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Chapter I

Ripples

Tarn stood straight and still, his eyes peering over the city's entrance hall one last time before he ended his shift. Guarding the city was usually uneventful; the only invaders Tarn had ever needed to repel from the city were bears and other wild animals. In a more turbulent time he may have been part of an army marching off to fight for some great cause, but in this age of peace he stood *inside* the gates, looking inwards. Not that he minded—he was a Dwarf, after all, and like most of his kind he was most comfortable nestled within the carved bosom of his mountain.

The entrance hall was cavernous and showy. Wide columns stretched to the ceiling, so high that it was hard to see their tops among the distant dark. The floor of the hall was tiled with polished marble, tapping sharply with each footstep from the Dwarves going about their business. Because it was so close to the main gate, over the generations this hall had developed into a marketplace for dealing with visitors from outside. The city received only one or two traders per day, and so most of the merchants here still served the local Dwarves. Occupying the stall nearest to Tarn was a silversmith, whose tables were decorated with scales and stacks of coins and ingots. Silver was the city's main export, and it was mined and smelted here in the mountain. In the stall next to that one was a wood carver, selling ornaments. There were larger markets deeper within the city, but this was the place to find those goods made to appeal to outside buyers.

The stone walls were engraved with elaborate patterns and images. These walls were carved in-situ, straight into the original rock, and not placed there. Marbled throughout them were veins of a pale blue mineral which the Dwarves named simply Omunkor, or "Blue-ore" in the language of Men. Where the blue touched the engravings, it was polished to be bright and clear, so as to be more easily seen. Omunkor

As with all Men, Lawrence was tall and lanky compared with most Dwarves, with a small nose and shallow eyes. Seeing Tarn, he stood up with his arms outstretched.

"Tarn, my old friend! How are you?"

"Good, good. And you? How was the road?" Tarn replied, sitting.

Lawrence lived in Hamlet, the town of Men in the valley below the mountain and the closest major settlement. Hamlet was built on the Kobarthrond River, which flowed east from the mountain towards the sea. Lawrence didn't sail up the river, though: although it was wide, it meandered through a thick, treacherous forest—called Riverwood by the Men—that had claimed many ships. And so, while they could engage in water trade downstream, no trader came to Kobarthrond except by road and through the main gate.

"The days were quiet and the nights were mild. All a man can ask for," he replied.

Tarn leaned forward. "Anything new in town? What are the Men up to these days?" Men were always coming up with new designs, theories, and technologies. Many were amusing failures, but sometimes real innovations took place. On his last visit, Lawrence had told him about an alchemist who had accidentally created a new kind of medicine!

"Nothing much in Hamlet, but I did hear that Westport is experimenting with new kinds of fertiliser. If it works, they think they can improve crop yields by a lot." Westport was a major Human city, the most influential power in the region.

The two old friends continued talking about their respective cities and peoples, and exchanging jokes and stories, and soon they finished their drinks.

Emptying his drink, Tarn put his mug down and wiped his beard with the back of his hand. Lawrence had no beard at all to match his dark-red hair, though Tarn understood facial hair to be less common among Men, and a matter of personal style. Dwarves, on the other hand, grew their beards long by convention, braiding and decorating them with care. Seeing anyone clean shaven, even a Man, and even a familiar Man like Lawrence, still felt odd even after many years of friendship.

"Can I buy you another?" Tarn asked. Then, jokingly, "or would you prefer water instead of beer?"

"Just because I don't bathe in the stuff like a Dwarf, doesn't mean I can't hold my own!"

Dwarves drank beer almost as much as they did water, and on social occasions like this there was no excuse to drink anything else.

"Anyway, I already tried ordering some," Lawrence continued. "The bartender said they were out."

"Out of water?"

"And not just today. He said they'd been having trouble for days."

"Odd," said Tarn, trying to remember the last time he'd replenished his own water barrel.

The city had one primary well near the centre, going deep into the aquifer. Other, smaller wells were connected to it. Tarn had never known any of the wells to go dry.

Lawrence went on. "In fact, that's exactly what brings me to the city this time. Your king ordered a shipment of water from the river, and I just carted in eight full barrels of it."

If there was a problem with the city's water supply, Tarn wanted to know about it. He may not have been able to do much about that sort of problem, but he felt some level of responsibility over the city—perhaps an inclination that came with his position as a guard—and wanted to keep on top of issues like this. So he resolved to visit the king and ask him what was going on.

"Guardsmen Tarn! What brings you to the throne room?" The guards posted at the entrance recognised their peer.

The two uniformed guards stood in front of a large door of dark wood, banded at the top and bottom by iron engraved with a complex geometric pattern. In the middle of the door was an outline of the mountain, carved into the wood and inlaid with bright silver wire.

"Hello boys. I'd like an audience with His Majesty."

One of the guards muttered something through the door to someone on the other side, and received a low, muffled response. He told Tarn to wait for a moment.

The three guards chatted for a few minutes, until

Eventually the low voice spoke again from the other side of the door.

"You can go ahead in, Tarn," said the guard. He pulled the handle and the door swung open.

Athzad, son of Valkold, was the king of Kobarthrond. He had reigned for nearly twenty years, and was well-regarded by the citizens of the mountain. King Athzad had a long, thick, brown beard, split into three with silver thread braided into each part. He wore a crown on his head, a band of patterned gold decorated with many jewels, uniquely coloured but all cut to the same size and shape, brightly reflecting the flickering light from the throne room's torches. The throne beneath him was solid stone, carved in precise straight angles and rippled with polished Omunkor.

Tarn entered the room, approached the throne, and bowed. The guard standing next to the throne stared straight ahead.

"What can I do for you, guardsman?" King Athzad asked.

"Your Majesty, I have heard that the city is having trouble with its water supply."

I want to know if it's true, and if possible, the cause."

The king sighed. "You heard correct, though this is not publicly known, and I ask you not to spread it around and cause a panic.

"For about two weeks now, Dwarves have been getting sick from our wells. Something goes wrong in the gut. We don't know what's causing it."

"So that's why we're importing water?"

"That's right," the king answered. "The only water provided for drinking is what we can get from outside. The wells are restricted to industrial uses, washing and brewing."

"Brewing? Is our beer being poisoned?" Tarn snapped quickly, in a tone not fit for the throne room. The guard by the throne raised an eyebrow and tightened his grip on his spear.

The king maintained his steady voice. "I understand your concern. Boiling the water appears to make it safe, and so our beer is not dangerous."

"I apologise, Your Majesty. Is there anything we can do about it?" Asked Tarn.

"We are pursuing a number of strategies," came the reply. "One team is exploring the darker caves and tunnels for potential new sources. Another is engaged in fetching water from the river outside. And we will continue importing what we need until a solution is found."

Tarn was not optimistic. Water sources within a mountain are rare; and anything accessible would have been found by now. Fetching water from the river, through that forest, was too labour-intensive. And long-term, buying water seemed like economic suicide. But he held his tongue, and took care to get his thoughts in order before speaking. He thought about Lawrence's stories about Men, and their experiments and advances.

"Your majesty," he began slowly, "I think it's worth sending somebody to the Human town downriver, to see if they know of a solution. Men lack our sense of beauty, and for want of a similar greatness they constantly try new things, with plants and animals and machinery. They may have a technology or a medicine that we do not." He was careful not to directly criticise the king's other strategies, or to suggest that Men had any kind of superiority over Dwarves.

King Athzad considered this silently for a moment, before responding, "Very well. You will go to Hamlet, and determine whether they have anything useful".

"Me?" asked Tarn meekly.

"With your affinity for the Men, you are the best placed to find the ways in which they can help us," replied the king with an almost imperceptible hint of sarcasm.

Tarn thanked the king, bowed, and took his leave.

Dwarven–Human dictionary

Alphabet

⌘ a	⌘ g	⌘ k	⌘ n	⌘ r	⌘ ū
⌘ b	⌘ h	⌘ l	⌘ o	⌘ s	⌘ v
⌘ d	⌘ ī	⌘ m	⌘ th	⌘ t	⌘ z

Vocabulary

āzthu *adj.* true, pure

bām̄k *v.* be (in some state)

brōlz *n.* hall, corridor

dū̄lt *prep.* like

gi *prep.* in, within

gorg *conj.* and

ī̄z *v.* polish, refine

kob *n.* ore

Kobār̄thron̄d *n.* “Orehome”, the Dwarven city and home of Protag

krithsū̄lb *adj.* natural, essential

kū̄gz *n.* wall, barrier

omū̄n *adj.* blue

Omunkor *n.* “Blue-ore”, the decorative blue mineral naturally marbled throughout Kobār̄thron̄d

thāku *adv.* yet

trobu *v.* shine

rond *n.* house, home