

Breath Of The Titans: The False Titanbringer

Complete Collection

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Breath of the Titans: Little Black Stormcloud

Chapter One

The forest floor started to shake. Elven scouts clutched the trees, feeling tremors traveling up the trunks, turning to report to their superiors. Guardians of the forest roused from their perches and began scouting throughout the trees, trying to find the source of all the noise caused by what sounded like a small army. They searched a wide expanse of forest as small twigs and leaves brushed and clung to them on their shoulders and backs, until they spied dark metallic figures on the ground between the trunks. They climbed down, seeing the bright swirls, runes, and geometric patterns carved into them. It appeared the Titans approached, and the Guardians knew they had nothing to fear from them, the constructs were trusted protectors.

The elves slid down the trees, going so fast that they seemed to drop effortlessly. They caught themselves on the bark, breaking their fall feet before hitting the ground. Dark cloaks billowed around, then floated back down to perfectly camouflage them with the forest. As the Titans drew closer to the elves, they slowed to a stop and one turned and faced where an elder elf stood against a tree listening to a few scouts, blending into the brown bark.

Sanche stepped forward from amongst his scouts, pulling his hood down. His hair was the color of leaves dead on the ground, a soft brownish white, and his skin was as pale as the moonlight. "Greetings, Titans, an honor to help you. What is it the elves may do to serve you today? The Guardians are at your service."

The Titans stood there not answering, not moving. To the head elf, it seemed as if they were

absorbing the feel of the atmosphere, doing as he and the other Guardians would do to find anything out of place around them. Unusual behavior for a titan, but then again, this was only his fifth time meeting one. Still something felt off. The Titans were usually responsive and courteous.

Finally the constructs silently moved, but not towards the elves. They turned and stared at each other, right where the eyes would be if they carried any meat inside their suits of armor. Sanche had never told anyone, but knowing those suits were empty always made him uneasy. He knew the Titans were responsible for saving his race from the orc incursion during the Greatmothers' March, but he could never shake the nervous feeling they gave him.

Finally, the Titans turned towards the elves. One of them seemed to act normally, jovial and helpful. "Hello, elf friend! How are you on this wonderfully lovely night? Aren't we blessed to have the moon shining her beautiful face upon us all?"

The elder elf wondered what had transpired between the Titans, but figured it was something he didn't want to know. "Excellent, my fine shiny friend. It's always an honor to have the Titans in Elvenhom." Sanche replied, a smile on his face, "I ask you again though, how can we help you?"

"We need to speak with your council and Wise. Gendry has sent us on urgent business."

"No problem." Sanche replied. Turning to one of the other elves he said, "Have we any messenger birds left? We'll need one sent to Amon. Tell him we have run into some Titans, and they'd like to see him and the council, tell them the Titanbringer wishes it."

The young elf acknowledged his orders and took off through the forest, heading for their main camp.

"You don't mind if we travel with you, do you?" Sanche asked, motioning his other elves to stay put.

"Not at all, comrade. Though we planned to travel throughout the night. If you wish to travel with us, I must insist that you allow us to carry you. We wouldn't want you to fall behind." The Titan stretched out his arms, reaching to lift Sanche onto his shoulders.

Sanche grimaced and jumped back, "You give us insult!" He pointed to his scouts, "These men were trained by Tyrosh herself! We are dragon trained!"

The Titan bowed, pulling off his helm and flashing Sanche his empty innards. "No offense was meant, my friend" Sanche shuddered at the sight, "and I humbly ask for your forgiveness. It's just, I know you can't keep up with us."

Sanche smirked at the empty suit. "We'll take that as a challenge!" He said, signaling his squad to form up.

"Have it your way." The Titan said, starting to move. "We won't slow down for you, so keep up."

Sanche signaled his troops and they took off after the Titans.

Chapter Two

Bright light assaulted Lovonian's eyes. The sun shone through the archway that led outside. His mother stood next to the curtains she had just thrown wide, luxuriating in the sunlight that flooded through the open windows.

"Honestly, Love, how can you still be lazing about in bed at this hour?" She asked shaking her head slightly, "I know dragons can be a bit lazy when they're young, but I figured your father's wild gryphon-like nature would have manifested in your character by now."

Lov swung his legs out of the bed and walked to his armoire, pulling the door open. He looked at himself in the mirror on the back of the door and admired what he saw. He shone brightly where the sun glinted off of the scales that comprised his outer skin. He had no hair on his entire body, and his bright blue eyes, spattered with green particles, seemed to shine with their own inner light.

His scales were the dark, blackish-blue gray of storm clouds that form in massive thunderstorms. Tightly interlocking, they felt more like armor over his real skin than actual skin. He ran his hands against the natural fall of the scales and felt their sandpaper like quality as he considered

what to wear on this day. Today was his sixteenth birthday, and he was looking forward to a hunt with his father and uncle.

He looked forward to this hunt every year, it was their time to go out and be wild like their ancestors had been. Usually they would only go for a day or two as Lov's father was the Wise of Elvenhom. He spoke for the common people on the council and held the most sway as to what laws were passed and how best to expend the elven magic and other resources to maintain their beautiful city.

But this year, they were to be gone for two whole weeks! Father had worked hard to clear his schedule for this annual trip, and Lov hoped that this year he'd get his own bow.

"Are you done admiring yourself in the mirror there, Lov?" His mother asked teasingly. Being a dragon herself, she perfectly understood the irresistible urge to admire oneself.

"Sorry, Mother." He replied as he pulled out a forest green leather tunic and some brown leggings. "You know I lose my head every year on this day. I build it up and build it up until I can't sleep from excitement! Only to crash the day of from exhaustion and sheer pent-up energy!"

His mother smiled at him, "I know that, Lov. Why do you think I tried to get you to go play with your friends? But you didn't want to." She admonished him, shaking a finger.

"I know, Mom. It's just I haven't had fun playing with those guys since I knocked out Circo." Lov reached down and began to lace his boots. They were a gift from his grandfather on his mother's side. The note that came with them said they were waterproof and enchanted so he would never outgrow them. As he slid them on, he felt the boots adjust to fit his feet perfectly. He decided to test them out, so he ran and stopped on the hard polished floors of his room. His mother laughed when he fell face first to the floor. Lov sat up, a serious expression on his face. "I wish I could go back and change it, Mom but I can't. And now, its like they're afraid of me. I didn't mean to hurt him."

His mother sat on the floor next to him. "It's okay, Lovonian. They're still your friends. It's just that, like you do, they need to learn about your strength. And you're just going to have to exercise more

caution when you play with the other children. You may be the smallest, but you have dragon blood, and that itself makes you much, much stronger."

"I know I'm going to have to learn to control my strength, but I don't think it will ever be safe for me to play so rough a sport with them again." Lov seemed to shrink in upon himself.

His mother reached over and gathered him into her arms. "I know, Sweetie, I know. You'll just have to learn to live with it the same way I did." She pulled away from him and looked her son in the eyes. "Come on, let's go find your father and uncle. This is just the sort of thing they started this trip for." She helped Lov to his feet and they went in search together.

Lov strode to the edge of the path he and his mother walked upon and leaned on the railing. The young half-dragon looked down towards the ground. The streets below seemed to flow across the city, as if a river made of earth passed through the trees. Lov could almost see the ground moving, running like water, here a rapid, there a smooth ford. The trees themselves seemed to spring out of the ground, reaching and stretching their pine needled branches as if to touch the sky. Sometimes, Lov would place his hands upon a tree's bark and feel it's want to float on high like a cloud in the sky. He could tell the trees were jealous of the clouds' free floating ways.

And truth to tell, he could hardly blame them. Everything in the elven capital was guided from seed to root and from seedling to tree. Even the path he and his mother walked upon was formed of the trunk of the tree.

In truth, he knew how they felt. All he needed to do was see his old guard, a Titan he named Reggie. Reggie had been around Lov since the moment of his birth. One of the old Titans, Reggie looked like a pile of scrap plate that had been thrown together and stood on display. The helm was an old bucket helm, narrow slits serving for the eyes. On it was a bright white shining rune that made Reggie seem like he had a mustache. The breastplate was polished silver with golden vines inlaid up and down the sides. On the torso and limbs, wavy lines burned brightly to form intricate patterns in the shapes of squares, circles, and triangles. The arms were of a set, copper and green with oxidation. The

legs were a highly glossed polished black. But even Reggie was not in control of himself. Being a titan, he was a servant to the Titanbringer, the spiritual leader of the free people of Heart.

Still, Lov supposed it could always be worse. Other elven children were guided to their life calling, but his parents believed one needed freedom to grow into one's potential self. That was one reason Lov wished he and his parents lived in the city of Heart, near the Titanbringer, where things were less rigid and not so formal.

His mother stepped up beside him, leaning on the railing. "A penny for your thoughts?" she asked, turning her head towards him.

"Truth to tell, Mother I was wondering why we don't live in Heart." Lov turned to look her in the eyes. "I know you and Father claim responsibility to the people, but couldn't most of his duties be handled just as easily there as here?"

His mother smiled at him, "Of course we could do that, but I don't think you realize just what all you would have to give up for us to live there."

"What do you mean?" Lov asked, thinking of all the things he wouldn't mind giving up in his life.

"For starters, the trees." She started, seeing Lov's eyes spark. She knew he loved life and all growing things.

"What about them?"

"Well, the only trees in Heart are the fruit trees in the groves, and those planted upon the temple complex. You thought the elvish trees were sad."

He jerked back, shocked that his mother knew he talked to the trees. "Don't look so astonished," she teased him. "Remember, I too am a dragon. You are just beginning to learn the extent of your magical gifts."

Lov felt a chill pass across his neck, sending a shiver down his spine. "Feels cold up here, Mother, let's go see if we can find Father and Uncle Nord."

Chapter Three

Nord looked down at his younger brother, who was busily digging through the pantry, trying to find food fit to pack for camping. The sun hadn't even crested the horizon and already Amon was hard at work. He stood a head shorter than his half-brother, but the tallness that was a legacy of their mother, was the only part of their common heritage that showed. Where Nord was thin and dexterous, Amon was stocky and strong. Nord's skin was pale as the first frost, whereas Amon had a dark olive complexion that caused some higher society elves to name him a dark elf. It was a good thing that particular prejudice had been torn from elven society. A few hundred years ago, Amon would have had his ears cut off and been sold in the old orcish slave market before he would have been appointed Wise.

Nord shook his head and banished the dark thoughts in his mind. He reached over Amon's shoulder and plucked a skin of spirits and a fat sausage from a shelf on the wall.

The younger brother turned, attempting to snatch the sausage from Nord "That's perfect for our trip! Don't eat it!"

Nord laughed at his brother, "It may be perfect for the trip, but it's also perfect in my belly!" He ripped a huge hunk off with his teeth, and proceeded to chew as loudly as he could.

Amon shook his head and went back to digging in the pantry. "Remember, Nord, we're supposed to be getting supplies for our hunting trip." He turned back to face his brother.

Streams of dark liquor poured down Nord's face as he attempted to chug the whole skin of spirits. As skinny as Nord was, Amon couldn't believe his older brother wasn't swelled to five times his size. He'd been eating like a pig for the past three days.

Amon shook his head. He'd forgotten that Nord had been gone for five years guarding the elvish border with the orcs. Sometimes manners were forgotten in such a dark place. He walked to the table his brother had taken over and reached for the skin. "Let me get a swig before you finish it off." Nord smiled at him, wiping his face with the back of his sleeve and handing the skin to his younger brother.

"I guess it's only fair, since I polished two off before you even woke up!" Nord roared with laughter. "Although, I think I may have overdone it." He said, releasing a loud belch.

Amon jiggled the skin in his hands, then sighed. "In one sitting, you just drank what would have lasted me at least a week!" Amon complained sarcastically, "I have a feeling we're going to have to postpone leaving until you can walk straight."

"It's not all bad!" Nord exclaimed in a too loud voice, "At least now you can get good and drunk with me!" Nord roared with laughter, slapping his brother on the back.

Amon, thinking of all his responsibility and the pressures pushing at him from the other members of the council, prepared to tear into his brother, rip him up one side and down the other for his irresponsibility, his reckless behavior that could very well ruin his son's birthday. Then he remembered who he was, where he had come from.

Amon had been wild as a youngling. The elders had feared he would be lost among the greater feral elves who lived in the deep wilderness far from Elvenhom. Nord was the one who had brought him to civilization. Nord was the one who had helped him to conquer his own wildness.

And here his elder brother sat before him, his first full day back among elven society, where everything was so structured and controlled. Five years along the borderlands with the orcs, you were bound to lose some polish, and while normally Amon would have lectured and chided his brother, instead he grabbed a skin of wine, and they sat down to drink, converse, and enjoy each other's company.

Amon watched as his lovely wife, Tyrosh, and his beautiful boy, Lovonian, came into the kitchen. They were talking quietly together, it sounded as though they had been searching for them awhile now. In his slightly drunken stupor it sounded funny, considering he and Nord hadn't moved for hours, so he let out a slight laugh.

His beautiful wife, with emerald green eyes and bright shiny copper hair to match her fiery temper transformed into a demon for a moment right in front of his eyes. Her hair began to lift from her

shoulders, grouping together into thick tendrils and transforming into hissing snakes. Her eyes glowed a dark red, just for an instant while she snorted a small fireball out of her nose leaving nothing but a smoke ring behind to show it had happened.

Amon attempted to warn his brother of their impending doom telepathically, but it seemed his brother had drunk his extra senses into fuzzy numbness.

"Well!" Tyrosh began in a way that Amon could tell was going to do nothing for those servants who said she was fiery. He watched as a curl of smoke escaped out the side of her mouth. Such were the dangers when you are the beloved of a dragon.

She continued, "I can't believe you two couldn't even wait to get on the way before getting drunk together! Today is supposed to be about you two taking Lovonian out to celebrate his sixteenth birthday, not for you little boys to get drunk and swap stories of bar room brawls you turn into epic battles for the kingdom!" He loved the way her eyes seemed to light with murder when she was this angry. She was never more beautiful.

Nord, seeing Tyrosh locked in on his poor brother, sought a way out without coming into her cross hairs. While they normally got along fine, for some reason his first days back home Tyrosh always seemed to have it out for him. But after a couple days and some epic battles between Amon and her, she became her sweet loving self that Nord had come to know as a sister in law. As he sneaked past Tyrosh, he grabbed Lov's hand, pushing him out the door in front of him.

The last thing Nord heard before ducking through the door was something along the lines of, "But, Honey, he's my brother and....." Nord quit paying attention and used his hands to steady himself on the wall. He looked down at his nephew and gave a little chuckle, "I don't think we're going hunting today, my boy. Your dad and I stayed up way too late and drank way too much to be going anywhere for a while."

Lov smiled up at him, "That's okay, Uncle. I figured something like this would happen, just like the last time you were home." He smiled wickedly, flashing his sharp canines. "Besides, it's more fun

to play clap and seek when you're drunk!"

Nord laughed, "I taught you well, you little bugger! Use your enemies' weaknesses against him!"

Lov took off down the hall laughing, and said, "Then catch me if you can, oh Nurser of Hangovers!"

Chapter Four

Nord walked down the hallway, eyes blindfolded and arms outstretched so as to not bump into anything. "First clap!" He yelled, hearing a sharp clap from farther down the hall, there was only one door that far down, so Nord went into the room. He ran his hands along the wall, feeling the spines of books stretching from the floor to as high as he could reach. He could only assume he was in the library. "Second clap!" He called, hearing a clap from above and to his left. He felt around the room until he found some stairs that lead to an upper level. The tall elf walked around until he was standing about where he had heard the last clap and called, "Third clap."

It sounded from directly in front of him and he pulled his blindfold off to see a smiling Lov standing there. "You're too good at this game, Uncle."

"This calls for a celebration!" Nord whooped before taking a large pull from the skin.

Lov shook his head in almost the same manner his mother would have. "Who would believe you were one of the most powerful men in our army?"

Nord took on a look of hurt. "You wound me, sir! The reason I'm one of the most powerful officers in our army is precisely because of my drinking skills! Sometimes you just need to share a few rounds with your soldiers for morale."

Lov considered this carefully before asking, "What about Sanche who says that as an officer, one should remain aloof and project an air of confidence?"

Nord took another slow pull from the skin, considering what Sanche, one of the lead generals in

the army and a mentor to Nord, had said. "A good point, Lov, a good point. And during a battle I would agree completely, but when you're off duty, relaxing, it's a good way to learn about your men. Find out who likes to gamble. Find out who whores around and gets the itch, so you know not to shake hands with them. And how to find the ones with hidden talents, like Half-breed Samuel who seems to know just how many beans are in those guessing jars. I've seen him wrong just once, and that's only because they used a filling, it wasn't all beans....the point is, I never would have learned about my men without drinking with them!"

Lov reached shyly for the skin, knowing his uncle was more lenient in some aspects than his mother, alcohol being one of those things. "I've never been allowed to drink, Uncle. Mother is always saying she's afraid I'll turn into a lush like you."

Nord snorted, remembering when Lov had been just a babe. The tall elf wanted to give the little tyke a taste of their wine, and Tyrosh had squashed that firmly saying something similar. Nord shook his head, banishing the negative thought. He pulled the wine skin away, "Sorry, lad your mother would skin me like a hare if I were to let you have some."

Lov put on his sad eyes, hoping to coerce his Uncle into letting him try a drink. "Please, Uncle Nord? I promise not to tell!"

Nord felt himself wrap nicely around young Lov's pinky. He always did have a hard time telling the boy no. "Alright, but don't let your mother catch wind!" He handed the skin to Lov, and turned to go back down the stairs. He felt something slap against his leg and looked down. He was puzzled by what he saw. There hitting his hip, was the wine skin. As realization of what that meant registered, he turned back to his young nephew, attempting to shout out "Wait!" But he turned just in time to watch Lov take a huge swallow from the spirits skin.

Lov felt the contents of it hit his mouth like liquid fire, he struggled to not spew it all over his uncle, but in the process, felt some try to escape out his nose. He barely swallowed before urgently gasping in air in an attempt to put out the fire in his mouth.

He learned quickly that it was a mistake. He felt the liquid fire run down his gullet and into his belly where it sat like molten magma.

Nord stood at the top of the stairs, a look of disbelief on his face, before he lost it. He began to laugh uproariously, seeing his nephew jumping up and down, hooting and hollering like a dwarf on the war path.

"How can you drink that stuff?" Lov demanded, "It feels like fire!"

Nord slowly brought himself under control, taking deep breaths and fighting off his laughter. "Well," he started, finally getting himself together, "first of all, you tend to start with the weaker stuff, like this wine I meant to give you. Second, you don't usually try to drink the whole skin in one go."

Lov felt a little dizzy, so he shook his head. Unfortunately, that didn't help matters. The room slowly began to spin. He tried swinging his head in the opposite direction to counter it, but only succeeded in making everything spin the other way.

Nord reached out and steadied his nephew, forcing him to sit on the stairs. "Don't worry, Lov. You'll get used to it in a moment." He sat next to his nephew, and pulled some bread and cheese from his pouch. "Here, eat this. It will help." Lov received half a loaf of travel bread and a generous hunk of cheese gratefully, and gobbled it up almost as fast as it hit his hands.

"Damn," Nord said with a start, "I've seen men starved for days who wouldn't of been able to inhale all that like you did! Do they not feed you here or something?"

Lov smiled shyly, "Sorry, Mother says I have the appetite of my grandfather. Something about eating everything in the house in one go. It felt good though. I don't really get to fill up often. I mean, I'm not starved, but I always hunger for more. Not just food either, Uncle."

Nord had spent a handful of years hunting great Wyrms, on the other side of the world. They were the dragons that couldn't master their appetites. One thing he admired about Tyrosh was her ability to not give in to her dragonhunger. It appeared young Lov still had some lessons to learn. Now the tall elf felt a little guilty about sneaking his only nephew some of the spirits. "How are you feeling

now?" Nord asked.

Lov thought for a moment. "I still feel like there's a fire in my gut, but at least the spinning stopped." He slowly stood up, and using the banister, made his way down the stairs. "Let's go find my parents."

Nord followed him down the stairs and out into the hallway. They passed back through the kitchens, looking for clues to their direction. A young elf maid pressed large bowls of rice and vegetables into their hands and all but forced them to sit down and eat while she found the mistress of the house.

A short time later, Tyrosh strode forcefully into the kitchen, all but crackling with lightning. Some of her hair was even standing up, forming long sweeping wings off her head.

Nord prepared himself for a barrage about the disorder he had caused in her house, the same kind of thing he always got after returning home from a long journey. It was how he knew she cared. If she were to ignore him, he'd fear for his life.

"I think I owe you an apology." Tyrosh said calmly, totally at odds with how she looked. Nord felt a chill up his spine. "As my husband pointed out, you are his brother, and you've been gone a long time. I suppose I should excuse some mannerisms while you get back to being comfortable."

Nord stood slowly and began to creep towards the closest exit. "Don't make any sudden moves, boy, but I suggest you run!" his uncle roared, sprinting out of the room.

Lov burst out in laughter, seeing the stunned look on his mother's face.

Nord hesitantly peeked his head in the door to see Tyrosh's reaction. At first her face turned beet red and later he would swear that smoke had come out of her ears, before she burst out laughing. She had pictured giving into her anger and exploding into a magical ball of fury! It seemed comical seeing Nord, ever brave and not afraid, grab a dragon by the tail.

Everything seemed okay, and Nord walked back to the table. "Sorry, Tyrosh, just trying to use a bit of humor."

She smiled at him, "It's okay, Nord. I know a lot of times I'm a stick in the mud, but it comes with the territory when you have to maintain such control. It's hard to surrender it when you've had so many friends lose themselves to a single vice." She hugged her son close, "That's why he's my treasure."

Lov blushed, his skin flushing until it was almost black, saying, "Stop it, Mom!"

"I'll try to keep that in mind, Tyrosh. Sometimes I can't help it though, the flighty nature of my father." Nord stretched for the ceiling, then relaxed in his chair.

"Speaking of fathers," she said, turning to Lov, "I'm sorry, Honey, but your father isn't going to be able to go tomorrow. Apparently there's a contingent of Titans headed to Elvenhom, and the other members of the council have decided that they just can't survive even one damned day without the Wise there."

Now Nord understood why Tyrosh had been upset. All night, Amon had talked about the bow he had ordered from the master bow smith. It was made with new technology from Heart's central priesthood. Called a re-curve bow, it was said to shoot almost as far as one of the elven longbows with a third less pull, and only be half as tall. It would be a bit tall for Lov, but he would grow into it.

Lov nodded his head solemnly, "That's okay, Mom. He's responsible for more than just me. Even if I do wish I could be selfish with him."

"I'm glad you understand, my son." Amon said, carrying a wrapped package into the kitchen. "I was going to wait until tomorrow when we were out hunting to give this to you, but those plans were spoiled. I'll just have to give it to you now." He handed the gift to Lov, who unwrapped it carefully.

Amon had described the bow to Nord during the night, but none of his descriptions did it justice. It looked carved from marble of brown and black, the colors ranging from a sweet honey to a thick molasses. When Lov stood with it, it suited him. By size it was large, but Lov made it fit him.

Love shone from Lov's eyes, and by the overwhelming sense of love and thanks he sensed from his son, Amon knew he had chosen well.

An odd look passed across Lov's face and he carefully set the bow down. Motioning to Nord, he walked out of the kitchen and into the hallway.

"What's wrong?" Nord asked, shocked that his nephew had let the bow out of his sight.

"That fire in my belly isn't feeling so good!" The young half-dragon said with urgency to his uncle.

And of course, for Nord's sake, Tyrosh had to choose this moment to follow her son. She walked through the door asking, "What's wrong, my little storm cloud?" right as Lov began to bring up the contents of his stomach.

It burned and sizzled as it set the wood of the floor on fire. Tyrosh's eyes flared and a burst of frosty air whipped by Nord, freezing the fire and the contents of her son's stomach. She stepped forward and broke a chunk of the ice off shoving it in her mouth. Her eyes flashed again and Nord felt coldness on his feet.

"You gave my son spirits!" She spat angrily, momentarily losing control of her temper causing her pupils to shape like a reptile's. "He is a young dragon, not ready yet to test his greed!" She screamed in fury. Nord felt the heat of a forge in her breath.

Amon hurried to save his brother from his wife's fiery breath and temper. "He meant nothing by it, Tyrosh. It's a wilder thing, from our not too distant past. He doesn't know what alcohol does to dragons."

Nord tried to move his feet and almost fell on his face. He had forgotten about the ice on them. "What does it do?" He asked, afraid he might have truly screwed up.

"It makes their hunger be felt more keenly. Brings it to the front of the mind." Amon told his brother his voice full of disappointment.

"I'm sorry, Tyrosh. I didn't know." Nord said innocently. "At least I'll be taking the boy away. He won't be at home to fall back on his creature comforts."

Tyrosh's eyes narrowed slightly, her nostrils flaring, but Nord took it as a good sign that no

smoke escaped from her nose. "Just be careful with my baby. He's my dragon treasure, and if anything happens to him, I'll wear your skin like a shawl."

Nord swallowed the lump in his throat as Lov stretched sleepily. Tyrosh and Amon smiled lovingly at their boy, and Tyrosh gave Nord one last withering look before she walked out and around the tree, up to the next level where the family rooms were located. Nord gave his own head a shake, and began to put his mind to preparing for the hunting trip tomorrow.

Nord was thankful when the ice that locked him to the floor melted away. He went into the kitchen to prepare some satchels for Lov and himself, before heading to his room for some long deserved sleep.

The next morning Lov all but leapt from his bed, eager to be gone with his uncle. He wished his father was still coming, but decided that he wouldn't let anything spoil his mood. He grabbed his bow from his bedside, and caressed the silken string gently before pulling it back, as if about to loose an arrow. He slowly released the pressure until the string was in its natural position.

He pulled an oilcloth out and began to lovingly rub down the marble pattern of his first bow. The wood felt as if it were singing to his touch. He thought back to how he and his father had poured over the diagrams for these bows from Heart. Lov had loved the design instantly. A bow made to be as powerful as an elvish long bow with half the length. If the design worked, he had hoped to get one next year. Amon had thrown him off by giving it to him this year. The bow smith, Fandra, must have not just approved, but also loved the new designs. Lov was one of Elvenhom's best students at archery, and showed fine prospects as a marksman in the elven army. He wouldn't give one of the brightest pupils anything but the best.

As he caressed the wood with the oilcloth he thought, I should name you. He set the bow aside and went to his armoire.

He pulled out his old clothes, choosing dark rich browns and greens the color of pine needles. When dressed, he tiptoed out into the hall, bow in hand. Lov crept into his uncle's room, placing his gift on the wall next to the door, and stood above him.

Nord was sleeping like a baby, his long, silvery gold hair spread across his pillow. His head was turned to one side, and his mouth was hanging open. A line of drool drooped off Nord's cheek, making a small wet spot upon the pillow. Lov smiled to himself mischievously. He couldn't resist the inner voice that told him to give his uncle a scare. He sucked in a breath. His plan, to roar at this tall giant, snoring away in dreamland.

But Nord's instincts kicked in. Before Lov knew it, he was being crushed to his uncle's chest, his right arm all tingly and numb, as he felt a sharp object press against his temple. "Uh, Uncle Nord!" Lov called out in a half yelp of unexpected pain.

Nord came to himself in an instant. "Oh, sorry, Lov. Old war habits die hard." He said with a smile, releasing the boy and placing a dirk back under his pillow. Lov clutched at his arm. "Don't worry," Nord said, watching his nephew, "it should regain feeling in an hour or so. I don't think I broke it." He gave Lov's arm a quick twist and jerk, causing Lov to cry out in pain. "Let that be a lesson to you about trying to scare your elders though!"

Lov continued to rub his arm, trying to work feeling back in it. "Are we ready to go, Uncle?" He asked, "I'd like to try out my birthday gift today."

Nord swung his feet from the bed. "I will be shortly. Why don't you run down to the kitchen, get us some breakfast, and I'll meet you at the stables in twenty minutes."

Lov gave an excited whoop, grabbed the bow, and raced from the room, barreling down the hallway towards the kitchen.

When Nord emerged from the house, he couldn't help but admire the beautiful day. The sun was just starting to make its way up in the sky, but hadn't warmed the day enough to chase away the morning fog. Muted oranges were forcing their way through, brighter at the horizon before fading into

gray.

Lov sat on his horse. It was a spirited brown mare. Her mane shone with the dawning rays of the rising sun, and Lov was all but jumping in the saddle as he waited for Nord. The young half-dragon's stormy scales seemed to drink in the light, reflecting none of it. As Nord approached, his nephew handed him some bacon and a soft morning roll.

"Come on, Uncle!" Lov said, bouncing eagerly in his saddle, "The sooner we get out there, the sooner I can start using my present!"

Nord remembered back to when he was Lov's age, and wondered if he had been so impatient. "We're getting there Lov, and you remember that thing isn't a toy." Nord turned to his horse and started rummaging through the various packed bags. "Now, let's make sure we have everything we're going to need."

Lov jumped from his saddle. "Of course we have it all!" He exclaimed, pulling open his saddle bag and showing Nord what he had packed. Everything seemed in order, divided neatly into their own segments, and Nord knew he had packed all of his supplies before going to bed.

He still couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing. Nord went over the checklist in his head as he ate his breakfast, trying to figure out what was missing. Then it dawned on him. "We forgot the pack mule!" He exclaimed, slapping himself on the forehead, "At least I remembered before we left this year."

He motioned Lov towards the stables for one while he removed the packs from their horses. After they had the packs situated on the mule, they mounted their horses and started their journey. As they hit the road, Nord heard Tyrosh yell out behind them, "Damn you, Nord. You didn't let me kiss my baby!" He gave a slight chuckle and waved to Tyrosh, who stood shaking her fist behind them. "Love you, Son! And remember, Nord, if anything happens to my boy, you become a shawl! A nice pretty pale one!" She called out to Lov as Nord motioned him to take the lead.

Chapter Five

Nord stood against a trunk of a tree, watching as his nephew took careful aim on a deer with his bow. He could just barely make out the rolling green that formed the hilltops, leading to where the halflings lived in Hobton. That made him wonder how Jaxon, an old friend, was doing. Nord could picture his short friend, using his tools from before the Dragon Wars, building a house or slamming together a bookcase.

The autumn colors of the trees contrasted wonderfully with the emerald green of the hills in front of them. And in those trees, a beautiful ten point buck stood, just out of Lov's bow's range. Nord waited patiently to see what his nephew would do.

The young half-elf stood next to another tree, maybe ten paces ahead of Nord. The lean giant couldn't help but admire his magnificent nephew. Young Lovonian shone in the morning sun, like a blue-gray storm cloud that did nothing to hide his golden heart. If you were to look close enough, you would see that his entire skin was nothing but tiny tightly fitting scales. Even his fingertips had the distinct pattern. Instead of fingerprints, he had scale prints.

Lov lovingly caressed his bow. He enjoyed how smooth it felt, like solid silk. The wind changed slightly, coming from behind the two of them. As the boy felt the first kiss of the wind on his cheek, in one fluid motion he drew back his bowstring, pointing it at an angle in the air. As soon as his arm stretched as far as he could draw the bow, Lov released the arrow.

Nord almost started, thinking his nephew was playing with his birthday present. He had warned Lov that if he started to treat this bow as a toy, he would take it away. Perhaps Tyrosh was right when suggesting that Lov was too young to own a weapon such as this. Nord had heard about that while getting dressed. Another of Amon and Tyrosh's epic battles, no doubt.

The arrow flew straight and true, threading in between the low hanging branches of the trees, and Lov lost it amongst the leaves and pine needles of those branches. Nord even lost it for a second, before it dropped suddenly from the trees and struck the chest of the buck. It took two steps, then

collapsed onto its side.

Lov ran forward, knife in hand, ready to end the suffering of the poor animal. But it wasn't needed. His arrow had struck true, and hit directly in the heart. The animal was dead before it knew it.

"Amazing shot, Nephew. I thought the deer was out of your reach." Nord clapped the boy on the back. "That was smart using the wind like that, to carry your arrow the last few meters easily. I didn't really see you aim at the deer, though. You just seemed to fire it off without thinking."

Lov smiled up at his Uncle. Nord towered over the boy. He would not only top any elf, but would be taller than most men and orcs as well. His platinum hair shone in the bright morning air. Eyes of deep blue considered Lov as he started to speak.

"Of course I thought about it. I waited for the perfect breeze to send that arrow on its way. I knew the deer was barely out of my reach, but I figured if I caught the wind just right, well, let's just say everything went according to plan." The boy's grin seemed to grow even wider if that was possible, considering it spread from ear to ear.

Nord lovingly smacked his nephew on the back of the head. "Don't get cocky now, son. That was only one shot. Let's see how you do over the next few hunting seasons, shall we?" Nord smiled down at his nephew with pride, "Now, comes the fun part. I'm going to make you gut your kill. You shoot it, you clean it!"

Lov lost some of his impish grin, "Okay, but you let me know if I'm doing it wrong."

"Well of course I will!" Nord replied with a hearty laugh, "I mean, after all, that is dinner tonight, I don't want you to taint the meat!"

Lov got down to the dirty business of gutting the deer, and as he worked, slowly his smile returned. These are the joys in life, he thought to himself. Good honest work with people who love you.

Nord and Lovonian lead their horses back to their camp, the buck that Lov had shot spread

across his horse's flank. Their little lean-to tent and the circle of rocks they used to mark their campfire seemed undisturbed. A thin tendril of smoke still climbed from the embers of the fire, raising slowly through the branches to be lost in the sky.

Nord dismounted and went into the tent, bringing out a bundle of cloth that he began to spread on the forest floor. Lov dismounted and began to search for wood to rebuild their fire again, and sticks to place a couple of deer steaks onto. By the time he returned with two good sticks and an armload of wood, Nord had already cut off their steaks, placed the deer carcass inside the spread out bundle of cloth, and had wrapped it tightly.

"Welcome back, Lov. Let me see those sticks there." Nord walked up to his nephew and pulled the sticks from on top of the bundle of wood. As Lov began to stack the wood next to the fire, Nord skewered the steaks and set them to hang over the flames. His uncle smirked at him a little and said, "You know, if we had your father here, he'd be telling me I need to learn to cook. Then he'd grab some leaves, shove these in the coals, and we'd take twice as long to be able to eat. I do have to say though, he does make one hell of a campfire steak."

Lov continued to work. He wasn't happy about his father not hunting with them. His father being Wise, Lov had grown used to sharing him. But it still hurt. This year, his first year with a bow. His father wasn't even here to celebrate in his first buck, taken down with his first arrow.

Uncle Nord is amazing and fun to be around, he thought to himself, but nothing compares to sharing these wonderful moments with my father.

He finished stacking the wood, and began to brush the sweat and pine needles from both of the horses. The saddles were piled just outside the lean-to. As he finished brushing all the muck from the horses, he saw his uncle pull the meat from over the fire, giving it a chance to cool. As Lov turned from putting the brushes up, one of the steaks smacked him in the face. He barely caught it before it could drop to the ground.

"Nice catch," laughed his uncle, a huge chunk of meat already torn from his hunk. Nord didn't

even bother to finish chewing and swallowing before continuing, "Good thing you didn't drop it. Wouldn't have been as good with dirt on it!"

Lov tore hungrily into his food. They've been camping for a week, and while they'd packed provisions for a few days, they had planned on catching a deer during the first day. So they ran out of food two days ago. The savory juices from the steak dripped down Lov's chin as he ate his dinner.

Afterward, they sat down together and Lov listened as Nord told him the story of Nord's father, a golden being who had come from the sky for the love of his mother.

Her beauty was said to be unsurpassed, and many an elf had tried to win the hand of Aliyah. She possessed rich creamy white skin and beautiful violet eyes. Her hair was a dark deep purple, almost black in color. By many, she was considered the most beautiful woman in the world.

Nord's father had spotted Aliyah one day, and had been struck by her beauty. His heart cried out for desire of her, and he had pined after her for months. Finally one day, he saw his chance. Thinking he had her alone, isolated from her people deep in the elven forest, the golden being dropped from the sky, landing at her feet and smiling down at her. No, landing wasn't the right word, more like hovered in the air, floating just above the ground. His iridescent wings like a dragonfly's seemed to be made from the very wind currents themselves, swirling around him like miniature tornadoes. His skin was a translucent gold and his hair a bright scintillating white. And his face, as soon as Aliyah spotted him, she felt herself melting inside for him.

They spent many days together wandering the forest woodland, even though he never touched the ground. They played hide and seek amongst the trees, chasing each other and being overjoyed to share their company. Finally, after weeks spent running together, the man felt the pull of home. He explained he needed to return there, and being an honest person, told her that she may never see him again. That night, Aliyah pulled him the rest of the way to the earth, and they spent the night together fueling and giving into their mutual passions.

The next morning, he was gone. Aliyah left the campsite and headed back to Elvenhom.

"I've never met him." Nord said sadly. "Even though I was already grown by the time Amon was born, it still hurt to watch him grow up with his father, while I had no father to confide in, no one to ask how to be a man." He smiled at Lov, "That's just one more reason you're lucky, child. You have a wonderful, attentive father. Don't forsake it, for you won't know what you have until you're missing it."

Outside, Lov showed a normal response, but inside a part of him, new and raw, seethed angrily. That part wanted him to ask his uncle why his father wasn't there.

"Well, we need to get an early start tomorrow. Kick some sand over the fire, boy, and let's get some sleep."

They spent the next couple of days at camp, smoking their deer to store for home.

Lov would go fish at a nearby stream during the days. It seemed to have an endless supply. He caught four fish the first day.

He started to walk up the bank of the river, exploring the forest. The stream meandered its way from deep in the woods to where it passed by their camp. Lov grabbed some smooth stones for his sling, and as he walked he kept his eyes out for small game. The young half-dragon spotted some squirrels in the trees, but didn't want to chance them getting stuck there.

After a few miles, he turned back towards their camp. About halfway there, Lov spotted a rabbit. He pulled out his sling and took his shot, smacking it right on the head, killing it instantly. He gave a small "Whoop!" and ran over to snatch it up. It was a big rabbit, he had problems lifting it. He was admiring the feet, considering chopping one off for a good luck charm, when an angry roar exploded from the forest. A loud thumping sound began to draw near. He took a second to look around before a sense of danger settled over him. Lov didn't want to take any chances, whatever it was, the creature sounded huge. He began running for his life, dropping the rabbit he had killed, and hearing the thumping right behind him every step of the way. His mind screamed for him to turn and see what he was running from, but he felt if he did, whatever it was might catch him. He just ran, trees passing him in a blur. Slowly the thumping feet fell behind him, but Lov was too afraid to notice.

He was back at camp before he knew it. He saw Nord sitting at the fire, eyebrow raised curiously. "What the hell is making all that racket behind you?" He asked Lov.

Lov shrugged, as he finally turned to face what was chasing him.

"I don- "

Nord couldn't believe his eyes. Out of the woods hopped the biggest bunny he'd ever seen. Easily the size of his horse, it ran a bee line right at Lov. Nord jumped up sprinting towards his nephew, but knowing even as fast as he was, Lov would have to make the beast miss before the skinny giant could reach him.

Lov saw the rabbit barreling towards him, and considered his options. He could run, hoping to out-distance and out-speed it, but he was tired from racing to the camp. He could attempt to dodge it, hope that his uncle could save him, or...he thought it, and it happened. The rabbit seemed to explode from the inside out.

Nord, who was right behind it running to save his nephew got the worst of its demise. When it exploded, it sent a hail of rabbit pellets splattering against his chest and face. He cried out in horror at having some hit him in the mouth, and somehow managed to keep the onslaught of scat out of his eyes.

Lov stood stunned by what he had just done. He hadn't known what he was going to do before he did it, but it had worked! He'd burned the beast from the inside out.

Nord was still coughing and spitting disgust out of his mouth. The moment he felt clean enough, he demanded, "What in the bloody blue hells was that?"

Lov shrugged his shoulders again. "I'm not a hundred percent sure, but I think it was a giant rabbit chasing me because I killed her baby." He sat on the ground, dropping from shaking legs.

Nord shook his head, "That's not what I meant! I mean what in the bloody blue hells happened to it? I was chasing it and poof!"

Lov began to pat his chest and pants as if looking for something lost in his pockets. "I'm not really sure, Uncle." He replied, searching his person as if he'd hidden something from himself. Slowly

he regained control of his movements, and brought his arms to his side. He thought about what had just happened. A smirk appeared on his face. "Hey, Uncle Nord, what's 'rabbit slayer' in orc?" He asked, eyeballing his bow.

Nord gave him a curious look. "Kotalod Oloc', why?"

Lov smiled, reaching out to caress his bow. "No real reason."

Nord shook his head perplexed as to what to do, other than clean the manure off himself. "I'm going to head to the creek and wash up. Stay here and stay out of trouble, okay?"

Lov nodded and Nord took off towards the meandering stream. He all but ran, eager to get the filth off himself.

"Oh, Uncle," he heard from behind him, "don't forget my fish!"

Nord made it to the creek and stripped. Scars lined his body, a thousand little cuts from people who should have killed him. They all had been either more skilled or quicker or even more intelligent on how to use the environment, but somehow Nord's luck always won out.

He fingered a particularly deep scar across his shoulder blades, one still pink from healing. The orc who had given it to him fought bravely, and should have won. The orc had used the same attack Amon always used to finish their duels. He dipped his head under the water and gave himself a thorough scrub with sand, clearing his head.

He finished cleaning himself and his clothes and found Lov's fish. Lov had caught some decent sized ones, they could have a veritable feast with what his nephew caught. He cleaned and gutted them in the stream, and made his way back to camp.

Lov was moving the last of the big pieces of the rabbit. He'd set some of the cleaner pieces aside to share with Nord, and looked to be carrying one of the feet tied to his belt.

Nord flipped a fish onto the small flat rock they had been using to cook their deer steaks. It sizzled as it struck the hot surface, and the most wonderful of smells began to permeate the camp.

As Nord cooked the fish, Lov pulled the last of the deer they were smoking from the fire. He

wrapped it carefully in some linen cloth, and placed it with the other bundles of smoked meat. The pack mule was going to have a heavy weight to carry home.

Nord poked at the second fish he was cooking. His mouth watered, and his stomach grumbled as he pulled it off the stone. As Nord was slapping the third fish onto the rock, Lov let out a scream sure to roust the old ents from their slumber. Nord dropped everything, running to his nephew while he bellowed out, "What is it? What's wrong?"

Lov whispered very quietly, but Nord heard him. "He's gone..."

Nord looked puzzled, trying to figure out what Lov meant, when he felt it. The loss, a piece of himself missing. And then he knew. His brother, Amon the Wise, had died.

Lov moved for his horse.

"Wait! We don't know what happened, Lov," he said as Lov shoved the saddle on his horse, "and it's too late for you to do anything about it."

Lov finished cinching the girth strap. "I know, Uncle, but you don't expect me to sit here, do you?"

"Yes," Nord said solemnly, "I do, we still have camp to pack."

Lov snorted, whatever little boy Nord had been seeing was gone. "Something is wrong, Uncle, and I'm going to find out what."

"Fine, I see there's no stopping you." Nord said his voice full of disappointment. "But consider this, no matter what, we're half a day's ride from home. It's still going to take us hours to get there, even if we leave right this second. So please, stay and help me pack the camp."

Lov growled, making the hairs on Nord's arms stand up. "Fine, I'll help pack the camp, but then we get home!"

"Of course, Lov." Nord said, placing an arm around his nephew's shoulders. "Don't forget he's important to me, too."

Chapter Six

They pushed their horses and mule hard, making as much speed as possible. The sun was just dipping below the horizon when they made it back to the city. The wide streets were deserted, and it was silent as a tomb. A figure appeared in the doorway. It was an ancient elf woman, her hair was shades of faded red to nearly white. Lov wanted to approach her, but Nord motioned him away.

Lov ignored his uncle and walked up to her.

"What happened here?" He asked her, trying to gently take her in his arms to give comfort.

She let out a wild yell and slammed her fist into Lov's mouth. She sprang away from him quickly picking up a nearby cat and sprinted off with it in her arms farther into the city.

"I could of saved you a punch if you'd of listened to me." Nord said, leading the animals behind him. "That's Old Maid Sybell, she's always been a bit nuts."

They mounted their horses and rode further into broad streets and avenues between trees, and they both became more uneasy with each step. Elvenhom is a quiet city, but the surrounding forest echoed as if dead. None of the sounds they'd come to associate with the living trees that were Elvenhom pervaded, and very few souls stirred. The taverns and inns were quiet, there was no hammering of blacksmiths working at their forges, nothing of the normal hustle and bustle between merchant and customer.

"I don't like this." Nord said gravely.

"You're just now sensing it, Uncle?" Lov asked. "I felt it as soon as we stepped into the city, before I even asked that old lady."

Nord shifted in his saddle. "What do you mean?"

Lov shook his head, "Father was right when he said you could be thick." He gestured to the city around him, "Look around us, Uncle." He pointed to one of the great trees, smoldering like a piece of charcoal. "There's no one home but the crazy lady!"

Nord frowned at Lov. "Let's just stick together and see if we can figure out what happened

here." he said, leading them towards the heart of the city. "If anyone who will know anything is still around, they would be at the council building."

They passed through the silent streets. The smell of smoke pervaded everything. The only sounds they heard were those made by old elf men and maids they passed. They tried asking them about what had happened, but after the fifth and sixth time being told a preposterous story of Titans cutting off ears and driving all able bodied younger elves from the city, they just pressed on. The trees along the roads seemed to stand a quiet honor guard for friends lost, never to be found in the halls of the living.

The council building came into view. It had been the pride of elven architecture. Built with the help of the ogier, it was a grove of trees that had been shaped and grown into a massive building. It had housed the council as well as the court system of the elves.

It didn't look like it would be holding anything anytime soon. Huge holes had been hacked out of the walls. As they approached for a closer look, Lov felt something squish under his boot. He looked down and was horrified. Ears, long, beautiful, pointy ears, littered the streets. He grabbed his uncle's hand and pointed downward.

Nord looked down at the sight and let out a weary sigh. "Looks like those elders were telling the truth."

Nord was speechless after that. He walked into the building, ducking slightly to avoid hitting his head on the opening. Lov followed him in. They stood in the large central chamber, where audiences were heard. More ears littered the floor. Nord felt an icy knot of dread form in the middle of his stomach when he spotted a body near the floor's center.

Lov ran forward to the body, looking to see the face, but it was an utter ruin. It looked like a grape that had been smashed between two fingers. But the hair was still there, thick and straight like Amon's. The young half-dragon could tell it was his father. He wept silently for the end that had come to Amon, the only man Lov had ever known to be able to cool his mother's most heated and fiery

wrath.

Rage began to boil to the surface of his thoughts. "Uncle, I want revenge." He said in a quiet, deadly voice.

Nord looked at his nephew and he could feel the hatred radiating from his body. "Who would you exact justice from?" He asked, kneeling down and removing the family seal from his brother's finger. He traced the outline of the eye upon it. It was the Eye of Gruumsh, the orc god of strength and power. His great grandfather had taken it from a fallen warrior, keeping it first as a trophy, then as their family seal.

Lov all but spat, "The Titans!" He turned and ran away from his uncle, tearing through the empty city, heading to his home. There was something he wanted before he left this dead, desecrated place behind.

He ran into his mother's study room, where she liked to experiment and create new things. He finally found it hidden in the back of a shelf behind some inkwells. It was a piece of his mother's shell. It sparkled green and blue in the faint light.

Lov walked out of that house, and never looked back. The dark part of him wanted to burn it behind him, so no one else could ever have memories there, but he just couldn't bring himself to do it.

Instead he went back to Nord, and they left the city.

Chapter Seven

Nord and Lov left behind the last of the elven forest. They emerged onto a grassland of soft rolling hills. It seemed as if someone had built mounds everywhere. The grass was a beautiful emerald green, standing waist high to Lov, and as the wind brought them the scents, Lov's nose was assailed by rich earthy goodness. They walked and rode the horses by turns, covering much ground. At night, Nord lit a small campfire and they ate and cooked all but a little of what was left of the deer. They went to bed soon after dark and were up well before the sun had risen the next dawn.

Nord wanted to set a ground eating pace, but wasn't sure if Lov or his mount were ready for it. He started them out at a mile by mile switch, one mile riding, one walking, and they kept this up for the whole day. It was a grueling pace, and Nord expected to hear at least a little grumbling from Lov. His nephew had lived a sheltered life because of his mother. But Lov was silent, eating mechanically and dropping into a sleeping pose before Nord could say a word.

Inside his head, Lov grappled with a feeling of emptiness. He felt such a burning hatred and rage, but had no one and nothing to direct it towards. Already he could feel the hunger building, slowly gnawing him from the inside. He felt filled with a want, a need, for his family. Everything he held dear had been ripped away from him. In its place was a burning hole, a bottomless abyss that seemed to suck everything he poured into it up, and demand more. Right now it begged for fuel to feed the raging fires within him that he knew he couldn't control yet. He didn't have the experience or practice. A part of him, the cold part, cursed his mother for not preparing him for this better. If they had talked about it, he might have some inkling of an idea how to turn it down or tune it out.

On top of it all, he had felt his father die. Amon had been an empath and would float with the ones he loved, experiencing what they did and sharing his love and wisdom. He'd known the moment his father died, like a string to a guitar being cut. It had sent him out of key. He knew he needed to find a balance, but he hurt so much. Finally, the blessed blackness of sleep overtook him.

Nord watched as Lov tossed and turned in his sleep, moaning in pain and loss. Seeing his home like that. The council all murdered. His mother missing. And the survivors insisted it was the Titans who destroyed it all. But that didn't make any sense. A thousand years and more Nord had lived and in all that time, never had the Titans been anything but a steadfast wall against any evil in the domain. They had been all that had driven the vicious orc hordes back during the Greatmothers' March. Even though the elves patrolled the border, it was the threat of the Titans had kept the Greatmothers from uniting under one banner and smashing across the plains.

Nord couldn't think of any reason why the Titans would do such a thing. Maybe Jaxon, up the

road in Hobton, would have an idea. If they kept up this pace, they'd make it in a couple days. He would just have to hope Lov could keep up.

The next two days passed with neither one saying more than two words to each other in a day, and Lov seemed to thrive on the pace. Nord flagged late into the second day, pulling up short a scant ten miles from Hobton. He pulled his horse off the road, motioning Lov to follow.

Lov sighed wearily. He felt energized and just wanted the journey over with, but he could see his uncle flagging. A part of him, the hunger within, pushed at his selfishness. It demanded that he make his uncle continue until he fell out of his saddle, and then to tie him on until the journey was finished. The only thing that stopped him was the fact that the young man knew no one in Hobton.

They were traveling to meet one of his uncle's friends. Lov wasn't even sure of the halfling's name, and he had no money or valuables with which to barter for a room in an inn, except for his bow, and he'd never willingly part with that. He reached out from where he lay on the ground and caressed the marbled wood lovingly.

Nord watched his nephew brood from his seat at the fire. He noted with approval the soft touch his nephew had for his bow. Though not a lover of the bow himself, Nord had known many elves who were skilled with the deadly weapons. Some could split arrows in a target ten and twelve times in a row. He knew Lov would be as good as any of them. The shot that had taken down the deer had been perfect, and Lov had done it with little effort or thought. He yawned sleepily and kicked some dirt over the fire, crawling into his blankets to sleep.

Some time passed, and Lov lay in the dark. He caressed his bow, memorizing every feature of the wood. The bumps, the dips, the smoothness. Every sense of touch stretched out as he began to learn the feel of his bow well enough to shoot it while blindfolded if need be.

As he lay there, he noticed a soft blue ball floating from the direction that he and his uncle had come from. As it drew closer to him, Lov could make out the features of a little person floating within the soft blue glow. It appeared to be a tiny woman wearing nothing but a leaf wrapped around her body.

She had short blonde hair and seemed to make a faint tinkling as she flew towards Lov.

She floated no more than an inch from Lov's nose, before he felt her land softly on the tip. A voice sounded in his ears soft and light.

"Hello, young one." She said bowing low, "Your grandfather sent me to tell you to be patient. He senses your hunger growing, but can't come to help you at this moment. He sent me with a gift to help you." She floated up away from him, and reached into a pouch on her side.

It didn't look big enough to even hold a copper, but unbelievably, she pulled a short bushy desiccated branch out of her pouch. He was amazed she could even carry it, it was bigger than she was. As she handed it to him, he saw that there were dried green and purple flowers upon it. "This is to be used in emergencies only, it will help to dull your hunger, but it has its own inherent danger. If you smoke it too much, you will get horrible cramps and your hunger will triple in intensity."

"How-" Lov began before she shushed him. "Now is the time for listening, you'll have time for questions later." She reached back into her pouch, this time twisting and struggling to pull something out. "Damn stupid thing!" She exclaimed, landing and pulling her pouch off. Lov watched, utterly stunned, as she put the entire top half of her body into the pouch.

He heard a muffled "There we go!" When she popped out, she was dragging a wooden pipe with her. It was decorated with carvings that Lov couldn't make out in the low light. He compared the texture to his bow, and felt the roughness. It seemed like a raw piece of wood, even though he knew someone carved it.

"Your grandfather says be careful with this, it's one of his favorite pipes and irreplaceable." She floated back up to his nose landing lightly upon it. "I have one last gift to impart to you. Use it wisely."

She flew to be eye level and brought her hands together. She began to rub them together vigorously, an intense look of concentration on her face, the tip of her tongue hanging out of her mouth. She slapped her hand above and between Lov's eyes, and it was as if a veil was lifted.

He could sense an immense well of power within himself and he could almost touch it. As fast

as though the veil was back, although not as thick as before. He could sense something, something he had known but a moment ago. Lov heard a light sigh next to his ear. He heard a soft breathy whisper as she sat up.

"Whew, you're stronger than you look. Take a lot out of a girl. Let me catch my breath and I'll tell you what I did." He heard her breathe deeply for a moment. She shoved herself off the saddle he was using for a pillow, and she flew around to where he could get a comfortable look at her.

She smiled and said, "I just guided you to your first touch. It put you in contact with the elemental, magical side of your heritage. I hope you can take it, you'll need to master it if you're to save your mother at any point." She considered him for a moment as if reading his aura. "I guess it wasn't your first. Still, it will be easier from now on."

Lov gave a start. "My mother!" He exclaimed, barely resisting the instinct to grab her and force answers from her.

She flew back as if sensing his intent. "You may not be full dragon, but you reek of dragon fear. You better get a cap on those emotions, or you're gonna have a lot of people out hunting you. Your uncle has the fact that he knows you and his time spent fighting the evil Wyrms. But I'm sure he's told you stories."

He hadn't, but Lov planned on asking.

The fairy slowly glided back down looking him squarely in the eyes, "If you can conquer your dragonhunger, everything should be fine. You are dark, but I sense it's from your father's heritage, not your mother's. Still, black dragons are omens of bad times," she said matter of factually, "so you'll see me from time to time keeping you in line."

She cupped her hands as if to impart a secret and whispered, "My advice for tonight? Set yourself a task, like using your concentration to light that pipe."

She flew over to Nord and dove into his pouch. She squirmed out a moment later pulling a worn polished stone and shoving it into her own pouch, "I'm sure I left you that much ability even with the

shield I put on you." She continued as if nothing had happened. "Plus, concentrating on that will take your awareness off your hunger. The less you feed it, the less it is." She smiled at him, "Well, time to get back to your grandfather, a slave driver, but at least he works himself as hard! Goodbye!"

With that, she seemed to rip a hole in reality and step through it, leaving Lov stunned, with thousands of questions in his mind, but one that pressed to the forefront. He uttered it quietly to himself. "My mother's alive?"

Tyrosh awoke, swaying with the steady gait of the armored construct that carried her. Slowly, her memory returned. The fear, the anger, the feeling of hopelessness. Knowing she could do nothing to save her friends, her husband's people.

They'd come to the door, asking for Amon and herself. Titans, there to escort them to the elven council that morning. One of them had given her a necklace, saying it was a gift from Gendry, the man she considered a second father. Tyrosh had put it on without thought. Now she cursed it, knowing it was the necklace that kept her from being able to transform.

She watched in her mind's eye, paralyzed with terror, as the elves met in council with the armored constructs. They had talked of an orc incursion into their forests, but Sanche protested. The old general and his men patrolled the forest constantly, they never saw signs of the hairy savages.

She remembered watching the Titans position themselves around the room. Tyrosh let out a small cry as she remembered the deaths. Her husband was snatched in a Titan's grasp, and with no effort, the construct killed him. Just reached out and crushed Amon's skull with his gauntlet hand. The others acted quickly, capturing the elven leaders in the shock of the moment.

The Titans smashed a rough hole in the council building, dragging all of the surviving elves outside. Tyrosh watched, restrained by her beloved Reggie, who had guarded her since she was a small girl. The empty suits of armor tore through Elvenhom quickly and efficiently, separating the useful

from the useless. Those found to be infirm were left to wander the streets in a daze. The elves who could prove useful were gathered together. The Titans stepped through the gathered people, cutting their ears from their heads. They tossed them in the street like the flimsy cartilage they now were.

Tyrosh cried, jerking against the Titan that now held her. Reggie had been torn apart by the other constructs as the elves were being chained and herded from the city. The Titans began to drag the elves away, taking the impotent dragon in the opposite direction towards Heart.

They had been traveling for days, and were headed deep into the Great Wyrms Desert. Already, they had passed the skeletons of ancient Wyrms blasted from the earth and killed in Dalanar's heroic sacrifice for the people of the world. Tyrosh had stood next to one of the claws in her younger days, her head barely reached the first knuckle. In the distance she could see another skeleton, rising from the dry crusty earth like a mountain. She could even see the wing nubs, the vestigial bits left of the magnificent dragon's wings after giving in to their dragonhunger and burrowing deep within the earth for precious metals and jewels. Its ribs spilled out onto the sands, looking like a jumble of sticks from this distance.

She pulled herself together long enough to wonder why the world would fall apart like this.

Chapter Eight

That's how Nord found his young nephew the next morning. He sat staring into the fire's coals as it died down. Nord waved, drawing Lov's attention from the burning embers.

"Anyone home?" He asked taking a seat next to the young half-elf.

Lov smiled at him and said, "My mother's alive."

Nord smiled, happy to see his nephew in better spirits. "I'm sure she is, Lad. I've seen that mad woman bring herself out of worse situations than what we saw."

Lov looked directly at his uncle and began to ask questions. Ones that had never occurred to him before last night. It was as if a spell had lifted, a veil removed.

"Why has my mother never told me any stories about her adventuring?" Lov all but demanded.

He didn't mean to ask so forcefully, but his hunger continued to push him.

Nord frowned, not sure how to react to his nephew's attitude. "I'm not really sure, Lov." He said, stirring the coals of their dying fire. "I can't attest to someone else's motives. What I can attest to is what she asked of me. She asked me not to tell you any stories of our adventures. At the time it seemed silly, but who was I to argue with a young mother." He shifted a bit, trying to get more comfortable. "Not to mention, your father tended to stick up for her a bit more when we were younger." He smiled lovingly at his nephew. "You really mellowed both of them out."

Lov considered his next question, thinking over last night. He quietly asked, "What's a Wurm?"

Nord shuddered, past wars running rampant through his mind. Fighting wingless dragons deep in the earth. "They're the ones who want to destroy the world. A thousand years ago, the Tuthan, a lizard-like people from across the world, attempted to bring death and destruction to everything. It had been a terrible war of earthquakes and volcanoes. It morphed the face of the world, leaving a scarred continent that your own great grandfather gave his life to save.

"Wyrms were what manipulated the Tuthan in order to shatter the world. They're dragons twisted and consumed by their own greed. The Wyrms convinced the Tuthan that their hunger could be fulfilled if they broke the world and its people. Reshaped the planet and its people in their own image.

"Dalanan was the dragon who saved us." Nord felt his eyes fill with tears. "You see, the Wyrms fight us by manipulating our reality." He took a deep breath, readying his mind to dredge up one of his first battles. "For instance, they can shape the very matter of this world. You'll charge at them, sword in hand, only to have it disappear."

"How do you fight that?" Lov asked, unable to picture any defense to that kind of assault.

"Me? I think I grabbed a stone club and just bashed its head in before it got me. But you beat them by making your reality more real." He pointed at Lov. "You have this power, as does every other living thing in this world. Remember, whatever happens to you in this world, only happens because you let it.

"Dalanar gave his life reshaping reality for this, the world he loved. He calmed the raging tempest that thousands of Wyrms sent. He froze the mountains and landslides they forced upon us in their tracks. He forced the Wyrms to turn aside while he kept the armies that fought beside him safe. Heart was built where he died. In a last heroic act, he poured his will upon the earth and shaped the beautiful city that lies there. All over the course of this one battle, the great Wyrms tried to force their reality upon us. We watched the world outside of where we were protected be reshaped over and over." He shook the old battle from his head. "Dalanar sacrificed himself though. In a last tremendous burst of power, he pushed us all through a...I'm really at a loss of words here, Lov. I experienced ten lifetimes in that short minute of Titanic power. We, who were protected came to where the desert now starts to turn green. In the distance, we saw a temple rising from the land, and everything near it was green with vibrant life. We were hundreds of miles away, yet we could spot the towering shape.

"As we approached, we saw a city had formed, as if cut from the very land itself. Beautiful and smooth as polished stone. Life sprang, trees and flowers, vines and bushes, they were everywhere. And walking amongst them, were the ogier. Our brothers and sisters of the earth, they are the ones that keep Heart green. Without them, it would be nothing but bare stone."

"At the heart of the city was a jewel, the Breath of the Titans. The Titans were created to be servants of the Titanbringer, and help our warriors get back to farming, as the Wyrms fell back in defeat, unable to shatter Dalanar's reality."

Nord smiled at his nephew, "That was a sad time, but it's heartening to remember where you come from."

Lov roared in frustration. "I don't know what you mean!" He all but screamed, glaring at his uncle.

Nord's face grew cold and distant, a look unfamiliar to the young half-dragon on his uncle's face. "You will learn one day that you need to be careful who you yell at. As it is, we both have had a rough few days. What with your father dying, and your mother's whereabouts unknown," Nord's voice

lowered in pitch, becoming quieter and more menacing, "and our city, our home, ransacked like a well stuffed larder. Jewels and precious metals collected, everyone healthy enough having their ears cut off and being dragged away. I can only assume they're being sold as slaves. Probably to the orcs, they love elf slaves." Nord came back with a start. "But there's nothing we can do until we have more intelligence. Which is why we're going to meet my friend, Jaxon." He finished, brushing off his hands and walking to where they had set the horses and mule to graze. He pulled the last of the deer out.

They started their journey with a lot of meat, but with the pace Nord had set, Lov's appetite had picked up. Not unexpected from one so young. He tossed a piece to Lov and tore into his own chunk.

"We should reach there in a couple hours, if we continue at a hard pace." He sighed wearily as he chewed. "I don't know about you, but something other than deer meat sure sounds good."

Lov nodded, agreeing that deer meat was getting old. Nord grabbed the pack mule's reins, and they mounted their horses, taking off towards Hobton.

Chapter Nine

They left the open hillside and hit the road headed into the town. The ground flattened out, as if someone had rolled a rolling pin along the hills, leaving a long wide avenue that passed through the center of a town. The two soon passed tiny houses with thatch roofs and small wooden doors. They approached a group of women sitting on chairs in front of what Nord assumed was one of their homes. They were drinking tea and eating a small picnic of sandwiches.

"Excuse me, ladies" Nord said as he pulled up his horse. "Would any of you happen to know where I could find my friend, Jaxon?"

The women all gave him appraising looks, sizing up the large giant before them. "And who are you to him to be asking?" One of them asked boldly. She appeared older with white curly hair, and a figure that screamed grandmother.

Nord smiled his best charming grin at her, "Why, Old Mother, I'm an old war buddy of his. I

haven't seen him in many years, so I wanted to pay him a visit."

They eyeballed him some more. The old one held up a finger to him, "Just a second, we must confer."

With that, they dismissed Nord and Lov. The women huddled together, whispering furiously to each other. Lov caught snatches of what they were saying.

"Tall one looks cute..."

"...but if it will help us find Jaxon a wife..."

"...young one looks like he need a couple good meals in him."

One of the women, darker of skin than the others roared out, "Just because he's dark skinned doesn't mean he's evil!"

Nord had enough of it. He stepped forward, towering over the table imposingly. "Ladies, are you going to help us or not?"

The old one gave a slight huff, then turned from the other women, looking up at the elf. "Fine, I guess we can help you." She pointed across the road to a stone house, where a figure looked to be working on the roof. "There he is, it looks like his roof sprang a leak again."

Nord thanked the women and made his way over to his friend. Jaxon knelt on his roof, lovingly patting mud and sod onto it. He didn't seem to notice Nord or Lov as they rode up to his house. "Hey Ja-xon!" Nord shouted, causing his friend to give a start.

"Why you son of a motherless dragon!" The halfling roared, jumping from the roof and landing in front of Nord. His friend barely came up to Nord's belt, and he wore a dark blue knitted cap. He wore it all the time, even as a child. Nord leaned in to Lov and whispered, "It's because of his thinning hair." His other clothes were plain and serviceable, showing many signs of repair.

Jaxon grabbed his friend in a hug, and the giant elf knelt down to accept it. "It's been near on fifteen years since I left your company! You never write or visit, I was starting to think you were dead!"

Nord laughed apologetically, standing back up. "Sorry, Jaxon, not dead, but I may as well of

been. They've had me patrolling the orc border for nearly ten years now. You don't get many vacations from a posting like that." He winked at the little man, "Nothing like our days on the Cursed Isles, eh?" He said, leaning over his friend to poke him between his ribs.

"Gods above man, don't mention that horrible place! I only stopped having nightmares last year!" Jaxon turned to Lov. The top of his head barely came to the young one's shoulder.

"Well as I live and breathe. You are the spitting image of your father." He winked at Lov. "Well, minus the scales and all that. It's shocking how much of him is in your face though." He said, grabbing Lov's cheeks and turning his head from side to side.

Lov pulled his head out of Jaxon's grip and eyed the little man before him. Jaxon had a kind face and a large smile. Lov could see laugh lines on his cheeks, and his arms hung well past his knees. He was dressed simply. Dirt covered the front of his shirt where he had wiped the mud off his hands.

"You knew my father?" Lov asked tentatively.

"Aye, and your mother too. Your dad and Nord, here took me under their wings, so to speak." He smiled up at his tall friend, "He's saved my bacon plenty of times." Jaxon said, jumping to smack his tall friend on the back of the head. Nord snorted. Jaxon continued, "Though most of the time it was him that got us in trouble in the first place."

Now Nord feigned hurt. "Who, me? I'd never lead people to trouble."

It was Jaxon's turn to snort. "Sure, I guess it was some other seven foot tall elf that led us into a great Wyrms' lair saying, and I quote 'Come on, live a little'. I still don't know how that damn dragon didn't eat you."

Nord gave a laugh, then seeing his nephew's confused face told him, "Another story for another time." He turned back to Jaxon, "Truth to tell old friend, I wish this was a purely social visit, but our people are in trouble. Something-"

Lov interrupted, "It was the Titans."

Nord continued as if he hadn't been interrupted, "Something or someone took the council and

most of the free elves and chopped their ears off."

Jaxon furrowed his eyebrows, thinking. "That sounds like the same practices the orcs used to use when they drove elves to the slave markets."

Nord nodded, "Yes, it does, but I don't think the orcs did it, it was too clean an act for them."

"I'll take your word for it, friend, you were usually pretty good at tracking this kind of crap." He walked toward the front door, calling out behind him, "If you two want dinner, you'll need to take baths. I won't have your stink in my house." He pointed at a shed in the back of the yard. "There's a tub in there. Be liberal with the soap, Nord. Remember, your stink sticks to you since that one Tuthan witch cursed you."

Nord laughed, following Jaxon into his home. It was a beautiful house on the inside. Stone and wood carvings covered entire walls from floor to ceiling. Dragons and mermen. Great Wyrms and orcs. His friend had carved their adventures into his home. Nord swelled with the feeling of love, knowing that this was a friend he could ask anything of.

"At least I was never as big of a sucker as you. I remember that cute little thing who almost gouged your eyes out. You fell for her story so hard!" Nord said, chuckling.

"How was I supposed to know she was a member of the thieves' guild?" Jaxon asked innocently. "Besides, she had such pretty eyes, and the way she moved those hips!"

"We were on a street called 'Murderer's Row' for the love of the gods!" The tall elf exclaimed.

Lov laughed at the two of them. As he laughed, he felt his hunger push away. Guess you can fight it off with love and laughter, he thought. The young man finally relaxed enough to think over what the fairy had told him. Tonight he planned on attempting to master fire.

Jaxon turned down a hallway and pointed to the back door. "Don't forget, be liberal with the soap!"

Chapter Ten

Lov felt like a new person after his bath.

Even Nord could see it as he looked at his nephew in the brightness of the sunset. Lov's scales drank in the light, while at the same time reflecting it. It reminded Nord of a sunset reflected by the waves of a lake. Lov rushed across the yard and into Jaxon's house, all but bursting through the door.

"Whoa, slow down there, Buddy!" Jaxon chided him, turning from his pantry. He shook his head disappointedly. "Looks like we'll have to hit the pub for food tonight." He said, as Nord ducked through the door.

"What's that?" Nord asked, shaking the last of the water from his hair, "I thought all you halflings thought about was food."

"That gives offense, sir!" Jaxon said, drawing his shoulders back and stretching his spine. "We also like gardening, getting good and drunk, and of course, smoking our pipes!"

Nord waved his hand in front of his face as if fanning smoke away. "I forgot you smoked one of those god awful things!" He complained sarcastically.

"Hmph!" Jaxon walked over to Nord and pushed his finger into his chest. "Seems to me I remember someone trying to talk me into sneaking into a Wyrms cave for some dragonweed!" Lov struggled not to laugh as Jaxon stood on tip toe to reach Nord's chest.

"You know you enjoyed that stuff as much as I did!" Nord argued back.

"It's not the point!" Jaxon said leading them out the door. Jaxon and Nord continued this argument all the way to the pub before Lov roared at them.

"Enough!" he said, shoving them through the door.

A young curvy lady met them at a counter. The Green Dragon was a tight run ship. One of Jaxon's relatives had bought it from the previous owner when he became too old to run it properly.

Now, Jaxon came here almost every night. A free meal was a free meal after all. It also helped that the place was kept clean and orderly, the portions were generous, and the staff all knew his name.

"Evening, Jaxon." The curvy barmaid addressed him. She had eyes the color of golden wheat in

the sunlight. "Who are your friends?" She asked curiously.

"Don't go getting yourself in trouble, Anna." He pointed at Nord. "That one's old enough to be your great grandfather's daddy." He pointed to Lov, "And this one seems to still be a bit wet behind the ears when it comes to women."

"Hey!" Lov defended himself.

"What'll it be, boys?" she asked with a chuckle.

"Just calling it as I see it, you young whipper snapper!" He turned to Anna. "Make it two meads and one coffee."

Lov blushed, the scales of his cheeks growing darker, and stared at the table. His hunger flared for a moment, burning to show Jaxon. What he'd show he didn't know, but he felt something building.

"Enough teasing him, Jaxon, I seem to remember a few girls cute as her leading you around by the nose." Nord teased his friend.

"My warning was as much for him as for her!"

Lov couldn't help but laugh again, it seemed his uncle and this man were close, but he wondered why his parents had never spoken of him.

"How do you know my parents?" He asked Jaxon directly.

Jaxon looked to Nord, "Seems he has the look of Amon, but the temperament of his mother."

Lov snarled, "Don't talk about me like I'm not here!"

Jaxon gave a start. "Are you okay there, Lov?"

Lovonian struggled not to snap again. He mastered his glare, forcing himself to smile. He felt shocked at how his dragonhunger had taken over momentarily.

"My people have just been mutilated, possibly dead or sold into slavery. My father is dead, my mother missing. No, I'm not fine, I'm the farthest thing from fine." Lov's voice sounded cold and angry. He took a deep breath, closing his eyes, and calming himself. "I'm sorry, Jaxon. I'm just tired, and I don't like being talked about, but not to."

Jaxon clapped him on the back, "All is well, my young friend. I remember puberty."

Lov blushed again and prompted Jaxon, "My parents?"

Jaxon got a distant look on his face. "How I met your parents. Actually, I've known your mother longer than I've known your father or Nord. I'm sure you've heard of Gendry, our Titanbringer?"

Anna arrived with their drinks, placing three large mugs before them. Lov picked his up and smelled it gingerly. A hearty bold smell filled his nostrils. It was rich and delicious. Eagerly, he took a drink, and promptly sprayed Jaxon with a shower. The bitter taste was unexpected. Jaxon wiped his face as Lov attempted to stutter out an apology.

"All is forgiven." Jaxon said, waving the apology away. "Let me show you how I like it." He put two spoonfuls of sugar into it and asked Anna for some cream. When she brought it, he poured a generous helping into the coffee, changing the dark almost black liquid a soft brown. "There, try that."

Lov tasted the drink, and knew nirvana. The strong taste had been softened perfectly. Just a hint of bitterness to go with a hint of sweetness. He drank deeply, and licked his chops, smacking his lips in pleasure. "That's delicious!"

Nord interjected, "That's gross, keep your tongue in your mouth, boy."

Jaxon chuckled a little before continuing the conversation. "Thank you. Actually, your mother is the one who introduced me to coffee." Jaxon looked to Nord, "Your uncle and I are close, but your mother and I were closer."

His smile deepened. "She and I were orphans together at the temple in Heart. Where they build the Titans." He turned away a little, "As for why she never told you about me, I don't know. Maybe she just felt you weren't ready."

He waved to one of the other patrons, then turned back to Lov. "One thing I learned from your mother is that dragons can take a long time to mature. When I met her, she was wild and a little crazy with her dragonhunger. She coveted other orphans' possessions, and while she never stole or beat up anyone for them, she had ways."

A thoughtful look came over the halfling's face. "Like the semester she ended up not having to clean a thing because of debts owed to her for simple favors. A roll from her at dinner for a day of doing her laundry, things like that. But when done to everybody, over time that is upwards of a hundred people at your command. And once you start taking orders, well, it gets hard to stop. We all did her chores for an extra week, she had us so used to taking care of her responsibilities. And she never once told us to do the things, only implied it would work off our debt." He took a long pull from his drink, wetting his mouth. "It was something beautiful to behold. She was a masterful manipulator." He wiped foam off his upper lip with the back of his hand.

"She was a hard egg to crack so to speak." He continued, "I'm the kind of guy who likes to make everyone my friend. And as skilled as she showed herself at playing people, I knew I had to be on her good side.

"Tyrosh was both magnificent and horrible in her younger years. The same as I expect you to be." Jaxon took another swallow of his mead. "As she got older, I think Gendry sensed great potential in her. He pulled her aside. Started giving her private lessons, and she thrived under them.

"She ran that place for the next fifty years before leaving with your father. I didn't agree with her at that time. I thought she had wronged us, abandoning us right as we started the war against the orcs." He shook his head and made a weird face as if to get a bad taste from his mouth. "Remember this because you'll probably never hear it from me again. I was wrong. Ultimately, it was your father's intelligence, linked to us by your mother, which won us the last battle. They had better numbers, better positions, and except for a small force of Titans, they also had better warriors." A look of admiration came to his face. "But somehow, your father found a way to get their battle plans. We knew what they were going to do. How they were going to do it, and what forces were going to be where. If that last had been all they had gotten, it would have revealed three groups lying in wait to hit us when we were down. Instead, the Titans took care of the ambush forces while we slept, and the orcs were crushed for not having their reserves."

He came back from his memories, taking in the room around him. "That is how I know your mother. She's what probably saved me from being killed in the Battle of the Horn, by making me all but useless. Not that I minded at the time, I was as wet behind the ears then as you are now."

Lov laughed and Nord pulled Jaxon's attention to more pressing matters. "We need a place to live, Jaxon. We need time to figure out what has happened, and fix it."

Jaxon nodded gravely, "I'll ask around, there are plenty of old empty burrows out there now that they built a proper town here. They even dug up around my lovely halfling hole, leaving me nothing but my little home in the ground to remember it by! I think they're all just jealous that mine is still sod!"

Nord laughed. "Alright, so what are we going to do tonight? You have a barn or something we can sleep in?"

Jaxon waved that away too, "Don't worry, my friend, I have plenty of blankets and pillows, you know how my back and hip can get." Jaxon clunked his mug against Nord's motioning for him to chug it. They both pounded down their meads and slammed the empty cups upon the table.

As Anna passed by, juggling three trays of food and one tray of drinks, Jaxon shouted, "More mead, Anna! Oh, and another coffee!"

They drank well into the night with Nord and Jaxon trading off on these fantastical tales. While normally Lov was an early sleeper, for some reason he was wide awake.

Nord told one about him and Amon walking to the Mouth of Truths, a holy place of knowledge for the center of what was left of human civilization. They'd gone there to study a different discipline, something Dalanar encouraged. But the journey had been long and hard. In the wilderness, while they crossed a narrow path, a huge mountain lion dropped on them in ambush. It had been a dark rust color with a black mane, and out-sized Nord by at least half of his weight. It fell off the path, dragging Amon with it. Nord had run down the side of the hill, trying to save his brother. When he reached the bottom of the hill, he found that Amon had things well in order.

He rode that cat like a wild stallion, until it had collapsed from exhaustion. The dark elf stood up, slightly dizzy from the ride, and spewed all over the poor beast.

"That's when I decided that I shouldn't fight your dad." Nord said drunkenly, waving to Anna for more mead. "He was crazy when he was angry." Lov laughed, glad to hear a story about his father, then winced at his loss. Never again would he be able to ask the wise elf for anything.

When Nord and Jaxon were well into their cups, Lov asked Anna for a dance. They danced a quick paced jaunt, then relaxed into a slow one. The woman rested her head on Lov's chest as they circled each other.

It was fun, and helped Lov push back his hunger. Anna told him he was a natural. He moved so gracefully and smoothly, Anna couldn't help but be impressed. She offered to take him to her room, and he accepted. When they made it upstairs, she closed the door and slowly started taking off her dress.

"Whoa, what are you doing?" Lov asked, alarm in his voice. The only woman he had seen naked before had been his own mother. She gave a light lilted laugh, saying nothing.

She began to rub his shoulders and back. It felt so good, and Lov felt muscles he didn't even know he had relax. It creeped him out at the same time, reminding him of motions his mother would use to help him relax as a child. His hunger asked for more, wanting him to command her like a slave, but he ignored it. She reached around and began to massage his chest. Slowly her hands moved downward until they were rubbing the inside of his thighs.

"Do you wanna go for a ride?" She asked him.

He noticed that his hunger had gone silent. Alarm bells went off in his head, and he searched for any excuse to escape.

"Not until you put some clothes back on." He said pointing towards the door, "Who would ride in town naked? Don't you know to do that in the forest?" He stormed from the room and left the tavern, headed for Jaxon's and a dunk in a cold bath.

Nord watched as Lov stormed out of the door. "I wonder what happened there." He slurred

drunkenly.

Jaxon looked him up and down, all but falling from his chair. "Are you serious? We're way too drunk to deal with that!" He gave a sharp hiccup and his head slammed down on the table. A light snore issued from his mouth.

That doesn't seem like a bad idea, Nord thought, then put his head down and went to sleep.

Chapter Eleven

Jaxon was just finishing breakfast when Nord came to the next morning. The aroma of sausage and eggs made Nord's stomach gurgle in a horrible way. He leapt to his feet and rushed outside, sucking in deep breaths and trying to keep whatever was in his stomach down.

Jaxon stepped behind where Nord was bent over. "My, my. Someone's developed a weak stomach." He joked. "You know, this reminds me of the time you and Amon introduced me to spirits. I was such a gomer back then."

Nord gave a slight chuckle as he straightened. "If I remember right, it was the women, not the drinks that turned your stomach."

"Well, when the cute one has an Adam's apple, that's enough to throw anyone off their game." The halfling straightened his hat, checking the position of the sun in the sky.

Nord started walking towards Jaxon's home, a hand on his upset stomach. "Tell me you have some peppermint in your herb garden."

Jaxon smirked at him, "I see you're still using my indigestion remedy."

Nord shrugged his shoulders, "If it works, it works."

They continued walking towards Jaxon's house, Nord holding his tummy as if wounded. Slowly the streets filled and merchants began to open their shops. A baker opened his doors right as they walked by, and the smell of fresh baked bread wafted out into the streets.

"We should probably pick up something for breakfast, since your pantry's empty." Nord said,

thinking of his nephew.

"Oh, no thanks, I already ate." Jaxon replied, walking onward.

Nord stopped in his tracks. "Really? You're going to try and bluff me like that?" Nord said, arms crossed, tapping his foot. "The same guy that stopped in the middle of a raging battle to fix sausages, tomatoes, and toasted bread, is going to walk by a bakery full of fresh bread? When I'm even paying?"

Jaxon turned right around. "You didn't mention you were paying!"

Nord laughed, "Here, why don't you go get a nice wheel of cheese, too." He said, tossing a bag of silver pieces to Jaxon.

"Fine, but you better get me a couple of honey cakes while you're in there!"

Nord agreed chuckling, and walked into the store. He ordered a dozen rolls and two loaves of bread, as well as the honey cakes, before heading out and searching for Jaxon.

Nord found him in the cheese shop talking to one of the other customers.

It was the bold woman from the day before. "You really should come over and meet my sweet niece, Sansha. I think you two would get along smashingly."

"I'll have to try to get away from my guests and do that." Jaxon replied, as he eyeballed Nord, trying to signal "Save Me!"

Nord ignored it though, relishing in the chance to cause trouble for his friend. "And who might this charming young lady be?" Nord asked, flashing her a dashing smile.

She smiled sweetly back to him. "Nice try, young man, but you're much too tall for my tastes." She mouthed, "Remember." to Jaxon, then turned to leave the shop.

"Whew, you have perfect timing, my friend." Jaxon handed Nord a large round of cheese. "The vultures have started to descend!" He said in exasperation.

Nord felt cheated by the universe, he had hoped to keep her around for a little torture on his friend. "Anytime, my friend, I know you'd do the same."

Jaxon disabused him of that belief quickly. "Actually, I would've thrown you off the cliff, like a

piece of meat, for them to fight over. But that's why you're a better person than I am." Jaxon walked out of the store and took off toward his house.

Nord caught up to Jaxon, juggling the bread and cheese, right as he was reaching for the doorknob. "You've given me a quick escape twice from that nattering vulture." Jaxon said, entering his home.

Nord laughed, "At least she seems to like you, I flashed her one of my best smiles, and she rebuffed me like I was a hairless orc." He smacked his head on a crossbeam, juggling his load as bright spots flashed in his eyes.

"You'll think that, until she really does pay attention to you, my friend." Jaxon said knowingly, striding to the table, "Then you'll be looking for escapes only I could fit through. You're too tall to avoid her clutches!"

"She can't be all bad." Nord said, walking over to where Lovonian slept and dropping a roll on his noggin. It hit the table and started to roll from it. Just as it neared the ground, Lov awakened enough to snatch it from the air.

"Good thing you caught that before it hit the floor. It's your breakfast." Nord shoved the wheel of cheese, the loaves of bread, and some of the rolls into the pantry. He brought the last three rolls to the table and gave another to Lov.

Jaxon put some water on to boil. He finally noticed his goat bleating in a demanding manner. "Oh good, sounds like my goat wants me to squeeze her teats."

Nord raised his eyebrow at his friend. "Did you really just say that?"

"You are a right sick bastard, Nord." Jaxon replied. "It hurts her to have too much milk in her, and I need milk for my coffee. Get your mind out of the pig mud." Jaxon went outside with a pitcher, and the bleating stopped.

Lov ate his roll and considered telling his uncle about his visitor. He thought about his failed attempts to light the pipe the fairy had given him. He'd sat here for hours like an idiot, trying to light it.

Nothing had happened. He had almost given in to his dragonhunger, and gone crawling back to Anna when his uncle and Jaxon had arrived. Nord munched contentedly on his rolls.

"Uncle, do you believe in pixies?" Lov asked tentatively.

"You mean little people made of flower petals with the vine clothes?" Nord asked.

"No, I mean a tiny woman who floated around like a glow bug. She made tinkling sounds." Lov realized how insane that sounded as he said it.

Nord gave his nephew the stink eye. "That's a fairy, not a pixie. Pixies aren't real." Nord said matter of factually. "Fairies are real though, and a pain in the backside."

"Well, I don't know about pain in the backside..." Lov started, trying to defend his little friend.

Nord laughed, "Okay, Junior. Let me know how that works out for you."

Lov shifted uncomfortably, "My grandfather sent her."

Nord stared uncomprehendingly at Lov. After a moment of Lov staring at him, it dawned on him. Lov's mother had told him nothing, other than bits and pieces she experienced with him.

"So your mother never told you anything about your dragon side, did she?" Lov nodded. "I don't know what to tell you, Lov. I've fought in battles with your grandfather many times. But he is a very busy warrior. We don't really get to talk much." He leaned back in the chair he was sitting in and put his boots on the table.

Jaxon walked in, pitcher in one hand, and smacked Nord with the other. "Boots off my table!"

"Sorry, Mate." Nord turned back to Lov tucking his feet under the table, and leaning upon it.

"Why don't you tell me what she told you, and I'll see what I can do to help."

So Lov recounted the tale, with Nord listening attentively. Jaxon passed out coffee he had made as the young half-dragon talked. As Lov drew to a finish, Jaxon couldn't help himself. "Can I see it?"

"What?" Lov asked.

"The dragonweed, my boy! You have the stash of kings!" Lov pulled out the branch and passed it to Jaxon, who inhaled the fragrance deeply. Lov got his first good look at the pipe in the light of day.

He saw now that dragons were etched down the sides of it, flames escaping from their mouths.

"This smells heavenly." He told Lov as he handed it back. "The first time you need to break into that, feel free to call on me. I love smoking my pipe." With that he whipped out his own pipe and lit it with a stick from the fire. He puffed away contentedly, while Nord fanned the air.

"Gods, I hate those things." He complained. "Anyway, Lov, it seems she told you about everything but your focus." He reached into his pouch for his blessing stone, the one he carried to use his innate gifts, and couldn't find it.

"What is it, Uncle?" Lov asked, leaning towards Nord, "Are you okay?"

"I seem to have misplaced mine." Nord replied, shaking his head. "Too bad really. I've had that one since the last orc war. Oh well, it was close to time to replace it anyways." He quit searching and turned back to Lov. "A focus. A stone or object you use to cast your magic through. If you don't use one, you stand a chance of burning yourself out. We'll look for some new ones later."

Jaxon jumped up, "Good, so now I can show you two what your chores are for the next couple days." He said, grabbing them by their arms and pushing them towards the door. "If I have to gather you two intelligence, you have to keep my farm running."

He took them through the rounds, feeding, watering, and showing Lov how to milk since Nord refused. After he got them started, Jaxon went back inside to pack for his journey.

Nord leaned on the rake he had been using. "Bleeding slave driver. If he didn't work himself as hard, I'd probably kill him." He went back to raking the leaves on the ground. "If I know Jaxon, he's got a stash of weapons around here somewhere. After he takes off, we'll have to find it. A bow's a good weapon, and I know you love that thing. But we have to train you with a hand to hand weapon too."

Lov nodded, shoveling dirt into a hole in the sod Jaxon had caused to fix his roof.

Jaxon came outside, pack slung over his shoulder. "I'll be back in a few days. Just don't break my farm, and I won't hurt you when I get back." He took off down the road and didn't even look back.

The two of them finished what few chores were left and went inside to get some lunch. While

Lov munched on some rolls, Nord carried a hunk of cheese, and stood tapping on the walls. "I know you've got it somewhere." He would say quietly as he tapped.

Lov went back out to put the tools away. As he finished, he heard Nord yell, "Woot! I found the mother load!"

Lov rushed into the house, finding the dining room table turned on its side. He circled around it to see a trap door and a stairway leading into the ground. He watched his uncle disappear around the corner, and chased after him. He rounded the same corner to find a hallway, split in two, leading left and right. He chose the left corridor, the opposite direction of Nord. Lov had no problems seeing in the dark holes of the earth, a gift from both his parents, but he wondered how Jaxon would walk through the corridor with no light.

He spotted glass balls filled with a liquid marking the path. He walked over to one and gently flicked it. It shed an eerie blue light that not even the blackness of Lov's scales could absorb. He shined bright blue in the light, glowing like the fairy that had visited him. He continued down the corridor.

The young half-dragon passed through a doorway and arrived in an immense chamber, filled with gold and silver statues, uncut gems, jewelry both plain and ornate, and riches of all kinds. It was an immense vault full of treasure. The hunger in Lov screamed with glee. It took every ounce of his willpower to resist the urge to pile some of it up in a high mound and swim in it.

In front of him, a small clearing with stands showed what Lov assumed were favorites. An ornate chest, gem encrusted and inlaid in gold and mithril, it shone beautifully in the low light.

Another was a suit of armor old and ancient looking. It consisted of simple plates worn on the body, but Lov could sense a presence in them. A golden statue of a naked fairy moved! She went from standing straight to bending over provocatively, and flashing Lov a kiss. He gave a start and left the room, in search of his uncle.

He found Nord at the end of the opposite hallway standing in the center of an immense training room. Various training dummies and targets lined one side of the room. Along another was an obstacle

course filled with traps and pitfalls and all kinds of moving blades and smashing clubs. But Nord was looking at the weapon collection.

If he knew Jaxon at all, these were the weapons of the fallen generals of the Orc Wars. Both sides had decided to use an assassination style take-over on the same day. The result was the death of the elven king without a proper successor. They also succeeded in beheading the army as well. Most of the elf generals with any sense of strategy were taken by dark rituals. The council had tried to take the reins in the war, but failed miserably. Amon had been the one to step forward and fill that void.

Nord and the elves landed their own blow upon the orcs. Suicide teams worked their way deep into opposing lands, killing tribal leaders, and attempting to split the orc alliance. They missed Greatmother Nika though, and she forged the men of her tribe into a hammer that smashed across the whole of the land, even pushing upon Heart itself, the seat of the Titan empire.

Only the Titans had been able to stop the orcs. The elven resistance, led by a much less experienced Nord and his brother Amon, had joined their intelligence gathering with the might of the Titanbringer Gendry. Once that happened, the orcs never stood a chance. The Titans sliced through the orc army like a blade being quenched in snow. The Greatmother Nika fell in battle attempting to drive her horde through the walls of Heart. The Titans smashed her and her army against the walls. What few survivors there were made their way back to their lands to lick their wounds, and for some to claim chiefdoms in the chaos. Nord realized he'd been talking out loud, and gave himself a shake.

Nord turned to Lov, a smile on his face. "Sounds just like something I'd expect Jaxon to do. Find all these weapons to preserve them. He always did believe in the powers of totems and talismans."

"And you don't?" Lov asked.

"Of course I do." Nord replied, admiring the weapons. There were axes, maces, ornate and plain. There were staves, swords, and everything in between. Some were etched, others were carved. Made of wood and metal. Stacked floor to ceiling, and they all looked beautiful.

Nord picked up a dagger and a long sword. He also chose an ornately carved elven shield. "Pick

a couple, I'm sure Jaxon won't mind if we use them to learn basics."

Lov admired and appraised every weapon. He picked up every club, every sword. Swung every staff, just trying to get a feel for the weapons. One, a broadsword he knew was too big for himself, he gave to Nord saying, "It fits you better."

Nord pulled the sword from the scabbard, the soft blue steel shone brightly in the light of the bulbs. He swung the sword back and forth, feeling it whistle through the wind as a soft cry arose from the blade.

"This is the sword of our last king!" Nord said, shock and awe in his voice. "This mighty sword and the elves that wielded it protected our lands. It's fitting that now of all times it should return to the hands of an elf." Nord appraised his nephew. "You have an eye, young one."

Lov bobbed his head saying, "Cool, I like the soft whisper of a song that comes off it when you wave it." His hunger wished he had swung it before giving it to Nord. "I know it's yours, but can I try it out?"

As Nord handed it to Lov, it hummed sweetly, but as soon as it hit Lov's hand, all the singing stopped. Lov swung it a few times, attempting to elicit a sound, but the blade remained silent. He handed it back to Nord, full of disappointment. He felt his hunger scream and curse.

As Lov continued down the wall, he stopped, pulling a scimitar that hummed with power. Ivy vines were etched down the back of the scimitar and it was flexible, but strong. Lov tested the weapon, giving a few swings and liked the feel of how the blade cut through the air. It also balanced nicely in his hands, easy to maintain a grip on.

He placed it back on the wall to pull a battle ax down. It was all of one piece, blue, yellow, and red metals all alloyed together in a brindle pattern. The ax blade was wide and sharp, while the other side had a hammer head, an eye emblazoned upon it. The shaft was long enough he could use it as a walking stick.

An eye stared out from the back of the ax head. "Of course," Nord said, a hint of exasperation in

his voice, "you have to choose the one weapon that's obviously orc made." Nord fingered the seal on the ax head. "That's the same symbol as our family signet." He said as he reached into his pouch and pulled the ring out. "It's the sign of the orc god, Gruumnsh. He is a god of power and strength. If you're going to wield that, maybe you should hold this."

Lov eyed the ring, then declined. "How about you hold onto it for me, Uncle. That way I know it's with a family member." Lov swung the ax experimentally. It was heavy for him, and the haft was a little long, but Lov could appreciate the brutal efficiency of the ax "I think this is the one I'll ask Jaxon about." He said, setting the haft on the ground and leaning on the pole.

He continued down the line of weapons, one hand stretched out touching them, the other getting used to the weight of the ax. As he caressed the last one, he inhaled sharply.

"I don't believe it." He said. Nord looked around to see who he boy was talking to, but no one was around. "Alright." Lov said again to thin air. He lifted the sword as if to test it and then let it go. The blade floated in the air, as if held by some invisible hand. It was a beautiful long sword, the hilt was wrapped in leather, and the blade was made of a bluish alloy. It moved as if it had a mind of its own, floating aggressively towards the tall elf.

Nord jumped back, startled as the sword attacked him. Lov reached out, snatching it from the air before it could hurt his uncle, shoving it into the scabbard. Nord eyeballed the sword as Lov passed him, battle ax in hand.

"You can't use that floaty sword tomorrow, that's cheating. And we'll have to see about making some practice weapons. I'll trade the blacksmith for some handles and weight. The good thing about teaching you the ax is it's just like teaching you a club. All you really have to do is hit your opponent and let the weapon do the work."

That night Nord fashioned two clubs with flat stones bundled in cloth to simulate ax heads for practice the next day.

Lov slept well that night. The next morning he rose before the sun, leaving the house and taking

his bow and quiver with him. He walked through the town, getting a feel for the day. Few people were out and about, and those that were, seemed too tired to notice the young half-dragon as he blended in with the morning fog. He walked away from the town, hoping to find a small bird or a squirrel to have for breakfast. Lov walked with an arrow nocked, searching for small game. Suddenly, a bird flew from a bush bordering the road. He fired without thought, catching the bird on the fly, and ran over to where it landed.

The young man winced in pain shared as he saw he had missed his mark. He had aimed for a quick death, but instead, the arrow went through one of its wings, effectively breaking it. Lov ran up and snapped the bird's neck, wanting to end its suffering. Part of him had enjoyed it, his hunger revealed in knowing he had caused that bird to suffer, and it called for him to drink its blood after snapping the poor avian's neck. Lov wished he could sever that part of himself.

He carried the bird home, then gutted and plucked it in the yard. Once done, he then went inside and set it on a spit over the fireplace. He lit some kindling with his flint and steel and built a small fire to cook the bird. He also placed a pot of water to boil for coffee.

All that finished, he went out and milked the goat. After Lov took the milk filled pitcher inside, he called Nord for breakfast.

They split the bird Lov had shot, and went out to do what small chores needed to be done. When they finished, Nord went back into the house, and grabbed their practice weapons. He dragged Lov down the stairs and into the training room. The blue bulbs reflected off the smooth stone floors, filling the room with their pale light.

Nord approached an old training post, cuts and chunks of wood missing from it. He motioned Lov over. "Come here and show me your fighting stance."

Lov walked over and dropped into what he thought was a loose fighting stance.

Nord shook his head. "Well, at least it seems you don't have any bad habits I need to beat out of you." He said, stepping around Lov. "But it appears I have to start with the basics." He stepped close to

Lov and used his own weapon to force Lov's legs farther apart. "You need to set your base wider... and spread your hands out more, you have them too close together. That will give you more power, but you'll sacrifice control for it. Like all fighting, you'll learn there's a time and place for it all."

When he was satisfied with Lov's grip and stance, Nord stepped back and assumed his own stance. "Alright, try to hit me."

Lov gave a half-hearted swing, not wanting to hurt his uncle. Nord caught Lov's weapon with his own, twisting his ax head around Lov's and sending the young one's weapon flying to the ground.

Nord gave him a good hard thump on the head. "Don't pussyfoot me, boy!"

Lov snatched his weapon from the ground. His rock head had been torn off. He set up his stance as if it were still there, and fought with everything he had. He managed a short exchange of three blows before Nord landed a solid hit to Lov's arm.

"You're gonna be sporting some bruises tomorrow, if you keep letting me abuse you like that, boy. Don't try to hit me with the head, just try to hit me. No matter what part of the weapon you hit me with, it's going to hurt."

Lov shook his head. "That's the problem Uncle, I don't want to hurt you."

Nord glared hard at Lov. "Then think of me as something you want to hurt. Picture me as Reggie."

Lov nodded, "I'll try." He said.

Nord gestured menacingly at Lov. "That's a crock of shit and you know it. You don't try. You either do it or you don't." He said emphatically to his nephew.

Lov nodded and assumed his stance. He thought of his uncle as Reggie, picturing him as the mismatched suit of armor that had watched him all his young life. The memory of the council chamber, and finding his beloved father dead on the floor returned to him. A scream of rage erupted from him and he attacked Nord with a ferocity the tall man was not expecting. Lov dove at him, thrusting the club head in his face, then swung the handle around in a wild arc that just barely missed Nord's head.

Lov let go of his pain and anguish, letting his hunger feed upon it and guide him as he fought. He jumped and twisted, pivoted and slammed the haft of his weapon at Nord's face. It was taking every bit of Nord's skill to keep Lov at bay, and he was growing impressed with his nephew.

He jumped away from Lov calling, "Enough." Lov ignored him and charged onward. Nord shook his head thinking, when will this boy ever learn? While doing a front flip over Lov, he caught the young one on the back of the head with his practice weapon.

When Lov came to, Nord stood over him, holding out a cup of coffee. "Here, Lov, get up and let's talk about what I think we need to focus on for you."

They put their practice weapons up and went inside, looking for food. They walked to a nearby hill and sat in the grass, eating a meal of chicken and spiced potatoes.

"Your technique leaves much to be desired. You have good balance and fast reflexes, but any opponent that's a decent defender will pick you apart. We need to develop your defensive techniques while not gimping you offensively."

Lov nodded, knowing what his uncle meant. A few times today he had left himself wide open.

Chapter Twelve

The next two days dragged on. They started the mornings doing chores, then spent the afternoons working on Lov's ax technique. He got better every day, and held his own when he gave into his hunger. When he didn't though, he was severely outclassed. At the end of the second day, Lov and Nord were having a furious exchange. They swung and sliced, blocked and dodged. It was an epic contest, until Lov slipped in the dirt. Without thought, Nord swung his ax around, catching Lov with an upward swing. It hit Lov squarely in the eye and sent him flying a few feet. The young half-elf lay on the ground for a second, then shook his head, attempting to rid it of the ringing.

Nord dropped his practice weapon, rushing to check on his nephew. "Son of a bitch, that looked like it hurt." He said, as he dropped to the ground next to Lov.

Lov saw his opening and took it. He swung his ax handle around and clocked Nord right between his eyebrows, catching Nord's nose as well, causing blood to pour from his nostrils.

Nord jumped up cursing, "Dammit, Lov! I know I said hurt me, but I didn't mean for you to kill me!" The giant elf yelped at the impudent whelp on the ground, spitting blood from his mouth while glaring at his nephew.

Lov cast his eyes downward and dropped his weapon. "Well, Uncle, I was just doing what you taught me. If I had slipped in a real fight, and gotten cold cocked, and my enemy had come to gloat over me, thinking me hurt worse than I was," Lov shifted his eyes from the ground to Nord, "I would do the same thing."

Nord continued to glare at Lov as he mulled over what the young man had said. Slowly Lov watched the smile creep back into Nord's eyes. Not long after, it was soon on his face. He fiercely hugged his nephew, then held him at arm's length.

"Just so you know, the next time you pull some shit like that, I'll hit you for real, not just practice." He grabbed Lov's face, turning it to get a look at where his ax head had hit. There was a split next to Lov's right eyebrow, and dark red flesh poked out between the scales. "Looks like I clocked you good. No permanent damage, though." Nord walked from the training room, motioning Lov to follow him. They stepped outside and Nord looked to the dark clouds overhead. A soft thunder rumbled towards them.

"Looks like rain tonight." Nord motioned Lov back towards the house. Water droplets spattered his shoulders as he reached the building, going through the front door behind Lov. And then the heavens opened and rain fell by the bucketful. A blinding white light lit everything and thunder crashed loud enough to shake Jaxon's home.

Nord looked out into the yard. "Talk about a close call."

Lov watched for a moment listening to his hunger. It was telling him he should go out and enjoy the rain shower, luxuriate in it. And he decided to do it. He stripped to his small clothes and walked out

the door. Nord watched and shook his head. "If you're gonna do that, you better go and get the soap, give yourself a decent scrub."

"That's a good idea, Uncle!" Lov replied, disappearing around a corner of the house, returning a moment later with the soap. He stepped under the eave, out of the rain, to place a good lather on his scales. When he was covered in white suds, he stepped back out and felt the rain wash the dirt and grime, as well as the general feeling of filth, from his body. He padded inside, dripping puddles all over the floor.

"I know one thing for sure. You better clean all this mess up before Jaxon gets home or he just might give you an ass whooping." Nord said matter of factually.

Lov chuckled. "You really think he could beat me in a fight?" Lov asked, thinking of his uncle's short friend.

"Oh yes, I do believe he would use you as a mop, young one."

Lov laughed as he grabbed a towel and dried himself. Afterward, he grabbed a mop and cleaned the water and mud from the floor. In this time, Nord sat reading a book, absently picking at a roll left on the table from this morning. Lov went to throw some clothes on and when he returned, sat next to his uncle. "What are you reading?" He asked, curious as to what things a man like his uncle would read.

"This?" Nord asked, raising his attention from the book. "This is Rorchester Wallace's Journey Along the Way." Nord looked thoughtful for a moment. "Reading this makes things not seem so bad. Sure we've lost our homeland, sure our friends and family are scattered on the winds. But at least I don't have a festering wound in my side, and I'm not worrying about having to give my life for the world to survive."

Lov shook his head unable to believe anyone would read that fantastical tripe. He turned to the fire and picked up some kindling from where it was kept. He placed it upon the table, then turned to his uncle. "So, Uncle, you think there might be something I can use as a focus around here?"

Nord looked around the house. He spotted a checkerboard on a shelf, and walked over to examine the pieces. The reds were painted wood, but the blacks were made of obsidian, dragon glass. Nord took two of the black pieces, one for himself, the other for Lov.

As he handed it to Lov, Nord warned his young nephew, "Be careful. It won't be hard to hurt yourself with this."

Lov took the stone, thanking his uncle. He sat at the table, piling the kindling together. He rubbed the stone, thinking of the wood lighting. He concentrated all of his thought, tried to pour his very soul into it. Nothing seemed to happen and after a quarter of an hour, he felt like an idiot and jumped from the chair. He ran to the door, throwing it wide.

"Hey!" Nord complained, a cool wet wind blasting through the house. "Close that, you idiot!" Nord demanded. Lov reluctantly closed the door on the rain. Nord gestured sharply for him to sit. Lov sullenly walked to the table and took a seat.

"Listen, Lov, this is all about relaxing, and just letting your gift flow. If that fairy did what I think she did, all you have to do is connect, and the shield should guide the rest of the process." Nord walked around and sat next to his nephew. "I can help with a guided meditation if you'd like."

Lov nodded his head, eager to accept help from his uncle.

"Close your eyes. Take some deep relaxing breaths." Lov complied, feeling his shoulders and chest relax as he breathed. "Picture yourself by the beach. Listen to what the world is asking you." Lov pictured it, hearing the waves crash on the beach. Who are you? Lov heard on the waves.

"Don't try to answer the question, just know your answer." Lov listened to the waves, hearing more. What is your purpose? Lov faltered, not sure of that answer. What do you want? Lov sent as clearly as possible, "Help!" He spoke aloud at the same time.

Nord shook Lov bringing him out of his trance. "What just happened? Why did you call for help?"

Lov shrugged his shoulders. "I heard a voice, so I answered. Why did you shake me?"

"You called out for help." Nord defended himself. "I'm not going to let you sit there so deep in a trance that you're drooling. Especially if you call for help."

Lov took a deep breath and calmed himself. "I understand, Uncle, but I was fine. I was just answering the questions."

Nord rubbed his eyes, confused as to what had happened. He stood from the table, heading towards his room. "Well, I hope you can figure it out. Promise me you won't try that on your own without training. I don't want you to lose yourself."

"Don't worry, I won't."

Nord headed to his room and fell into bed. His feet hung off the edge of it, stretching across a flat topped trunk. He fell asleep quickly, feeling that soon their peaceful routine would be broken.

Lov sat at the table, attempting again to touch the power within. His dragonhunger seemed to laugh at him. It seemed to tell him that he was hopeless and all was lost. Lov lost himself to time, listening to the steady drumming of the rain on the world outside. He listened to the rhythmic beating and, as he did with the waves, heard a voice. I am coming.

He lost himself in a trance, and didn't notice when he lost control of his consciousness. His dragonhunger manipulated his magic, and he felt himself connect with his power. Excitement filled him and he opened his eyes, looking to the kindling. But nothing had happened. Not even a hint of smoke. In disgust, Lov tossed the checker piece onto the table. He went to the door and stepped out into the rain. The cool water felt good as it dripped down his face.

He turned to go back inside, and was startled to see that the kindling on the table was lit! He ran back into the house, and the force of his body rushing in seemed to fan the flames. The entire tabletop was now on fire! Lov panicked and flipped the table onto its side. As he rolled it out the door, he stomped the last burning embers of the kindling out.

He walked over to the ash pile on the floor, and picked out the checker piece. It was hot! Not enough to burn his skin, but enough to elicit smoke and leave a char spot on the floor. He chucked it

through the door, not willing to risk burning the house down.

A startled "What the....?" sounded from outside before Lov heard the obsidian piece land in a puddle with a soft explosion, and it fractured into many pieces. He heard a hearty laugh from outside. "Well, looks like you figured it out." Lov stepped outside and found an old man standing in the rain. He was shorter than Lov, bald on the top of his head with long hair on the sides. He wore a simple brown robe. "I thought you said you needed help."

Lov gave a start, recognizing the voice from the waves. "Who are you?" He asked the old man.

"I'm your grandfather, kid, and I've come to give you a guiding hand."

Chapter Thirteen

Nord awoke the next morning to the sun blinding him. A shaft of sunlight had managed to slip through the small gap in the wooden shutters, sending a slant of golden brightness perfectly across his face. He sat up with a groan, clutching and pawing at burning eyes while muttering sleepily, "Damn sun's tryin' ta kill me." He went out into the dining room, expecting to feel the table bump into his leg. Just when he was wondering where the table was, he stumbled into the wall. He pried his eyes open as he fumbled around to see that the table was missing.

He sat in one of the chairs and stared at the pile of ash on the floor. It didn't seem to be enough ash to be the table's remains. "Lov!" He attempted to call out, but the words croaked in his throat. He cleared his throat with a cough and tried again. "Lov! What happened to the table?" When no answer was forthcoming, he rose from the chair and went to his nephew's room. He pounded on the door. "Lov! Wakey wakey! Hands off snakey!" He pushed the door open and was shocked to see Lov's bed empty.

He ran back into the kitchen, searching for any clue as to what had happened. He didn't see Lov's bow, or the ax and sword he had taken from the training room. He ran outside, looking for tracks to follow. He found the table, upside down in the yard, and two sets of foot prints. He followed them

around the side of the house to the bathhouse. And then Nord found them. Huge gouges of earth were dug out of the ground. It looked like a dragon had flown from here. "Well, be safe, boy. Come back to me in one piece."

He went back inside the house and started to pack.

As he was finishing getting his pack back together, Jaxon came home. "What happened to my table? And what is this mess all over my kitchen floor?" He glared at his friend. "Were you playing with my treasure?" Jaxon demanded, eyeballing his tall friend.

"Yes, we were, but I don't think that's what caused this." Nord replied reflexively, raising his hands defensively. "Lov's missing, I think his grandfather might have taken him somewhere." The giant of an elf sat in one of the chairs, pulling out the broadsword he and Lov had found. It was comical, as his knees were pressed to his chest, making the seat look shrunken and uncomfortable. "So why did you never tell me you had this?" He pulled it from the sheath, and the blade sang.

Jaxon's face turned scarlet. "Well, I don't know what to say." He sat in one of the other chairs wearily. "I found it. I've spent a lot of years out treasure hunting. Part of the reason the women around here are so eager to get their claws in me. I'm the oldest eligible bachelor left." He sighed with fatigue. "But that story can wait, know that I always meant to give you that blade."

Nord smiled and gave his short friend a hug. "It's come at a time of great need, my friend. I have a feeling we're going to need it, as well as the two weapons Lov took."

"Which ones did he take?" Jaxon asked. Those weapons had been his for many years. He felt protective of them.

"A battle ax, with an Eye of Gruumsh stamped on the head. And a plain looking blue sword that floated behind him." Nord told him. "He's the one that picked out this sword too. He's got one mean eye." Nord said, the blade humming a light song as he waved it in the air.

Jaxon smiled, "You're right when you say that boy has an eye. He chose the weapons of Greatmother Nika's husband. The orc who commanded her armies." Jaxon furrowed his eyebrows

thoughtfully. "I hope he's as stubborn as his mother, if half the stories I've heard about that floating sword are true. It'll be just as dangerous to him as his enemies."

Nord rubbed his eyes, worried for his nephew. "I hope he is too. His dragonhunger is untested, and I worry about him."

"I did find out some of the scuttlebutt about the tragedy in Elvenhom." Jaxon said, changing the subject. "It appears Gendry is dead. The Titans have avoided spreading the word." He stood and started to pace. "Apparently, an elderly human acolyte named Martell has taken control of the Breath of the Titans." He stopped pacing and sat back down. "Gendry died without naming his successor. Martell was his last private student, which is why he was chosen to succeed Gendry. But there's talk that the old Titanbringer may have tried to summon another candidate to succeed him." He stood up and gestured to the door. "Come outside with me."

They went outside and Jaxon took a deep breath. He pulled his pipe from his pocket and filled it with fresh herb. He puffed away furiously, formulating his thoughts. "I feel a storm coming, my friend. And I think your nephew will be at the heart of it."

Nord shook his head. "Of course, you'd curse me like that, wouldn't you?" He walked back into the house, his shoulders sagging. "He's the last family I have, and I've no way to keep him safe." He closed the door on Jaxon, who stood outside, still puffing his pipe.

To no one in particular Jaxon said, "I hope you know what you're doing." He tapped out his pipe and followed Nord back into the house.

Chapter Fourteen

Tyrosh was propelled through a door, throwing her to her knees. She stared around the room, drinking in the scene. She recognized her adopted father's old study. There was Pilate's Principles and Ethics of Governance, on the same shelf it always was when Gendry gave her lessons.

She saw his chess board sitting along one wall, where it always had been. She and Gendry

played many tough matches in this room. The dragoness smiled, remembering the first time she had beaten him in a game.

Her concentration was broken by a door slamming. Doors never slammed in this place. An old man strode deeper into the room. His thin white hair hung to his shoulders, and his skin was pulled tightly over his face. It made him appear skeletal. Intense emerald eyes stared at her, intelligence and madness shining in them.

"Ah, Tyrosh!" He exclaimed, stepping closer to her. She resisted the urge to choke him where he stood. She understood that this was the puppet master to her torment. "What? No love for your fellow orphan? We were both the favorites of Gendry. That should be some sort of family, right?" Tyrosh reexamined the old man, and knew who he was.

"Martell!" She spat, her hair flying wildly around her. "I always knew you were jealous of me, but this? Enslaving a whole people?"

"Oh come off your high horse!" He yelled back, showing behavior unbecoming in a Titanbringer. "How is what I did any different than what you did to the orcs?"

She choked on her rage, gave in, and struck him with her closed fists. A Titan surged forward, snatching Tyrosh by her hair and lifting her a foot off the ground. Martell clutched at his bloody mess of a nose, as it dripped red down the front of his robes. "You'll pay for that." He said, stepping forward with a dagger. He reached up and began to cut through her luxurious copper hair. When he had it shortened, he ordered a Titan to closely hold and pin her against the floor, while he shaved it to the skin. He tore out gouges from her scalp whenever she struggled. When finished, he dropped the dagger at his slippered feet.

The Titan let go of Tyrosh, and her hair fell all around her. She gathered the long silken tresses into her hands, her elven ears all the more emphasized with her mane gone. She refused to cry, instead her voice went cold. "One of these days I'll see you pay for this, Martell!" She then let out a scream of impotent rage.

"I can't believe Gendry would name you his successor." Martell guffawed, a cruel and wheezy laugh, when he saw the shocked expression on her face. "I'd forgotten, I haven't told you the best part. At the end, when Gendry was dying, he sent for you. Lucky for me he told no one of his intentions. When he died unexpectedly, it was too simple and easy to play off being his last orphan, convincing the high priests that I am meant to be the next Titanbringer." He sauntered to where she knelt on the ground. "You were meant to control the Titans, and I stole that from you."

Tyrosh attempted to jump to her feet, filled with a desire to choke the life from this insane bastard. But the Titan, sensing her building hostility, calmly grabbed her by an arm, and dragged her from the room.

"Don't worry, darling." Martell gloated to Tyrosh, "We'll have lots of visits like this. It will never get tiring, showing you how I one-upped you."

Lov sat up to the sound of waves crashing on the beach. He peeled his eyes open, looking around the cave. Almost a week had passed since his grandfather dropped him off on this island. He had spent the last few days exploring the sandy beaches, searching for a bright purplish fruit he had discovered. He still couldn't get the addicting sweetness out of his thoughts. He had brought a few small game animals down with his bow, but there weren't many, and he had to supplement his diet with large juicy purple fruit. Still, he craved more meat, and his dragonhunger warned him it wasn't satisfied.

He walked to where the water lapped the sand, feeling the ocean's waves wash up over his feet. Lov surveyed the jungle not a hundred paces away and the mountain that thrust up from its depths. There was a pack of monkeys cavorting in the distant treetops. I've been here nearly a whole week and nothing's happened. He thought to himself.

Lov thought back to the day his grandfather had dropped him off. The old man, who happened

to be named Tryton, told him that using a focus had been the wrong thing for him to do. "It comes from inside, and you will it to happen." He had said before floating away in his humanoid form. Lov had been practicing, attempting to master the fire again. But so far his efforts had borne no fruit.

He fell into a sitting position on the beach and closed his eyes. The sun warming his face, as a cool breeze washed in from the ocean.

Piercing the silence, a crashing and thundering erupted from the jungle. Lov opened an eye, wondering what was going on. What he saw was a beast of nightmare. It was easily the size of a horse, and it loped across the sand, its paws barely touching the ground. The head of an eagle glared at him with large eyes focusing intently upon its prey. It appeared to be covered in scales the size of his fist, looking like tiny green interlocking shields over its whole body. A vicious hooked beak snapped intimidatingly as it bolted towards him.

Lov turned and ran his fastest. He sprinted towards the trees, looking for some cover. The beast gained steadily on him. Lov burst through the trees, bodily tearing a way through the thick foliage. Leaves and branches slapped him all over. He ran through a hive, causing biting, stinging insects to swarm around him in a thick cloud. He heard the beast behind him, crashing and breaking through the jungle. In desperation, Lov climbed a tree, going so high up he feared the branches would break under his weight.

Lov watched the foliage move from his high perch, as the creature stepped into view. He struggled to ignore the insects that still buzzed around him. It was looking right at him, as if it knew exactly where he was from the start. It moved underneath the young half-dragon, pacing at the bottom of the tree. The beast reared back and launched itself from the ground. Lov felt the wind of its swing against his legs as it took a swipe at him. The creature missed by feet, but the strength of the swing was still felt. It sat back again, twitching a long whip tail back and forth, considering. The creature acted, launching at the tree, and catching its long claws in the smooth bark. Lov felt the whole trunk shake. It started to pull itself up, slowly but steadily. Lov watched in fascinated horror as it drew closer. Just

when it seemed close enough to touch, its green scales the color of emeralds, deep yellow eyes staring right into the heart of Lov, it slipped and tumbled from the tree. It hit a couple of large lower branches on the way down, busting one of them from the trunk. The tree shuddered and shook with each impact.

When it landed, the animal heaved itself onto its feet and shook its head, as if to clear it. The beast gave a sharp bark, then lay down, head up gazing at Lov. The young half-dragon started looking around, hoping to see another branch or something to escape to another tree with. But nothing was close enough that he'd want to risk it.

So they waited, looking to the other to make the first move.

Chapter Fifteen

A tall, lanky old man with a thick, bushy white mustache stepped out from the trees. Tryton had changed his appearance in case Lov woke up. He looked to where his grandson slept, then turned his attention to the beast.

"Good, Fifi. But he didn't go where we wanted him to." The beast cocked her head listening. Tryton pointed to the mountain. "We need him up there, so disappear and try again."

The beast moved through the jungle, melting into the thick underbrush. Tryton sauntered over to stand under the tree's branches where the young half-dragon slept. He willed himself to levitate until he was eye level with Lov. "You better figure this out, kid. You're the only one who can save your mother, and get the Titans on the right track." He levitated down to the tree's trunk and took one last look back up at his grandson. As he walked into the forest, he grew in size. From the size of a man to the size of a wagon, then to the size of a house. His blue and orange scales glowed lightly in the night as he took off from the island, headed to his own battles he had to fight.

Lov gave a start grabbing for a nearby branch as a gust of wind blasted him in the tree. It was

still dark, but he could see. He searched for the beast that had chased him earlier, unable to spot it. He waited patiently, making sure that the beast was gone. The half-elf slowly lowered himself from the tree, feeling the jungle for any changes. As he passed where the beast scaled the tree, his fingers slipped into the gouges it had made on the trunk to his second knuckle. He snatched his hand out, shocked by how deep the claw marks were.

His foot slid on the trunk, and Lov scrambled for a hand hold on the tree, but was unable to find one. He tumbled along the same path the beast had, even landing on the branch it busted off. A sharp pain filled his side, and Lov looked down to see a piece of the branch buried there. He groaned as he twisted around trying to get a better look at the stick. It was as thick as his thumb, and it hurt. He ripped a strip of cloth from his shirt and pulled the stick out, bandaging the wound as best as he could. He felt the wound stretch as he stood. It was painful, but Lov chose not to let it affect him.

He heard a sharp familiar bark from behind him and headed deeper into the jungle, away from the sound. After several hours of traveling, he climbed another tree to get his bearings. He heard the sea from behind, but it sounded distant. From time to time, he would hear the beast making noise from that direction. The mountain rose from the jungle floor in front of him, and Lov noticed that he was much closer to it than a couple of days ago. Lov could see a small building on the mountainside, about halfway up. He decided to push for it, since he needed shelter.

Lov returned to the small shed on the mountain he had been living in for the last few months. Built to house an altar of some sort, it didn't offer much in the way of creature comforts, but it kept the water off while he slept. The wet season had rolled in, bringing much needed precipitation to the jungle, but it hampered Lov. It was hard to keep an ear out for the beast with the splattering of droplets on the ground. Twice he had almost run into it. The rain masked its sounds well.

He rounded the corner to his shelter, and went in through the open front. He nocked an arrow

lightning quick, aiming at the immense snake that was curled upon the altar.

"Put your toy away, kid. I mean you no harm." it said, sounding like his grandfather.

Lov rubbed his eyes, as if to wake from a dream. "Tryton?" He asked, thinking himself hallucinating.

The snake morphed, turning into a tall, hard looking man. His hair was long and black, and he wore a braided band around his temples. A hard hawk-like face glared at him with deep blue eyes. "I'm disappointed in you, kid. I leave you here for a couple months, hoping you'll show me some spirit. And what do you do? Survive. No fun, no pets, nothing." He threw his hands up in exasperation. "I do have to say, you've done an admirable job of surviving."

Lov heard a snap behind him. He turned in alarm, knowing the sound of the beast's beak clacking together. "Why do you jump?" His grandfather asked, coming forward to grab the beast by the scales under its beak. Tryton began to scratch the eye ridges roughly. His voice light and endearing, he cooed. "Who could jump at such a pretty girl? Fifi's so sweet, yes she is!"

Lov was startled. The creature, Fifi, flicked out a tongue long enough to lick his grandfather from two feet away. Tryton turned away from the beast and back to Lov. "If you had only turned and faced her as a dragon, she would have done you no harm."

Lov slowly blushed, turning black in the face, feeling his dragonhunger building up within him. "What in the hell do you think you're doing? You're insane! I ask for help to avenge my people, and you drop me on an island, with your crazy ass dog to keep me company? Only, you didn't tell me it was your pet! Instead, it chases me the whole time I'm here like I'm dinner!"

Tryton seemed to grow in size. His hair brushed the top of the shelter as his shoulders broadened. "Watch your tone with me, young man!" Tryton replied, his eyes glowing with a purple light. "What have you done to help your mother while you've been on this island?" The old dragon demanded.

"Nothing, there's nothing I can do from here." Lov shot back petulantly.

"There's plenty you can do from here." Tryton replied, his voice and size returning to normal.

"How are you doing at lighting a fire?"

Lov pointed to the corner where some coals burned. "I've kept that going."

Tryton gave a small laugh, then sucked the air away from the embers. "That's not what I meant." He stated as he killed Lov's fire. "I don't want to know what you can do with sticks and tinder. I want you to light that fire. Using our power, not your muscles."

Lov swallowed the anger that wanted to burst forth. Instead, he took a deep breath. "I still don't see how fire will help." He said calmly.

"Really?" His grandfather asked. "Let me show you."

The young half-dragon watched as he was surrounded by tall walls of flame. He started to reach through it, since fire didn't hurt dragons, but stopped when his grandfather told him to.

"One day, you might be able to save yourself from the flames of a fully grown dragon, but now isn't that time." Tryton dropped his flame walls and walked out the front of the building. "I'll be back in a couple more weeks to check on you." He said as he walked into the jungle. "Be sure to work on your magic! Fire is easiest, but if you can master another element, it'll do!" Tryton shouted out as he disappeared into the trees.

Lov absently reached out and scratched Fifi on her eye ridge. "Well, looks like it's just you and me, girl." He said to the hulking beast. Fifi shook her head, as if to deny, and took off into the jungle, leaving Lov alone in the dark.

His anger smoldered inside him. He could hear a phrase his father used to say. Think, Lov. Don't get angry. Your anger makes you stop thinking, when you stop thinking, you lose.

He needed to calm himself before he'd be able to do anything. Lov sat cross legged and took some deep breaths. Slowly he felt himself calm. His dragonhunger cursed his tranquility, demanded he do something besides sit there, but he pushed it aside, and felt his anger dissipate.

The young half-dragon sat as he had with his mother many times before, relaxing and drinking in the world around him. She taught Lov that you don't need your eyes to see what is around you. He felt the wind kiss his face, felt the earth beneath him welling with power. Felt the trees around him swaying. He heard the little animal sounds, chattering of squirrels and other rodents on the forest floor. The many mysterious calls of monkeys back and forth. And the birds, the wonderful strange melodic sounds they made. He didn't know how, but he tried reaching for the immense well of power he felt beneath his feet. Lov grasped a small part of it, and struggled for control. He thought he had it, when he lost it with a physical slap. It threw him to the ground, knocking the wind from him.

Lov sat up from landing sprawled on his stomach and resettled into a cross legged position. Something told him that wasn't the way. He started his breathing exercise again, this time drawing from the well of power within himself. He felt himself reach out and seize the power within. It twisted and writhed in his grasp, like an eel, slipping away from him faster than thought.

The young half-dragon tried again, wrestling the eel, and managed a form of control. He felt his mind guided, following a path laid before it.

Warmth began to come to him from where his fire was situated. He turned, a smile upon his face, until he saw what he had done. A full half of his shelter was in flames. Lov gave a startled cry and lost control. The fire swelled and burned hotter. The young half-elf grabbed his weapons and beat a hasty retreat from the burning building. Smoke billowed out behind him as he ran. He wasn't sure if that was dragon fire, but he didn't want to stick around to find out. The shelter collapsed with a whoosh shortly after he escaped. Late in the night, the collapsed shelter's embers finished burning out.

Lov walked out into the jungle, looking for a roof to place over his head. He found a cave and approached it cautiously. Rocks tripped him sending him stumbling into the cave. The darkness from the back of the cavern unnerved Lov as he lay on the ground, thankful he wasn't hurt. He decided to stick to the front of the cave. It went deeper, but he just wanted a dry place to sleep, in case the rains

came. The young half-elf curled up in a ball and went to sleep.

Chapter Sixteen

Lov was awakened in the night, hearing a snuffling sound outside. He climbed to his knees, grabbing his ax and bow, then slunk towards the entrance. Outside was the biggest bear the young half-dragon had ever seen, it would top Nord by its head and shoulders. The bear's shaggy brown coat was wet with a rain that had fallen while the young half-elf had slept, but that didn't detract from its aggressive look. It seemed to favor one paw as it walked toward the cavern's mouth. Lov wished he had been able to start a fire, but there wasn't any fuel available.

The bear spotted him inside the cave. It gave a roar as it charged the entrance. Lov reacted without thinking, swinging his ax around. He caught the bear in the shoulder as it charged over the rocks. His weapon was lost as the beast tore away, taking off through the jungle. Lov gave a curse before pursuing. He didn't want to lose his weapon.

He tracked the bear for hours, heading into parts of the jungle unknown to him. After a few hours, and many miles, the bear finally collapsed from exhaustion. Lov approached cautiously, the beast didn't react. Tentatively, he reached out and gave his ax a tug. It refused to budge from where it was, but the bear finally reacted, groaning in pain and agony. Lov touched its fur and felt its pain acutely. He knew there would be no recovering from this wound. This bear was old and sick. It had just been looking for a place to die. Lov felt pity for the beast and drew his sword.

He put the bear out of its misery, then set to work freeing his weapon.

Lov huddled, freezing in his cave. He tried building a fire for warmth, but for some reason he couldn't keep one alive. He would have a good ember burning in his kindling, but it refused to catch. The young half-dragon had seen flames for a second, but they had faded immediately. As if something

suffocated them. He thought his grandfather might have something to do with it, but there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Sight wasn't a problem. Lov could see the night-darkened jungle outside the cave as if it were daylight. The trees swayed in the breeze and the air filled with the soft sound of bird calls.

He left the cave, knowing that movement would warm him, and began looking for a plant he had seen before. Its large wide leaves would serve nicely as a blanket. Before long he was nice and warm, barely feeling the chill that had overcome him in the cave. Lov found a grouping of several nice plants. The leaves were long and wide, just one would make a nice umbrella. He broke the branch-like stalks of the leaves, picking as many as he could carry then headed back.

When he reached the cave, Lov piled them on the ground, then hopped onto them, pulling the topmost layer over himself like a tattered blanket. He fell asleep thinking of how nice a fire would be. He'd be able to cook some of the bear meat he had been eating raw. While it gave him energy, his dragonhunger craved cooked meat.

While the leaf blanket helped, Lov was still cold and shivering as he fell asleep.

Lov sat at a campfire. His father and uncle were nearby, sharing a wine skin, and talking about the lofty people of elven society. Their family was a bit of an enigma. Amon had stepped forward into a leadership role when the elven king died. An unusual role for a dark wilder elf. Lov knew he was a hero whose shrewd tactics saved countless lives, but his father always changed the subject whenever Lov would ask questions. Still, it was a warm and pleasant dream.

Lov heard the relaxing sounds of a crackling fire nearby. He sat up, startled as he finished awakening. He hadn't been able to get any fires going, yet a soft yellow light lit the cavern. Looking to the glow, he saw a large fire burning. It danced and sent shadows across the cave walls.

Lov climbed to his feet and approached the fire. As he drew near, he saw a huge lizard, easily

the size of a large dog, lay stretching and warming itself by the flames. Its scales glowed orange and red in the firelight.

"What a wonderful fire you make." The lizard said in his grandfather's voice. "A soft glow with lots of warmth. Reminds me of the fires your mother would make when she was just learning."

Lov gave Tryton a puzzled look. "I didn't build this fire." He said, wishing he had. Maybe Tryton would take him home then.

"Of course you did." Tryton replied, eyeballing Lov. "You slipped into a dream and used that to help build it up, didn't you?"

Lov shook his head. "I did have a dream, but it was just me relaxing with my father and uncle."

"Was there a fire there?" His grandfather asked, knowingly.

Lov nodded. "We were sitting around it. They were discussing some of the councilors and generals from home."

Tryton smiled at Lov. "So, if it wasn't me who built the fire..." Tryton flipped onto his back, exposing his soft blue underbelly to the flames. He scratched a claw across his blue skin. "And it wasn't you, well, who else is there, kid?" Tryton rolled himself back onto his feet, and transformed himself into the old man from the other day. He stretched, reaching for the ceiling, and gave a loud sigh of pleasure. "No form is more satisfying to stretch in than a humanoid one. Cat is a close second, but something about being able to stand and do it." Tryton's eyes went to Lov, considering. "Well there's a lot we need to teach you, and as usual, the universe never seems to give us enough time. I'm sure you'll find that out over the course of your long life." Tryton stood and headed for the cave entrance. "I guess I should get you some supplies." He disappeared, the air clapping into the space he vacated. Lov shook his head, thinking his grandfather insane. He went and cut the rest of the bear up, determined to cook the meat before it spoiled. The smell of cooking flesh filled the air, making his mouth water. The young half-dragon grabbed a piece, still hot from the flames, and gulped it down. The juices warmed his tongue and throat as the meat traveled down. As he was tossing another chunk into his mouth, he heard

a slight poof, and felt the air move as if it were fanned. Tryton waved his hands around his face.

"Whew. Sorry, Lov. I thought I left that behind."

An overpowering aroma wafted over Lov. It smelled of rotten eggs and broccoli. He gagged at the putrid stench, almost losing the meat he had just eaten.

Tryton held out a bound book to him. He also passed the young half-elf some quills and a couple of ink pots "I want you to start keeping a dream journal." Tryton told Lov. He pointed to the book. "There are two hundred blank pages in there. I don't care how stupid it seems," Tryton jabbed his finger into Lov's chest. "You write it down!" Tryton jabbed his finger at the book. "Give it a couple weeks, and I bet you dream every night."

Lov tossed the book onto his leaf bed. "Fine, but only if you stop putting my fire out." He told Tryton as he dropped into his bed. "And no more late night surprise visits. You can come by at a decent time just like anyone else."

Tryton started laughing. He laughed so hard tears streamed down his face. After a moment, he collapsed to the cave floor, still rolling with his mirth. When he ran out of breath, Tryton sucked in lungfuls of air, and slowly calmed down. "It's so cute, you thinking you can dictate me." He gave one last chuckle. "Still, I suppose I should tell you why I'm suppressing your fires. You really don't understand how pressed for time we are. One day you'll comprehend though."

Tryton rose to his feet, and transformed into a magnificent macaw. A large crest stood off his head, and his feathers were mostly red with green and yellow wing tips. "I have work I've been neglecting for you, kid. So stay out of trouble, and try not to get yourself killed." Tryton took off into the night, leaving Lov alone with his thoughts and struggles.

Chapter Seventeen

Nord awoke with a pounding in his head. He didn't remember much of yesterday, it all became hazy around lunch time. He fumbled into his clothes, still half drunk. It had been almost two months

since Lov had disappeared. Nord had no word of him, and the worrying was wearing on him. Losing your entire family in such a short time would be hard on anyone.

He stumbled out into Jaxon's kitchen, catching himself on the new table. It jiggled Jaxon's cup of coffee, slopping some over the side. Jaxon glared at his friend, not even saying good morning.

"Do you remember what happened last night?" Jaxon angrily spat out.

Nord scratched an itch on his head, stretched and yawned lazily. "No I don't, but can you not be so loud? I've got a roaring headache."

"Oh poor baby Nord, has a headache! Forget your headache!" Jaxon screamed, slamming his hand on the table and spilling more of his coffee. "Anna had to have you thrown out of the Green Dragon! You were complaining about the furniture being too small and said some pretty offensive remarks!"

Nord grabbed his head, trying to squeeze the pain out. "Don't worry, I'll pay for any damages."

"That's not the point, Nord! You're going to get me labeled a disturber of the peace! I'll never be invited to any parties! And I'll be damned if I let you ruin my free liquor just because you can't hold yours!" Jaxon jumped to his feet, and headed for the door. "I can't sit here anymore, I need some air." Jaxon slammed the door behind him.

Nord was stunned. He'd known Jaxon for many years and had never seen him this hopping mad. He went to the sink, pumping water from the spigot into a basin. He scrubbed his face vigorously, and felt the pounding in his head subside.

Nord took the last of the old coffee Jaxon had brewed, drinking it bitter and black. It tasted horrible, but the last of his headache began to recede. He looked in a mirror that hung on one wall. A gut stuck out where he used to be flat. Nord grimaced, and decided he needed to get back in shape.

He opened the front door, taking a deep breath and swinging his arms to loosen up, and started down the road at a steady trot nodding to the little people he saw about. But none of them seemed inclined to return a greeting. Most glared or ignored him, and none were kind.

He ran past the Green Dragon, seeing that the front window was boarded up. A flashback hit him. He remembered throwing a chair through the window. Slowly other memories of what he had said and done returned. Slapping the hostess across her rump, like she was a common prostitute. He couldn't even remember her name to apologize. An image, which would have been hysterical at another time, of four halflings picking the giant-like Nord off his feet, and throwing him out the door passed through his mind's eye.

Nord hurried past, embarrassed at his actions.

He returned to Jaxon's house after an hour or so. His friend had returned and was sitting at his table smoking a pipe and reading a book. Nord ducked through the door, keeping his head downcast. "I owe you and your town an apology." Nord sat next to his friend. He didn't even fan the smoke as he normally would. "I've invaded upon your hospitality long enough, Jaxon. I need to get out of this place before I go insane."

"It's all good, friend, I figured that after last night. You know us halflings, we hate change. Part of why I was so upset this morning." Jaxon sat forward, pointing the mouthpiece of his pipe at Nord. "You know that no matter what, I'm coming with you. Through the depths of hell to the top of the Mountain of Skulls, where the dragons keep their ancestors." He put his pipe back in his mouth puffing away contentedly.

Nord's eyes filled with tears. "You're a true friend, Jaxon. A better one no man could ask for."

A light voice filled the room. "Aww, isn't that sweet. Would you two like me to leave you alone for a minute?"

Jaxon rubbed his eyes and turned to Nord. "Am I seeing things?" He asked his big friend.

"I only wish you were." The big man replied. "I... hate... fairies."

A bright yellow ball of light floated down from the ceiling. The fairy inside had bright blonde hair and yellow eyes. Her dress was made of pine cone scales. "That's funny, we l-oooo-ve you!"

Chapter Eighteen

Nord led his horse. He, Jaxon, and the little fairy had been walking through the hills for weeks, and Nord was getting sick of it. The scenery was beautiful, but the constant up and down was making him dizzy and nauseous. The fairy, Missy, floated along behind them. She had been whipping Jaxon and Nord along like a slave driver. Nord had thought they were headed north when the group had left Jaxon's home, but five days out from the village, she had turned them east, heading towards Elvenhom. Nord rode on, preparing to see his ravaged homeland again. But after ten more days, she turned them back west, causing them to retrace their steps.

Nord had grumbled to Jaxon about it a little. His friend told him not to worry, she was being guided by Lov's grandfather. A dragon would guide them to where they needed to be. The giant elf rumbled a little more, but not loud enough for Missy to hear. That little blonde minx worried Nord, he knew how tricky fairies could be.

They started south before they hit the road back to Hobton, cutting cross country. After another week passed, Nord didn't know where they were being herded to. He screwed up his courage, and boldly demanded to know what their destination was.

Missy gave him a death stare, as if to imply, how dare you question me. "We're headed for Golbekli Tempe, the seat of the Anuunaki." She flew ahead of them, taking the lead, making the two riders have to push their horses hard. It was a cruel thing to do to the animals, but kept Nord from bothering her for a few minutes.

When Jaxon and Nord caught up with her they dismounted to lead their horses. Nord started with the questions again. "Why were we headed north, anyways?"

Missy rolled her eyes, turning and flying backwards to talk to him. "Did you see what you looked like? You were getting fat, and we need you in fighting shape. I don't know if there will be a dragon war, but I know the big guy told me to 'Get that loud annoying elf ready to do what he has to. And don't forget Jaxon, that kid will keep that other ijit safe'." She saw it was getting dark, so she shot

up into the sky to be a guiding light. She hated it when people questioned her guidance. She and her sisters were well trained by Tryton, they knew just how to steer his pawns.

Nord grumbled to Jaxon, who told him to shut it, leaving the elf alone with his thoughts. He reached for where Amon used to be and felt the familiar pain of what he had lost. He felt an unfamiliar presence with him though, and sent a probing question.

Clear as the fairy in the sky, lighting their way, Nord heard Uncle? Before losing contact with it. A part of his worry vanished, feeling that Lov was safe, if not happy. Late into the night, as the full moon reflected onto the lake from on high, Nord gave a sharp whistle and waved for Missy to come to their level.

She shot down, like a dart, worry clear on her face. "Did something happen to one of the horses?" She asked, her eyebrows furrowed.

Nord shook his head. "No, the horses are fine, but I think Jaxon and I need some rest." He gestured to the halfling, swaying lazily in his saddle with eyes half closed in sleep. "I don't know about you, but the walking dead creep me out."

Missy flew over to Jaxon, and punched him in the ear. Small as she is, it would have been like Nord flicking it. But it was enough to startle Jaxon awake. "What's for breakfast?" He asked cheerily, eyes red with lack of sleep. When Missy turned back to Nord, Jaxon slouched back down, eyes half closed and snored softly.

Nord chuckled, then pointed to Jaxon. Missy flipped around, then turned back to Nord. "Alright. I guess I can't be so cruel as to make you go without sleep. Besides," she said, gesturing for Nord to take his sleep pack off, "I guess it does make more sense to rest here and hurry across the salt of Tempe Bay."

Nord shuddered as he prepared for sleep. Even thinking of what had happened there filled him with despair. There once was a large inland ocean, full of islands and cities of the Anuunaki. The great Wyrms had decided they needed the water for their Tuthan made hot springs on the other side of the

world. The renegade dragons had sucked all the water away, transporting it to where the Tuthan had dug out deep pools for them.

What was left over, they dumped back into the ocean, being too lazy to carry it back to Tempe Bay. The Wyrms had taken the water, but not the salt. So the result was a vast salt flat. He hoped the rains had been plentiful there this year, as it was the only source of water for the ant people.

He pictured the only Anuunaki he had ever met. The woman stood only a little taller than an elf, but with four arms, and the ability to lift four times her own weight. They ran on four legs, small, residual abdomen sticking out between them. Her middle two legs could be used as arms, and she stood a foot taller than Nord when they stretched to their full height. The Anuunaki also had tails, similar to a scorpion's, but not ending in a stinger. Instead, the women had a nozzle that shot out slime. A goo so slippery nothing but another Anuunaki could stand on it. Nord had never seen a male, but supposedly, males were slightly smaller than the females. Having the same six appendages, but half the strength of the women, their tails end in a large blunt ball, multicolored with swirling patterns.

They hobbled the horses, and laid on the ground to sleep. Missy looked down at Nord from where she floated, keeping watch over the two men. The night passed quietly, it seemed the forest knew the group needed their sleep.

The next day, in the predawn light, Missy thought about all the intricacies of what was happening with Tryton's guidance. Nord and Jaxon thought she was leading them to Lov, which she was. But first, they needed to make another stop and pick up a field commander. Tryton wanted Nord to develop an army. The old grump figured putting as many bodies between Lov and danger was the best way to keep him safe. One day, Lov would be a powerful person, able to shape the world with a thought, but for now, he lacked the discipline and knowledge. For all his faults, Nord was a superb leader, but he needed the right commander to take him in rein.

As the sky filled with purples and pinks from the sunrise, Missy decided to wake her companions. She floated down next to Jaxon's head lightly kissing his eyelids and calling for him to wake up.

The halfling stretched and let out a light groan as he awoke. Missy motioned him to silence, placing her fingers across her lips. Jaxon sat up a little and turned to face Nord as Missy floated over to him. She landed lightly upon the saddle Nord was using as a pillow.

She grabbed her tiny knife turning back to smile slyly at Jaxon, before jabbing Nord in his earlobe. The big elf gave a yelp, slapping at his ear, thinking a bug had stung him. Missy was propelled backwards as the back of Nord's hand caught her, sending her crashing into the halfling's chest. Jaxon looked to Missy an expression of disbelief and concern upon his face. When he saw the little fairy was alright, he exploded in loud deep laughter you wouldn't expect from a person so small. Nord shook his head, clearing the last of the dream from it, then looked to his friend, "I never realized dream bees could sting so hard. What has you so jolly today?"

Jaxon fought back his laughter, choking out a "Nothing!" before Nord saw his friend shaking with contained mirth. They packed up quickly and were back on the road as the sun crested the horizon, spreading dazzling light on the world, and spraying beautiful patterns of color across the surrounding hills.

They continued to head south. Today they should reach Tempe Bay and in a few days, Golbekli Tempe. Slowly, as they traveled, the grass became more sparse and they could see sandy brown patches in the ground. Eventually they came to where the white sand beaches used to be. Nord could smell the salt from the bay in the air, left over from when the water was drained. A sandy basin spread out, stretching as far as the eye could see to a faint glimmer on the horizon.

They passed the sandy expanse quickly, and headed across the ancient sea floor. The grains were baking underfoot, Nord could feel the stuff through the soles of his boots, sun-warmed and hot enough to cook on. Something glinted in the distance. As they neared the glint on the horizon, the sky

approached them. In front of them spread the wonder of the sky, large and vast as an ocean. Clouds passed through that beautiful blue. As they drew closer to the scene, Nord saw that it was caused by a thin layer of water covering the ground, the white salt underneath caused the water to reflect the sky, leaving Nord with a tranquil feeling.

Jaxon, who had been half dozing in his saddle, suddenly jumped. To him, they went from the beautiful soft rolling hills of his homeland, to falling through the sky. Jaxon's start threw Missy, who had been sleeping in the crook of his arm, flying. She landed in the salty water, drenching her from the waist down.

"Are you kidding me?" she screamed up to the sky. Grumpily, she floated over to Jaxon, taking position over his head. She used her magic to dry her clothes, sucking the water from them. She then dumped the salty wetness onto Jaxon's head. It was just enough to soak his hair and run down his face. She flew over to Nord, landing on his shoulder next to his ear. "We should be at the city soon. Just a couple days of this hell."

They pushed hard that day and Missy used a device of tubes and pumps she had pulled from her pouch to extract the salt out of the water. Nord pumped as he listened to her speak, making a fair amount of clean water quickly. The water wasn't very refreshing and tasted flat, but it did relieve their thirst.

They found a small rise ahead white with salt, but it appeared to be dry. They stopped there, even though the sun was well above the horizon, and set up camp. Missy reached into her bottomless pouch and pulled out some jerky to share with Jaxon and Nord. Nord hobbled the horses, and pulled grain and oat bags from their pack setting them up to feed.

Jaxon pulled his pipe out of his pocket, and puffed away contentedly, watching Missy and Nord set up the camp. His job was the fire, but the wind still conspired against him, making his efforts futile.

As the sun lowered in the sky, they were surrounded by a sunset on a little white island. Pinks and purples spread around them like watercolors. Jaxon was awestruck at first, but his curiosity got the

better of him, and he skipped a stone across it. The ripples ruined the picture, but was beautiful in its own way. The pinks and purples mixed as the tiny waves spread. Eventually, the ripples faded away and the sun dipped below the horizon. They all went to sleep happy and at peace.

The next morning the companions all awoke to see a similar picture from the night before, only with oranges, yellows, and blues. They packed camp quickly and started on their way. Each wanted to reach Golbekli Tempe as soon as possible.

As they rode through the day, the scene began to wear on them. None of the riders felt comfortable. The air was too silent. In the distance, they could see small funnels of wind and water. As they drew closer to the waterspouts, which grew to immense proportions, fifteen feet wide and hundreds of feet high, Nord began to feel a tightness in his chest. Salty water rained down on the small group when the spinning water columns turned towards them. They were soaked to the bone when the water funnels died fifty feet from their party. The airborne water plummeted to the ground, pounding down upon the group like a waterfall.

Missy whined, "Not again!" wringing her hair out.

Slowly, the waterspouts spun themselves out, and the water fell back to the salt floor. They rode on in silence, Missy working her powers to keep her clothes dry and comfortable.

The group was glad to leave the basin that was Tempe Bay. It had been beautiful, being surrounded by the heavens, but it grated on your nerves after a mere few days traveling through them.

They rose up onto a large green bluff, the island that housed Gobekli Tempe. Brine flies swarmed the base of the bluff and swamped the three companions as they reached the edge of the water. Jaxon and Nord pulled cloths over their faces, and Missy hid in Nord's pocket. As they rode out onto the top of the plateau, a grassland spread out before them. On the horizon they could see a large brown mound rising out of the ground. As they drew closer, figures began to swarm from the mound rushing towards the group.

Missy said, "Be calm and let me do the talking." as the Anuunaki drew close. The insects ran

fast, their legs a blur as they crossed the grass. They surrounded the group, and pointed their tails at the companions.

Missy flew out of Nord's pocket saying, "Hi there, we're looking for a friend that should be in your city." The Anuunaki didn't move. Their multifaceted eyes gleamed in the sun.

One of them stepped forward. Her voice had a slight buzz to it. "We must ask you to remove your weapons, as we do ourselves in Gobekli Tempe," she said while reaching for a coil of twine that she carried. "They will be marked and returned to you when you leave."

Jaxon nodded and jumped from his horse, beginning to disarm. He pulled knives from his boots, sleeves, behind his back, and out of his hat, putting them in Anuunaki hands. They bound them and started to walk away. He gestured for them to stop, then pulled a mace out of his pants and a sling from his belt. He patted his body one last time, to make sure he had everything and was rewarded with a palm knife he had almost forgotten. An Anuunaki went to Nord, who surrendered his singing sword and belt knife. "Don't lose them." He said gruffly.

Missy gave the Anuunaki her most innocent look. "Even my little blade?" She asked, giving sad puppy dog eyes.

The ant being was unphased though. "Especially you. You're just the right size to be a pest."

Missy handed her knife over, a scowl on her face. The twine the Anuunaki used to bind the weapon was twice as long as the blade.

The leader motioned one of her underlings over. The Anuunaki jumped, eager to please their superior. The leader told her, "You, escort this group into the city. Take them to The Purple Mushroom and introduce them to Shatalia." The leader turned to the group, "He should be able to help you." She turned to the rest of her company and ran back to the city.

Their escort turned to them and with a hard buzz in her voice said, "My name is Zth. Please follow me." With that, Zth took off ahead of the party, stopping and pacing every time she was a hundred meters ahead of them. Her legs moved lightning fast while she paced impatiently waiting for

the group to catch up. As they approached the mound, they could see a vast hole in the side of it. A loud buzzing came out of the cave while a brisk wind blew from inside. The buzzing became louder as they walked deeper into the cavern. Once inside, they saw dozens of large female Anuunaki the size of Nord, waving broad long leaf fans at an amazing rate. The air that passed them was warm and smelled of close bodies.

The companions and Zth passed into a wide tunnel that split seven different ways. Their guide headed purposefully towards the closest one, motioning impatiently for the group to follow. They walked along the long corridor, brightly lit shops appearing cut into the walls. They were lit with the same bright blue bulbs that Jaxon used in his underground rooms, only these were brighter. "How do you get such bright bulbs?" He asked wanting that kind of lighting for his own underground complex.

Zth stood still for a minute, as if thinking, then replied, "We make them. They are a chemical we find deep in the earth."

Jaxon jumped for joy. "I want some before we leave!" he said, glee in his voice.

"Of course, someone will take you at a later date."

Zth guided them to a hole in the wall, a large purple mushroom painted above the entrance. She led them into the bar, and pointed to a male Anuunaki behind the counter. He was a rich warm brown, and taller than Jaxon. "He's Shatalia. He will help find your friend." Zth walked them over and did introductions. She then turned and headed out of the cavern at a rapid rate.

Shatalia turned to them, speaking with a slight and light buzz. "It's just Talia, how may I help you?" He asked, turning his head to look at all of them.

Missy flew around the room, drinking in the sights. It was a marvel of architecture. The walls and ceilings curved together seamlessly. The floor looked made of dirt, but felt like marble. The walls reflected the glow of the blue bulbs into the common room, lighting up the entire area with just a few of them. Nord watched as Missy flew off, lost in wonderland. He shook his head, cleared his throat, and started describing Lov. "Yes, we're looking for a young half-elf, maybe a foot and a half shorter

than I am, with dark blackish blue-gray scaly skin, and long pointy elf ears." He pointed to his own long and well-kept ears.

Talia seemed to pause, then spoke. "I have heard of no one by that description in this part of the city." She shook her head negatively, "And outsiders are not allowed in any of the lower caverns."

A dejected look passed over Nord's face. He'd been hoping Lov was here. It's why he stuck to Missy rather than leaving to search on his own.

Missy flew over, scolding Nord. "I told you to let me do the talking." She turned her attention back to Talia. "We're looking for an elf. Somewhere between the short one and the tall one's height, with pale brownish white hair and deep blue eyes."

Nord rolled his eyes. "You just described about one quarter of my people."

Missy shot him a glare and continued to Talia, "His name is Sanche."

"Sanche!" Nord exclaimed, "Why didn't you tell me we were saving him?"

"Because you didn't ask, Dummy!" She shot back before turning to hear what Talia had to say.

"Sanche I have heard of." Talia said, pointing to a figure at a corner table. "I believe he is here as a guest of Xctchul, one of our retired generals."

Missy thanked the Anuunaki and flew to where the elder elf was seated, Nord and Jaxon trailing in her wake.

Nord didn't even recognize the man they approached. Sanche looked nothing like the elf Nord had trained and fought with. His cheeks were sunken in, and his eyes stuck out from his face, making him look bug eyed. Sanche's hands appeared skeletal. His fingers stuck out like claws. But the worst were his ears. Before, he had long beautiful ears. They had been his pride and joy, now nothing remained. Holes were all that showed where his ears had been. He used his hair to cover the scars of mutilation.

"Sanche?" Nord asked, still not believing it to be him.

Sanche turned his head slowly. He scowled at the three companions, then rubbed his eyes

vigorously. "Nord?" He asked, disbelief in his voice. "Damn hallucinations, be gone!"

Nord reached out and touched Sanche's hand, "Sorry old friend, you're not licking the toads of ogier groves... I'm real."

Sanche jumped from his chair, and Nord couldn't believe how horrible, emaciated, and creepy his friend looked. "Oh my goodness! Nord!" Sanche wrapped the giant elf in a tight hug. His great big smile made him almost appear normal. "I never thought I'd ever see another elf!" Sanche took his seat again and looked around the room. "Where's Lov?" He asked, eager to see his best young archery student.

"His grandfather came and took him." Nord answered truthfully. He pointed to Missy. "She had me thinking we were going to find and meet him here."

"We are, ijit." She shot back, floating to the table to land next to Sanche's drink. "These youngsters can be so impatient. I told him we were going to meet Lov here, and we will. As soon as his grandfather brings him." She nodded her head to emphasize the point.

"If you say so, little one. I try not to fathom the mysteries of dragons." Sanche shuddered. "My own are bad enough."

"How did you end up here anyways?" Nord asked, leaning into the table.

Sanche shook his head. "I wish I could forget that journey." His eyes lost focus and the smile left his face. "I won't tell you what happened in the council room. I don't want to relive that nightmare again unless I must. Suffice it to say, I escaped with my life if not my ears."

He took a long pull from his cup and motioned for Talia to bring him more. "I found a woman escorting her children out of the city. One was an infant, the other couldn't have been more than twelve. I joined them, thinking to keep them safe. We managed to avoid all the Titan patrols, and I managed to keep them from the mutilation. We made it to the Great Wyrms Desert, but the infant couldn't survive on the little bits of water we were able to find."

Sanche saw his cup was filled, and drained it in one shot. "The mother, I lost a short time later.

We were crossing the back of a dune made from the spine of one of the great Wyrms. She was bringing up the rear, and as she crossed one of the vertebrae, it separated from the spine, sending it tumbling down the dune. She was buried under the sand, and though we dug for her, we never found her." He paused a moment, then took a deep shuddering breath before continuing.

"Her son and I struggled on. We made it to the bay just fine, but once we reached it, and saw the reflection of the sky in the water, he seemed to give up. I told him not to drink the water, but he wouldn't listen. He drank his fill. As we approached the bluff, he collapsed, falling from his horse and smacking his head upon the salt. He died, of course. I told him not to drink the water!" The last he yelled, hurling his cup across the room before bursting from his seat and running out the door.

Chapter Nineteen

Lov watched the fire he had started drop to bare embers. They were outdoors tonight, enjoying the cool air. The ever present waves played their continuous song. His grandfather sat across from him, stretching and yawning lazily. Lov struggled to find power to feed the coals, but wasn't able to grasp it. The embers died, a trail of smoke rising serenely from the now blackened wood.

"Better, Lov." Tryton said lazily, scratching his side as if he had just woken up. "Much better. I actually had to put a little effort into it." He leaned forward and shook his finger in Lov's face. "But you can do better. I know you have elf blood in you, but you're still a dragon!" Tryton pumped his fist in the air. "We are beings made of magic. Nothing is beyond the realm of possibilities, but you have to concentrate!"

"I'm trying!" Lov complained, grabbing the energy and using it to restart the fire. It roared to life. "It's so hard trying to set it. I feel the pattern forming, but my own doubts stop me from stopping you from killing the fire!" Lov sprang to his feet. "It makes me just want to scream. Balancing the knife edge, using my dragonhunger, while not letting it use me." His shoulders slumped as he sat back down. "Maybe I'm just tired."

"Well, you identified half the problem. You need to conquer your doubt." His grandfather gave him an appraising look. "What are you worried about anyways? Do I beat you when you fail, to make you so afraid of it?"

"No, you don't." Lov conceded. "But I know that until I master this, I'm stuck here." He gave a sigh and lifted his eyes to the sky. "I just want to save my mother and my people. I feel their captivity like a chain around my neck."

Tryton took Lov's hands into his. "My boy, you are still very young. You'll learn in time that all things happen in their own time."

"Yes, boy." A strange voice said contemptuously from behind Lov. He turned, seeing an old woman. She was attired simply in a long dress in varying hues of purple that covered her from neck to ankle. Her hair was white as snow, gathered into a bun on the top. She carried herself with a regal air as she approached Lov flashing him a predatory smile. "Don't worry, boy, I won't bite you. At least not hard enough to draw blood."

"Ah, Draka, I was beginning to wonder when you were going to show up." Tryton said, turning to Lov. "Be careful around her, kid. She may be your grandmother, but you need to watch her, she's one of the great Wyrms."

Lov moved away from the woman. Draka pouted at Tryton. "There you go again. I suppose you've told him how evil and wrong we Wyrms are, but your vaunted light wouldn't burn so bright without the darkness." She turned to Lov smiling and appraising the young half-dragon. He was beginning to feel like he was being hunted. "I come bearing a gift, Grandson." She snapped her fingers and a belt appeared in her hands. Long and supple, the belt was made of braided leather with a buckle that glowed reddish silver in the firelight. "Here, this will help you to find your focus."

Lov eyed the belt and his dragonhunger roared within him. Tryton glared at Draka, "Can't you wait until I've trained him before you ply him with your toys?" He asked her contemptuously.

"Well, I would have left him alone for a bit longer, but someone who had an engagement at a

party with me didn't show!" Her voice roared like a hurricane on the last two words, but was clear in Lov's ears. In her normal voice she continued. "You and the dragons were supposed to meet us in a neutral battleground. I've wanted your head for my cave for a long time, and I'm growing impatient with your cowardice."

"That's right, Draka, show the boy how dark and twisted we become. Show him why we must always fight our dragonhunger." He took the belt from her. "I'll make sure he gets this when we finish his training. You're right saying it will help him someday."

"As for our battle, even you must agree we should put it off long enough to train our youngest descendant. I mean, what would the other Wyrms say if he were to be weak? What would they say about you? Besides, I refuse to let him languish in ignorance. That would do nothing but leave him to your clutches once I was gone. I could never harm you, you're my sweet buttercup." He caressed her cheek softly, and she leaned into it, she loved attention of any kind. He pulled his hand away quickly, as if burned. "But you are not the woman who was my mate. I hardly recognize you anymore."

Lov sat, utterly stunned by these two insane beings. Between the two of them, he knew whole worlds could be ripped apart. It was like watching two feral cats fighting over a piece of meat. "You two do realize I'm still here, don't you?"

Tryton and Draka both jerked slightly. "Little boys should be seen, not heard!" Draka replied coolly. She snapped her fingers, and Lov felt his mouth slam shut. He tried to speak, but his lips wouldn't part. She turned back to Tryton a fiendish light in her eyes. "Do what you will with him. But I think first, you should remove your block. It's hampering his ability to connect."

Tryton bowed. "We'll try it. I will concede, you were always a better teacher than I."

Draka turned to Lov and grinned before disappearing in a clap of air. That predatory smile made him feel even more like a piece of meat.

The next morning Lov awoke to an empty beach. The fire had burned down to coals and the sea spread out from the sand into the horizon. He sat, thinking about the woman from the night before. She hadn't seemed as horrible as everyone had led him to believe Wyrms were. Still, he couldn't help the feeling that she looked at him as nothing more than a pawn. A piece to move around the game table at will. He looked to the belt she gave him. Tryton had given it to him the night before, after thoroughly inspecting it to make sure there wasn't a curse upon it. His dragonhunger sighed contentedly whenever he looked upon it.

His stomach grumbled at him, so he rose to his feet, grabbing his bow and quiver. He heard the sharp bark of Fifi and knew his grandfather was still on the island. Lov considered that Tryton might be trying to get him to move camp. They had done that several times since Tryton had joined Lov, but he never came out and said, 'We're moving!' It took Lov a week to realize that the first time, and three days the second.

As he moved inland, searching for small game he saw not one creature. The animals had come to fear him since he arrived on the island. It became harder and harder to find good meat. All he needed was to get lucky and shoot a nice sized hog. One of those would feed him for a few days.

He found one of the bright purplish fruits that tasted of heaven, spotting it high in a tree. He managed to find a few of these rare and succulent delicacies throughout the island. They seemed to grow randomly, sometimes high in a tree, other times growing straight out of rock. He plucked the fruit, savoring the taste as he continued on his journey.

Something told him to head up the side of the mountain. He felt guided, as if a hand held his collar and dragged him there. He searched for a good game trail to start the climb, finding a well-worn goat path winding its way up the rocky terrain. He kept an eye out for any animals, knowing a ram wouldn't hesitate to headbutt him off the path. He followed the trail and slowly wove his way up the mountain. As he reached a certain point, impassable because of loose pea gravel, he felt himself guided into a crack that suddenly appeared. Sheer walls rose high overhead, a narrow strip was all that showed

the sky. He had to turn sideways in a few places, but finally found himself walking into a wide open bowl, a large cavern on the opposite side.

Lov could see immense dragon skulls lining the way. Some had crests three feet in radius, the bone rising away from the neck like a lion's mane. Others had horns as tall as Lov's uncle. He passed through a large gaping maw, a wall of smaller skulls lining the inside of the bowl. As he drew nearer, he could see even smaller skulls, those the size of an elf's head, pressed into the mouth of the cavern, making a rough doorway. He approached cautiously.

He tried to pass through the doorway, but an invisible force refused him entrance, pushing him back. "Back off, kid," Tryton called from inside. "You're not ready to come in here, it would fry your mind." Tryton came out, carrying a skull as big as Lov's torso in his hands. Tryton motioned Lov into the middle of the bowl. A fire appeared from nothing, illuminating the whole area like a blazing sun.

Lov walked to the edge of the fire.

"Step in." Tryton told him, motioning with the skull for Lov to step into the flames.

Lov forced the fire out, as he passed into the center of it. The flames roared around him, Lov liked the warmth they shed upon him.

"I needed some help with this." Tryton told Lov, handing him the skull.

Lov held it by a tooth and a horn, the other horn resting on his upper arm. The horns were smooth and black. His hand glided over it like polished marble. The fangs were immense. He gripped one by the tip, but it easily outsized his hand. He could feel sharp serrations along one edge of the canine.

A voice flooded his head, seeming to reverberate through him. "Ah, a young one. I see why he needs help. His shields have fused with those your mother put upon you." Lov felt a pressure he never even realized release. The world seemed brighter. He heard a loud repetitive sound, but he couldn't pinpoint it.

"I suggest you don't leave the valley for, oh, a hundred years." The voice vibrated through him.

His sense of it was intensified, he could feel it in his temples. The sun, which had been hidden behind the mountain, rained down into the bowl. Intense pain greeted the young half-dragon's eyes as he tried to look at the world as he always did. The voice commanded him, "Hey, hand me back to Tryton before you drop me!"

Lov thrust the skull out, blindly, and felt the presence disappear as it was lifted from him. The world was still too bright and rough on his vision, and the popping of the fire sounded like explosions in his ears.

He heard his grandfather's voice, booming and echoing around the bowl. "I'm sorry, Lov. This is going to hurt, but we don't have time to coddle you as your mother would want." Lov heard a splatter near his feet. "I don't envy you right now, but this needs to be done."

An intense smell assaulted his nostrils. It smelled putrid and rotten, with just a hint of burn. Lov found himself wishing he hadn't found the fruits this morning. His stomach heaved, bringing up purplish chunks, his throat burning from the acid.

"What a waste of dragon fruit." Tryton said, shaking his head disappointedly. "Remember, this was your grandmother's idea."

Chapter Twenty

Lov suffered through hell the first day. It started out sunny and bright, the popping wood of the fire exploding in his ears. Before long though it rained, and he hated it more. The rain was a light sprinkle, but to Lov the drops were drums, thundering constantly. Lightning would explode in his ears, and the flashes would blind him for tens of minutes. Before he found a slight overhang to huddle under, the rain had felt as if it were battering him, pounding into his skin and getting under his scales. He felt chilled to his bones as he prayed for the sun to return. His eyes had hurt worse with the blazing ball of light in the sky, but the rain was unbearable.

The storm kept him awake all night. Towards morning, it blessedly moved from overhead. The

sun was just lighting the horizon as Lov sat and listened to the world. He heard a sound like someone drumming their fingers. Lov craned his neck around searching for Tryton, or anyone else that could be making the noise. As he looked, he noticed he could focus on a spot, and zoom in upon it. For example, the tip of a blade of grass. He could focus upon it and see the serrated edges of the blade. All of it he processed instantly. The wind blew through the bowl, howling around it, causing swirling eddies. Lov shivered as it blew past him, and watched the sky as the sun lightened it. He was amazed to see greens and yellows mixing with reds and blues. It looked like an oil slick across the sky. It was as if a god had painted the clouds with rainbows. Lov sat breathless and filled with awe.

The sun coming over the lip of the bowl blinded Lov, and he covered his face with his hand, blocking out the burning light. Slowly he felt the searing pain subside. He felt the small puff of wind that signified Tryton's arrival.

"How are you doing, kid?" Lov heard his grandfather's voice thundering in his ears. "Is there anything you need? Food? Water?"

Lov slowly removed his hand from his face, so he could glare at Tryton and give him a piece of his mind. But Lov was shocked to see Tryton standing on the other side of the bowl. Tryton, seeing his grandson's face, laughed, and it roared in Lov's ear. "You think that mean mug is going to scare me?" Even though Lov watched Tryton say it calmly, Lov couldn't believe what he heard was so loud.

Lov sighed wearily. "I just want to get some time away from here. I've been here for months, and I've hardly relaxed." Lov turned beseechingly to his grandfather. "Will you please send me back to my uncle? I need time to digest everything that's happened to me."

Tryton looked to the heavens, rolling his eyes thinking, the boy will never learn. "Are you sure that's what you want?" He asked.

"Yes!" Lov all but shouted. His own voice thundered in his skull, making him wince.

"Alright, I'll send you back to your uncle. Bumble headed buffoon won't know what to do with you, but that's better than you moping around here." Tryton yelled out "Tinkle, come here!" The

familiar blue fairy appeared out of thin air.

"What's up, old man?" She demanded, anger in her eyes. "I was just about to bathe in the waterfalls."

"What's the idiot up to?" He asked.

"You'll have to be more specific." She replied. "You call a lot of people idiots."

Tryton chuckled a little. "I mean the elf idiot."

"Oh, Nord!" She concentrated for a minute, thinking over her reports. "Missy says they're in Gobekli Tempe with the halfling."

"That will do nicely." He turned to Lov, "Grab the kid's things and drop them there with his uncle. I'll follow with Lov in a moment."

She glared at Tryton. "You better make this worth my while, I'm not an errand runner. Especially since you're making me miss my shower!" She stepped sideways and disappeared.

"Alright kid, you need to grab your power, and just hold it. I'll guide you through the spell we'll use to transport."

Lov nodded and attempted to seize it. The sun blazed on his closed eyelids, blinding and painfully bright. He shook his head in disgust after a moment. "I just can't seem to grasp it." The young half-elf complained.

"No matter, that just would have made it easier on you." Tryton reached out and seized Lov. It felt as if his body were ripped apart tiny piece by tiny piece, and reformed in a dark cavern. It was agony, and when he felt himself pull back together his hearing was assaulted. The cavern reverberated with the tremors of thousands of people marching past. Lov felt the vibrations of them through his ears and feet.

"Yes, this will do nicely." The old man said, walking deeper into the cave.

Tyrosh walked through the lush garden inside the temple. They grew everything here. Every spice, every flower, some crossbred and found nowhere else in the world. Huge statues of dragons lined the garden. Some as tall as a Titan, if not taller. Others were more the size of a vase. Every one of them was different. Here a serpentine dragon, a long twisting sinuous body with small wings. There a monitor dragon, fat and wide like the lizard with a large wingspan. She loved to come here, it had always been her favorite place in the temple structure.

As she walked, she could see some novices practicing their meditation. One, a large ogier, sat softly humming to himself. Tyrosh was a dragon, used to forming the reality around her to work her magic. Even the Titanbringer needed the Breath of the Titans to bring his constructs to life. But these ogier were amazing, they sang to plants, and the plants grew. They also shaped, formed and split how the ogier wished them to go.

This one was singing to a young sickly flower vine. The flowers hung, weak and brown on the vine. But as the ogier sang, the sad brown flowers rejuvenated, filling with a rich purple. The leaves, which had been hanging on by a thread, sprang to life and glowed a hearty green.

"That's beautiful." She whispered in his long pointy ear. Unlike the elves, it was as hairy as a halfling's. "What's your name?"

The ogier gave a start, then turned and bowed low to Tyrosh. He was short for an ogier, only standing head and shoulders above her. He had soft black hair, cut short as most novices kept their hair. "Thank you, Great One, and honor to you and yours. My name is Kaon." He bowed low, his ears tipped back and his cheeks rosy. "And your praise brings me honor. Some ogier wait all their lives for praise from one of your kind."

Tyrosh shook her head. "How many times must we dragons tell you? You ogier are just as powerful as we are, just in a different way." She turned and gestured to the temple wall. It extended hundreds of feet above her, covered in vines and grasses, trees jutting out from the many different levels. "Just look what your kind does to beautify this place. Without you, Dalanar's sacrifice would be

a plain bit of stone." She turned back to the ogier. "I know he loves the life and vitality your kind brings to the stark rock."

"How could we do any less? He sacrificed himself for the whole world."

Tyrosh smiled. "That's why every being in this world could learn a lesson from the ogier."

The Titan that was her ever present guard walked over and placed a hand on her shoulder. "The Titanbringer wishes to speak with you." It stated.

Tyrosh turned back to the young ogier. "Until next time, Kaon."

Kaon bowed low, the Titan escorting Tyrosh away. It followed her as she crossed the complex, walking by where the constructs were forged. She could see some novices meditating over the armor, pulling pieces from the racks hanging on the walls, and focusing their energy into individual segments. She could hear the metallic twang of blacksmiths pounding out the metal coming from ahead of her. The forges they used were covered in shining silver runes, and she could see a faint blue sheen where the hot air tried to force its way out of the furnace. Swirls and spirals lined the furnace doors.

There were beings of every sort here, even orcs were welcome to train as an acolyte of Dalanar. She watched as one, hairy with the thick black fur of his people, poured old armor into a crucible. It appeared Reggie wasn't the only old Titan destroyed. Most of the beings in here were human though, and none women. She snorted her nose at that. She would never understand why humans refused to let women step into their traditionally male professions. She believed they cut themselves short, keeping the elven smiths, a lot of whom were female, from their forges.

At the anvils, large broad shouldered men pounded out the iron. The anvils were set onto raised platforms, covered with runes and symbols. A soft yellow light emanated from the lines. Elvish was inscribed along the edges of the anvil, Tyrosh knew it said "And I give you breath."

Tyrosh continued into the main temple building, walking towards the lifts at the center of the complex. While Gendry had slept most nights with the orphans in the school, or wherever sleep happened to find him, Martell had taken the uppermost level of the temple for his rooms. She rode the

lift to the top, stepping from the plain bareness of the public temple, to the opulence that Martell had always sought in life. Rich silk tapestries covered the walls in dark blues and greens. Large gold statues were placed on pedestals down the hallway. Most were great humans from before the Dragon Wars, when they had spread over the world.

She strode through the arches that led into Martell's study. "It's bad enough you've cut my hair, enslaved my people, and are making a sham of what should be an honored and great office. You can't give me a morning walk without calling to torture me with your presence more?" She threw her hands up in disgust. "So what is it now? What couldn't wait?" She glared at him, wishing he would melt into a puddle of pig excrement.

Martell glowered at her. "You do know I'll need to punish that ogier, don't you?" He strode to his desk, picking up a piece of paper. "All temple personnel are to leave the dragon, Tyrosh, to suffer in her shame for her crimes against me.' This was spread throughout the temple, posted in the barracks, and the priests have been trying to drive it in to the ogier." He continued as he threw the paper to the desk. "Kaon ignored a directive, he'll be flogged for it."

Tyrosh's eyes flashed. If she had not been restrained by the necklace, she would have eaten Martell right here and now. Instead she growled, low and dark. "Mark my words, Martell, if you do anything to that boy, everyone will suffer."

"You should have thought of that before talking with him." He motioned for the Titan to drag her away. "Lock her in her rooms, so she can't spread any more discontent."

The Titan grabbed Tyrosh by her wrist, and dragged her from the room. "Don't do it, Martell, we'll all suffer!" She shouted out as the door closed behind her.

Lov covered his ears as he walked. It didn't really help with the noise he heard, but it made him feel better. The pounding had quieted some as they had traveled through the caverns, but a loud

humming had taken its place. He could still feel the rocks vibrating under foot. But his vision had returned to normal, if you call being able to see in the dark as if it were a sunny day normal. When they had first entered the cave system, Lov had seen as if they walked in the noon day sun. Now blindingly bright points of blue light spread across the corridor they walked. Tryton walked purposefully ahead of Lov, as if he knew exactly where they were going.

They came to a hole in the wall, a large purple mushroom painted above the door. Tryton strode through and approached the bar. Behind the stone counter was the strangest being Lov had ever seen. It looked like an ant that had grown to monstrous proportions. The hard chitin that was its skin was a rich brown, and the eyes glowed like rainbows in Lov's new vision. It stood, staring into a ball that appeared to be attached to its tail. That ball glowed like the points of light from the corridor, only softer.

Tryton rapped his knuckles on the counter top. "Hello, good sir." The being said from behind the bar. It tucked its tail behind itself. "How may I help you this afternoon?"

Tryton smiled, flashing pearly white teeth. "Yes, I'm looking for a seven foot tall elf, he's kind of an idiot, way too pretty for his own good." Tryton pointed to the stairs cut into the walls. "I just didn't want you to flip your lid when I went up there. I know how prickly your species can be."

Chapter Twenty One

Nord lay back on his bed, a copy of Rorchester Wallace's Journey Along the Way in his hands. He hadn't even heard the commotion coming from the common room, so engrossed in his book was he. But he noticed when an older man, with a long white whiskery beard and a bald head, burst through the door to his room.

Nord reached for his sword, leaning haphazardly on the wall next to the bed. He snatched it scabbard and all, swinging it to face the old man.

"Oh, put that toy away, you ijit." The old man admonished him. "You look almost as silly as you did at Tyrosh and Amon's marriage ceremony." He reached out into the hallway, dragging someone into

the room behind him.

"Are you done being loud yet?" Nord heard the person ask as they were pulled into the room. His heart skipped a beat when he realized who it was. Nord looked again, then ran over gathering his nephew in a hard hug. "Dalanar be praised! Lovonian!" He exclaimed.

"Yeah, yeah, my father be praised." Tryton answered cynically before taking a seat in one of the chairs.

Lov pushed against his uncle, trying to get him to loosen his hug. "Not so loud, Uncle! My ears and head hurt so badly. I hear a few thousand people marching across my brain."

Tryton gave a small laugh. "Try closer to fifty thousand. The Anuunaki like having a large standing army." Tryton focused his attention on Nord. "Now you listen carefully, you imbecile." Nord bristled at the second insult from what he knew was Lov's grandfather. "Lov is going through a sensitive time. He's just now experiencing the full stimuli that comes from having a dragon's senses. I don't care how badly you torture him, as long as when I come to pick him up, he's in one piece." He turned back to Lov, stabbing a finger in his face. "And you, stay out of trouble. Keep trying to work your gifts, just try to stay away from the lightning, it's hard to control in tight spaces."

Nord walked to the bed and sat down "I'm glad to have Lov back, but are you really just going to dump him here like that?"

Tryton smiled a toothy grin. "Of course I am. You're the one he was asking for. Besides, would you bring someone acting as he is to a battle?" Tryton disappeared, a loud clap following, as it always did.

Nord turned to Lov. "That's what you've been dealing with for the past six months?" He asked incredulously. "I only see him in bits and pieces, thank the maker." He took a deep breath, calming the last waves of irritation within. "What has that old bat been doing to you for the last six months?" He really took in how Lov looked. The boy had never really been fat, but what baby fat there had been had melted away. The boy's face had more hard edges, and sharp angles to it. He didn't look like a boy

anymore.

"Let's just say that wasn't an experience that I want to repeat, but will have to if I want to save Mother." Lov walked over and flopped onto the bed. "I'm happy to see you, Uncle, really, I am. But all I want to do right now is sleep on this nice soft bed. Without a root in my back, or a rock in my side."

Nord protested. "But it's the middle of the day! We have to find Jaxon, he's outside the temple here, waiting for Sanche." Nord expected Lov to jump at that. He and Sanche had been close.

Lov waved him away. "I'm sorry, Uncle, I just keep getting overwhelmed. I'm hearing so much right now. Like the barkeep complaining about how Tryton is a dick for barging up here."

"He is a bit of a dick, isn't he?" Nord chuckled, glad to know he wasn't the only one upset at that damn dragon.

"Uncle!" Lov barked, command entering his voice.

"Alright, I can see someone missed a few naps because of that old man. I'll check on you soon, in a bit I guess." Nord slammed the door behind him, just because he could.

"You're a jerk, Uncle!" Lov shouted after him. Nord chuckled to himself, going to the bar and getting a disposable cup of beer. It was bitter, but better than anything else an elf would drink. He walked out of The Purple Mushroom, heading deeper into the cavern complex. A wide open area appeared as you passed through the corridor. Huge stalactites hung from the ceiling. Holes had been cut through them for windows. Nord could see hundreds of people stacked together, their faces glowing blue in the light from the bulbs. Short stalagmites served as light posts, while others soared into the ceiling. Nord heard thousands of voices all around him. One thing about the bare stone that served as the home of the Anuunaki, it carried noise. A soft roar surrounded Nord as he walked farther into the complex. He approached the temple the Anuunaki had set up for outsiders to pray to their gods. The Temple of Many Faiths was a magnificent structure, one pyramid leading up to another pyramid, stacked upside down upon it. A large statue of an Anuunaki woman stood outside it. She was the last queen of the Anuunaki, the one that passed breeding to all of her daughters. Her name was Xinthar.

Jaxon was leaning lazily against the statue, looking to the entrance, and puffing away furiously on his pipe. Nord tried to sneak up on his friend, but the halfling turned just as his tall friend was reaching to goose him. Nord snapped his fingers. "I almost had you."

Jaxon laughed. "Are you sure about that? Missy told me you were coming as soon as the old coot left. I've been expecting you."

Nord frowned at his friend. "I hate fairies. And soon dragons will be on the list!"

"He call you an idiot again?" Jaxon asked.

"That's not the point!" Nord snapped. "Besides, I'm more worried about Sanche right now. Has he come out of there yet?"

"Nope. In fact, one of the priests in there told me he'd string me to his guitar if I tried to sneak back into the meditation rooms again." Jaxon shook his head. "Never thought I'd see the day a man of cloth threatened bodily harm. But these Anuunaki are touchy."

"Hey now! They aren't so bad." Nord defended. "In fact, I think they're a great group of people."

Jaxon rolled his eyes. "Let me guess, the stodgy one behind the bar didn't like Lov's grandfather either?"

Nord glowered at his friend. "You're entirely too good at that." He waved a cloud of smoke Jaxon blew into his face away, giving a slight cough. "Do you really have to smoke that thing while we wait for Sanche to quit pouting?"

Now it was Jaxon's turn to glower. "First of all, he's not pouting." The little man climbed onto a stone bench nearby, attempting to look his friend in the eye as he defended Sanche. "He's grieving. Did you not hear the story of his journey? And secondly, yes, I do have to smoke this thing." With that, he blew another thick cloud of smoke in Nord's direction.

"Fairies, dragons, and halflings." Nord grumbled to himself, as he leaned against the statue, settling in for a long wait.

Jaxon chuckled. "I welcome my place on that list, my friend!" He said, taking off down the

street.

"Hey, where are you going?" Nord shouted after him.

Jaxon yelled back. "I've been here staring at that door for four hours! Your turn for guard duty!"

"Well, where the hell is Missy?" Jaxon ignored his friend, pretending he didn't hear Nord, and continued down the street. He found a guard, standing on a corner of an intersection and approached her for directions.

"Excuse me." Jaxon started, waving to the warrior. She was slightly taller than he was, and held an impressive poleaxe in her arms. It appeared to be made from a large chitinous forearm, and glowed faintly green in the blue light of the street lamps. Her chitin was a dark reddish brown, like oxblood. She turned to him, head cocked to the side. "Do you know where I can find some blue bulbs?" He asked her, looking for guidance.

She shook her head at him and put her arms up as if mimicking a shrug. Jaxon shook his head, then pulled his coin purse from his belt. He shook it, then pointed to the street lamp. The guard nodded and led him through the windy streets, then inside an immense stalagmite, taking him to an Anuunaki male who sat behind a large desk.

"My name is Kaila, can I help you?" He asked from where he was seated, looking to Jaxon. The man's chitin was a deep rich forest green with small yellow spots, circular in shape.

Jaxon flashed the Anuunaki a smile, gesturing for the female to stay. She buzzed a little, then strode away. Jaxon shook his head and turned back to the male. "Well, I've learned that you sell blue bulbs here, and I'd like to purchase some."

"Ah, yes, we usually don't sell them unless we have a bad batch." Kaila gestured around, "We're the only factory in the whole of Gobekli, but this chamber for outsiders is the only one we use them in."

"Ah, I see, well, can I still get a tour? I do use some, and it would be nice to find out how they're made." He shook the purse at his belt, and it jingled with the ring of coins.

"Something may be able to be arranged." Kaila replied, gesturing for Jaxon to show him the money.

Jaxon slid two gold coins across the table, and Kaila just stood there. He slid one more over and Kaila scooped them up and gestured for Jaxon to follow.

He guided Jaxon to a ramp that wove its way around the inner wall of the building. Windows were cut into the outer walls along the passage. As they climbed higher, rooms began to appear on the inner side of the tunnel. The first room Jaxon looked into contained thousands of bright blue bulbs, laying in bins along the wall. Workers swarmed around the room, separating bulbs out by size and shape, before placing them into the bins on the walls. Kaila looked in too, and said. "Not bad production for today.", then went on up the hall.

They passed four more rooms with as many bulbs as the first one before coming to a different chamber. Inside was a fountain, natural looking and constantly flowing. Bright blue liquid poured from the fountain into a large stone vessel, where it collected. Jaxon could see another container off to the side, workers ready to move in when the first one was full. The floor had splatter spots all around where the vessel sat.

"It's beautiful." Jaxon said reverently before being dragged away.

"Yes, but quite poisonous to beings. Those workers are specially bred for this type of work. They'll take the liquid to another room where magic will be used to seal the bulbs. Makes the bulbs less likely to break." Kaila continued walking as he talked. "Now on to the last stage. Where the whole process starts."

"Wait, what about the magic?" Jaxon asked anxiously.

"We don't give away all our secrets." Kaila replied, pulling him into a last room. In it was an open stone vat. Liquid dripped into it from above, at the top of the structure. Workers stood chucking what appeared to be eggs into the vat.

"Those aren't what I think they are, are they?" Jaxon asked gesturing to one of the workers.

"Yes, they are the unhatched fertilized eggs of my people." Kaila gestured into the vat. "The liquid and vat happened to be here when my people first tunneled into the rock formation, looking for a good room to set up for disposing eggs that didn't hatch. One of our workers, when we were slaves to the queen, was careless and dropped his eggs into the vat, which then began to glow. We found they were helpful in lighting up our merchant area, where we deal with outsiders. So as you can see, our recipe can't be made anywhere else."

"In other words, you have me by the balls if I wish to buy some." Jaxon said, thinking of the gold he had asked Missy to carry for him.

"Precisely."

Chapter Twenty Two

Lov lay on the bed, attempting to sleep and get some reprieve from the sounds of a closed in city. The whole room buzzed with it, and the sounds of marching had grown louder. Lov tossed and turned, twisting this way and that, but was unable to fall asleep. Still, it was comfy in this bed.

Lov felt something land on the mattress next to him, something small. He turned, looking to find whatever it was, and spotted a fairy, this one surrounded in a soft yellow light.

"I heard what your grandfather said." She said, walking across the sheet to Lov. "I turned my glow down as much as I could. I remember when Tyrosh went through this, maybe a hundred years ago." Missy shook her head in pity. "I hope you don't suffer as much as she did. She was a hatchling going through this, took Tyrosh a whole year to get used to the world outside the nesting cave."

"Are you from my grandfather?" Lov asked the fairy. "If you are, where's Tinkle? She's the one that usually brings me Tryton's messages."

"I'm Missy, and yes, I work with your grandfather. But I was sent here to keep an eye on Nord, he may have a funny way of showing it, but that giant idiot is definitely one of Tryton's favorites." She walked across the bed and sat a comfortable seeing distance from Lov. He loved how her dress was

made from the scales of a pine cone It reminded him of home. "So, young half-dragon, tell me what ails you, and I will do what I can to help."

"I just want some relief from my grandfather opening my senses." He burrowed the side of his head deeper into the pillow. "I mean, I can hear a fly fart in the next room!"

Missy laughed a hearty laugh. "Oops, I hope that wasn't too loud for you." She said, as Lov winced with the sound.

"It's okay, just sit here and talk to me for a bit." He carefully sat up, attempting not to disturb his new friend. "Just sit here and talk to me, your voice doesn't boom like Nord's. I love my uncle, but he has no idea what I'm going through."

"Okay, just talk and I'll listen."

Lov opened his mouth to speak, then cocked his head to the side, as if he were listening. "What's that?" The young man asked, an intense look of concentration upon his face.

Missy shook her head and gave Lov a questioning look. "What's what? You're not going insane already are you?" She backed away slowly from Lov, her arms outstretched as if to push him back. "Wait, no, I don't sense your dragonhunger, or the fear." She flew up and around to stand on his shoulders. "What are you hearing?" She asked impatiently.

"It's like a hissing and grinding. It's coming from that direction." Lov pointed towards the ceiling in a corner of the room. Missy looked in the direction he pointed, and thought where that might be in this immense city. She was small, and had snuck around a lot of the lower levels, including the birthing chambers, where eggs were hatched. Lov had pointed towards the merchant district, but the merchant district was in a separate chamber from the rest of the hive. Whatever was coming wasn't from the Anuunaki.

"Stay here, don't move." She started to fly from the room.

Lov snatched her from the air, not realizing what he was doing until he did it. Startled, he released the fairy, and muttered out a, "Sorry." Looking away from her with shame.

"Oh boy." She glared at him, then softened her look before saying, "You need to get a hand on that dragonhunger of yours, kid, before it takes control of you." She turned and shot from the room.

Nord leaned against the statue in front of the Temple of Many Faiths, eyes glued to the door, looking for Sanche. He couldn't believe that an elf like Sanche, so stoic and honorable a presence in elven society, was in a temple in grief. Sanche had been the instructor who pushed Nord the hardest, always getting on him for sloppiness and general laziness, was taking a vacation when the elven people needed him most.

He heard the rustle of shoes on the stone floor, and turned, slapping Jaxon lightly across the face. "Where have you been?" Nord asked anxiously. "I thought you were joking about the priests in there, but two of them threw me out on my arse." Jaxon laughed as Nord rubbed his shoulder. "It's no laughing matter! I landed funny, now my arm tingles."

Jaxon stifled his laughter and asked. "You want me to fix it?" An evil smirk replaced the laughter.

"No, no, I think I'm good." Nord replied, moving away from Jaxon, only Dalanar knew what the halfling would do.

Jaxon shook his head. "Some fearless leader you are." He turned and looked down the road, back the way he had come, and thought of how much gold he had just spent. As he was contemplating his trader nature, the halfling noticed a change in the air. A stillness settled over the cavern, sending a chill down his spine.

He watched as Missy, a yellow streak behind her, shot past him yelling her loudest. "NE-MEZ-IR!"

Nearby Anuunaki all looked around, most softly buzzing. "Nemezir." Before taking off after the fairy. Nord and Jaxon watched stunned as hundreds and thousands of Anuunaki poured after Missy.

"Maybe we should check that out." Nord suggested, running before he even finished.

Jaxon shouted from behind. "Hey, wait up!" But Nord ignored him, pushing himself to keep up with the ant beings. They may be shorter than the elven giant but they were quicker.

Nord turned past a large stalagmite and rounded a corner to see a giant worm, swarmed over with Anuunaki. They were stabbing and slicing into the worm as it tried to take a bite from one of the stalagmite light posts, they stabbed and slashed at the beast in an attempt to stop its carnage. It reared up shaking its head, sending warriors flying in all directions. Green liquid splattered in drops around Nord, but none hit him. He counted his blessings when he saw the liquid begin to bubble and smoke. The smoke was terrifying, thick and yellow. The smells induced nausea.

Nord ran back around the corner and peeked around the building. The thing opened its mouth, like a crocodile's. Green fumes curled around the opening as it roared, spraying the Anuunaki trying to attack it. The ones that were hit head on fell to the ground, their chitin melting off their bodies, exposing the meat below.

The remaining Anuunaki took up a battle cry, the entire chamber seemed to buzz with it. "Tchltal Nemezir!" Nord could only assume it meant kill the enemy.

Jaxon came running up behind Nord, heaving for breath. "Don't... you... ever... take off... like... that again." He huffed out, before collapsing against the wall.

Nord shook his head at his friend. "Someone's out of shape."

Jaxon waved the comment away, sucking in air he managed to wheeze out a question. "Now what's all the commotion about?" Gesturing to the Anuunaki who continued to stream by.

Nord pointed around the corner. Jaxon stuck his head out, just in time to see the beast toss its head again, sending warriors and acid flying, causing the rocks to sizzle. The worm took off down the street, dragging the Anuunaki with it.

Nord heard Missy scream above the battle noise. "It's heading for the temple! Stop it before it gets there!"

The worm seemed to forget the ant beings, stopping periodically in its reign of terror to take bites from the rock formations that filled the cavern.

Jaxon and Nord chased after the ant beings, looking to lend a helping hand, but whenever they reached the back of the Anuunaki battle line, the rear guard would push them away saying, "This is none of your concern" before turning back to see what the worm was destroying now. Periodically, the monster would shake its head to clear it of the swarming enemies, splattering acid throughout the cave.

Entire sides of buildings melted away, exposing the interior rooms, and causing more Anuunaki to pour over the worm. A loud crack filled the chamber, and Jaxon watched in disbelief as a stalactite dropped from the ceiling. Anuunaki scattered as the rock split the creature in half. He let out a low moan, and watched as the stone then fell, crushing the thing's back end. Hundreds of Anuunaki had still been swarming the beast when it happened. Their blue green blood mixed with the purple blood of the worm, covering the entire intersection of the street. The head of the worm let out a loud roar, before twisting and turning to disappear into the hole it had entered from. "Oh, dragons above, that was something you don't see everyday." Jaxon said as thousands of Anuunaki tried to force their way into the tunnel and chase the beast down.

"Thank you!" Missy said cheerfully, splattered in a thick purplish stinky goo. "I must admit, that was the most fun battle I've been in a long time." She flew over to Jaxon and wiped the stinky purple goo from her knife onto his collar. "Let's get back to the inn. The Anuunaki wouldn't let you help anyways. 'Not enough coordination to work with us' they said. Guess that's why I managed to rip out the thing's spleen." She said gleefully, holding up an organ as large as she was.

"Worms don't have spleens." Nord said sarcastically. "It must be the gizzard."

"Whatever, we need to go check up on Lov." She said, flying towards The Purple Mushroom.

"Lov? Aren't we worried about Sanche anymore?" Nord asked, confused. "And how did you get your weapon?"

"I'm a fairy, you think I wouldn't use my magic to keep my weapon? And of course we are, why

do you think I had you watching the temple while he was inside meditating?" She sped up a little, making Nord speed up, and causing Jaxon to groan.

Chapter Twenty Three

Lov sat with Sanche and a large Anuunaki male, named Zae. Zae was immense for a male, being able to look Lov in the eyes. He easily had twice the mass of Talia behind the bar, and Lov was grateful to him. The Anuunaki had come into the room upstairs, Sanche behind him, and offered to ease his suffering. Lov agreed and Zae had placed his hands upon Lov's chest. A deep rumbling had filled the room, drowning out the other sounds of the city around and below them.

The pain was excruciating, and Lov had to force himself to relax. The buzzing grew louder and louder in Lov's ears, driving thought from him. His arms tingled and his legs spasmed painfully. The spastic flailing slowly became cramps that traveled from the back of his thighs, all the way to the base of his neck. Lov's body twisted and contorted, lifting him from the bed until nothing but his shoulders and his heels touched it. Through it all, the ant being calmly buzzed, his hands lightly placed on Lov's chest.

Lov was just about to scream "Enough", when he felt himself slam down a barrier. The buzzing lowered in pitch and volume to normal conversation levels. Lov sat up, thankful for the blessed release. "Thank you, sir." He said, stretching his body, twisting from side to side to work out the kinks. "You didn't put a shield on me, did you?" He asked. "Not to be rude, but my grandfather would not be happy."

Zae had laughed. "I did you one better, I made you put up your own!" He had a heavy buzz, deep and rumbly.

Afterward, they headed to the common room, looking for something to drink. Lov leaned back in his chair, thankful to get out of his uncle's bed. They didn't have coffee here, but they did have tea, something that was supposed to be similar.

They had been talking for hours, catching up and debriefing each other about their journeys. It helped the young half-elf come to grips with what had happened to his people, and Lov helped Sanche to realize that the deaths along his travels weren't his fault. After they were caught up, Sanche explained that Zae was a priest at the Temple of Many Faces and also a negotiator for the Anuunaki mercenary army. While the Titans were the elite military force of the world, having no soul to lose, the Anuunaki weren't far behind. As Zae and Sanche were beginning to explain their agreement to the young half-dragon, Missy, Jaxon, and Nord entered the common room.

Lov hardly recognized the yellow glowing fairy as she flew into the inn, followed by Nord and a breathless Jaxon. Her hair was plastered to her head by a sticky, smelly, purple substance. "What happened to you?" He asked, trying to see if she had cut the hunk of flesh she carried from his uncle.

Nord appeared fine, pointing at Sanche. "When did you get out of your meditation room at the temple?" He pointed to Zae sitting at the table. "And who's this guy?"

As Nord reached arm's length from him, Sanche slapped his hand. "It's still not polite to point." He said with a glower to Nord. "And this is Zae, one of the priests, and main negotiator of the mercenaries." He smiled at Missy, and said "I believe I've worked out reasonable terms with the Anuunaki, but they still require a sizable sum of gold before they're willing to start marching." Sanche gestured to the ant being. "That's why he's here. He wishes to evaluate whatever coin we give them in payment."

Jaxon groaned, causing Lov to ask. "What's that about?"

"Just you wait, they're going to want to use my treasure to pay for it."

Lov shook his head disappointed in the little man. "Sanche wouldn't do that, he doesn't believe in handouts."

Jaxon cocked an eyebrow at Lov. "Who said anything about Sanche? It's the wee one I was talking about."

Jaxon tapped Lov on the arm, motioning and mouthing "you'll see" to him. Lov shook his head

again and turned back to everyone else.

Zae began speaking. "Well, I won't bore you with details, but suffice to say, as long as Missy can come up with the first payment, we'll have a standing army of just over fifty thousand troops. Mostly males, so we can use them as more than a defensive force."

Nord whistled. "Fifty thousand?! You just got an army bigger than what we elves kept! How the hell are we supposed to pay for that?"

"What do you mean?" Missy piped in. "Your dear friend Jaxon there," she pointed to the halfling, a knowing look upon his face, "has more than enough money to cover this. We'll only use a quarter of the gold he made me bring." She patted her pouch lovingly. "Of course, it's going to take awhile to get it out. First things first, I need a bath." She considered the flesh she held, then flew to the bar, asking Talia something. The barkeep nodded and took the meat from her, disappearing into the back. She returned to the table. "Now you boys wait here, I've got to get cleaned up." She flew up the stairs, and out of the common room.

Nord had a bewildered look on his face. "That didn't really answer my question."

"She's taking some of my gold to pay for it, you dolt!" Jaxon teased. "I mean, I guess it's not really taking if I'm willing to pay for it, I just hate that she doesn't even ask... just assumes."

Nord nodded knowingly. "Now you're starting to appreciate why I hate fairies."

Zae laughed buzzingly. "I know how you feel, Nord." He said with a deep buzz, the words very clear. He rubbed his hands together, turning to Lov and asked. "Would you like a sample of Anuunaki music? We superior Anuunaki don't leave the hive much, and it's rare to have fresh ears with time to spare."

Lov nodded eagerly, he loved when bards would visit his parents. Zae unfolded a small pair of wings from his back, each wing three of Lov's hand lengths long, if that. Slowly Zae rubbed them together, bringing a soft melody to the common room. Talia walked from behind the counter and sat at the table with them.

The music reminded Lov of a strange and rare instrument he'd once glimpsed, called a violin. A grieving song, slow and mournful, began to take shape. As Zae continued to play, Talia began to hum and buzz a sad dirge that reminded Lov of what had happened to his family and his people. Zae began to glide his wings a little faster and Talia's voice began to carry anger and passion.

Lov felt his dragonhunger stirring, compelling him to act, to leave this cursed hole. Now that Tryton was gone, he was free to do as he pleased! He should convince Sanche to take this army and march into the seat of the Titanbringer. Lov shoved at it, and slowly, his dragonhunger receded to a quiet whisper in the back of his mind.

Zae wove the melody through another melancholy moment, and Talia fell quiet. It was a sad lonely piece that tugged at Lov's heart, bringing a tear to his eyes. He looked around the table to see that everyone else was afflicted with the same feeling.

Jaxon wiped at his eye. "That was beautiful."

Nord raised his fist in the air saying, "Here, here!"

Sanche appraised the priest before him. "You could have robbed me blind in negotiations, couldn't you?"

Zae became very serious. "Never, my friend... I enjoy taking it all from you, face to face, at the negotiation table. I would never deprive myself of the pleasure of taking it all, but I assessed off what I thought you would be able to afford in your lifetime." Zae gestured towards Jaxon, "I didn't expect to see a golden goose with you."

Jaxon puffed up a bit. "I'll have you know, I am not a goose! I'm a gander!"

Missy laughed from above them, spotless and clean as could be. "That's a good one, Jaxon. Now, back to the gold, just how much are we talking here, Sanche?"

Zae leaned forward, raising his hand, "I believe we agreed to twenty thousand pieces of gold, plus mail and leather armor for the army."

Jaxon whistled, "I hope you realize how much I love you, Nord." He turned to his tall friend,

wagging a finger under Nord's nose. "This is why you always save some of your treasure from your adventures!"

Nord bit the tip of Jaxon's finger, causing his friend to jerk his hand back. "I advise you not to do that again."

Missy cleared her throat, loudly. "Back to the topic!" She said sharply. "This is going to take awhile Zae, if you'd like, I'll send the young one to get you when we finish."

Zae nodded his head, "That will work wonderfully, send him when you're through." The ant being headed out the door.

Nord turned to Sanche. "Why the hell couldn't we reach you if you were just negotiating?" He moved to the chair next to Sanche. "Would've been nice to communicate and not leave everyone in the dark. I mean, why tell us you were meditating."

"That was me," Missy said unclasping her pouch and turning it upside down. A coin popped out, thudding onto the table. "I figured I'd have some fun keeping you in the dark." Coins continued to drop from the pouch as she shook it. They clinked together loudly. "Plus, it was fun watching you and Jaxon keep watch on the temple doors." A coin shot out of the purse, slapping Lov in the face. "Sorry, kid. Anyways Nord, I just wanted to tell you, I love wasting your time!"

Chapter Twenty Four

Lov ducked as Zatha, an Anuunaki male warrior, whipped his tail at Lov's head. The young half-elf ducked under the tip, the tail whistling through where he had stood. The ball on the tip waited to inflict sharp stinging pain. He could see his ax lying in the dirt, behind Zatha. The Anuunaki had ripped it away from Lov just a moment ago. Training was not going well for the young one.

Lov slid to the right attempting to circle the purple and black insect, but his opponent swung around faster than the boy could run. Zatha whipped his tail again, catching Lov in the eye. It stung where he was hit. Lov considered the Anuunaki before him, as blood poured into his vision. When

Zatha whipped his tail at Lov again, the half-dragon reached out and snatched it from the air. Lov was surprised to find the chitin to be soft and leathery, but thick. His dragonhunger screamed at him to rip the tip off. He resisted the urge though, knowing that he shouldn't mutilate the soldiers he hoped to be fighting alongside.

The Anuunaki lifted Lov from the ground, sending him flying through the air, and crashing into a stone wall. Lov heard a sharp crack, and felt pain explode up his arm from his wrist. He tried to twist it, hoping it was just a sore tendon, and dropped to his knees in pain.

Missy let out a sharp whistle from above, motioning to Zatha to stop. He retreated to the other side of the chamber, where other Anuunaki stood, awaiting their chance on the training ground. They took their fighting very seriously.

Missy floated down next to Lov and considered his wrist. "Did you break it?" She asked, leaning forward as if to peek.

"What do you think?" Lov snarled, before taking a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Missy, you didn't deserve that." He lifted his arm carefully, wincing. "It just hurts. I did a good number on it."

"Let's get you to Zae then. Healing arts are definitely not in my repertoire. I mean I could try, but I'm pretty sure I'd end up adding bones that weren't there before." She flew back as Lov climbed to his feet, he nodded to Zatha and the other Anuunaki. They all saluted him, before spreading out through the chamber to begin training again. The last sight Lov saw was two males slapping at each other with their tails while using weapons made from chitinous forearms that had been hardened and sharpened, in an attempt to cut the other fighter.

Missy led Lov out the front of a stalagmite building. A block down, part of the chaos caused by the worm was being worked away. Hundreds of Anuunaki moved at a high pace, pouring a thick viscous liquid into pockmarks. Others followed, sanding down the excess once the substance had hardened. They passed into the temple square, where the floor looked good as new. There was no sign of what the worm had done. A few days ago, the Anuunaki warriors had returned, carrying the eyes of

the worm that dared to desecrate their city. Lov had held one in his hands. It was so large he needed both to handle it. He tried to look through the pupil, and saw a sharp reflection of himself.

A sharp sense of bitterness and resentment for past glories missed had filled Lov. Missy had to fly into him, fist first, to break through his trance. She had said, "Be careful with that. A worm's eye will show you the blackest part of your heart. I hope I saved you from the worst."

"Ugh, why would anyone keep such a relic?" Lov had asked.

"I don't know, ask Zae, he should be able to tell you."

They passed through the temple entrance, Lov admiring the scenes cut into the walls. Lov had seen them, two weeks ago, when the worm sign was still fresh on the city. He'd asked Zae about them at the time. They seemed to display the slaughter of Anuunaki by Anuunaki. Zae had explained, "Yes, that is the story of our dark days, from our past when we fought and scrambled amongst ourselves for resources."

Zae had gone on to tell Lov more about old history of his kind, written along the walls of the temple. Some were sad stories, others were joyous and celebratory. One told of a hive of red Anuunaki that had needed to be wiped from the earth.

Lov and Missy walked along a hallway, more pictures etched into the stones. It showed Anuunaki running in terror from a dragon. Missy signaled a guard, asking if he knew where Zae was. The Anuunaki pointed down the hall, towards the central prayer chamber. She thanked him and they continued farther into the temple. They passed several intersections before entering a large hall. In the room were pedestals, statues of great people from many races upon them.

The last queen, Xinthar, held a prominent seat in the room. People, Anuunaki, a human, an elf, even a statue from the lost race, a dwarf, were also afforded prominent spaces. Two dragons finished the scene, snarling and glaring at each other. Lov noticed one had stubs where the other had wings.

Zae sat cross legged between the statues, his top hands lifted above his head, together. His lower hands rested on his knee joints, palms up, fingers relaxed. A buzz filled the air around him.

Missy grabbed Lov's pointy ear, stopping him. "He's praying. I know your arm hurts, but we can find another priest to heal you."

Zae stirred. "No need, I'm more than happy to help a friend." He stood, then walked over to Lov and Missy carefully taking a hold of the young man's arm. Lov winced in pain as Zae twisted and turned it assessing the injury. "This will be easy to heal." The Anuunaki said covering Lov's break with his hands. He began to buzz, and Lov could feel it resonating in his bones. Slowly he felt the bone begin to stitch itself together. After a moment, Zae removed his hand from Lov's arm.

Lov twisted and turned his wrist. He smiled broadly at Zae. "That's amazing, how did you do that?"

Zae thought for a moment, then replied, "It's hard to explain. It's something instinctual, left over from when we were a hive mind. We can draw upon a collective power." He gestured, and a ball of light floated in his hands. "Do you know when we will be leaving yet?" Zae asked, looking to Missy.

The fairy rolled her eyes, Zae had been asking her that question at least ten times a day. "Yep, as soon as his grandfather shows up to take him again."

Lov groaned.

Tryton sat, surrounded by hot magma. He was deep within the earth, feeling his ancestors. They were locked together in an immense skull totem that cut from the Dragon Isles on one side of the world, to the capital of the Tuthan, who worshiped the great Wyrms on the other side.

He focused his thoughts on the pattern of the world around him. Here, Tryton felt Lov being healed by the collective of the Anuunaki. There, towards the mermen, he sensed an oracle trying to propel a ship of goods through the water. And towards his mate's cave, he felt a dark power rising.

The old dragon stepped sideways, entering an immense hall with beautiful statues lining it. Three gold statues watched him enter the room, and flew up, dancing around each other. They looked

like babies with bird's wings, each carrying a bow. Tryton watched as two of them collided, then applauded when they were able to stop their free fall and fly up to join the third dancer. Two large lizard people stood guard at a door. They had red and brown scaly leathery skin. Their eyes were slanted, their snouts elongated, like an alligator's. They hissed at Tryton, crossing their spears to bar his path. Tryton snorted disdainfully before waving a hand, making them crash together. He waved his hand again, slamming their heads into the ceiling. They fell to the floor, their heads smashed in.

Tryton stepped over the bodies, saying, "Your stench offends me. Next time, keep your breath to yourself."

He strode through the doorway the Tuthan had been guarding, into a rich opulent room. Black and gold marble columns lined the room. Between were cases full of different artifacts. One held a plain sword, but as Tryton stared at it, he felt the presence of the dark soul that resided in it.

He circled around to the center of the room, his eyes searching for his paramour. Tryton spotted her, reading from an ancient tome. It appeared to be made from the skin of a Tuthan. It stank enough to make Tryton want to gag. Even knowing what she was, Tryton felt his own dragonhunger stirring. Draka had always been his treasure. She called out, "Welcome, Tryton." Waving her hand, runes began to etch into the floor.

"What are you doing, Draka?" He asked contemptuously, trying to hold longing from his voice, as he walked over to stand next to her.

Chapter Twenty Five

Lov felt a shift in the air around him, and shuddered as a chill ran up his spine. He shook it off, then went back to stretching as he waited his turn on the practice floor. Lov watched the two Anuunaki there now square off. One was a female, a strikingly bright white and slightly larger than her male opponent. He was dark brown with yellow spots. While she was stronger than him, he used his tail to keep her at a distance. Lov had a few small scars now from their whip-like sharp bite, but day by day

he felt his skin hardening, becoming more like armor. On his chin, two bones were beginning to protrude out. It made Lov's jaw wider, and he looked much less like an elf.

The Anuunaki male ran close to the female, cutting and slicing with the four curved swords it handled so expertly. The female grabbed two of them with her sword breakers. She blocked the others with her shields before slamming one of them into the male's face. He slumped unconsciously to the floor.

Smaller sized Anuunaki ran in and carried the unconscious fighter to the side for medical attention, while the female soaked in the accolades of the other females. They jeered the males in their own language, and one of the males made a gesture that made the whole room buzz with laughter. Lov shook his head. He had attempted to learn their language, but no matter how hard he tried it sounded like nothing but buzzing to him.

Missy whistled from on high, calling out the winner in the fight, in the Anuunaki language. He had asked her to do as she had before and slap knowledge into his head, but she had refused. "What would you learn if I just gave it to you?" She had asked, before disappearing. It annoyed Lov every time she did, and he was beginning to think it was on purpose.

Nord stepped into the room. He came every day, but mostly to watch. When he did choose to fight, the Anuunaki lined up to have a go. Anyone who could go toe to toe with a Wyrms was a worthy opponent of an Anuunaki. Nord usually schooled them, showing them where they missed a chance thrust, or exposed themselves too much, and the Anuunaki fighters blossomed under his tutelage.

Today, Nord strode to the center of the practice ground, and pointed to Lov. "Get out here, Nephew. We haven't sparred since we were at Jaxon's, show me what you've learned."

Lov stepped out, and the Anuunaki formed a circle around them. This young warrior had earned his own respect from the ant people for his quick techniques, resilience, and determination when it came to surrendering. He still lost more often than not, but most spars he gave and received bruises. Lov slammed the haft of his ax into the ground. It rang out metallically as it hit the stone floor hard,

and he felt the vibrations up into his hands.

Lov bowed to his uncle, and Nord bowed back, pulling his sword and scabbard from his belt. He didn't even bother to remove the cover. They squared off, Lov adjusting his feet to a wide base. He circled his uncle who stood there, not moving a muscle. Lov lunged in, thrusting the head of his ax at Nord. The giant elf casually leaned back, then struck the young half-dragon in his scaled ribs with his still covered sword. "Still over-extending. You need to watch that."

Lov jumped back, anger clear on his face. Nord shook his head. "Disappointing. You've already lost before we've even started."

Lov charged in, swinging his ax wildly. Nord parried the blow, deflecting the ax head towards the rock floor. Chunks were torn out where the ax hit. Nord swung his sword around, clocking Lov across the skull.

Lov fell back, shaking his head to clear it. His dragonhunger took his rage and fed it. Lov became so angry that he cast a wall of flame between himself and Nord. "You're not going to win if you keep losing yourself to your anger." Nord looked to Missy, floating above. She nodded, and pushed her will on the flame, causing them to shrink from where they brushed the ceiling. "You shouldn't depend on your magic. You never know when your opponent might be stronger."

Lov considered his uncle, still fighting defensively, and took a few deep breaths to calm down.

"Better." Nord told him. "Now try to keep up."

Nord launched into motion, slicing and stabbing at the young one. Lov twisted and dodged his uncle, only taking light taps if he was hit. Nord took a cut at Lov's neck, but Lov deflected it, spinning around and smacking his uncle in the chest with the hammer side of his ax. Nord flew, slamming into a wall, and sliding to the floor, the breath knocked from him. The Anuunaki cheered Lov on, it had been a clean and fair hit.

Nord staggered to his feet, a grin crossing his face. He pulled his sword from the scabbard.

"Don't hurt him too bad, Nord!" Missy called down from above.

Nord waved her words away, stepping confidently towards Lov. "If you're going to use your tricks, boy, then I'm going to use mine." Nord swayed his sword in the air, it released a low moaning sound. Lov felt his muscles slacken and relax, though he felt tense inside his head. His dragonhunger thrashed against his control, and Lov surrendered to it, just enough to start him moving. Nord charged towards his nephew at the same time, his feet barely touching the stone as he ran. His sword sang loud and clear, the pure ring of crystal. They came together in a thunderous clash of metal on metal. Nord swung an overhead blow that Lov blocked. The force of Nord's swing was so strong that it pushed down through Lov's block, slicing the tip from one of Lov's ears. Missy zipped down, collecting the tiny piece of flesh. Maybe Zae would be willing to reattach it.

The two jumped apart, Lov swinging his wicked ax for Nord's face, but Nord just leaned back, letting the inexperienced fighter swing himself around. The giant elf kicked his nephew square in the arse, causing him to sprawl to the ground, upon his knees.

Nord circled around to face his nephew. "And remember, don't ever get too cocky in a fight. Many a proud warrior has died thinking he knew his opponent's limits." He motioned for Missy to come down. Lov flipped him off before the fairy flew down and guided him to Zae.

Nord just shrugged his shoulders and turned to the other warriors. He placed his sword back in the scabbard and called out. "Alright, who's next?"

Chapter Twenty Six

Lov stalked from the training room. He enjoyed training with the Anuunaki, they pushed him to be faster, to strike harder. You didn't have to hold back with them, problem is, they won't hold back either. Lov examined a new cut he had received today. An Anuunaki female had sliced him across his shoulder, and the cut burned. Lov was beginning to suspect that Anuunaki coated their weapons in toxic substances. Not enough to kill, but enough to help their opponent stumble drunkenly.

Lov hated to lose, as he had today. It was embarrassing, but no where near as bad as what Nord

had done to him. He still burned with rage when he thought back to that day. Two weeks had passed, yet he couldn't forget the incident. The young half-dragon resolved to sit down with Nord tonight and hammer out any resentment.

Lov passed through the door of The Purple Mushroom, and headed up to his room. As he stood outside, reaching for the doorknob, he stopped. Lov felt a presence in the room. He still carried the ax he had been training with. He swung it to a ready position, and kicked in the door. Lov roared as he charged into the room.

He raised his ax, prepared for anything... except for the sight of his grandfather, sitting in a copper tub of water, a small fire beneath the tub. "Ah, there you are!" Tryton said as he scrubbed his arms with a thick lather, "I've come to take you back to training. There are some things we still need to teach you." Tryton splashed water over his arms, rinsing the lather away, "We're running out of time, my boy."

Tryton jumped from the copper vessel, pulling the water from his body as he stood at its side. He dropped the ball he formed with it into the tub with a soft splash.

Lov averted his gaze. He'd never understand why his grandfather liked the old body look. The liver spots made Lov fear aging. His dragonhunger grumbled in agreement with that fear.

Clothing appeared upon Tryton, a long leather coat and breeches and a plain white shirt. He strode to Lov, reaching out and taking his hand before pulling his grandson through what felt like a small knothole.

Lov wanted to scream from being squeezed out and reformed into his body. When he could collect his bearings, he looked around. He appeared to be halfway down a cliff, walls extending above him in a rim. Large lizards, the size of a horse, sunned at the top of the rim flicking out tongues and searching around. One hissed right above Lov's head.

Tryton pointed up to the lizards. "If you had been born a true dragon, these would be your nursery mates." The old dragon strode to the edge of the cliff, looking down. Lov began to notice that it

was warm. It felt as if the sun were shining directly on his face, though where he stood was in shade. He walked to the edge and stood as Tryton did, looking down. Below them, a hundred feet down, reddish orange magma slowly cooled, covering with a black ooze like film. There appeared to be eggshells near the magma, but heat waves rose off of it, distorting the view. "And that would have been your crib." The sun crested the rim, sending bright light searing into Lov's eyes. He tried to cover them with his hands, but Tryton slapped them away. "I'm trying to teach you, kid! We don't have much time before you lose my guidance. Even now I feel the pull of my hunger, pulling me towards your grandmother." Tryton threw his hands up. "Or maybe I'm just deluding myself. I wanted to give the world one last dragon warrior to fight on their side. But maybe you aren't it."

Tryton jumped from the edge, his body expanding and reforming. His hands and feet transformed into huge Talons, each finger and toe stretching out to become a claw as long as Lov's hand. The nails were long, wide, and black. Tryton himself grew to the size of a house, his scales glowing blue and orange in the sunlight. His jaw extended, and his skull became the size of Lov's body.

Large wings, the joints in them raw and red, extended a hundred feet, and Tryton caught a heat updraft, sending him soaring into the sky. Lov yelled after his grandfather in disappointment, not sure why Tryton had brought him here.

Lov looked around the area, searching for a way to scale the rocks. He walked to where the ledge met the cliff, strapping his ax across his back, and started to climb. The young half-dragon slowly made his way up the cliff face, the world quiet around him, except for the hissing and bubbling of the magma below him. He found cracks and crevasses galore, so the climb wasn't that taxing. He pulled himself up over the rim, rolling onto his back to relax sore muscles, then stood, looking down to the ledge he was previously on fifty feet below. A sharp clacking noise caused Lov to turn and see what had made the sound. One of the baby dragons was attempting to stalk him. Its green scales seemed to shift color and blend in with the surrounding dirt and stone, the only sight giving it away, a sharp red outline that Lov never noticed before. Lov could feel the hatchling's eyes measuring him. It slid quickly

across the dirt, moving faster than any reptile Lov had ever seen. Large powerful jaws snapped open and shut, flicking its forked tongue out every so often, testing the air. Lov stood frozen by fear. As the young one approached him, Lov's hunger screamed and railed inside his head, demanding he flick his own tongue out, to assess the danger.

Lov's conscience mind was stunned, as if in a trance, unable to respond. His dragonhunger took control. He flicked out his tongue, tasting the young dragon's aura. There was no malice, only curiosity. As it approached Lov, the half-dragon stepped towards his brethren, his arms outstretched, attempting to convey peace. When it was no more than a few paces from him, a large claw swept down, snatching the hatchling from the ground, and tearing gouges from the earth. It let out a piteous cry as it was carried away.

Lov watched the larger dragon, its wings fully formed, stretching in a wide expanse of a soft sky blue and white. It blended into the sky very well, the faint red outline all that pointed it out to him. He zoomed in on the outline and definition came into focus. A large bony ridge extended from the skull, and there were three long horns upon the nose. The larger dragon reached down and ripped the head from the young baby dragon. The juvenile chewed upon its snack as it flew from Lov's view.

Lov looked around him, noticing things he hadn't before as the primal instinctive air sunk in. There were numerous red outlines all around him. Each of them belonged to a young dragon, and they were all different sizes. The second thing he noticed was the taste of the air. It tasted of hostile intentions as often as it did of comfort. Lov watched as some of the outlines attacked each other, slamming together and bowling apart, over and over. Every once in awhile, an outline would stop moving and fade. The survivor always either stooped to eat its dead brethren, or left in search of another fight.

Lov considered his options. One thing was for sure, he didn't feel safe on this rim. He walked to the edge of the cliff, and slowly made his way back down to the ledge. The sun was shining brightly, and Lov felt the heat from below as well as above. It felt wonderful, and he felt rejuvenated by the hot

air.

Lov took a seat on the ground, considering what his grandfather wanted him to do. Tryton had brought Lov here for a reason, if only he hadn't flown off before telling his grandson what! The young half-dragon stood and walked to the edge. He considered the way down, looking for an easy climb. As he was searching the walls, he saw stairs appear, their outline clear as the sun dipped below the rim opposite where it had risen. Lov began the long climb down the sharply cut stones. They twisted and turned annoyingly along the rocky wall, more a ladder than actual stairs. Nothing prevented Lov from falling a hundred feet to his death, but he had no fear. Halfway down, the steps narrowed to where there was barely enough room for Lov's feet as he climbed down. He needed all of his concentration to maintain his balance, and when he looked down, his dragonhunger tempted him to just jump the last thirty feet. That was nothing to one dragonborn. But Lov shoved the voice aside, instead concentrating, passing the five steep and small steps, descending to an easy climb to the bottom.

He approached the edge of the magma, looking at all of the cracked shells that haphazardly covered the ground. Every color of the rainbow, and some not on the rainbow, littered the ground. The shards looked like multicolored iridescent shale. There were large shards upon large shards that had been grinding other shards into dust. It felt like a sharp rocky beach.

As Lov neared the magma, he felt surrounded, as if he were tucked tightly into a warm blanket. The air felt thicker, and he felt his skin begin to dry.

An itch spread all over his body. He began scratching at his scales, softly at first, then as hard as he could as the itching persisted. Tiny pieces of the interlocking armor began to fall off, scaring Lov and causing him to stop. He climbed back up to the ledge and curled into a ball, refusing to scratch himself no matter how hard his hunger pushed him.

It was a long night that passed in an agony of itching that Lov refused to assuage. Sleep finally claimed him when the moon stood well into the sky, exhaustion and stress dragging Lov to unconscious bliss.

The next couple of days passed in an itch-filled agony. At one point, Lov surrendered to his hunger, using the cliff face to scratch his backside. It felt amazing, and Lov sighed in pleasure as he scrapped himself. But the sight of his scales littering the ground worried him still, and he forced himself to stop.

Lov's stomach rumbled, reminding him he hadn't eaten in several days, but he still buzzed with energy thanks to the same dry heat that was causing his scales to itch. Lov's belly rumbled at him again, and slowly his dragonhunger, its willingness to do anything to survive, took control.

He climbed up the cliff wall, his consciousness trying to wrestle control from his instinctual side. The young half-dragon crested the rim of the cliff wall, his eyes searching for the now familiar red outline.

He spotted one, twenty feet from where he peeked over the edge of the cliff. His hunger roared inside his head, and Lov leaped over the edge, pulling his ax from behind his back. Lov charged the red outline, his mind scrambling, attempting to slow his hunger and make himself slow down and think. He leapt a rock, and came face to face with what he hunted.

A large juvenile dragon, small wings only halfway formed, sat sunning itself upon the rocks. Lov's consciousness noticed that this beautiful specimen, a dark purple that turned green as the sun hit it from certain angles, had grass growing beneath it. Everywhere else was sparse vegetation upon the rock, but under and around the purple beast, the grasses had found a home.

Lov heard a high pitched roar escape from his throat, his hunger driving him towards food, and a relenting of the pit in his stomach. As the dragon startled awake, the grass began to fade. The purple of its scales turned to the blackest night, and as it roared, green gasses curled around its upper jaw.

Lov didn't slow down, charging forward, roaring back in challenge. The other dragon jumped into the air, flapping its wings to glide over the teen. Lov swung his ax at the beast's belly, but the

dragon was too high, and it swung through empty air. The juvenile spit out a thick ball of green goo, which missed Lov, and hissed as it splattered the rocks.

Lov watched as the beast landed, no more than a stone's throw from him. The dragon spread its jaws wide again, and Lov dove to the side as thick goo landed where he had been but a moment before. He came to his feet, a large stone in his hand. He reached back and threw it as the dragon opened its mouth again. It choked as the stone landed in its gaping maw, stopping the acid from being projected.

Lov charged as the dragon struggled to spit the rock out. It chomped down, cracking the stone in its throat, and opened its mouth to spit at Lov. But the young half-elf was close enough to do something about it this time. He swung his ax, catching the beast across its eyes, blinding it. It flailed wildly, roaring in pain. Lov stood just out of the dragon's reach, watching it swing about, trying to find the assailant that had stolen its vision. Seeing an opening, the young half-elf swung his ax down through the adolescent dragon's skull before it could locate him.

The smell of fresh blood inundated Lov's nostrils, causing his mouth to water. Lov tore into the dead dragon, ripping hunks of flesh from its body. As his hunger was satiated, he felt his control return. A sense of horror filled him at what he had done, consciously or not. Lov didn't want admit that there was dark part to his soul.

Chapter Twenty Seven

Draka turned to Tryton, "So my love, when will we be able to bring Lovonian to our side?"

Tryton shook his head and pointed to the chess board in front of him. "Your move, dear."

Draka hissed, "I would prefer if you called me by my name." Her eyes narrowed slightly, and she flicked out a long, forked tongue. "You know I hate pet names." She moved her knight, removing a pawn from the board, and blocking a bishop that had just lined up for the queen.

Tryton considered the board as he spoke, "Lov has yet to find a treasure, my dear. Until he does, there's nothing we can really do to speed the process." He moved a pawn, then rose from his chair. "I'll

be back in a moment, he may need a good prod, now that you mention him." Tryton stepped from his mate's palatial home into the birthing crater.

Lov was huddled on the ground, rocking back and forth. It appeared that the carcass he had killed had been finished a few days ago. Tryton shook his head in disappointment. He walked over, kicking Lov in the ass.

"Get up!" Tryton reached down, grabbing his grandson by the arm and lifting him, one handed, to a standing position. "By all that we're made of, you look pathetic. You only scratched off half of your shed. Even Draka would take pity on you, I think."

Lov's ragged clothes disappeared. Tryton made his hand more claw like, using his sharp Talons to scrape off the thick patches of scales. Lov struggled when he saw the patches coming off, but Tryton smacked him across the butt, sharp and hard. "Stand still, you're only making it worse." Tryton continued scratching until Lov had lost all of his loose scales. "My god's you are young, boy. Your dragonhunger isn't always an evil thing, you need to learn to trust it sometimes. Admit it, you feel better."

Lov stretched, relieved of the itch for the first time in weeks. His hunger had begged him to scratch, managing control in snatches. It had forced him to abrade his skin, and Lov had loved it, until he noticed the scales, thus repeating his everlasting cycle of hell. His grandfather, a dragon who loved a great Wyrn, had helped him. Showing him the nature of what it was to be a dragon. Balance. Too much giving into your hunger, you eventually went insane and became a Wyrn. Or stay good, and watch your loved ones twist and fall into darkness. Enough corruption will drive even the most stalwart to insanity, and hence, a Wyrn you become. Lov realized that even though his grandfather had helped him, the young half-dragon didn't trust Tryton.

"Thank you, Tryton. That helped me immensely, but do you mind telling me what you brought me here for?" Lov felt his hunger smolder, and let it edge his voice. "I mean, I have been stranded out here. Having to eat a baby in order to survive!" He roared at Tryton, "What was the point of this?"

The dragons along the rim stirred, they sensed Tryton in the crater. They knew he was dangerous.

Tryton shook his head, slowly fading away. A whisper on the wind touched his ears. "Talk to the dragon you ate."

Lov shook his head, confused. How could he talk to a dead dragon? Then it dawned on him. He ran to the desiccated corpse, using a sharp rock to cut through the neck bones. He picked the severed skull from the body and...

A soft happy presence filled his mind. "Hi." She said, a soft feminine voice vibrating through his body, "Thanks for ending it for me. The world wasn't ready for a dragon like me. I appear so good, but it was all just a sham. I would have swept across the world and destroyed anything that wasn't a plant. Even you, young half-dragon.

"Still, death has mellowed me, and all I wish is to join my brethren in the lava. Will you carry me there?"

Lov said, "Of course, it would be an honor." He carried her down the stairs, listening to his hunger. The young half-dragon leapt the last thirty feet when he came to the narrow steps. Broken empty shells cracked beneath his feet and he rolled, crushing more.

He asked hesitantly, "Do I just throw you in?" Stepping towards the edge of the lava.

Laughter vibrated through him, it reminded him of Anuunaki laughter. "No, silly, we go where our eggs were lain. Deep in the earth, near the skulls of the ancestors."

Lov eyed the hot bubbling magma before him. "You mean I need to swim in that?"

"Of course, we are creatures of fire. Why would fire bother us?" The skull laughed again, then told Lov, "This will definitely help your grandfather know if you are the one."

"The one what?" Lov asked as he stepped into the lava. His clothes burned from him in an instant.

"He must be the one to tell you, it is his prophecy to guard. Swim deep, friend... feel the pull of

the ancestors."

Lov dove deep into the lava. It wasn't really swimming, more moving with conscious thought than propelling himself physically. He felt a pulling, and his hunger roared in his head, high on recognition and anticipation. Lov thought himself in the direction of the pull.

He felt more and more energized the deeper they went down. The skull in his hand vibrated with pleasure. "We're getting close!"

Lov felt the skull connect with something solid, and the rumble of thousands of voices filled his head. They all clamored to speak to him, almost overwhelming him. But one thing came loud and clear. "He is awakened!"

Chapter Twenty Eight

Lov awoke, the waves lapping gently against his hand resting in the water. He felt a rock digging into his side, causing a sharp pain. He sat up and looked around, seeing a stony shore, sparse vegetation and sand up the beach. He looked inland spotting the rocky terrain. Large boulders covered the land, stacked upon each other precariously. Lov started to walk along the shore, remembering his experience. He had felt complete when talking to his ancestors. The young half-dragon had known his place in the world, what was expected of him. Where to go and who to talk to. All of that was gone now. He had expected many things, but he hadn't expected to awaken on the beach. The last thing he remembered he had been surrounded by lava, enjoying its warmth and the closeness he felt to the world while there.

Lovonian searched up and down the beach, looking for any sign of civilization, but he saw no one. He began walking north, looking for a river or crevasse to follow inland. As he walked, he listened to the sounds of the wildlife around him. He heard lizards sliding across the rocks and saw a troop of ants marching purposefully back and forth. Seeing the ants reminded him of the Anuunaki again, and he wondered how his uncle and everyone else was doing.

He considered how to get word to Nord. Lov had a feeling the tall elf would come looking for him soon. He just hoped that Jaxon and Missy would keep his uncle out of trouble. As he walked, Lov noticed that he couldn't hear the sounds of wildlife anymore.

Instead he heard what sounded like someone screaming, coming from farther up the beach. Lov saw a pink figure lashed between two posts. He was screaming incoherently at Lov, kicking his legs, trying to motion Lov over. The teen approached the figure cautiously. As he approached, Lov saw that the figure was a bald humanoid, a little taller than Nord and thick through the arms and neck. Lov could see star shaped scars all over the pitiful soul's body. They covered him from neck to knees, even spider webbing their way up his arms like sleeves. A fresh scar over one of the chained figure's knees looked red with infection. His jaw jutted forward and sharp canines stood prominently with the other teeth. "Why are you tied up like that?" Lov asked the screaming pink figure.

The naked man answered in broken common. "I break laws. Punishment. Shaved, scarred, and hung to dry."

"Well, then why are you calling me over?" Lov asked the prisoner, moving closer so he didn't have to yell.

"Water. Thirsty!" He all but demanded, his eyes pleading. Lov shook his head, then reached for his water skin, pouring some into the prisoner's open mouth. "Thank you!"

Lov accepted the thanks, taking a drink from the skin himself. "So where is the closest town?" He asked, taking another swig of water before putting his skin away.

"Follow river inland, tribes never far from water."

Lov thanked him before heading north, looking for the river that would lead him to civilization.

Lov sat on top of a ridge, looking down at a tent city. All he could see were temporary shelters, mud huts slapped together, and fabric tents looking as if a strong gust would blow them away. He saw

sentries patrolling the area, dark black fur covering their bodies. Lov didn't see anyone pink like the prisoner he'd seen. They were all of the same size and shape, but there the similarities ended. Lov spotted a few with pink faces, but he spotted just as many with green or blue or brown.

Lov observed a few of the groups from a distance, seeing that muscle ruled here. He watched the general disorder as they fought amongst themselves. One sat eating the leg of some poor animal, and another smacked him on the head with a hammer, stealing the meat as the first was knocked unconscious.

A younger looking orc was smoking a pipe, when an older, larger male approached him. The elder stretched out his hand. The smaller one protested, a loud guttural cry. The larger one picked up the smaller male, holding him by the fur on the scruff of his neck. The younger male screamed and kicked at the larger one, but eventually was cowed, handing over the pipe. The elder male set the smaller male down carefully, but the smaller male jostled another near by. The third immediately began to beat the smaller male, casually walking away when he finished, as if it were a daily occurrence.

Lov shook his head, thinking that things couldn't possibly get any more barbaric. A woman, Lov assumed it was since she had no fur and wore clothing, strode to the orc gnawing on the leg bone. She had light green skin and she looked a physical specimen. She was tall, only a little shorter than the male. Her rags barely hung on her, the shoulder slipping precariously far down before she pulled it back up. She shook her breasts at the male, before reaching her hands between his thighs, saying something to him. The male shook his head negatively then pushed the female away.

Lov watched the female's face contort in rage. Her soft green skin darkened to a forest green before she strode up to the male. She kicked him between the thighs, causing Lov to wince in sympathy, before taking the leg he had dropped and began to munch on it furiously.

The male peeled himself from the ground and crawled away.

Lov crawled down from the top of the ridge, resigned to a long cold night without a fire. He thought for a moment, remembering a lesson his grandfather had taught him. Lov concentrated heating

the rocks below him. At least now he wouldn't freeze. He laid upon the stones staring at the stars, and trying to think of a way into the camp. Tomorrow he would hunt, see if a deer would earn him a place in the tribe.

Chapter Twenty Nine

Lov awoke the next morning, the stone under him hot in the baking sun. His mouth was dry, and he reached for his skin. He swallowed the last of his water. It was warm and stale, but satisfied his thirst. Lov searched the rocky terrain for a game trail, but couldn't find anything. He was heading back to the ridge when a piercing shriek filled the air from above him. Lov looked up in time to see an enormous bird swoop down and nab him with its Talons. Lov reached for the sword at his back, the one he had never used, about to pull it from its sheath. Alarm bells went off in his head, so Lov lowered his hands from it. Instead, he grabbed his belt knife, jamming it into one of the creature's thighs.

The avian let out a shriek, attempting to drop Lov, but the young half-dragon reached up grabbing a handful of feathers. He used them to pull himself up the bird, and worked his way around until he sat between the bird's wings. It turned its head attempting to snap him off of its back.

Lov reached back with his left fist, his right clinging tightly to the feathers for support, and punched the bird square in the beak. The creature's head whipped around, limp in the wind. The wings went slack, and the bird began to plummet to the ground.

Lov panicked, shaking the bird, attempting to bring it back from unconsciousness. But the bird was out cold, limp and lifeless. Lov panicked a little as the ground rushed up towards them, so he reached down, attempting to flap the bird's wings. Finally, the beast roused, shaking its head and taking in its surroundings. The bird panicked, flapping for everything it was worth, attempting to avoid hitting the ground. Lov pictured a current of wind pushing both of them from below, and the bird felt the wind catch under its wings.

The young half-elf moved forward on the giant beast's back, climbing in front of the wings. He

grabbed handfuls of feathers, using them to turn the bird's head and steer its flight. When Lov turned the bird's head to the right, the bird banked to the right. If he pulled back on it, the giant bird would flap its wings, climbing for altitude.

Lov searched around, spotting the camp. He thought how impressive it might seem to ride this horse sized wild avian into their encampment. As he banked for it, he spotted large buildings in the distance. They were a few miles from the camp, and looked as permanent as the mud huts looked temporary. The ground approached quickly though, and Lov had to fight the bird to force it towards the ground. It landed grudgingly, attempting to throw Lov over its head. But he hung on for dear life, maintaining his seat. He punched it in the back of the head, jumping from its back. Lov watched as the bird took off, leaving him standing in the middle of the camp. He watched as the creatures surrounded him, anger clear on their faces. They screamed and roared at him, so Lov pulled his ax from his back, slamming the butt of the handle into the ground. The eye glared from the back of the ax head.

A large male approached him, covered in thick dark fur. A star, like the one that covered the guy staked next to the sea, stood out from the hair on the male's chest. If he didn't look so cut and hard, Lov would have said the green tinge to his skin was sickness. It calmly stepped up to him, pointing to the ax and speaking in a language Lov didn't understand. Lov shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, trying to show he didn't understand.

The large brute repeated himself, a little louder this time. He gestured emphatically at Lov's ax, mimicking surrender. Lov pulled the sword from his back, leaving only his bow, strapped tightly to his quiver unstrung. The sword floated at Lov's shoulder, slowly passing back and forth behind him.

The large male pulled two hammers from his belt, pointing to Lov and shouting incoherently. An old stooped male, patches clear in his fur, stepped forward. His skin was dirt brown where the patches were. He called out in heavily accented, if clear, common. "Tormac here wants your ax. He is convincing people to take it from you for him. He is promising great wealth."

Lov laughed, deep and hearty. "You ask Tormac why he's so afraid to come get it himself."

The old man shook his head. "Another wasted youth." He said mournfully before turning to Tormac and translating. Tormac turned a deep dark green, his face contorted in rage. He pointed to Lov screaming and gesturing aggressively. Three other males charged Lov, weapons drawn. The first swung a sharp cross body swing at Lov, but the nimble half-dragon listened to his hunger. Lov let it guide him, and he jumped, stepping on the cross cutting sword before stomping down viciously on the poor soul who wielded it. He felt the orc's neck snap under his foot as Lov launched himself over the second fighter. He crashed into the third, slamming the hammer side of his ax into the unfortunate face of the attacker. Lov turned to find the last fighting furiously with the disembodied sword.

The sword attacked quickly, catching the survivor in the neck and severing an artery. Lov was reaching out to take the sword from the air, when it swung at him. He barely reacted fast enough to pull back his hand from being cut, then snatched the hilt and slammed the sword into its scabbard.

Lov turned to face the big male. He didn't say a word to him, just stared. Tormac roared and charged the young half-dragon, anger in every step he took. Lov waited patiently for Tormac. Tormac screamed "Fru Gruumnsh" as he rushed towards Lov, swinging one hammer, and rearing back with the other.

Lov swung his ax up, catching the first hammer and ripping it from Tormac's grip. He ducked as the second swung through the empty air his head had just occupied.

"Fru Gruumnsh!" Tormac screamed again, swinging his hammer down with two hands. Lov spun out from under the blow, swinging his ax around and catching the large male in the side of his neck. Lov kicked Tormac in the stomach, ripping his ax free of the big brute. As Lov slammed the butt of the ax into the ground, Tormac's blood dripped down over his fingers. A part of him weeped for the lost life of one even so simple as his victim.

He turned to the old man, tears slowly tracing their way down his face. "Anyone else?" He asked the old man, pain clear on his expression.

The old man shook his head, and looked to the heavens saying, "Well.. shit."

Chapter Thirty

Nord walked into the room, spotting more than the usual one fairy on the table. Seated with Missy were two other fairies. Tinkle, glowing blue, her blonde hair shinning in the blue light. And for the first time ever, Nord saw a male fairy.

He was shorter than the two women, round and dumpy looking. A long curly mustache stuck out from his upper lip, and his side burns stretched clear to his neck. The hair was thick and red, with freckles covering every inch of clear skin. Parts of him seemed to glow faintly red in the light, a reflection off the skin.

Their eyes were reddened from crying, the man had long bags under his eyes that sank into his cheeks. He looked like he had been weeping for days.

"We lost him!" Missy wailed. Nord had heard the crying downstairs, it had drawn him to inspect.

The male jumped to his feet, his voice deep and booming for one so small. "Yes, Tryton's left us for that bitch! Stupid Wyrms. They ruin everything! We need to find Lovonian, now."

Nord hurried to the table, "Say that again? You mean you don't know where he's at?" He asked, glaring down at the little man.

"See here, you brute! I'm starting to see why Tryton always called you an idiot. Lovonian is special. He did something...unexpected, and we've lost track of him." The little man strode forward, his gut jiggling under the leaf vest and shirt he wore. His pants were sewn of leaf and threaded with stems, tailor fit. He stretched his hand up, pointing to Nord. "It's your fault, he gets his recklessness from your elf blood! But no matter, I'm sending Missy and Tinkle here to search for him first thing in the morning." He pulled his arm down and strode to the two other fairies. He put his arms around their shoulders, pulling Missy and Tinkle close. "They'll find him! Or my name isn't Sherman Thurmond Maxwell Thomas Chancellor the Second!"

Tinkle, the blue fairy, pushed Sherman's hand from around her shoulder. "And who do you think you are?"

Missy stomped her foot down, catching Sherman in the top of one of his feet. "Don't tell me what to do! You're not my boss!"

"Ladies, I mean no harm, I just want some rest." Sherman spread his arms wide, as if to show he had nothing to hide. "Just a few days, I'll take over after that."

"You would cause Nord to get all fat and lazy again. I know how much you enjoy drinking!" Missy said shaking her finger under Sherman's nose.

"Yeah!" piped in Tinkle, "You may think you're the boss of us, but remember what happened the last time you tried to push an issue." She smiled sweetly at him, "You looked so cute with the violet pollen on your eyelids, it really brought out the color of your eyes!" She started giggling uncontrollably, causing Missy to join in.

Nord shook his head, and covered his eyes with his palm. "I hate fairies and dragons. They're both insane." He turned to leave the room, shouting over his shoulder, "Let me know what you decide to do to find Lov. I'll help in anyway I can."

Sherman piped up, "Don't worry, I'll put you to work soon."

Nord groaned, heading to the common room, looking for Jaxon and Sanche to share a pint.

The giant elf and Sanche sat playing Gin in the common room of the inn. They heard a racket upstairs, as if someone were throwing onions around. A door slammed from upstairs and they heard Sherman calling out, "I think I've found him!" zipping down the stairs, leaving a red after image behind him. Sherman and Tinkle had left a few weeks ago, searching for Lov. Nord jumped to his feet, throwing his cards face up on the table.

"Where is he?" He demanded, resisting the urge to snatch the fairy from above the table. "Is he

okay?"

"Lov's fine! He's actually set himself up pretty well." Sherman smiled deeply, "He somehow manage to take over a small tribe of orcs. Whoever gave him that hammer...that was a smart move."

Nord shook his head, "No one gave it to him. He picked it out himself."

"Oh... well, good eye. But no time to waste! Make haste! Get the army together," Sherman frowned, thinking hard. "Yes, Jaxon should be enough to keep you out of trouble. So make sure you don't forget your smart friend, and make haste for the Orc Lands!" With that he stepped sideways through a slit in the air, gone in an instant.

"I hate fairies!" Nord called over his shoulder to Sanche as he rushed up the stairs, kicking in his room door.

Jaxon lay on the bed, reading Rorchester Wallace's Journey Along the Way. Nord frowned as the halfling dog eared one of the book's pages. "Yeah, I heard patches but not enough. Nord, I'm beginning to see why you hate fairies."

Missy stomped her foot on the table. "You two, shut up and get in line!" She commanded pointing to the floor in front of the table. "I don't know if you two are prepared for the shit storm that's coming, but I'll do my best to make sure you both come out of this alive." The little fairy began to pace across the table, Tinkle behind her, fighting back laughter. The blue fairy knew Missy meant every word of it, but the sight of a foot tall woman telling off a giant filled her with mirth. Missy kept talking. "You two just shut up, follow my lead, and all should be fine." She glared at Nord, "Just don't let yourself go soft again! Tinkle and I will be heading this army with Sanche as adviser. You are just way too rogue to be put in charge, Nord. Especially with your nephew involved."

Nord turned red with anger, then took a couple deep calming breaths. "I might disagree with you if my own conscience didn't agree. I just hate being told that I need to follow orders. Authority and I tend to not get along, exception Sanche."

"Why do you think we tracked him down? Don't worry, Nord, we'll get to Lov with an army.

We'll see that the Titanbringer pays." Missy floated off the table, Tinkle a half beat behind her. "We need to go get the Anuunaki ready to march. Get your gear in order." She pulled her pouch from her belt and tossed it to Jaxon. "Don't lose it, and don't get lost in it. I know you'll need it for something. Just be sure to give it back tonight."

Jaxon bowed low, pulling his hat from his head and placing it over his heart. His bald head glowed brightly in the blue bulbs. "Thank you, Missy, I take back what I said about fairies. Nord is just a jerk!" Jaxon shot from the room, laughing as he ducked under Nord's reaching arms.

"Fairies, dragons, and halflings, I hate them all."

Chapter Thirty One

Missy watched as a long line of Anuunaki stretched before and behind them, only two to three thick. They moved rapidly, swarming through the salt flat. She observed as Nord said something to the Anuunaki he rode, then watched as he jumped to his feet, riding while standing upon the Anuunaki's back. Jaxon whistled and hollered from his seat upon another.

Jaxon and Nord had abandoned their horses as they crossed Tempe Bay. The poor beasts weren't able to keep up with the quick insect-like beings. The Anuunaki seemed to glide over the surface of the terrain. No matter how uneven it looked, even Nord had to admit that they gave a much better ride than horses. Sanche had given Nord an "I told you so" look as he said it. Missy grinned, happy to see everyone smiling. Even the Anuunaki seemed cheerful and full of pep. She knew from experience how quickly that morale could turn around.

She floated down to sit on Jaxon's shoulder. "Glad to see you in such good spirits! I would think you'd be homesick right now, having to travel halfway across the world." She winked knowingly at him. "It's okay, I know how much halflings are homebodies."

Jaxon shook his head, his ears close to slapping Missy. "If that's what you think of me, my dear, you're sorely mistaken." Jaxon puffed out his chest, pointing to himself with his thumb. "I'm of the rare

breed of halfling afflicted with wanderlust. You see," he said, beginning to use expansive gestures, "my tastes run to the fancy, so I tend to have to pay more for what I want. That, or gain the connections that give me a better deal." He gestured to her pouch. "Why I'm so happy you're here is that I can use that magnificent pouch of yours to peddle items. It's a merchant's dream!"

"Wait a second, I thought you were a man who fixed things, a tinkerer if you will." She pointed to the tall elf who finally sat down upon the Anuunaki he rode, laughing in joy. "So why did Nord there never mention your being a merchant, or rich?"

"Because he was rich too, he just didn't listen to me and invest in the trade routes. I made fortunes from the elves and men, selling trinkets from Heart." He put his hands behind his head to cradle it, "And I made as much again, selling elven and halfling relics to the merchant class of Heart." He snorted and gestured dismissively "They were suckers though, the items I sold them were just feathers and beads tied to the chicken bones of my meals."

Missy shook her head, looking to the front of the line. She couldn't see it at the moment, but she knew Sanche was at the head of the column, leading the army to the Great Wyrms Desert. She hoped they would all survive the march. "I'll be back in a bit." She stated, stepping sideways through a hole in reality.

She loved traveling through the fabric of reality to Hae Terrae, the ancestral home of fairies and pixies. Time moved differently here. She watched a beautiful daisy pixie, its petals flowing in the wind as it floated by where Missy had come out. Its body seemed made of daisy petals, shifting and twisting in the wind. The pixie looked to be fragile, as if a strong wind might rip it apart. She nodded to it when it waved to her, flying towards the central abode.

Water appeared beneath her and she could see many points of light ahead. They shone and reflected off of the water, weaving through the branches of what appeared to be a giant tree, but all fairies and pixies knew better. They knew that the tree was an ancient Entwife, one of the last companions to the shepherds of the forest. The Ents had been wiped out when the Wyrms had

restructured the world. Hae Terrae was the last of all Ent kind. She has housed the fairies and pixies for thousands of years, and looking upon her now, Missy felt herself filled with gratitude and love.

Everyone who lived in Hae Terrae felt that way.

Hae Terrae is a giant weeping willow, stretching a hundred feet into the air. Missy could see the fairies flying through the strands of leaves, bright points of light that lit up their lovely home. Pixies came, carrying wildflower vines, which they weaved through the long hair-like leaves, adding multiple colors to the green. Missy knew they did this every day for the love of Hae Terrae, who had saved the little people from an evil too large to imagine.

Missy flew on in silence, heading for Hae Terrae's face. She always felt comfortable talking to the Entwife there, as if she were listening. She looked to Hae Terrae's beautiful face when she arrived. A soft, rounded chin lead up into full lips which were flat in relaxation. High cheekbones angled themselves to a soft, long, thin nose. The eyes were enormous. If they had been hollows in the wood, Missy would have been able to use one as a house. She was beautiful, and though the bark's wrinkles ruined the ageless wonder look, the face was still young.

Missy flew to Has Terrae's nose, hugging it as tightly as she could, pouring love towards the tree. "I wish you would talk." She whispered softly to the wood. "I feel lost. Our last great champion from the dragons has fallen, becoming a Wyrn." Tears began to make a slow stream down her face. "First to fall, the mightiest of dragons, and Dalanar's brother, Asheron. Saw what men were doing to the world, and he wanted to avenge it.

"That was the start of the Dragon Wars, in which the poor humans were decimated. Now all they have is the Mouth of Truths far to the north. We lost our second champion in that war. Dalanar was our genius. He always found a way to come out on top. I believe the people of this world were his treasure, and that's why he sacrificed himself to save us."

Missy slammed her fist into Hae Terrae's eye. "And now Tryton, son of Dalanar, and our last hope, has twisted and become a Wyrn." She flew back from the nose, turning away from the Entwife.

"I don't even know why I'm telling you this. You won't help, you haven't since your kind was wiped out. I understand why, but it doesn't make it any easier." Missy tore a hole through reality, and stood staring down at the Anuunaki army that she could see streaming by. "I guess it's time to put our faith in the unknown. I just hope Lovonian doesn't buckle under the pressure." She crossed her rip, closing it behind herself.

Chapter Thirty Two

The'oak smiled at Lov as he slapped the frog in his hand upon its back. The frog croaked, its back beginning to cover in a thick clear goo. The old orc carefully scraped the slime into the paste he was making in a clay bowl. Mostly goose fat and crushed beetles, it was a thick, grayish white. Lov's stomach churned just looking at it, but he knew he would have to eat it. The orcs needed proof that he was man enough to be a chief.

Yesterday, they had thrown him into a pit with what they called a kegaroth, an eight foot lizard. It had been an interesting challenge: him bare handed, it with its three inch claws and razor sharp teeth. A large brown frill had stood out from the neck when it charged Lov. He still wasn't clear on what he had done to kill it, and he hadn't escaped unscathed, as it took a small chunk from his upper arm. He still felt hazy with the effects of its venom, a poison that knocked its victims unconscious for hours if not days.

Lov shook his head as he watched The'oak mix the slime into the paste. The orc was being careful not to touch it, always a good sign in Lov's experience. The'oak had been helping Lov pass this, his test of manhood. The young half-dragon had the feeling that the old one's life depended on it. The shaman stood shorter than most orcs, easily a foot shorter than Lov. He was also impossibly skinny. Not that there weren't skinny orcs, but this one looked so thin, like he had been starved his whole life.

The'oak handed the light gray, pasty slime to Lov, gesturing for the young half-dragon to eat it. "Eat it all! This will send you to Gruumnsh's halls, so you can commune with the god himself."

Lov sniffed tentatively at the slime. It smelled like unhealthy dog excrement, a strong pungent odor. The half-elf wrinkled his nose, setting the bowl on the table, and pushing it away from himself. "I think I'll pass on that." He said, turning from the table, heading for the door. The oak jumped in front of Lov, pushing him back towards the table.

"Not my fault you smelled it!" The old orc said, pointing to his chest. "You're the one that wants to head the tribe." The oak said, shoving Lov into a chair. "Now you want to walk away with the test half done?"

"I only wanted to be chief because those idiots won't stop trying to fight me!" Lov exclaimed, slamming his hand onto the table.

The oak caught the bowl as it bounced off the table and into the air. "Listen, Bawldy, you started this shit, made me back you up, you are damn well finishing it." The oak handed Lov the bowl, then strode to the door of his crude hut, whipping it open. The oak gestured to all the nearby tents and hovels. "This is just a small part of our tribe. Either you finish this, or they and everyone else, will want a piece of you. The only way out of it, is for you to take the chieftom."

Lov grimaced, considering his options. "So, I can eat this... goop, become chief and have everyone listen to me like a king. Or, I can throw this out, and guarantee that everyone out there wants to fight me."

Lov considered the slime in the bowl as The oak smiled and replied, "King is too weak a word, more like dictator."

Lov sniffed at the goop again, turning back to The oak. "Can I at least get a drink to wash it down?"

"Sure!" The small orc said, turning and pouring a thick brown liquid from a pitcher. "This grog will make you forget the taste of the paste!"

A strong alcoholic smell wafted from the cup as The oak set it in front of Lov. "Never mind, I think I'm good." Lov said, pushing the cup away. "Alcohol and I don't mix well."

The oak shook his head taking a large pull from the cup instead, "Then hurry up, there's more to this ceremony."

Lov took a deep breath and plugged his nose. He scooped half of the slimy goop from the bowl and shoved it in his mouth. It was salty and vinegary with a hint of rotten fish as it slid around his mouth. Lov's stomach churned as he struggled to force himself to swallow. It felt like snot running down the back of his throat.

"Good, good. Now take the rest of it, and we can take you to the rock." The oak said, drinking the grog Lov had pushed away. "Can you hurry up? I need to take a big shit, and I can't until we get you to the last leg of this."

Lov closed his eyes and shoved the last of the paste into his mouth, his muscles trying to reject it as it slid down the back of his throat. The young half-dragon shook his head and shuddered, struggling to keep it down.

The oak slammed the now empty cup on the table with a loud belch. "Alright, boy, follow me." They strode from the rude hut, Lov trailing the shorter orc, the old, odd man calling out their way. "Kuta iata! Chifte tola hitu Rok!" Orcs began to fill the sides of the path, cheering and hooting. Lov watched as a larger orc picked up a smaller one, swinging him like a weapon, clearing room. Lov shook his head, there were going to be some changes here soon.

Lov continued down the road, keeping close to The oak. The people were jumping up and down, screaming obscenities and cursing him. It seemed some wanted him to succeed, and others didn't. But today would be the last time they could approach him as an equal. If he succeeded, he would be a chief of a small tribe. If he failed, he would probably be killed and fed to the young to increase their power.

As he walked, he began to see other peoples mixed in with the orcs. Here a halfling, all but punching the orc behind him in the genitals as it jumped and cheered, fist pumping in the air. There an elf, their ears cut off, hooting and hollering as no proper elf would. And humans,

thousands of them, seemed to mix with the orcs. Also scattered among the masses were tall beings that towered over the orcs. They seemed reserved compared to the other people Lov saw, but he could tell they were being enthusiastic.

As they approached the town's central monument, a giant pillar of stone with a large balancing table rock on top, Lov saw a figure clutching the pillar. The figure was twenty feet tall, with the strong muscular body of an orc, muscles tightening and loosening as it gripped the pillar. But where the face should be, a giant yellow eye stared down on him. Lov felt a sense of awe wash over him as he approached the figure. He felt as if he should bow down to this omnipotent being.

A deep booming laughter filled the air. "Don't do that, little boy. Those who worship me properly would rip you limb from limb." The figure that Lov now understood to be Gruumsh, disappeared, leaving the pillar behind. The other peoples vanished from the crowd at the same time, orcs were the only ones cheering him on.

Lov shook his head to clear the vision, then approached the pillar, confident that he would climb it easily. The crowd died down, eagerly waiting to see what he would do. Lov climbed up the red clay steps, soaking in the look of the pillar. It was smooth and a slightly darker red than the steps leading up to it. He ran his hands along it, examining the stone. It felt polished. Lov was searching for a hand hold, a foot hold, anything to get him started up. A shout rose up from the crowd, "Will you get on with it already!"

Lov sprung into action. He listened to his hunger, as it told him what to do. He jumped his highest and best, slapping a hand onto the rock. The scales of his hand found a way to grip the polished stone, leaving him hanging there by his palm. He released his hold, falling back to the top step. A collective groan rose from the crowd, and he heard some say he had given up already. The half-dragon calmly pulled his boots off, listening as the orcs threatened bodily harm, chucking small pebbles at him. When he had them off, he jumped again, this time catching the rock with the scales of both hands and his feet. The crowd shushed again, watching, waiting, and full of suspense.

He scaled the pillar easily, like a spider at home on its web, but was stuck once he hit the rounded table top. He could see the slight curvature of the stone. Lov placed an experimental hand upon it, and felt it shift, slowly rotating to the right. He could catch the very edge of the table if he tried, his fingertips could get a solid hold there, but he didn't know if his fingertips would be strong enough to hold him. His dragonhunger laughed at him, calling him a coward. Lov shook the thought from his head, and took it on faith. He let go of the pillar with his other hand and feet, leaving himself hanging thirty feet in the air, the table top slowly rotating him around. The watching audience below hooted and hollered exuberantly, some calling out, "Fall!" Lov reached up with his other hand, slapping it down flat on the smooth stone. He released his first, and felt himself slip. His hand that was firmly planted on top of the rock slid to the edge, the only thing holding him up were two fingertips. He momentarily panicked until he felt his fingertips supporting his weight.

Lov reached his other hand up, getting his fingertips along the edge, and pulled with all of his might. Once his face was level with the edge, he swung his legs around until a foot found purchase on top of the rock. He managed to pull himself the rest of the way up, then rolled onto his back, his heart thumping with the heat of the moment.

Lov sat up, the table top continuing its slow rotation, and surveyed the orcs below him. They were looking up at him, arms raised, and cheering while yelling his name like a chant. "Lovonian! Lovonian! Lovonian! Lovonian!"

The'oak stepped forward from the crowd, motioning for silence. "We all knew this day would come! The Tribe of the Eye would rise on the back of a storm cloud! I think Lov is that storm cloud! The one to forge our fallen society into a true power!"

The orcs all stared at The'oak, confused looks upon their faces. The'oak rolled his eyes, then explained in simpler terms. "Lovonian help us conquer all tribes!" The orcs, big and small, fat and skinny, all burst out in loud cheering, and Lov knew he had found his first army. He remained seated in the center of the stone, searching the horizon for what to do.

Lov shook his head at the vision he saw. Across the rocky plains, he saw his uncle and companions. Sanche, Nord, Jaxon, and Missy, all being carried by a giant colony of ant like beings. They swarmed across the rocks like a flash flood. As they drew nearer though, Lov saw that Sanche was taking wounds. The rest seemed fine, but Sanche formed a scar above one eye, then lost the bottom half of his arm. Lov didn't see anything doing this to Sanche, it just was. As they climbed up to join him on the pillar, Sanche lost the left half of his face, collapsing on the very edge of the platform.

Missy, Jaxon, and Nord continued to him, as if nothing had happened, smiling at him, saying how proud they were, before the Anuunaki carried them off. Lov approached Sanche, fearing the worst, but his mentor sat up, and turned a smile to Lov. His face, where half had gone missing, appeared mist-like and Lov could see through it. The same with the partial arm Sanche had lost. His mentor nodded to Lov, waving with the misty hand, then disappeared on the wind. Lov shook his head again, and saw he was bent over the edge of the rock, looking down at his new tribe. It was time to enact some changes.