Fangador...”

Adavald knelt next to the man. “Healfdene, rip some fabric for bandages and get our water skins.” He looked down to the man, “Where are these riders?”

“They burned Heathtown...” He coughed again, “They burned Heathtown and plan to do the same for Emelle. They are thirty men strong on horseback, and they are torturing villagers to get information. They are searching for something... Go! Warn the town! The riders will be in less than a day.”

Healfdene grabbed a water skin from his belt and handed it to Adavald, grabbing Adavald’s knife in the process. He cut the man’s armor free and carefully broke the shaft in the man’s gut. The man goaned in pain, and as Healfdene peeled away his bloody armor the man cried out. The armor stuck to the man’s tunic, and the stench of blood rose up from the wounds. Healfdene cut several strips from the armor and handed them to Adavald.

Adavald had begun to wash the man’s wounds—water red with blood spilled out onto the grass and seeped into the ground. Adavald looked down at the man and grabbed a nearby stick, placing it in the man’s mouth. “Bite down on this,” Adavald told the man gently. The captain then grasped the bolt in the man’s shoulder and pulled, tearing the shaft out. The stick in the man’s mouth snapped as he bit down and screamed.

“Sammie. Another stick,” Adavald commanded. The captain of the guard wrapped the strips of padded cloth around the man’s chest and shoulder in practiced bandages. He did the same with the second bolt once Sammie brought another stick.

“Ada; you should back to Emelle.” Healfdene nodded towards the wounded man, “Sammie and I follow with this.”

Adavald nodded. “Go to my cottage. Adela will tend to you. I will meet with the bailiff and reeve and a few others to figure out a secure plan.” He stood and looked around to get his bearing. “Which way to Emelle, Healf?” The druid pointed, and Adavald jogged from the clearing.

“Name? Family?”

The man was breathing heavily, and he blinked a few times to get the blood from his eyes. “Geofry…I’m Geofry. No family; I never married. Just an old guardsman.”

The journey back to Emelle took two hours, and by the time they strode quickly into the town outskirts it was well past dark. The sky was painted with thin, dark clouds, and the moonlight shone dappled upon the piles of wheat in the fields. Sammie headed forth ahead of the other two about five miles prior to reaching the village.

When Healfdene and Geofrey reach the cottage, Adavald's wife, Adela, let them in. The cottage was small and homely, but it was warm, and it had beds. Sammie was already seated at the table, sipping from a tin cup. Adela poured each them small cups of milk and sat them down. “Sammie told me. Let’s get this man layin’ down on a bed. Healf, help get these bandages off. Sammie, fetch some blankets from the bedroom.”

Adela was two years younger than Adavald and had long red hair pulled into a braid. She was the youngest daughter of the lord's steward, and it was her dowry that gave Adavald his land. Her family's money helped keep the guard program financed, and both Healfdene's ax and Samitha's bow were gifts from her.

Geofrey grunted from the pain. “Thirty men on horseback, pretty sure about twenty were wearing the colors of Fangador to the north, looked like soldiers; the other ten were…different. Cloaked in black they were, and some had armor ‘looked like the devils of legend! Them ten had horses black as night ‘s well.”

Adela began to wash out the wounds with the steaming water, and the man’s jaw tightened from the sting. He took a deep breath and continued, “They came in the night, throwing torches to the houses and rounding up the people like sheep. We had a good twenty-five-man militia, and we managed to take out four o’ the soldier types, but when Eard was killed right off we stood down. They executed Townry an’ four others right after that ‘cause they were the ones that killed their soldiers. They rounded us all up in the square and ‘ad us all line up. They had brought out a table from Urda’s and were sittin’ people down, questionin’ them. It was one o’ the black-cloaks that was doing the most of the questioning. More like torturing than questionin’, though. The cloaker had ‘im two wicked blades and the whole table full of little knives and scissors and pins and gods know what else. Oh gods…the screaming…” Geofrey shuddered, and his eyes widened. “I had to run. I ran, but when I turned around to look behind me they got me with their crossbows. I was already some ways off though, and I hid in a hollow by the brook up there, in case they’d try to follow. Mayhaps they did, but I didn’t see them.

“Before I ran, I got the gist of what they were asking everyone—it was always the same questions, over and over. ‘What is your name?’ ‘How long have you been in this town?’ ‘Do you have any family?’ ‘Where are they?’ ‘Have you noticed any suspicious behavior from anyone—like they’re trying to hide something?’ ‘Do you know of anyone who associates with an ancient order?’ ‘Where is the key?’ ‘Do you know who holds the key?’ All this stuff about some key. They got my fingers on my first time at the table…”

"Would you like to tell me more about what happened at Heathtown? How many riders were there again -- fifty? (Adela, do you have water ready?) How many strong was your guard? Did you manage to kill any? (Should I get his boots off?) Do you have any idea what they're looking for, or where they're from?"

Healfdene awoke groggily as the cottage door swung open. Adavald came in quickly, and Healfdene saw that it was still dark outside. Adavald came quietly over to him, and Healfdene heard from his breath that he had been running, and there was a large scratch on his cheek. “The bailiff is gone, and so is his family. The reeve is dead, and his family is gone. They have abandoned this town. The bailiff himself rode north to Fangador a week ago under cover of darkness. He's the traitor who spat to the them.

“I have already sent a rider to the lord in Waterford. The lord's forces will be much too late though, I fear. As for myself, I must do what I can to save this village—and that is to ride out and lure away as many of the riders as I can. You see, I’m the one they’re looking for. Well, not me, truly. This.”

Adavald grabbed Healfdene's hand and pressed something into it: “Take this and keep it safe.”

Healfdene looked down at what Adavald had given him. It was a small, normal looking brass key. The metal felt cold to the touch, and a leather cord was threaded through the eye.

“They will believe that I have what they seek—that key. Please understand, you musn't follow me, and you musn't let them get ahold of this. I must leave now to have the greatest chance of leading them off course. Find Reinhart and tell him of this. He will understand.”

Healfdene's brother stood up and went to his bedroom. He grabbed his riding garb—a studded jacket, high boots, and his cloak—and came back out. “I will try to lead them to the Flint Ridge. From there, I will ride to the Western Hills and cross the Urial, looping back down to Tessenhall.”

Adavald stepped into the doorframe, his hair blowing the cold breeze from the outside. “Be careful, Healfdene, and keep your sister safe.”

Healfdene yelled at him, "Wait! What is this thing? Will you be returning to Emelle? What's going on?"

Adavald paused briefly and looked back at Healfdene. "Guard that key with your life, Healfdene. Look for me in Tessenhall in eight days’ time at the temple of the Nine. Go to Reinhart, he can help."

Healfdene went quickly to the door to watch Adavald ride away into the north. Once he was lost from sight into the forest, Healf woke Sammie and explained to her what transpired.

"Sammie, wake up. Adavald has just come and gone. It looked as though he'd been recently in a fight --- he says that the bailiff is a traitor and that the reeve is dead. He's sent a man to Waterford to call for aid; until then, he's riding out to distract the Fangadorians. He says that they're looking for a key that he carries --- that he used to carry. This is it." Healf held out the key. "He said that Reinhart would know what to do if we took it to him.

"He'll meet back with us in Tessenhall, at the temple of the Nine, in eight days. Our journey there should take about two days. Until then, I think that we should find Reinhart. I do not know what trouble Adavald found, however, and it seems unlikely that the Fangadorians could have gotten here so soon . . . I think that it would be best to stay out of sight until we know better what is going on, but Reinhart may well be in danger too, so we should make haste to him.

"I will inform Adela of this while you ready yourself to go . . . she ought at least to know where Adavald's gone, but I think that it would be best to keep our whereabouts a secret."

Samitha awoke quickly, and stood hurriedly as Healfdene spoke. “Ada rode out while he was injured? When did he leave? Can we still catch him?” she said quickly, running towards the door.

As Healfdene spoke on, Sammie breathed deeply ad calmed down. She looked at the plain brass key in Healfdene’s hand and questioned, “What’s so special about a simple old key? Did he say what it was to?

“Right…we’ll go to Reinhart’s. I’ll get ready!”

Reinhart’s cottage was not far, only across the town, but on this night it seemed a mile. Sammie was dressed in warm cotton pants and tunic, with a thick woolen scarf borrowed from Adela. She had her bow and quiver slung across her back.

Healfdene and Samitha’s breath formed white clouds in front of them in the cold of the night, illuminated by the soft moonlight overhead. The air was silent but for the crunching of dirt beneath their feet. A slow breeze ruffled the grass and leaves of the trees around the village and blew the flames of the torches sconced on the sides of some of the buildings. The yard of the barrack complex was lit with torches, and horses scuffed their hooves against the ground in the stables there. The blacksmith’s forge was cold and quiet, and the inn was closed, its lanterns snuffed and its torches doused—no boarders or travelers renting. Behind the inn the reeve’s house was dark and silent.

As the passed the town hall, Healfdene could see that two of the front windows were broken, and the door was ajar. Upon a hill behind it, the bailiff’s residence was dark and still behind swaying trees. They crept up through the grass behind Reinhart’s cottage.

Healfdene and Sammie peek through the windows of the cottage as they head for the front door. Inside there is a candle lit, but that is all. The cottage is dark, and barely illuminated by the moonlight. Samitha knocks on the front door, quietly at first but then harder. After about a minute the latch shakes, and the door opens. Reinhart lifted up a candle towards the doorway. He was an older man, probably about the age that Healfdene and Samitha’s father would have been were he still alive. His hair was of mid length, the longest strands able to reach down to his eyes. In his age his hair had turned white but for a few streaks of black. He had a short, rough, salt and pepper beard around his thin lips. He squinted his right eye—his left gouged out by a troll, with the socket hidden behind a plain black patch. “Strange to see you two in the middle of the night. What’s this about?”

"We have much to explain, and I think it would be best were we not seen. May we come in?" After entering the cottage, Healfdene found a safe space at the edge of a window and began.

"Yesterday evening, Samitha and Ada and I were out hunting. We were about to retire when we spotted a golden-white buck staring at us -- believing it to be a message or omen of some sort, we approached it, and it led us to a clearing where it vanished into a tunnel in the earth. While Adavald and I attempted to pursue it further, Sami remained on the surface and encountered an old guardsman from Heathtown. He was tired and wounded, and he told us of a group of riders from Fangador who had sacked his village and tortured his people not hours before -- he had escaped from them.

"After tending to the man, Adavald went back to town to prepare for the invaders; he says that he's sent a rider to Waterford to call for protection, but I don't know who. He also found the reeve murdered and the bailiff fled town, having betrayed us to the Fangadorians. They're looking for him, he says, so he's ridden ahead to meet them and draw them off course. He'll find us in Tessenhall in eight days' time. He also gave me this key" -- I hand the key over to Reinhart -- "which he said you would be able to tell us about. It's what the Fangadorians are seeking.

"Adavald was slightly wounded when he found me at his home, which is where we took the guardsman from Heathtown. He did not stay to tell who had aggrieved him, but it is for this reason that we wish to stay out of sight. You had perhaps best be on your guard too."

“Let me see this key,” he said, hand rubbing his roughly stubbled chin. “I remember Cloud always wore this around his neck. I wonder if… I can’t say for certain what importance this key holds, but I may know where to start. Whatever the reason for this key, the fact is that we've got a group of mounted men coming to do gods-know-what.”

“Did Adavald tell you how many he thought he'd be able to lure away?”

“Well...we can only assume the worst. Let's say there were a full thirty men riding towards us right now. Heathtown is almost a six hour ride if you’re not slowed by anything. We have a good twenty—well, eighteen without Adavald or the man he sent out—able-bodied militia not counting either of you two, each with decent training with an ax or a crossbow. I'm sure we can get some of the others to heft a crossbow and pull the trigger if we needed. Since the bailiff is a back-stabbing turncloak, we could use his stone manor house however we need to—maybe fortify it. But even then, it wouldn't be impenetrable. Or...we could evacuate. What do both of you say? This guardsman from Heathtown is at Adavald’s cottage, yes?”

"Yes, the guardsman is at Adavald's cottage -- why? I don't know what more good he can do us. He said that ten of the riders were clad in black armor; it was they who were doing the questioning. I would guess that a good number of them will go after Adavald.

"As for our militia, I do not think that we can turn these invaders without many dead. Heathtown had a force of comparable size, and they could do nothing against the Fangadorians. We cannot abandon Emelle to be razed, however ... and we cannot reason with this enemy. I propose this -- we send a small force out, five or six strong, to pester the Fangadorians as they make their way here along the forest roads. In case this does not deter them, the rest of the guard will fortify the bailiff's manor, and everyone else will make to the south, towards Waterford. If we are victorious, we can send for them by horse.

"Ideally, we could turn them before they reach the village, but at worst we need to hold them here until reinforcements from Waterford arrive. The guard in the manor need only survive for as long as possible; it will be necessary to assail the enemy with crossbows at times, but the majority of their energy should be spend barricading the doors and windows and devising weapons such as boiling water and oil. They must be sure to stock the house with sufficient ammunition and food to last them several days.

"However this plan evolves, we should begin to assemble the guard now. If the enemy is continuing at us through the night, they will be tired and disoriented: perfect targets for skirmishing. If not, we might have time to lay traps in their way; if one of their horses is lamed, it's as good as dead if it hasn't reached Emelle.

Date: 3 a.m., 30, Elient; The Fading, 996 of the First Age, The Year of Somber Smiles

Setting: Emelle

"You can tell us what you know about this key as we walk."

Reinhart began to gather his things: a stiff leather vest, dark cloak, and a longsword. He looked at Healfdene as the forester laid out the plans and slung the longsword across his back. “You sure are your father’s son, boy. Come on, let’s go.”

The three stepped out into the cold dark. “This key. I believe it might have something to do with a group—and order—that your father was a part of. I’m not sure if either of you know this, but Cloud came to Emelle from King’s Mark to the west, before he had any children—” Stepping behind the cottage, Reinhart noticed the lights shining through the broken windows of the town hall. He reached into a pocket of his vest and wrestled out a small dagger. Handing it to Healfdene he said, “You and Sammie go see what’s going on in the town hall. I’ll gather up the militia. Be careful—find me if you find anything noteworthy.”

Healfdene slipped the dagger into his belt on the left side, opposite his axe. "Very well, but you had best take care as well ... we can't afford to lose track of anyone we trust. Whose houses will you be visiting first and last? So that we can find you if need be."  
 Reinhart turned, “Ol’ Abel’s house will be the last I catch.” He walked off into the dark, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

Healfdene turned to Sammie. "You go ahead; I'll be a few steps behind you. You're the better at moving unseen. Try to get a glimpse of what's going on in there."

Samitha crept up towards the looming building, the grass sighing under her soft steps. As she got close to the window, a shard of glass cracked under her. She froze momentarily, but only the wind answered her silence. She moved the strands of blonde hair from her face and peeked into the room. After a few seconds, Samitha beckoned back to her brother. Healfdene snuck towards the window, and Samitha crawled through it, careful not to cut her hands on the glass. “I don’t think anyone’s here,” she whispered. Healfdene climbed in after her and took in the scene.

A weakly flickering torch lay on the floor, casting a ruddy light on the room. Broken glass was strewn over the old boards, and the double doors at the entrance hinged open in the breeze. Samitha stopped suddenly and gasped, “Healf… Is that a person?” Healfdene followed her gaze, but his nose found it before his eyes. A slight, sour smell clawed through the air, emanating from a corpse just beginning to bloat. The body was leaning against the wall in the shadows of the room. The torchlight swam in the pool of blood surrounding the body.

Healfdene stepped closer, and crouched down next to the pool of blood. The body belonged to a thin man, wiry, with an unkempt and scraggly grey beard. His head slumped down, and his chin rested onto his blood stained chest, his beard drinking the color. “His neck’s been cut just above the bones of his collar,” Healf muttered.

“Look! Someone left from the front—it looks like they were limping,” Samitha noted, following a line of blood-stained footsteps leading from the body to the open doors.

Healfdene’s eyes wandered over the body. “This is the reeve. I remember him now… He would never buy my firewood,” Healfdene remarked as he stood. “Wait, under his leg…” Healfdene circled the corpse, noticing the hilt of a dagger jutting from beneath the dead man’s leg. “Sammie, he had a dagger. He might have been trying to defend himself from whoever killed him.”

Samitha walked to the back of the hall and slowly nudged the door of the back room open. She took a deep breath and slowly peered in through the crack. “There’s no one back here… It doesn’t look like it’s been touched. Come on, Healf. Let’s get to the barracks. We need to tell Reinhart about this.”

Healfdene’s skin prickled as he walked back into the cold autumn air. He and his sister walked through the sharp grass just beginning to brown from the cold. Torches had been lit around the barracks, and people had begun to gather.

Healfdene slipped through the murmuring crowd with Samitha close behind. Almost the entire village was gathered, with Reinhart and the few guards standing at the front, facing them. Reinhart came up to them when they emerged from the crowd. “Healf, Sammie, I’m glad your back. What did you find in the hall?”

Samitha quickly explained the scene to the old veteran—the body, the blood, the footsteps. “He had a dagger, too, Reinhart. He might have tried to defend himself from whoever killed him. The killer might’ve been working with the bailiff—and if they were, they could still be here somewhere.”

Reinhart grimaced. “We’ll have to watch our backs then. Come, we need to get these people moving.”

He turned back to the crowd, “Alright everyone. We have heard that there is a group of Fangadorian soldiers riding for us as we speak. From what we’ve heard, there’s a solid group of them. We’ve discussed our options, and we’ve decided… that we have to get everyone out.”

The crowd began to murmur. Emund, the old man who runs the town warehouse, bellows out, “N’ where we ‘sposed to go then? This is our home!”

“All those who are not part of the militia will leave for Waterford. Gather only what you need to survive for a while. I’m sure the lord of Waterford can spare some hospitality once we arrive. We don’t have much time before the riders get here, so pack quickly. Glen, take the cart and two horses for the old and the babes.”

As the villages began to disperse, Reinhart turned to the militia and guards. “We’ll take a select few of you to accompany Healfdene and Samitha. They’ll be riding out to bite at the Fangadorian’s sides while the rest of us fortify the old bailiff’s house.”

Reinhart scanned the crowd and pointed to a few of its members: “Galred… Friso and Petra…and Brendan. You’ll ride out with Healf and Sammie. Gather some weapons from the barracks and get your horses saddled. The rest of you, come with me. I’ll distribute gear.”

As the group moved out, Healfdene spied a man leaning against the far shed. The torchlight flickered across his figure. He stepped forward, limping slightly. “I heard that you might need some help. ‘Just got in town last night.” He extended a hand towards Healfdene, “Velam Milenko, pleasure to make your acquaintance. I’m the bailiff’s son. Do you happen to know where he might be?”

Petra stepped towards him, spitting, “Your father’s a turncloak bastard. He’s got the Fangadorian’s riding for us, the Mystic knows why…”

Healfdene crossed his arms, ignoring the man’s extended hand. “The bailiff’s not here. He left a week ago for Fangador.”

“Is that so…” Velam ran his hand through his shoulder-length hair, black as charcoal and greasy as weed oil. “I was expected a nice welcome home. I suppose that will have to wait. A traitor, you say?”

Samitha nudged Healfdene and whispered, “His leg. It’s injured. He might’ve been the one who left the bloody footsteps in the hall.”

Healfdene’s eyes narrowed, and his hand moved towards his axe. He ignored Velam’s question. “How did you injure your leg? It seems somewhat severe.”

Velam shifted his weight to his injured leg and pulled his ratty cloak around his side. He grimaced slightly, “It was a fight back in Tessenhall. A job I was on, nothing more.”

“It was bound recently,” countered Healfdene.

“The job was last week,” spat the man, his voice cold. “Now, do you want my help, or not?”

Galred emerged from the barracks, strapping a longsword to his side and adjusting a suit of leather armor. He looked up at Velam and turned to Petra, “Is that Velam? I haven’t seen him in years! Hasn’t been back ‘ere for a strong seven years! No… eight years I think. Why’d he pop up now of all times?”

Velam stood in the circle of torchlight, feebly trying to balance his weight and cover up his injured leg. His dark clothing was ragged from travel, and his gaunt face was pale in the light. He had a straight black goatee beneath his slightly hooked nose. His sunken blue eyes flashed brightly as they darted back and forth. His jaw shifted as he ground his teeth, his muscles taught.

Healfdene slid his axe from the belt ring, resting it softly in his hands. He looked severely at the dark man before him. “What were you doing tonight, Velam?”

The mercenary smirked, “As a matter of fact, quite a lot. ‘Woke when someone banged on my door. See, I was staying up at the house since last night. Anyway, I got up to see who it was bangin’ on the door, but before I got down the stairs, my leg was injured, see, they broke the damned door off its hinges. Turned out it was your brother,” he said as he pointed at Healfdene.

“You’re wrong!” Samitha yelled, “Adavald wouldn’t break into someone’s house!” She turned and walked away from Velam, her hands clenched into fists.

Velam scowled at the girl. He continued, “Adavald and I spoke about a few things, he asked where my father was, I said I didn’t know. That was that. He told me to come with him to the town hall, said he needed to find the reeve.

“So, I got my stuff and headed with him to the hall. He was talking along the way; said he didn’t find the reeve in his house. We were headed to the hall to check if he was there.”

Velam fingered the longsword at his side, and shifted in his thin leather armor. “We got to the hall, and when we got inside, the reeve came out of the back room. Had a knife with him. Adavald walked up to him, asking him questions. He pulled the knife, got your brother in the leg. Adavald fell back, broke a window. I, thinking to help him out, drew my sword and swung a few at the old man. Nothing major, not wanting to kill him or anything. Then, Adavald came up with his sword brandished and slit the reeve a new mouth,” Velam said as he made a cutting motion along his neck.

“Reeve was bleeding like the giant rat he was, so we got out of there. Adavald said he needed to get back to his cottage, so I went off on my way, back up to my house. That’s all. Satisfied?” The cloaked man looked down on the boy in front of him. He was a good five inches taller than Healfdene, his frame thin but muscled.

Healfdene looked down at the grass, feeling the weight of his axe in his grasp.

Velam barely had time to blink before the druid thrust the butt of the axe up into his face, the wooden haft cracking against the mercenary’s nose. Velam cried out in pain and stumbled to the ground. He grasped his leg as pain shot through it, and he tore at the tall grass, pulling a clump up and flinging it at Healfdene.

“Why don’t you tell me what really happened, Velam.” Healfdene’s voice was cold, and his knuckles were white on the haft of the axe. Petra laughed behind him, and Galred cursed in surprise.

Velam spit a glob of bloody spittle at Healfdene, gurgling, “I told you what happened, you bloody bastard!” Healfdene’s axe cracked into Velam’s face a second time, thoroughly breaking his hooked nose.

“Why don’t you tell me what really happened, Velam,” Healfdene repeated.

Velam sucked in air through his shattered teeth, and spit a few of them out. The blood dripped slowly from his mouth. He flicked his head towards his aggressor, his eyes cold and hateful. “Adavald came to my house just like I said. We went to the town hall to find the reeve, but only because I said he was there.

“Once we got there, your idiot brother started asking questions to the reeve. Once I gave him a signal, the reeve pulled his knife on the bastard. He’s a quick one, your brother. Got his sword out before the damned old fool could get a good stab in. Slit his throat right then and there. The fight went back and forth for a while,” Velam shook his head and wiped some blood from his face, smearing the red across his face. “I got him on the leg, though, not before he got me the same way. He got me down and stunned me, thought me dead maybe.” The mercenary in black smiled a broad, bloody, broken smile. “Now he’s the one going to be dead, once he gets to the black riders!” A third hit from the butt of Healfdene’s axe sent him into unconsciousness.

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They plan

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The Fangadorians reached Heathtown at midnight of the 28th. They burned buildings and rounded up the people, putting down any resistance in the process, within the hour. The prisoners sat, guarded, for the next hour while the Revenants prepared and discussed their next move—they decided on torture. Heathtown had a total of ninety-two civilians, six were killed before the torture, two ran during the torture—one lived, one died—bringing the total to eighty-four. Each person passed the table twice, each time taking ten minutes. They did not torture many of the younger children. The torturing lasted almost 24 hours, bringing the end of the torturing to 1 a.m. on the 30th. The Fangadorians leave at 3 a.m. for Emelle.

Adavald catches the force after three hours—at 6 a.m. on the 30th.

The rider that Adavald sent out—Cal, the blacksmith’s son, will take ten hours to reach Waterford by horse. He left at 3 a.m. on the 30th, he will reach Waterford by 1 p.m. on the 30th with no delays. He is, however, delayed. Recent rains have made the stream higher and harder to cross, delaying him by an hour. He reaches Waterford at 2 p.m. Lord Reid Connor hears him out, and sanctions a force of fifteen light mounted militiamen to Emelle and five guards. The Waterford reinfocements depart at 4 p.m. They know the way through the swamps of Waterford, so they reach Emelle in eight hours, at midnight of the 30th. This means that the militia of Emelle must hold out for thirteen hours in the bailiff’s manor house.

Villagers left at 5 a.m.

The force arrives in Emelle at 11 a.m. on the 30th—There are twenty-two. Twenty of them seem to be standard soldiers from Fangador: they are outfitted in studded leather armor under a dark red hauberk bearing the wolf symbol of Fangador. They each carry a broad-bladed sword and a short spear.

One, which Healfdene recognizes, is the former bailiff of Emelle: Raul Milenko. The other is clad in a dark cloak, the hood pulled up. He has two sheaths across his back.

\_\_\_Mission\_\_\_

-Relatively open ended. Adavald has left the Player, and with them, he left a strange key. The town's bailiff, Raul Milenko, has tentatively informed the lord at Fangador of a suspected member of the Taritir—Cloud and his family. The lord of Fangador, Lord Norrix, is a member of the Revenants, the arch enemies to the Taritir. Norrix sent out a party of twenty men led by ten revenants to find the Key of Taritir and to kill those holding it. Adavald leads nine of the ten disciples away, however the remaining one continues to Emelle to find the family.

Westring’s relationship with the Basilian Confederation was shaky at best over the last century. Multiple wars were fought throughout the century, the last being the War of the White Mountain ending in 966. Prior to the White Mountain, wars tended to be small scale, between warring holds more often than the actual kingdom’s in their entirety. Skirmishes between Tessenhall and Fangador plagued the first half of the century, however they drew to a close as the War of the White Mountain began in 956. Since, there have been no notable skirmishes between either of the two holds or their parent kingdoms.

The War of the White Mountain’s main theatre were the hills to the far north and west of Tessenhall, over territory disputes around profitable mines in the area (namely that of the White Mountain). Conscripts from Riverlock and Tessenhall, along with soldiers from the south fought for Westring, while soldiers from Fangador and mercenaries from the far north fought for the Basilian Confederation.

Adavald has three total full-time guards for Emelle, as well as fifteen others as trained militia.

-One of the full-time guards is a middle-aged man, one a young woman. Neither of these two have had actual war experience, however both have had experience against small bandit troubles.

-Eight of the fifteen militiamen are males aged between 20 and 50 (distributed similarly to a bell curve), four are youths between 14 and 20—two boys, two girls—and three are aged over fifty.

-There are six veterans of the War of the White Mountain in Emelle, one of which use their time as part of the full-time guard. Three of the other four veterans take part of members of the militia, while one is too venerable to offer much help at all.

Healfdene has observed the guard and militia training quite a few times, though mainly in the corps’ early years. He has seen that the guard and militia seem capable, and they have been capable against bandits, at the least. Healfdene truly doesn’t have much to compare them to besides bandits, however. He, though, has heard war stories from Reinhart. Reinhart, one of the veterans of the War of the White Mountain and a full-time guard, and his stories don’t offer too much as to the strengths of the village’s current enemies, however.

As a manor state of Waterford, the parent hold is obligated to assist Emelle in times of need. This assistance is implied to be in the form of soldiers, and the decision of the necessity of this need is based on the word of the vassal manor’s bailiff and the parent hold’s lord. Waterford itself is a town of about 900 adults, mostly human. Known, ironically, for both the popular gambling and the strict military judiciary, Waterford is walled on three sides by tall stone and on one by the deep water of the Urial. It stands on a hill rising from the marshes around it and boasts four gates evenly positioned around the circumference of the wall. There are about fifteen full-time guards in Waterford, however there are quite a few men and women available during emergency. The swampy lowlands around Waterford are woven with forest paths to take familiar travelers to their destinations, however it would prove to be a maze for any intruder. Waterford is about thirty-five miles away as the crow flies, and a river stands between it and Emelle—not to mention the marshes. The lord of Waterford, Reid Connor, is well liked and respected.

Greycott, east of Waterford, is a large manor village under Waterford’s control. The village has around 500 adults, and sits in the flatlands in the thinning of the marshes. Relatively spread out, the village has no wall not any true defenses. A lone watchtower stands near the center of the town garrisoned by the six guards there. A flat 24 miles stand between Emelle and Greycott, mainly plains with thin lowland mashes towards the west. The plains in the immediate vicinity are taken for farms, and the thin marshes to the west are used by villagers for a small amount of rice farming, learned from Sunset’ai travelers from the far east.

The roadside thorp of Briar Glen was drawn onto the map not a generation ago, yet already has a bustling 230 villagers. Famous for the temple’s charity to travelers and those in need, Briar Glen is quaint and clean, with many beautiful buildings and luxurious shops. The centerpiece of the town is a large temple of the Nine Gods boasting fancifully carved statues thanks to the skilled carpenters of the thorp. The tiny stop has no official guard force to speak of, however some of the men are minorly trained for the militia. Any crime is simply taken care of on a personal basis. Briar Glen sits almost 40 miles to the east across flat plains and sparse forests. The glen for which the town is named is of thick pines, their trunks offering slight protection to those trying to pass through unnoticed.

The Plains Hold of Tessenhall stands at the great meeting of the Midurial and the Urial. The two surging rivers merge on the south side of the city and pass under the famous Turhuriath, or Master of the River in the common tongue. The fine cobbled streets of Tessenhall town are shadowed by the lord’s fortress at its center. The fortress acts doubly as the lord’s manor and as the main defensive position in the area. The city is patrolled by around 60 official guards, a few of which are dedicated to the sole northern gate of Tessenhall. The huge gatehouse offers a point of bottleneck for invasion, yet is wide enough as to not slow down business on the Godsroad. The walls around Tessenhall town are thick and tall, but there are no towers save for on the walls of the fortress itself. The city itself isn’t the most cleanly—slums dot the riverside wards fraught with small time criminals, as many of the guards keep to the northern part of the city. Tessenhall is over 50 miles south of Emelle as the crow flies, and the isolated stretches of Godsroad between towns in the area are not known for their safety. Tessenhall’s banner shows the