

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a forest. In the foreground, there are large, moss-covered rocks and ferns. A path leads through the forest towards a stone tower with a conical roof in the distance. The sky is filled with dramatic, grey clouds, and a bright light source, possibly the sun or moon, is breaking through the clouds, creating a hazy, ethereal atmosphere. The overall color palette is dominated by greens, browns, and greys.

Legends of Atalmon

Caryn Chronicle
Volume III

Jeff Stanhope

**Legends of Atalmor:
Caryn Chronicle, Volume Three**

Jeff Stanhope

**Copyright 2016 Jeff Stanhope
tystylcaryn@gmail.com**

Cover image courtesy of [Irinama on Deviantart](#)

Prologue

Atalmor, a small island continent west of the mainland, was divided by rivers and mountains into four countries. Caryn, the largest, was in the northwest. This was the land where humans ruled. Many small towns and villages dotted the landscape, surrounded by fertile fields. In the city of Caryn, named for the country, was a small jeweler's shop situated in the middle of a long avenue. The unremarkable shop was in a narrow, drafty old building that was two stories tall, the shop occupying the first level with the jeweler's home neatly tucked away upstairs.

"But I am only a jeweler," said the tiny man. Standing before him was the imposing figure of a mage. The mage was one of the tallest people Jwas had ever seen. "Please, I beg you. I do not wish to be involved in this. Can you not make the rings yourself?"

"You will do as you are instructed, and if you do not," the wizard said with a menacing grin just before shooting a tiny lightning bolt into Jwas' long black hair, singeing the ends. "Horlarl will not be pleased, and we all know how elves are when they are not pleased."

The jeweler nodded, motioned for the wizard to leave him so that he may begin working on the four rings as they were commissioned. He worked endlessly for ten days without rest until all the rings were complete and perfect. Though Jwas wanted no part of the rings, he took pride in his work, noting how beautiful his creations were. He sent a street messenger to fetch the mage that had ordered him to make the rings once he had finished.

The next day, the mage returned. "I have been wondering, what is it that makes you waste so much time in crafting simple rings, hmm? Have you been dawdling while the kings wait? This is unacceptable!" The wizard lifted a wand, spoke a soft word, and Jwas was gone. The wizard then hurried out from the jeweler's shop, heading out of Caryn altogether.

High in the tower of the mage's master in Gumlor, the younger mage carefully brought out the four rings. Two of the rings were plain silver, as instructed, one had the designs of vines carved into it all around, and the final ring was made of gold with an emerald set into it. The mage went to work. With the help of his master, the wizard carefully imbued the rings with powerful magics.

Days later, once the rings were finished, imbued with the magic of the wizards and tied to the soul of an unfortunate jeweler, the wizards presented them to the rulers of the four kingdoms.

Chapter One

The dog guarding the room lay on the small bed and never looked up to regard its intruder. The man was short but stout with short, tidy, graying hair and a stubble beard. "Useless," the man scoffed at the hound as he began to rummage through the papers tucked away in a coffer beside the bed. The cottage was small, with but two rooms, a small room with a kettle hanging over a fireplace, and a bed chamber. The bed chamber was tiny and cramped, and smelled of dogs and sweat. The man had to strain his golden eyes, for the only light in the room came from a very small window. As the intruder was searching every crammed corner, he failed to notice the dog slowly rise and transfigure into the form of a woman.

"Now, what have we here?" asked the slender older woman with light brown hair who was suddenly filling the doorway. She was wearing a flowing blue and tan dress with glowing runes stitched onto both sleeves. Sword in hand, she quickly had the stunned man pinned to the back wall, her green eyes piercing his own. He frantically searched his mind for an excuse to be there, other than the obvious.

"Allow me to show my official papers?" he asked. The woman, looking as beautiful as she was deadly, nodded and kept the sword close enough to strike at him should he try any tricks. Slowly, he slid the strap off one shoulder and swung his pack around in front of him. He unbuckled the flap on top, and, still moving very slowly, but deliberately, brought forth a bundle.

Worn leather wrapped around several sheets of parchment paper, bound with a leather thong, tied very neatly. As he began to open the bundle, the woman noticed a symbol stamped on one side of the leather, and her green eyes widened as she recognized the crest. It was a shield, divided into quadrants, a river running through the top left to the bottom right, a mountain in the top right, and a tree in the bottom left. It had a knight's helm atop, and worn runes in the cross dividing the panels. It was an early version of the current royal crest.

When the intruder produced the paper he was seeking, she took it, eyeing it curiously. As she was reading his "official" papers, she left the sword floating in position in front of the man's nose. The papers this man held were required those days, in order to travel throughout the kingdom of Caryn. She read his name aloud, "Kryzzl".

"An odd name, even for a thief..." As she spoke, the floating sword crept closer to Kryzzl's face. Without pause or alarm, Kryzzl placed a finger on the tip of the blade and guided its sharp point, carefully, away to the side.

"I am no thief, Lady Lisann," he calmly replied, "I am a representative of the land of the dwarves called Jire. I seek the one named Wyrwood, and was told he could be found here."

"Haven't seen 'SIR' Wyrwood in these woods in a decade. Ever since he lost his title, he has been in exile. Someone told you my name, but nothing of his absence?" She asked angrily.

"The last man I spoke to in search of Sir Wyrwood, told me he could be found here, and the lady of the house would be happy to show him to me" said Kryzzl.

"All I have of him is this." She held out a small gold chain with a silvery half-moon pendant.

Kryzzl held his hand out, and she dropped it into his dry, cracked palm. He carefully examined it, and it seemed attached to this chain was only one-half of a larger piece. On

one side was carved a scene of a mountain, no doubt the Great Hill in Jire, on the other was inscribed half of a message. Kryzzl read the pendant and asked, "What does the other half read?"

"Only Sir Wyrwood knows. He made this in exile and had it sent to me"

"I see. May I?" he produced a scrap of parchment and a small chunk of coal.

The woman nodded her agreement and he set about to make a rubbing of both sides of the pendant.

They sat for hours talking about the dwarf. She told him many tales of Wyrwood's various battles and exploits. After they had eaten a supper of stew and bread, Kryzzl departed. "Thank you, Lady Lisann, I shall remember you in my travels."

"Be safe, young man, and gods be with you on your quest. If you should find him, send him back to me, safely." Lisann allowed a single tear to fall from her eye.

Moments after leaving the cottage, Kryzzl remembered something else he had been told on his journey, and turned to ask Lisann of the matter. Yet when he turned, all he saw were ruins of a small cottage sitting on the knoll. Weeds and small trees were growing through the cracks of the old stone floor.

Was it all a dream? No, he still had a full belly and the taste of stew on his lips. Kryzzl reached into his pack, and yes, the parchment scrap with the rubbing on it was still there. He walked over to the rubble, to where the bed chamber had been just moments before, and saw the glint of metal through the weeds. Crouching down, he picked up the object. It was a plain silver ring with a scrap of papyrus rolled up inside. He carefully unrolled the minuscule scroll. It was blank, save for a single spot of what appeared to be dried blood in the center. Carefully, he placed the crumbling paper in a pocket of his pack, placed the ring in the inside pocket of his green coat, and turned south on the road between the cities of Caryn and Ravenwood.

The suns were setting and light was fast waning when Kryzzl decided to stop for the night. He found a meadow on the side of the road surrounded by a low wooden fence. Kryzzl stepped over the fence and laid down in the soft grass, using his pack as a pillow.

He was awakened the next morning to find a crossbow aimed squarely at his eye. "Just who in the flame are you?", bellowed an angry, growling voice. As Kryzzl's eyes adjusted to the brightness of the morning suns, he saw the man it belonged to. He was very tall and thin, blonde hair, with sun-darkened skin. He was dressed in blue cloth breeches, black leather boots, and chain mail under a tunic that had a familiar crest embroidered in its center.

Shaking off some of the sleep he replied, "Kryzzl, good sir."

"Papers", the man said coldly, crossbow ever still.

"Here," Kryzzl said as he handed his pack to the patrolman, "In the top of the pack, a bundle."

After finding and reading the papers, the patrolman said to Kryzzl, "Do you know not who owns these lands?"

"No."

"This field is part of Fael's territory, this and almost all others around here," the patrolman swept his free arm out wide. "He is not very welcoming to free-loaders who sleep in his fields, taking his rabbits and boars as they please." He went on to explain that Fael was an ancient man who worked cruel and dark magics, calling on the dark forces that were forbidden for most mages to use. He was given special permission by the king,

though some may say he used magic to “convince” the king to permit him to do so.

“My apologies,” said Kryzzl in a soft voice, “I will take my papers and be on my way.”

“You'll take care not to stray from the road, except for the marked areas for camping, lots of foul things out there.” As he handed back the bundle of papers, he noticed the crest stamped in the leather. “A friend of the king?” the patrolman asked.

Kryzzl gave a tight smile at this, but remained silent.

“Gods be with you, sir,” the patrolman said as he watched the short man stroll away down the ancient cobbled path.

Around midday, Kryzzl came into the city of Ravenwood. This was a grand city, not as large as the city Caryn, but large enough. Looking down its newly cobbled streets, one could see tall, colorful buildings. A large keep reached for the clouds in the town's center, with beautiful gardens and high iron fences surrounding it. Bards and minstrels lined both sides of most streets, singing praises to the king and of glorious battles of days and times long-forgotten. One street had ten or more taverns, countless merchant carts and carriages from which the traders peddled wares, and several inns to take in new visitors. Horses and ponies whinnied and stamped, this street was very busy indeed.

He chose the cleanest looking tavern, called “The Crow's Feather Tavern”. Kryzzl stepped through the doorway to find a circular bar, packed with patrons sitting elbow to elbow. In the center of the noisy tavern was a rolling fire with several kettles hanging above. The smells of fresh bread, roast boar, and spicy stew entered his nostrils, making his stomach grumble. All around, he looked at the tables scattered about, and found an empty table in a dark corner. When he sat down, he reached into his inside coat pocket and pulled out the ring he had retrieved from the cottage. Examining it, he noticed nothing remarkable, just a plain silver ring, so he slipped it on his first finger. Nothing seemed special about the ring, so he placed it back in his coat.

Soon after, a serving wench arrived at his table. “What'll you have?” she asked in a pleasant voice, smiling that fake smile that most servers have.

“One tankard of ale, please,” he said. He added, “and a small bowl of stew.”

“Right away, sir”, she replied. Moments later, she returned with the ale, stew, and a basket of fresh bread on her tray. As she set the bowl in front of him, a horrible crashing sound came from outside in the street. There was commotion as the tavern patrons rushed to the windows to see what was happening.

Out on the street, two men were standing over a very young boy who was unconscious and bleeding from his head. Laying on the road, the boy looked pitiful indeed, and outnumbered as more armed men arrived on scene.

Kryzzl pushed through the crowded doorway of the tavern, sword and dagger in hand. When he reached the men, he noticed they both had the same crest on their armored chests as the patrolman he encountered in the field earlier that day. Kryzzl quickly put his blades away, hailing the nearest armored man.

“What has happened here?” he asked calmly.

“This rat was trying to steal from that vegetable cart across the street,” the guard told him.

“And you killed him?!” Kryzzl exclaimed.

“If he dies, so be it,” the guard said. He then added after realizing Kryzzl was not from there, “Papers, please.”

As Kryzzl handed over his papers, the child began to twitch. Wincing in terrible pain from the gash in his head, the boy slowly sat up, dazed. Blood began streaming down his face, darkening and discoloring his short blonde hair. Kryzzl started to ask the boy if he was alright, when the second guard advanced with a mace in hand held high above his head, swinging at the child with all his might.

A moment before the mace would crush the boy's skull, the world stopped. Kryzzl saw everything stop. Birds hung in the air in mid-flight, drinks that were being poured froze in place. Citizens and guards alike were frozen mid-stride. Kryzzl found he could still move, and thought best to try to re-position the poor child away from the path of the mace. The man stepped over to the boy, picked him up from the ground, and moved him aside. As soon as he had the helpless body out of the way, the world started to move again.

The guardsman cursed as his mace struck nothing but thin air.

"Magic!!" the first guard cried. "Bind him immediately!!"

There was no struggle in tying the boy's hands. Kryzzl stepped forward and said "If this child is to go to the dungeon, take me as well. For I also worked magic"

The boy looked incredulously at Kryzzl as he was jerked up to his feet. Kryzzl gave him a smile and a wink as the first guardsman bound his hands with a chain made from crystal. The two were loaded onto a pony cart and were taken away from the bloody scene.

The dungeon was dark, dirty, and smelled of rotting flesh. Dim torches hung on the wall every fifty feet or so. Men chained to the cold stone walls screamed and spat curses at the guards escorting the two through the narrow passages. Kryzzl heard the sounds of torture coming from a side hallway. One prisoner managed to spit a wad of mucus onto the last guard, who returned the favor quickly with a thump from his club. The dungeon seemed to go on forever, sprawling in all directions deep beneath the keep. They eventually came to a cell with a heavy iron door that was bound by magical forces, reserved for those who illegally worked magic. The man and the boy were shackled tightly to the wall, side by side, in the darkest corner of the cell.

In the lit portion of the cell, a dwarf was chained to the wall, quietly spitting curses to gods unknown. After a few moments of looking at his newest cellmates, the dwarf barked, "Ye got yerself in a bloody mess, ain't ye? What'd the boy do, summon a demon?"

Kryzzl smiled at the dwarf, "I guess I somehow slowed time when the boy was about to be slain for stealing. The child has done nothing except for steal fruit."

"Funny, they normally let the little rats die in the street," the dwarf replied to the darkness.

"They thought he did some magic, so they brought him to this foul place. Why would they let him die for theft, but live for dealing magic?" Kryzzl asked

"Oh, they'll kill 'im, don't ye doubt, an' ye too, just takes different measures to kill a mage," the old dwarf replied.

"Never mind that," Kryzzl said, "What are you in for?"

"Me? Hah, well I had an axe enchanted and wouldn't give up the feller I had do it. So they'll kill me, I reckon. Never was one to follow the letter of the law anyhow. I reckon I deserve it somehow."

"That doesn't sound like any reason to die. What would you do if you got out?" Kryzzl asked

The dwarf looked toward the ceiling and replied, "I'd go back to Jire, where these dumb laws don't exist, and get me king to talk some sense into the damned king o' Caryn."

"What if I got you out?" Kryzzl asked, suddenly standing free of bonds in front of the dwarf.

"What're ye goin' to do, turn us into mist an' hope we float outta this forsaken prison? Nay, I'd rather die in this cesspit than be helped out of it by a damned wizard!" the dwarf exclaimed.

"My friend, I am no wizard," Kryzzl replied. In moments, he had the dwarf and boy free of their bonds, and was working on the magical forces keeping the door locked. The boy had found a small length of wire on the floor, a component to an earlier mage's spell, grasped it with his toes, lifted the wire to his hands, and was working the pins and tumblers with a skill that was far beyond his years. Soon, the lock was open and the door swung open silently. A quick search down each direction of the hallway revealed no immediate guards, so Kryzzl swiftly led the other two in the direction they came from. All along the corridors, prisoners spat and cursed the free men, but they had not run into any guards yet. Retracing their steps was a challenge, as the dungeon was dark and every turn looked the same, but Kryzzl somehow prevailed.

At last finding the room where their belongings were held, Kryzzl blew on the lock, melting it with his breath.

"I knew ye was a damned wizard!" the dwarf exclaimed. Kryzzl gave a hateful look, but had no reply, he simply stepped into the room and retrieved his personal effects and bade the dwarf to do the same. The dwarf grudgingly rummaged through the items in the room until he found his pack and his boots. He also grabbed a cloak that obviously belonged to someone else, but Kryzzl held his tongue and said nothing.

At this late hour, only one guard was keeping the entrance. When the sleepy man saw the escapees, he quickly went for the spear he had leaning against the door. The dwarf launched himself up the three stairs leading to the guard, throwing his weight into the man's belly, knocking him off balance. The guard let out a loud grunt as the wind was forced from his chest. Kryzzl and the boy slipped past as the dwarf was pummeling the guard with a bare fist, denting the man's breastplate and breaking his jaw. He found himself on top of the man's chest, punching his face over and over. The dwarf finally came out of his fit of rage when the man went limp beneath him.

The dwarf rose from his victim, covered in blood, and ran out through the door and into the streets of Ravenwood, looking for the man who let him out of the dungeon. After an hour of searching the alleys and streets, he gave up and rushed out of town, lest he be caught.

Chapter Two

The king of Caryn sat in his study, deep in thought. The room was full of scrolls and books from the far corners of the Mainland, books of knowledge and of histories concerning the migrations to Atalmor and the beginnings of the land known as Caryn. The king was studying one such tome when a servant burst through the tall arched doors. "Your Majesty, pardon the intrusion, but the High Mage beckons you. Urgently," the elf servant huffed as he doubled over, hands on his knees, trying to catch his breath.

The king smiled softly as he said, "I will be in the throne room in a moment. Thank you, Myrad." The king stretched as he rose from his comfortable chair, placed the gold bejeweled crown back on his head, adjusted it, sighed hard, then left the study.

The tall, muscular king stood a full head above any other man in Caryn. Today, he was dressed in his favorite cloak, an old, tattered cloak worn long ago by his birth father, the colors of which had long faded to a pale red-brown. He had his customary garb underneath; a dark purple shirt embroidered with his crest, black cloth pants without pockets, and black leather boots. Around his neck was an old pendant that his mother had given him when he was a baby, and on one finger he wore a gold ring. He had neat, dark hair, a full trimmed beard, and many well earned battle scars on his cheeks and neck. His eyes were deep-set and emerald green, steady, and ever determined under his thick brow.

As he entered the throne room, everyone in the room bowed or knelt until the king sat on the large marble throne. "King Tystyl," the shriveling old mage's voice cracked out, "there is a very urgent matter we must tend to."

King Tystyl waved a hand in dismissal at the other occupants of the room, "Leave us to talk privately", he said to the many servants and guardsmen there. When the room was empty, he blew a long sigh and said, "Now, what is it, Fael?"

"Sir Wyrnwood's Elder Ring has been used," said the decrepit old man.

Tystyl's stern discontented expression washed away instantly into a wide smile. Excited, he asked, "He lives? My dear old friend lives?"

"It certainly appears so, my King. I know not where, but I have a general idea and have already sent out a search party for him. We cannot let him go. Not this time," said the gray-eyed old man as his purple robe faded to blue, then green, now orange, and back to purple.

"How far out is the party?" inquired Tystyl.

"An hour sir, going south," was Fael's reply.

"I must join them, I cannot let him remain lost to me." At this, the king quickly stood up, hurried to a large chest hidden behind the throne. Opening the chest, Tystyl smiled as he always did when he saw its contents; a full suit of plate armor, a great axe, and two bastard swords sheathed in elven made leather scabbards. He removed his cloak and crown, setting them reverently on the seat of the throne. He then donned his armor, strapped the axe to his back, and buckled his sword belt securely around his waist. Fael bowed and left the room, smiling wickedly as soon as his back was turned to the king.

Tystyl rang a bell, and seconds later Myrad appeared in the throne room. "Myrad, make ready my black horse and arrange provisions enough for a week," Tystyl ordered. Myrad, an elf who had been the king's personal servant for a decade or more, smiled and bowed, and in a moment was gone. Tystyl glanced around the ornate throne room, looked at all the colorful and intricate tapestries, mostly images of the last battle Caryn suffered, at the beautiful stained glass windows, and the granite floor, and sighed. It had been three

years since he last stepped out of the great city of Caryn, the one that he had rebuilt atop the ruins of the old city some fifteen years before, and on a similar mission, no less. Wyrwood had been rumored to have been seen somewhere near Strungvali, just on the north side of the border. Tystyl had himself gone to investigate, only to find not his precious Wyrwood, but a younger blue-bearded dwarf, whose name escaped Tystyl's thoughts now. "Why did I let them take his title? I should have listened to Father and Lisann, and not that damned Fael," he thought to himself.

When he reached the stables just outside the castle, his favorite horse stood ready. "Old friend, are you ready to go find our father?" he asked the steed. As if in reply to the king's question, the horse stamped his mighty hoof then gave a snort as he lowered and raised his head. "Well, then, we should be off."

At first light, Kryzzl stopped for a rest after the long night of walking. Kryzzl brought out some smoked meat and cheese from his pack. Sitting on the grass beside the road, he considered where he should try next. If Wyrwood had been this far south, perhaps he could be in Strungvali, which was only a few more miles down this road. Kryzzl could go to Strungvali, however the elves may not welcome him. He could try to get more information, but the only town this far south in Caryn was Ravenwood, and he certainly wasn't going back there. The only option it seemed was to carry on into the land of the elves and take his chances.

As he walked along the road, he was thoroughly enjoying the crisp, spring morning. The suns were both up, the birds were singing their songs, and the early wildflowers were in full bloom. The smell of the morning dew was thick in the air. As he topped the ridge of a hill, a beautiful sight laid out before him. From this vantage, one could see the northern parts of Strungvali, trees and streams as far as the eye could see. There were rolling hills, serene valleys, and meadows all about the forests. The leaves on the trees were of all hues of the rainbow. He paused for a long moment to take in the majestic view before continuing down the path for the last mile of the road leading into the land of the elves.

Upon entering Strungvali, an elf in a greenish tunic and brown leggings dropped from the nearest tree. With an arrow resting on his front hand, the elf drew his bowstring taut as he demanded, "Either state your business quickly, turn back, or die where you stand."

From behind the elf, a gruff voice said, "That be the feller I told ye about, the one 'twas to be meetin' me." To Kryzzl's surprise, the dwarf from Ravenwood stepped into view.

"I- I have papers," the man stammered as he reached for his pack.

"Those are not necessary here. I will repeat only once more, either state your business, turn back, or die where you stand," the elf stated flatly.

Kryzzl swallowed hard, trying to get the lump out of his throat and said, "I am a representative from Jire, in search of King Bareet's brother, Wyrwood. He is a blue-bearded-"

The elf cut him off, "I know what Wyrwood looks like, he needs no description here, but I am afraid you will not find your dwarf here. Seems he slipped off to the east into Gumlor," was the elf's response. "You may find him in or near Wels." He then turned to the dwarf as he lowered his bow and said, "Take the east road when you reach the

valley.”

“Many thanks, good sir,” said Kryzzl. As they walked away from the elf, Kryzzl regarded the dwarf, looked at him for the first time in sunlight. He was quite tall for a dwarf, with black hair and beard. He had many scars along his cheeks and crossing his large round nose. The bare arms of the dwarf revealed corded muscles, veins winding through them like vines choking a tree.

“I ne’er thanked ye,” the dwarf finally said at length.

“Why did you help me back there?” asked Kryzzl.

“Why’d ye help meself in the dungeon? I felt ye needed it. Ye would ne’er woulda’ got past the elf without me.” The dwarf looked hard at Kryzzl. Something seemed off about the man. He could not put his finger on it, but something was definitely different about this man. “What be yer name?”

“Kryzzl, and yourself?”

“William. Yer eyes, they be a little distinct. Not sure I seen any like ‘em,” the dwarf stated.

“Well, I’ve had them all my life,” Kryzzl replied, and they continued in silence for a long stretch.

“Well, we need to make the valley before the moon rises,” William replied.

The road to the valley curved, climbed, fell, and seemed to sometimes shift in several directions at once. Kryzzl had never been to this land before, had never seen anything so beautiful. Under the colorful canopy reaching out from the trees, he stared at the bright sunlight shining in tiny rays through the leaves. All manner of creatures scurried out of the way as the strangers passed. Kryzzl watched vividly-colored birds take flight as the dwarf and he approached. William stopped at an enormous oak marked by a single rune on a stone in front of it and said, “I left something here last time I was through, I need to get it.” He stepped behind the ancient tree. Kryzzl heard some scratching and digging noises from the tree, and William returned with what looked to be a newly forged double bit axe. The head of the axe was as broad as the dwarf who held it, with cruel sharp edges on either side. It had gold inlaid into the silvery steel in intricate patterns. Kryzzl stared at the fine weapon. He had never seen anything like it.

“That is a mighty axe, William, is that the same one you were put in the dungeon for?” Kryzzl asked as the dwarf strapped it to his back.

“No, this one be me own. The other I had made for a friend o’ mine,” he said. With that, they made haste to get to the valley before nightfall. The suns were already going down, and the two could not afford to be on the road after dark, not without an elven escort.

They arrived at the head of the valley just as the last light of day was giving way to the darkness of night. An elf guarding the entrance recognized William and allowed the pair of travelers to pass. “I will set ye up with me old friend, Jak, and I meself will stay with another friend this night,” said William as they reached one of many small huts scattered just outside the elven city. William bade him, “Stay, whilst I explain to Jak what we be doing.”

“As you wish,” came Kryzzl’s answer. William walked into the hut, and Kryzzl heard much whispering and hushed tones coming from inside. Kryzzl took in the layout of the lively village. He saw several huts gathered around the wall that protected the elven city. There were gardens and stables tucked away in almost every corner, and a large fire pit

that appeared to be for religious gatherings, for it had stones with ancient runes carved in them and spaced evenly around it, right in the center of it all. Moments after he went into the hut, the dwarf emerged with a smile on his face, beckoning Kryzzl to come.

“Jak has a straw bed set for ye, an' a fire. 'Twill be a cool night here in the valley.” As William was speaking, Jak, a tall elderly elf wearing the same garb as all the other elves they had seen that day, appeared in the door of the hut. He silently showed Kryzzl the way in.

“Do you think he is truthful?” the elf sitting across from William a little while later in a different hut asked.

“Nay, Emir, he shows kindness from his right eye, while I see deceit in his left, he's not to be trusted. 'Twas why I gave 'im a fake name ” answered the dwarf. “I think he has me ring. Lisann would ne'er let it out o' her sight, unless...” He trailed off for a moment and a look of pure dread and profound sadness crossed his weathered face.

“Jak will find out soon enough, Sir Wyrnwood,” said Emir after some thought. “Worry not for Lisann, for even if your fears are realized, she will have passed to a far better place.”

On the trail south, King Tystyl easily caught up with his men, and after another hour or so of riding, they settled in a flat spot to camp that night. Fifteen knights, most in dirty armor, sat around the fire as their king played on his lute and sang a song of glorious wars waged long ago. When the king had finished, the closest of his men and Captain of the Guard, Omarus, asked why he was with them.

“To find our father,” he said simply. “I will not stop this time until I do. I wish to ensure his safe return to the kingdom, and to show him how I have missed him all these years. I rue the day that he was dismissed from my court, forced out by that damned mage. Fael has something else up his sleeve as we speak, I can feel it.” When he was finished, King Tystyl put his bedroll down on the ground and laid down to sleep. The other men followed suit and soon there was a chorus of loud snoring echoing through the forest.

The king was soon awakened by the sound of thunder. Quickly, he roused the rest of the party and they all started gathering up their campsite. He told them after studying the movements and scent of the wind, “We should make our way to Lightwood before the rain comes in.”

Mounting their horses, all the men eagerly agreed, and set off quickly to the small town in which many of them were raised. Omarus, riding beside King Tystyl behind the rest of the men, asked, “Why do you want that damned dwarf back so badly? He is a traitor and a threat to the throne itself.”

“So says Fael,” the king snapped, “do you not remember how he took us in, raised us as his own? We were all brothers under his care. I love that dwarf as should you. Every man here owes his station and his very life to Wyrnwood. We all have good reason to return him to Caryn alive.”

“True, but we all have a thousand golden reasons to return only his head,” Omarus sneered as he aimed a tiny hand-crossbow hidden under his cloak, “and even you, The Great King Tystyl cannot quench our thirst for gold.” He pulled the trigger, the bolt tore through his cloak, hitting King Tystyl squarely in the neck, knocking him of his steed, slumping lifeless to the ground. “Eternal sleep is yours, 'brother'...”

Chapter Three

The first rays of the early morning suns were creeping into the valley, elves all around were setting about to do the day's work. Wyrwood had crept into the hut where Kryzzl was still snoring to search for his ring. He looked through the man's pack, found only papers, fruit, and hard bread. He reached into a pocket of the pack, pulled out two scraps of parchment. On one was the rubbing of Lisann's pendant, the other a reddish-brown drop of blood. "She lives, thank the gods, else the bastard would o' taken the whole pendant" he thought, and quietly returned the parchment to its place.

"I have to find me ring," he thought to himself. The sunlight was now shining through the small doorway of the hut, and Kryzzl stopped snoring. Wyrwood quickly and quietly returned the pack to its place. The man looked up and found his new dwarf friend standing above him, as if patiently waiting for the man to wake up.

"Tis late in the morn' fer a young man like yerself to be rising," the dwarf said with false impatience. "I must find Jak an' get some answers an' supplies, ye get yerself ready for the day. Boar sausage an' cheese are by the hearth."

"Thank you," the man said as he pulled his tan shirt over his hairless chest. Wyrwood then saw it.

"Me ring," he thought. "I'll get it back soon, even if'n I have to chop his finger off with me axe."

"He cannot be trusted, he speaks of the death of your brother, yet our scouts report otherwise." Jak was sitting on a fallen tree far enough away from the huts that he could not be heard by anyone but the dwarf standing before him. "The man holds papers, obviously forged, and the coat of arms of King Tystyl's father. He claims to be from Jire, but we both know that's a lie."

"Aye. So what is he about, can ye read his thoughts?" asked Wyrwood, puzzled.

"A strange magic surrounds him, no, his thoughts are not to be read. I believe he may have an Elder Ring," answered Jak.

"Aye, he holds me own ring," Wyrwood said regretfully, "an' he will give it up, one way or the other. I'll take him to Gumlor, to let him die by the hands o' the stinkin' orcs," the dwarf said grimly. He stood up and walked back to Jak's hut to find Kryzzl finishing his breakfast, already dressed in his brown trousers, tan shirt, and green coat. His pack was laying on the dirt floor beside him.

"Are we ready to head out? It is very important that I find Sir Wyrwood this day," Kryzzl said politely.

"Aye, but I fear ye won't find him this day. We'll set out. The elves have offered ponies for us to ride," said the dwarf as they left the hut, "'tis a hard road from here, an' we need all the help we can get."

As they mounted the ponies, Wyrwood said to Jak, "Take care, me friend."

"May your gods go with you 'William'," replied Jak, "we will keep watch over you until you reach the mountain pass."

"Thank you for your hospitality, it is much appreciated," Kryzzl said.

Nodding, Jak swept a hand out in front of them as if showing them the way.

Peering into the large crystal in the center of the room, the ancient wizard was softly

uttering the words of a continuous spell. He was pleased with what he saw. He had seen what transpired the night before, that his new lackey had done the deed.

“It played out beautifully,” Fael thought to himself, “Now all there is to do is get his ring, and find that damned dwarf, and I shall have all the Elder Rings I need. Nobody will be able to stop me then...”

What he did not see in the crystal was what happened after Omarus and his crew rode off. Lisann had gotten news from a squirrel that a man was in danger on the road. She had hurried off to find him, and to help any way she could. The night sky was beginning to open up in a full rain by then, and visibility was low. After an hour of searching, she finally found the man, and seeing who it was, her heart sank deep into her chest.

“Tystyl...” she whispered. Her king was already dead. She rolled his lifeless body onto his large shield and dragged him to a nearby chapel to get him out of the rain.

The woman stood over the broken man on the altar. Her light brown hair curled around her ears and down into her deep green eyes. She stood straight and beautiful, tears welling up as she performed the ceremony of last rites for her fallen king, before preparing his body for public display. When she had finished with her ceremony, she bent over him and softly cried, “Oh, my king, my king. My dear, sweet Tystyl. First I lose my dearest friend Wyrwood, now his adopted son, the kindest soul anyone could meet. You saved this great kingdom, and built your city back up from the ashes. My dear Tystyl, may all the gods be sad this day, for their realm has lost the greatest king it has ever known.”

As she spoke, tears fell like a water fall. A teardrop landed on Tystyl's hand, running along his finger until it reached his ring. It was a plain gold ring with an emerald set deep into the gold. When the tear touched the ring, the emerald began to shimmer. Within an instant, lights of all colors shot forth from the ring and darted about in the air like hummingbirds. The lights swarmed about the fallen Tystyl as flies would swarm around a honey pot. She watched in awe as his chest began to move, ever so slightly, up. His chest then fell with a jerk. The lights vanished. Her heart sank once more.

After a few moments, Tystyl's arms and legs began to jerk, a light twitch at first, but after a minute or so, his entire body was convulsing violently. She rushed to get a cushion under his head to prevent further damage to the king's skull. A minute later, the convulsing stopped. He breathed.

He breathed!

She was ecstatic, hurrying to hold him in her arms. As he drew another ragged breath, she gave him a soft kiss on the forehead and laid him back down so he could sleep.

Lisann sat by the stone altar all night, and when morning came, Tystyl woke up to find he was looking at the familiar vaulted ceiling of an old chapel near Lightwood. “Good morning, my king,” Lisann's voice might as well have been that of an angel. He looked deep into her green eyes, then threw his arms around her in a weakened, loving embrace.

“I live?” the king questioned. “I was in a place of great darkness, then lights of so many colors surrounded me, entered my soul. I have never had so much pain.”

“You caught a crossbow bolt in your neck, I fear it was poisoned.” She told him to rest this day, and she would take him back to her cottage in the morning. “I will stay with you as much as I can, dear Tystyl. You must need food, so I will go out and gather some

fruit, unless you would prefer a hare or some stew..."

"No, I will be fine," said he in a weakened voice, "I must find Father before Omarus and the rest of my men do."

"You mean?" she asked him with hope in her eyes.

"Yes, he is alive, but I fear we will lose him forever if my knights find him. Fael has put a price upon his head. I was a fool to trust that damned mage. Now he has my own men rising against me. I must reach Strungvali by the morrow."

"Rest today, young king, and in the morning I will send you to the valley. The elves should know where Sir Wyrnwood is, and aid you in finding him," Before she finished her half-whispered sentence, Tystyl had fallen fast asleep.

All that night, Lisann prayed over his wounds, healing him with her powerful magic. When morning came, her king was almost as good as new. She was growing weary, having not slept in almost three days, when Tystyl finally woke up. "Take this," she said as she poured a vial of potion into his mouth, "it should help with the pain from that bolt."

"I thank you, Lady Lisann," Tystyl said once he swallowed the bitter elixir, "I owe you my life. Anything you desire from the kingdom is yours," said the king.

"All I desire is that you find our dear Wyrnwood and bring him home." She then added, "When you are ready, come outside so that I can send you to the valley."

Tystyl quickly pulled his boots on, fastened his armor, and walked outside to his weapons. He strapped the axe across his back, and buckled his sword belt tightly. Standing in front of the chapel, Lisann quietly began the words of a spell. She reached into a pouch around her neck, taking a pinch of the fine powder within, sprinkling it over the king. She knew her spell was working when he closed his eyes, mist swirling about him, and started to fade out of the material plane. A moment later, Tystyl was gone.

Chapter Four

The sky was nearly black at midday, relentlessly pouring rain on the dwarf and his companion as the storm worked its way south and toward the east. Wyrwood grumbled a curse as his pony struggled chest-deep in pools of rainwater, soaking the dwarf's feet through his worn boots. Terrible winds squealed and howled through the mountains as the man and dwarf turned a bend on their road of mud. "Me thinks we should find higher ground, er me pony'll drown an' meself with it."

"Try riding a pony smaller than you, my feet have been dragging on the rocks, and have been in the water most of the trip, I now know how my younger brother's fat wife feels," Kryzzl chuckled to him as they rounded another bend.

"Aye, an' yer backside be getting wet, too!" They shared a laugh, even though what Wyrwood truly had in his mind no laughing matter. The dwarf was struggling with the vow he silently made before leaving the elves. This man did save him from death, though his motives could not be clear. Wyrwood would only kill him if necessary, as he knew that men could easily be persuaded in those times. Perhaps the right words would change this man's course of action. As they rode the path along side the river, the water was rising rapidly. "We'll head up to that there ridge," he yelled over the sound of the growing storm, pointing to an outcrop high above, but not very far down the road.

"How?" Kryzzl asked him as he saw no easy way to make ponies climb the sheer rock cliff looming over the road.

"There be a pass up the road here, easier for the ponies, and may give us a way to shelter."

As they reached the pass, the man and dwarf saw that it would not be usable. Large rocks and boulders had fallen across the entrance. The rain was a little lighter now, but the river was still rising fast. Wyrwood splashed as he dropped down from his pony and waded over to the rocks, surveying the scene. If he could split one of the boulders, if he could find the strength, they could pass. He looked up and saw that the sides of the cliff were fast crumbling inward toward the pass. He would need to work fast, or else his effort would be in vain. Beckoning Kryzzl, Wyrwood unstrapped his axe. "When I split this boulder with me axe, I need ye to get the ponies through as quickly as ye can, we'll nay have much time."

Kryzzl nodded his accord, dismounted and took the reins of both ponies in his hand. Wyrwood gathered his strength, spoke a few quick words in a tongue unfamiliar to Kryzzl, most likely dwarvish, and his axe began to hum with magic. He raised it high above his head with both hands. Calling on the might of his ancestors, the dwarf brought the axe down with as much strength as he could bring forth, and lightning shot from it. The axe struck the gray stone of the boulder, cleaving it cleanly in two. Kryzzl ran through, practically dragging the ponies, and soon he and the ponies were safely out of harm. The sides of the cliff were steadily dropping more rock and mud into the pass. Wyrwood, weakened considerably, tried to hurry through right behind. When he was almost through the fast shrinking opening, he stumbled. Face down in the mud, he could feel himself being buried. He struggled to get to his feet, and fell again. With his axe, he punched through the mud and gravel ahead of him. The hole he had made was rapidly closing. The dwarf spat a curse as he lurched forward, dragging his feet through just seconds before the hole closed again.

Pulling himself to his feet, the muddy dwarf looked around, saw Kryzzl frantically

trying to keep the ponies calm. The storm was worsening now, and there was great thunder echoing through the pass. "We must find shelter," Kryzzl yelled, though he knew the dwarf would barely hear his words.

"Aye, half a mile up the high road be an old chapel with a stable, but we need to hurry," said Wyrwood, still busy wiping the mud and grit from his face. When he was ready, he mounted his pony. Kryzzl elected to lead his own mount, for he was growing weary of stumping his toes on the rocks and dragging them through the mud.

They made it to the chapel within the hour, a gray and blue stone building looming over an outcrop along the road. The outside of the chapel was beginning to crumble from years of neglect. It had not been used in many years. After securing the ponies in the stable, Kryzzl joined Wyrwood at the front step of the crumbling old structure. The old door was held by an old rusted lock and had been barred from the inside, however the wood was rotting away at its rusty hinges. Wyrwood removed his axe from his back, and with an easy chop, the door was taken down.

In the midst of the elven village, a fog sprung up. It swirled about and began to materialize. First was a pair of leather boots, then legs. A few moments later, when the transport spell was complete, a tall, muscular man stood amid the village before a score of startled elves. At least ten bows were trained on his defenseless head, ready to fire. "Weapons down," cried Jak as he recognized the man. "King Tystyl, what brings you so far from home?"

"I must find Father before my knights do," huffed the king, "I need to speak with Lord Horlarl. Fael has placed a weighty price on Sir Wyrwood's head, and I fear he will be killed by my own men."

Jak turned to the elf beside him, said something hastily in the elven tongue, and the other elf was off. He rushed into the city, and Jak turned back to King Tystyl, "Your adopted father was here only a day ago, accompanied by a human. The human is not to be trusted. He holds Wyrwood's ring. He also has false papers claiming he is from Jire, bound in an old leather folder with your birth father's crest stamped into it."

"That cannot be, for that crest has not been in use for more than thirty years," Tystyl said, voice trailing. After some thought, he seemed to understand. "Fael," he said, "that damned mage is out after all the Elder Rings. Fael already holds one, I have mine, and this new man has Father's ring. The last ring is held by Lord Horlarl."

A moment later, the elf that went into the city returned to Jak and Tystyl. He nodded to Jak, and Jak said to Tystyl, "Follow me, old friend."

The elven city was smaller than the great city of Caryn, but was vast still. The moss-covered buildings seemed to have grown up from the earth. Everything in this city seemed so natural, from the beautiful houses built high in the trees to the gentle pools of crystal clear water along its streets and avenues. At the far end of the city, through a maze of narrow foot paths, stood a very large looming structure. Built in the midst of four ancient ironwood trees, the home of the elven king was made entirely of wood, and looked to have been formed from the great trees themselves.

"Your father is in no immediate danger, King Tystyl," Horlarl later told the king. The old elf sitting on a throne made of woven vines was thin, wore a green robe and had a crown of antlers upon his head. "He knows the man with him is foul. Wyrwood brought him here so we could try to find out what his motives are. However, this Kryzzl... if that

is his true name, carries your father's ring. You should know that we cannot read the thoughts of those in possession of an Elder Ring.”

“Yes, I am aware of that,” answered Tystyl, “What I wish to know is where these two are now. My knights are riding this way, and I need to intercept my father before they reach him.”

“They took the road east toward Gumlor. My scouts tell me that the two have taken sanctuary from the storm in Hillchurch, the chapel you and your father built by the high road. The pass is blocked now, you will have to find a different way.” Horlarl took a sip of wine, and dismissed his guest.

Tystyl walked back out of the city, and found Jak bridling a large black horse. As if meeting a long lost relative, Tystyl rushed up and threw his arms around the horse's neck. “He came thundering into the valley as if on a mission. I calmed him down and fed him. He seems to have lost his saddle, though.”

“No worries, Jak. Many thanks for taking care of him. Might I use one of your saddles?” the king asked. “I will bring it back when this ordeal is over.”

“I only have pony saddles, but I think we can modify one,” Jak said. A few moments later, the elves had fit a saddle onto the mighty steed.

When Tystyl was in the saddle, ready to ride, he said to Jak, “Thank you, my dear friend. I apologize that I could not stay for a drink and a song, perhaps when this business is finished.” At this, the king headed out, horse at full gallop.

Chapter Five

Omarus paced nervously in the hallway. He had not thought to gather his king's body, nor had he remembered the ring. Now, he was awaiting Fael high in the wizard's tower. That decrepit old wizard would be furious. "Oh, well," Omarus thought, "the worst he can do is kill me, and when the people of Caryn figure out how their king died, I'm dead anyway." Moments turned into minutes, which in turn became an hour or more, before a squat servant emerged from the great room beyond the huge dark door.

"Master will see you now," the servant's voice cracked as he swung the door wide. Inside, the mage was pacing before a large crystal in the center of the room.

"I give you one task, ONE TASK!" Fael shrieked at him. "One task, and you fail me. One task, and your incompetence has compromised the entire plan." Omarus began to speak, and Fael waved a hand, magically closing the knight's mouth. "All you had to do was kill the man, take his damned ring, and return here. Just a ring, did you not remember that part of your instructions?" Waving his hand again, Omarus found his lips were free.

"I will search every corner of Caryn until I find who is hiding Tystyl's body." Omarus, eyes down, continued, "I shall not fail you again."

"It would be folly to search for a corpse, as I see that he now lives. If he gets to Kryzzl and the dwarf, the entire kingdom is lost to me. I fear the dwarf is already suspicious of Kryzzl, and that man has no chance in battle against those two." Fael began to pace a little faster, trying to improvise his plan. Suddenly, the old gray eyes of the wizard lit on an idea, "Bring me the druid, that girl they love so much. She can prove useful to me now."

The road was flooded, water ever rising. It was waist deep, and Tystyl's horse was trudging along very slowly, sinking down into the mud more and more with each step. The king imagined he would never make it to the pass. The rain had stopped now, and the clouds were opening up to reveal the sapphire blue sky above. The river was still high. Even if the water receded, there would still be the deep mud. The horse never complained, never made a sound. It knew the importance of the mission.

Coming upon the pass, Tystyl's heart sank. It was definitely unusable, full of large boulders and black mud. Dismounting and approaching the fallen debris, King Tystyl decided to leave the horse behind, for now. He took from his pack a scrap of parchment, and using his finger, wrote a note with mud and attached it to the horse's bridle. "Go back to the valley, old friend" Tystyl told the horse, "safely." He slapped the horse's rump, who swiftly turned about and headed back the way they had come. Tystyl knew of a way around and also knew he would be climbing.

After a few minutes of searching, he found what he was looking for. A small tree shot out from the rock above, just below a shelf in the rock that was unseen from the road. The elves often used this path when stalking orcs that attempted to invade the valley. Tystyl took from his pack a length of silken rope with a grapple on one end. Swinging the rope to get a bit more distance, he threw the rope at the base of the tree. The grapple wrapped the rope around the tree twice, securely hooking into the wood. Tystyl began to climb. Using the rope to steady himself, he walked up the shear rock face. Easily ascending the twenty feet, Tystyl sat on the tree, unhooked his rope, and jumped the other four feet to his rock shelf.

Walking east along the rocks, he came to where he would be just under the chapel.

Inspecting the wall in front of him, he found the boulder he needed to move. Pushing with all his might, Tystyl was able to move the boulder just enough to reveal a hidden tunnel in the rock. The man squeezed through. He pulled a torch from the tunnel wall, took a flint and a dagger from a pouch on his belt, and lit it. He then moved the boulder back to its place, hiding the tunnel from the outside once again.

The dark tunnel was narrow with a low ceiling. It was just about the right size for the dwarf that built it, but Tystyl nearly had to crawl to navigate it. The tunnel curved and climbed, spiraling upward and outward. Cobwebs choked the passage. He was only about twenty feet below the chapel, but the tunnel was at least a mile long. After an hour of crawling the spider infested tunnel, Tystyl finally reached the bottom side of a long-forgotten cellar door. He pushed a small stone embedded in the wall to his right, heard the telltale click of the lock mechanism opening, and carefully pushed the door open.

He came up into the stable of the chapel. Surveying the scene, he noted that the ponies were sound asleep against the wall. The sky was dark now, the moon beginning to rise in the south. Silently exiting the stable, Tystyl crept around to the door of the chapel. He saw Wyrwood's axe leaning up against the door frame, along with a dagger. He heard the familiar voice of his adopted dwarven father, along with a voice he did not know. He stood silently listening to the conversation within.

"Might I see yer ring?" Wyrwood asked.

"I don't see why not."

"Ah, ye hold one of the Elder Rings. Looks plain in the light o' day, but put her out in moonlight, an' she talks," said Wyrwood, moving toward the door. Tystyl slid around the corner, drawing a sword. Wyrwood, as sly as they come, sensed the movement. He raised a hand to stop Kryzzl, and put a finger up to his lip to ensure the man's silence. Peering around the door frame, he recognized the shape of that shadow. He turned back to Kryzzl, continued with the ring. "Ye see, the words inscribed here only show in the moonlight. It is dwarvish," he continued, raising his voice so Tystyl could clearly hear, "It reads 'Stay yer hand, me son. No danger will come this night.' O' course, it will only protect a dwarf." He closed his fist tight around the ring as they turned back into the chapel.

"Don't know why it helped ye when ye were in trouble, unless a dwarf was close." Kryzzl stood in awe at the ring. He now knew that he had to deliver the ring to his master. "I'll take that back, now, William," he said, grabbing at the dwarf's hand, "I found it, and now it belongs to me."

"You'll be wise to let the dwarf keep the ring," boomed a voice from the doorway. Tystyl stood tall in the door of the chapel, both swords drawn.

"King Tystyl," the man nervously said, "I thought you were dead." Wyrwood glared at Kryzzl with this, the pair had been told nothing of the sort. So this was the plan, kill Tystyl and Wyrwood, stealing the Elder Rings in the process.

"How would you know of my recent 'death'?" asked the king. The sword in his right hand flashed. Wyrwood, knowing the fight could not happen in this chapel, promptly swept a foot under the man's knee, knocking him to the stone floor. Grabbing Kryzzl's collar, Wyrwood dragged him outside, allowing Tystyl to pin him to the ground with a sword. "Talk," said Tystyl menacingly.

"I've nothing to say," Kryzzl spat. Wyrwood grabbed his axe, and within an instant

was sitting on the man's chest.

“Oh, ye'll wag yer tongue now, me friend,” said the dwarf, the cruel edge of his axe pressed against the man's throat. “Talk, or I'll cut it out meself.”

Tystyl considered the man for a moment. At length, the king asked, “Who are you working for? Who sent you? Why are you trying to gather Elder Rings?”

Kryzzl, who was struggling to find breath, said “I work for no man that you could defeat.”

“Then why has he not come for the rings himself? Why has he not shown his face? I know who you work for. That damned mage is too cowardly to come after us himself. Fael knows he cannot defeat my father and I in battle, so he sends lackeys. I'll not kill you this night, I have much to learn from you.” When he was finished talking, Tystyl pulled some rope out, and tied the Kryzzl's hands. When Wyrwood rose to his feet, the dwarf gave Tystyl an odd look.

“I had him where I wanted him, boy. He'll not harm me. Not yet.” The dwarf spat on the ground in front of Kryzzl.

“Father,” Tystyl began, “this fool works for Fael. The mage wishes me and yourself dead. He put a price on your head, and had Omarus try to kill me.” The king exposed his neck so that Wyrwood could view the wound. Kryzzl looked quite concerned now, putting the pieces of the puzzle together. Of course! He had his quarry and the ring all along.

“Why did I not see it? The only dwarf that could get that close to the valley, the ring... I shouldn't have been so blind,” Kryzzl said, aggravated with his own folly.

“Sight o' gold got ye blind to the truth,” Wyrwood remarked. “Won't be gold yer seein' at the end, ye damned fool, even if'n ye succeeded. That foul mage would have burned ye to a bloody crisp. I'll have me boy spare yer life, if'n ye vow loyalty to the throne o' Caryn.”

Kryzzl stared at them in obstinate silence.

Chapter Six

The day was windy but clear. She could see the animals of her forest going about their daily routines. She could smell the fresh new blossoms on the trees. The only thing missing was a good nap. Lisann quietly returned to the ruins of that old cottage, spoke the words of a spell, and watched it grow. Many years had she lived here since Wyrwood was raising Tystyl up to be a warrior, until the dwarf had gathered enough orphans to have to build a larger home. Once the walls had formed and the roof began to take shape, the woman stepped just inside the door. Her fire was already burning in the fireplace, and furnishings were materializing. When Lisann wasn't home, she would cast the illusion of the house being in ruin to discourage folk from trying to steal anything.

She didn't know she was being followed.

From somewhere behind her, in the woods, she heard an unnatural sound. The sound of steel being drawn from leather. She quickly closed and barred the door. A minute later came the knock. A deep voice she recognized came from the other side of the door. The captain of the guard called, "Lady Lisann, King Tystyl is in dire need of your assistance." Omarus was lying. Lisann went to a corner of the main room, gathering a few assorted wands.

"Omarus," she called, "is that you?"

"Yes, my Lady, our king is injured, he needs your healing powers" came the man's voice. She wondered what he was up to, for she knew Omarus was the one who attempted to kill the king.

"I shall be out in a minute" she said through the door. A moment later, she triggered one of her wands, aiming squarely at the door. The blast knocked her backward into the other room of the cottage, incinerated the door, and threw Omarus twenty feet back. With a thud, he landed hard on his tail. Lisann frantically began to work another spell.

"You wretched whore!" Omarus yelled as he pulled himself from the grass, smoke rising from his singed cloak. As soon as he had his balance, he rushed forward, shielding his face from the heat of the flaming doorway, and into... Nothing. Omarus now found himself in darkness. He didn't feel the floor, nor did he see anything. All of the sights and sounds of the forest were gone. He couldn't tell if he was falling or if he were still. Had he died? All he knew was darkness now.

Knowing she could no longer stay at her home, Lady Lisann decided she should join Tystyl in his search for their friend Wyrwood. She went outside and cast her illusion over her house. Putting two fingers between her lips, she let out a loud whistle. A few minutes later, a giant eagle landed in front of her. "Kemda, my old friend," she said as she climbed onto the eagle's feathered back, "take me south."

Tystyl and Wyrwood talked throughout the night, far enough from Kryzzl that he could not hear them. "I went out for you three years ago," said Tystyl. "I have felt nothing but pain since that damned old wizard pushed you out of court. I pray you can forgive me for that, Father. I meant you no wrong, but I should have been wise enough to see what Fael was up to."

"I do forgive ye, me son. I tried to warn ye 'bout the mage. Any man lives longer than a century, always be up to no damned good." He smiled at his son as he began to formulate a plan. "Are ye still allied with the wizard from the main land?" the dwarf asked.

"Of course, but how will he help us?" The puzzled king asked.

“We'll need all the help we can muster for me plan, ye see. I reckon we ought to take the fight straight to Fael. He'll not know what hit him.” The old dwarf grinned.

“Father, we cannot harm him in his tower. Plus, if we had these rings close enough to his own, he would surely fight harder.” Wyrwood seemed amused at Tystyl's naivety.

“That be why we need the other mage, me boy. He can cast his protection spells an' break down the tower's magical defenses. An' then...” Wyrwood swung an imaginary axe and hung his head, feigning death.

Tystyl considered the option. After some thought, he finally said to Wyrwood, “We'll need more muscle. If Fael knows we are alive, he will be watching us as soon as we enter his territory. He will either vanish, or call my knights to his aid.”

“Aye, 'tis why me own folk will have to help us. I will send for me brother Bareet, and if'n Lebouf still fights for the king... I know ye have some pull with ol' Jak an' the elves. We can get this done.”

The darkness enveloped him, pressed in on him. Omarus could not move. He could not see. Could not hear. He called out several times, without even hearing his own voice. How long had he been there? It seemed like an eternity. This didn't feel like Hell. He was not consumed by fire and brimstone, only darkness. Then, suddenly, he saw a spec of light. The light slowly grew, the larger it got, the slower it seemed to grow. This great light in the vast darkness seemed to beckon him, pulsating and changing colors.

The first color was purple, then blue, then green. The light changed in this manner many times. The light slowly formed into a shape. At this time, Omarus began to hear a gentle breeze. The light was ever changing and moving about now. The sound would crescendo into a more prominent wind, until the roaring cacophony was almost too much for his ears. It all stopped. The light went out, he heard no sound. Back to darkness.

Jak the elf was tending to his garden when the call came out. “To Arms,” one of the other elves in the village yelled. “A giant eagle is overhead!”

Jak called to him sternly “Hold fire until it screeches.” Jak knew that these giant eagles usually screeched out a warning before taking prey. They like the sport of the chase. This one, however did not screech, but circled the village seemingly looking for a clear landing. When the eagle finally started to descend, Jak could just make out the form clinging to it's back. “Hold your fire,” he said, “It's the Lady of the North Forest.” The eagle landed in the only place that was large enough in the small village. Lisann hopped off, spoke a soft word to the eagle, and Kemda took flight once more.

“Well met, Jak,” the druid said, “I need to know where King Tystyl has gone. He may need me.”

“Tystyl is well, he has Wyrwood at Hillchurch. They have taken Kryzzl prisoner, and should be returning to the valley this day.” Jak smiled as he always did when speaking to Lisann. She was a human after an elf's heart. She held the utmost respect for nature, healing the land and all of its inhabitants.

Lisann had come to know Tystyl and Wyrwood one day when Tystyl was still an adolescent. She had been caught in a bear trap, and the boy freed her without expecting any reward. She had been forever grateful to him and loyal to his cause. When he finally grew into adulthood and was crowned king, he had given her the title of Forest Keeper. She wore the title with pride.

“Kryzzl?” She was puzzled, did not understand why they had the man prisoner.

“Kryzzl came to me a few days past seeking Wyrwood for some business in Jire. I sensed no ill will in the man.”

Jak replied, “He has in his possession false papers from Jire, and Wyrwood's ring. He also speaks falsely about the dwarf's brother, Bareet, claiming him to be dead. However, we have scouts in Jire that see the king riding out on his daily patrols.”

Lisann gave Jak a worried look. “I gave him Wyrwood's ring in hopes that he would find him and help protect him.”

“Worry not, My Lady, the Elder Ring is in the right hands now. We should be seeing your king and his father soon. Stay with us until then, we shall all have a meal in the presence of Horlarl and the court.” Jak turned his head to the east, his pointed ears alert. “They come now, I hear the ponies.”

A minute or so later, King Tystyl and Sir Wyrwood topped the ridge just above the valley, leading the ponies. Riding on one of them was the bound Kryzzl. Lisann rushed up the hill to get to them sooner, stumbling on her own dress a couple of times. When she met them, she quickly went over to Kryzzl and gave him a hard backhanded slap across his mouth. “You should never lie to a woman,” she scolded, “we always find out the truth.” She then turned to Wyrwood and barely kept her composure.

Ten years he had been gone. Ten years she worried. This dwarf was the closest thing to a husband she ever knew.

“Me Lady,” Wyrwood said as he wrapped his arms around her slender waist. “How I have missed ye these years.” With tears in his eyes he raised up on the tips of his boots as she met his bearded face for a kiss. Lisann stroked his hair and tugged at his beard just to make sure he was real.

Tystyl stepped forward and bowed, “Lady Lisann,” he said, “we have a plan, of sorts. It is a good thing for you to be here. We will need your help.” He then turned to Jak, who had walked up to meet them, and said “we will need help from the elves as well if we are to have any chance at victory.”

Later that evening, in the dining room of the elven king, Tystyl began to lay out the plan. “I will need a messenger to get to the main land and bring back the mage Edward of Costil. If he then can spare any troops, it would be good, but it would also waste time.” He then turned to Horlarl, “If you could send a score of archers, I can assure you the reward will be great.”

Lisann put in, “I can ride Kemda above the tower and watch over everyone, healing as needed.”

Jak stood up, retrieved an object from a pouch hung on his belt. He tossed the object to Tystyl.

“This might be useful,” he told the king as Tystyl examined the square gem. It was clear as glass, but with swirling energy as black as the darkest of nights.

“What is this?” the puzzled king asked, turning the stone in his hand.

Jak replied, “The body and soul of your captain of the guard. Lisann cast him into this gem without knowing. I witnessed it this morning through my seeing crystal.” Tystyl continued to gaze at the gem. “When you need it most, the gem will get warm. The object is intelligent, It will know when to release the captain.” Horlarl looked tired. His wrinkled face showed great concern.

“King Tystyl, I have not left this valley in two hundred years. Through my crystals I have seen every event that has happened in all of Atalmor. I have never once seen any

army of any size defeat a wicked mage in his own tower. I know of this Edward of Costil. He is a great wizard, however I do not believe he has studied the Dark Arts. I will aid you any way I can. I will have five score archers ready in three sunrises. I will send for a friend of mine, if he still lives, on the main land. Adley is a sorcerer, trained in the Dark Arts, and may be of more use than Edward of Costil.” The elven king then excused himself from the table, limping toward his private chambers. “Good luck,” turning his head to the table just before walking out of the room, “and may Caryn live to see freedom once more.”

Chapter Seven

A pigeon landed on the window sill in front of the sorcerer's face. Adley had been awaiting something. He sensed all afternoon that something was brewing, had seen in his reflecting pool armies gathering somewhere to the west. He had seen the elves gathering archers and scouts, had seen dwarves hastily forging weapons and armor for a large army. The pigeon cooed quietly, staring the man down, unblinking. Adley brought a hand forth to touch the bird. The gray bird had a ring about his left ankle, a ring of platinum, vines carved in intricate patterns. "Horlarl, my friend, come forth," he said at last.

A deep red mist began forming about the bird, slowly swirling, entering the room from the window. An arm was the first formation, forming from the left leg of the bird. The elven king was completely transformed within minutes. "Greetings Adley," the elf announced, "as I can see in your expression, you know the game is well afoot."

"Aye, your majesty, how may I be of assistance?" The sorcerer bowed low, then knelt on the step in front of Horlarl. The elf explained the situation, shared with him the battle plan, and told what he needed for his friend to perform. Adley agreeing that his services could be useful, offered, "You will need more than just one magician, I can bring my two apprentices, Emiras and Blind. They have become very adept over the past few years, and compliment each others skills beautifully. I may also be able to call upon the Reapers Guild here in Sorga."

The elf stood in thought for a moment, shrugged his shoulders, and at length said, "All for one wizard, I fear the price of their services may prove quite costly for the kings of Atalmor. However, every inch of assistance we shall receive will be greatly valuable. If you could negotiate a reasonable price, then the aid of the Reapers will be greatly appreciated." Horlarl looked haggard and tired, almost hollow, for his time was near an end. "The land of Atalmor must win this battle, else we will all perish, or worse, be enslaved by Fael."

Sir Wyrwood had been on a flight of his own, of sorts. Being carried by the great talons of Kemda, the giant eagle, the dwarf was protesting every chance he got. "Ye get to ride atop the damned thing, why do ye make meself hang from the stupid bird's claws?"

"Because, my dearest Wyrm, you refused to fly. I had to do something," Lady Lisann yelled down to him. The truth is, Wyrwood had actually preferred this method of travel over the other option. He hated being transported magically.

They soared through the north-western corner of Gumlor, traveling toward Jire-Rey, the largest city in Jire and the home of Wyrwood's brother, King Bareet. Mighty gusts of wind had helped the three tremendously, pushing them twice as fast as Kemda could normally fly. They arrived at the south gate in Jire-Rey before the suns had set to the west. Kemda set Wyrwood gently on the ground before she landed and allowed Lisann to dismount. "Stay here, Kemda, we will be prompt with our inquiries," the woman bade the eagle.

Once inside the city, which is not exactly a city, it is more of a complex of tunnels carved into the Great Hill. The tunnels went every which way, expanding far below and well beyond the Hill itself, with doorways and corridors dug for homes, forges, etc. The pair made their way to the middle of the complex where the king's home had been for many years. Along the way, busy dwarves hustled by, never paying mind to the newcomers, though a few older ones who knew Wyrwood bowed or saluted them. The way was easy for Wyrwood, but the low ceilings proved challenging for Lisann, who

had to duck and even crouch low at times to navigate.

Outside the king's residence, another blue-bearded dwarf met with the two. "Me brother, Wyrwood. How have ye been all these years? We have all missed ye. How fares Tystyl? Who is this lovely lass?" Bareet had tears in his eyes as he regarded his brother. He loved Wyrwood with all his heart, had never given up on him. Never fully understanding why Wyrwood had left, Bareet had never lost hope that he would see his little brother return to his side, ruling the dwarves of Jire.

"Me boy fares well, an' this be Lady Lisann, Lady of the North Forest. Enough with the pleasantries," Wyrwood said as Bareet kissed Lisann's hand, "We need yer help."

"Anything for me brother," returning his smile to his usual stern expression, "We heard what has happened in Caryn, figured ye would need us. The swordsmiths are already hard at work making extra swords for the army coming out of Sorga." Bareet noted the surprise on Wyrwood's face at the mention of the army coming from the mainland. "I had me priest do some seeing. He seen in the glass a boat with hundreds of fighters. Horlarl sent word this mornin' The Reapers are comin', so we been steady at work, making extra axes an' swords."

"Aye. Is ol' Willy still smithing? I need to have a word or two with him."

"Aye, he still teaches the young swordsmiths an' armor makers." Bareet smiled again, "Ye needin' a new axe?"

Wyrwood considered this, but declined. He came in closer to Bareet's ear and whispered, "I need me green ore."

Bareet, always a wise dwarf, warned, "'Tis no wood on this island can burn hot enough." He then added slyly, "but I meself have a way."

A long, long way down they went, the tunnel turning sharp corners every now and then, descending into the belly of the mountain. Lisann had been handed off to a yellow-bearded dwarf who was to keep her entertained until the brothers returned. At the end of the several-mile tunnel stood a pair of heavy silver doors, secured by a crystal-link chain and a tremendous silver padlock. Bareet, always secretive, even to his brother, had asked Wyrwood to turn around whilst he opened the giant lock. Upon opening the doors, Wyrwood understood why he had been so secretive. In the midst of this great room, a room roughly the size of Jire itself, was a crystal cage holding an immense red dragon. The dragon looked up when the dwarves strolled in. "Ah, Master Bareet brought his brother, Good evening, Master Wyrwood," it said sarcastically. "Spill it, dwarf! What would you have me do?"

"Calm down, Suvious," Bareet yelled, "I will be freein' ye soon. There be a war brewin' outside. I will let ye go as soon as we win." Suvious grinned, flashing his razor-sharp yellow teeth. Wyrwood stepped forward, bearing a very large chunk of a greenish-yellow ore. "We need ye to smelt 'er. Yer fire's the only one hot enough."

"I will do this for you, only if you agree to free me once it is done," the dragon reasoned. He seemed to seethe hatred for the dwarf who had been his captor for nearly a century. "I will smelt it and enchant the metal for the weapon you are planning to make the great King of Caryn."

"Bah, damned wyrm, ye always know what's about," Bareet grumbled. "I will free ye when ye are done, then. But only if ye promise, upon yer miserable life, to leave this island and not return."

Suvious bowed his large head, said, "Upon my life, you have my word."

Bareet, returning to the entrance of the tunnel, summoned a smith's apprentice. "We need a furnace block, and the biggest crucible ye can find." The young dwarf bowed low, turned and was soon out of sight. A little while later, the apprentice returned, pulling a large flat cart holding the requested items along with a variety of tools. Bareet and Wyrnwood pushed the cart down the long tunnel, back to the dragon.

Hours flew by, and soon the dwarf brothers had a large ingot of an exquisite green metal. As promised, Bareet freed the dragon, smashing the crystal cage with an enchanted hammer. Suvious bowed low to the dwarves, who were cautious for fear of a swift fiery death. True to Suvious' word, he left through an opening in the back of the cavern. When the dragon was gone, Wyrnwood looked to his brother and said, "We need to get this to ol' Willy. Quickly."

Chapter Eight

Looking out over the rail of the airship, the elf cleric kept his constant vigil. Grimm, the chief healer of the Reapers of Darkness, rarely slept while traveling. He knew the dangers, even though they had found a way to be out of the water, for also had a few of the pirates that once sailed this part of the sea.

Songbird, the airship, was the fastest boat on the water before it had been converted to fly. Now she was the fastest in the air, even loaded with the entire guild and their equipment. A day before, all the Reapers were spread abroad, until they were called by a talisman each had hanging around their neck. With a flash, they had all been transported to Guild Hall in Sorga, where the leader, a halfling named Erimas, informed them of the situation in Atalmor. All had agreed that they should help, a few even called upon members of other guilds in Sorga and Costil.

This journey was not so bad, only a hundred or so miles from the Sorgan Coast to the Port of Gumlor, and with no wind to offer resistance to the ship. Erimas, stepping over to Grimm's post, blew a short sigh at his friend. This one is always on guard, the halfling thought.

"And if I were not, we might have fewer members in the guild. Be lucky, for I watch for you as much as for myself," came Grimm's words, reading the thoughts of the guild leader.

"You know that gives me the jitters," Erimas replied. Grimm smiled, still looking out to the air.

"I at least had more to look at when we were on the water. Up here, it's only clouds and the birds." Grimm turned to look at Erimas, giving a nod of dismissal. As the halfling walked away, Grimm couldn't help but notice his perpetual limp had been getting worse. The cleric had tried for many months to heal his little friend, and he did get better for a while, but some wounds, he knew, could never fully heal.

Erimas had been caught the summer before in the midst of some of his roguish activities by a rather large minotaur. He was climbing a wall to enter a window when the minotaur caught him. The beast ran him through with extremely sharp horns, piercing the halfling's hip, crushing his pelvis to a pulp. Brought back from the brink of death, Erimas was lucky, however he knew he would never be the same. Grimm thought the halfling may never walk again, though he showed great progress within a week or so.

All of the spells the cleric had to aid his friend were used, and used again, until Erimas finally made him stop. Figuring he was as good as he was going to get, and indeed he was, he did not wish to waste the efforts of his powerful friend. Now, on the airship, the guild leader was limping badly. Perhaps it is the damp air of the sea, Grimm reasoned to himself.

The other members of the guild were bustling about the deck of the ship, sharpening weapons, readying spells for battle, and praying to their various gods. One dwarf, who went by the name Sunuva, was tinkering, working on a small catapult that could be carried by one of the grunts. His orange beard was unruly, singed by many failed experiments. He wore a patch over his left eye, and armor that looked like a patchwork of several different armors. A little chain mail here, a bit of plate there, metal scales in another spot. In truth, this patchwork was merely a skin for his real armor, a mail shirt made from the tough scales of a dragon. Sunuva had lost the end of his left arm while harvesting the scales from a live dragon, but that hardly bothered him, for he made a

crossbow that fixed into the socket he fashioned to replace it.

Erimas, watching his men and women with pride, remarked, "Crafty old dwarf, you always come up with something." He limped over to Sunuva, placing a small hand on the dwarf's shoulder. "Tell me, how will this do anything against a fortified tower?"

"Well," Sunuva began, "you put a ball of pitch in it, light it afire, and launch. The orcs that Fael will no doubt employ will scatter, giving us a clear path to the walls."

Erimas, scratching his chin, replied, "We won't be alone, you know. The dwarves of Jire will be in the battle, as well as the elves of Strungvali, and doubtless the army of Caryn will be there as well."

Willy worked feverishly through the night, beating the green metal into shape. A bastard sword, or hand and a half sword, was longer and larger than a normal long sword, but slightly smaller than the great two-handed swords. It was the weapon of choice for King Tystyl. The man had such strength that he wielded two of them, one for each hand, as easily as most fighters did with a pair of daggers. This one, however, was special. It was being formed from one of the rarest metals ever known. The light metal was stronger than normal steel at half the weight. The dwarf was grumbling and struggling with the hard metal, for this was the hardest he had ever worked on a piece. Not only was the material difficult to form, the dwarf was more familiar with crafting axes and long swords, not this exotic type of sword. Willy kept working, making steady progress.

The hilt arrived from the silversmith, a cross piece in the form of a dragon's snout, befitting the origins of the sword. Finishing off the unique and beautiful weapon, Willy wrapped many layers of leather and fitted a flattened pommel to the end with Tystyl's crest engraved into it.

The sword was nearly finished. All that was left to do was to enchant the exquisite weapon. For that, a wizard and cleric would be needed.

Tystyl was awaiting the return of his messenger to find out how many men he could have march from the city of Caryn. Sitting in Jak's hut, he was going over some maps, beginning to draw up an attack plan. "We can go into Jire-Rey, taking the tunnel from there straight to this mountain," he said to Jak, pointing to a spot on the map just west of Fael's tower. "There is a colossal cavern just behind the cave opening on the north side of the mountain. By the time he can detect us, he will not have much time to prepare a defense."

"Do you think we need as many men as we are taking? If we give him less time to get ready, he would not be able to even raise an army," replied the elf. Just then, another elf knocked on the open door of the hut, holding out a rolled up parchment toward Jak. Jak took the paper, nodded to his friend, and began to read. "Forget I said that, for the western scouts have reported a rather large population of orcs heading out of Gumlor going northwest. Do you know what that means?"

"Means Father was right about needing all the help we can get," Tystyl looked up to him, taking the paper. "Also means we are less likely to surprise Fael. He may already know what we have coming from overseas." The king wore a grim expression then, wondering how they would fare against a large army of orcs.

Caryn's army was not very large, had not needed to be, for there had been nothing but peace on Atalmor for more than twelve years, since Tystyl raised an army of farmers to take Caryn back from the Gumlor orcs. The battle was great, but the orcs had been

routed so badly that there had not been a single orc attack since. So since there had been no need for excess soldiers, Tystyl had decided to keep the taxes a little lower in the land by thinning down the ranks. Still, with just over a thousand soldiers, and all of them having been trained by Tystyl, Caryn's army was nothing to be taken lightly.

There was a commotion outside, and Jak went to the door to see what was about. "King Tystyl, you should come see this." When Tystyl joined him at the door, he saw what Jak meant. Up on the hill at the entrance to the valley, the beginnings of Caryn's army was filtering down into the village. Three columns of marching men came in a seemingly endless line, bearing the banner of Caryn.

At the same time, from above, Kemda was circling overhead, carrying Wyrwood and Lisann. It seemed everything was going smoothly and as planned. When the eagle had landed, Wyrwood marched over to his son, with Lisann trailing close behind, carrying a long silk-wrapped package. They paused and waited for the army to file in, watching the numbers fill the village.

A large shadow suddenly blocked one of the suns above. Looking up, Tystyl could make out the shape of a large boat. The end of a rope hit the ground in front of Tystyl, followed by a halfling with curly brown hair. When the halfling hit the ground, he limped over to Tystyl, bowed low, and with a flourish of his wide-brimmed hat announced, "Reapers of Darkness, at your service. I am the guild leader, Erimas."

Tystyl returned his bow. Soon after, the remainder of the Reapers had rappelled down to the ground from the airship, following trunks and chests of supplies. The last one to vacate the ship was a short, thin man with a flowing red and black robe and a sack strapped to his back. A staff in his hand and the garb he wore told the king that this must be Adley, the sorcerer that Horlarl spoke of.

Tystyl scanned the scene, pleased with the turnout but still doubting this would be enough to conquer Fael. He had known the wizard for many years, knew the man was a master of strategy. This was going to be no small feat.

Later that evening Tystyl, Wyrwood, Horlarl, and Erimas were discussing tactics in a large tent erected by the Reapers in the middle of the elven village outside of the city of Strungvali, when Erimas produced an item from one of the many hidden pockets in his coat. "This is an extra-dimensional box. Inside, there is ample room for weapons, equipment, or whatever you'd like to carry."

Tystyl thought on that for a moment, "I have an idea."

Chapter Nine

“Get the general,” Bareet said to his councilor while reading a note that had just been delivered by an elven scout. Bareet was sitting in his war room, surrounded by detailed maps of underground passages all about the island. The councilor returned a few minutes later, followed by an ancient dwarf. The old dwarf had a suit of nondescript plate armor, a helmet with wings fashioned on either side, and an axe with a head that was larger than Bareet himself. “Lebouf, me friend,” he said to the general, “I need ye to gather all the fighters. We need to go to Caryn an' help.”

“Aye, me liege. How many?”

Bareet looked at his general curiously, and at length said, “All o' them, ye fool!”

Tystyl paced before the man. The king had been trying to extract information from him for the last hour. “Why does Tystyl, the great King of Caryn, care if a mere spy lives or not?” Kryzzl asked of the king.

“I only require answers, I am not asking your life. You will live, dear Kryzzl, but it will be upon yourself whether your life will be worth the living. If you decide to help me, you may find freedom in this great land of Atalmor. Otherwise, I will escort you myself to Fael's tower. There, I fear you will not find much reprieve, for Fael is a foul one, who desires the highest power, the power over life and death. Your own life will be of little value to that one.” Kryzzl again sat in silence. Obstinate to the death, this one. Tystyl thought for a moment, and with a bow, said, “Then I will escort you to your master, and we will sort this out in his tower.”

The next morning, Tystyl, along with Wyrwood, made sure the man's binds were secure, mounting him atop a fresh pony, took off. Kryzzl noted that the army he heard coming into the valley the night before was gone. Every last man.

The trio made haste for Fael's tower. On the way, when they stopped for a respite, the dwarf pulled Tystyl aside, saying, “Me son, I know ye have all that ye desire, but I had a lump o' special ore for many years before ye, wondering what I might make from it. Knowing ye need all the help ye can get, I had me friend Willy make somethin' for ye while I was in Jire.” As he was talking, he reached for the silken bundle he had brought. Handing the bundle to Tystyl, Wyrwood then said, “May I present to ye, 'Infernous', named fer the flames imbued in her.”

Tystyl slowly unwrapped the bundle, revealing the most marvelous sword he had ever seen. The blade was longer than his normal bastard swords, yet so much lighter than anything he had ever wielded. He checked the perfect balance of the sword, took it in his right hand, and swished it through the air in front of him. The green blade crackled with fire and light as it cut a path in the air.

“Superb!” Tystyl exclaimed.

“An' it'll ne'er leave yer hand. She's yours 'til you give her away.” Wyrwood sat back, proud of the craftsmanship of this new blade.

The trio rode, out of the forests of Strungvali and back into the land of Caryn. Tystyl noted the lack of guards along the road going into Ravenwood, where they would stop for the night. When they arrived at southern entrance to the city, there was a blockade on the path, guarded by several patrolmen. Wyrwood noticed something strange about these guards, something amiss in their eyes. Upon closer scrutiny, he observed their eyes were glazed over, as if they were all in some sort of trance.

Tystyl noticed the eyes of the patrolmen as well. Mind control, the king had seen this

before when Fael had dominated a man on trial for murder, forcing the man to tell the truth of his crimes. Realizing they would either have to fight or somehow go around, the king dismounted his horse and approached the blockade. The guards made no moves as Tystyl got closer. "Step aside in the name of your king," Tystyl called out when he was still a few yards away, giving himself room to maneuver if the guards decided to go against him.

"Our king has perished," the one large guard standing in the middle of the line boomed. "The traitorous man was acting against Lord Fael and was eliminated."

Tystyl was not surprised that the tale had been twisted to suit the wizard's cause. Anger began to fill the king's chest, resulting in a low growl as he drew his weapons. Wyrwood, taking the hint, drew his axe as well, advancing to a better tactical position behind his son and to the left. The guards began to form an arch around the two seasoned fighters, spears lowering into position as they moved closer.

The first strike came from a guard flanking Wyrwood on the left, a spear darting in low at the dwarf's ribs. Wyrwood immediately deflected it. The entire scene exploded into action then, spears coming in here, being cut out there by a sword or an axe. Eight of the guards were eliminated, leaving the two biggest ones, who had not yet joined the battle. Now, the large one who spoke earlier faced off against Tystyl, spinning a huge axe in front of him, making circles in the air. Tystyl studied his opponent's movements for a few moments, watching for holes in the movements. Tystyl then burst into motion, he flipped his offhand blade, reversing his grip as he spun around into a low crouch, making himself as small as possible. He then waited only a brief moment before diving headlong into the brute's attack, causing the man to lean to one side, overbalancing in the process.

The nimble king then planted one foot, changing direction and barreling into the reeling man's side, taking him hard to the ground. The man was wearing such heavy armor he was bound to be slow to get up. Tystyl planted his toes and went into an immediate roll, getting back to his feet before his rival could even react. A moment later, the guard had a green sword searing his exposed neck with immense heat, Tystyl sitting firmly on the man's chest. This immense pain brought him immediately out of his trance, making him recognize his error. "P-Please, King Tystyl," the man stammered, "don't slay me, I beg you."

Tystyl, still holding the Infernous to his guard's neck, replied, "I will spare you, as I need your help." Wyrwood was having a similar conversation with the opponent he had taken, although the man underneath the dwarf was in far worse condition. Tystyl shook his head at the sight.

"Do what I tell ye, damned fool!" Wyrwood was roaring at the injured man, spittle flying off his lips stinging the man's eyes. Tystyl stood, still with a sword aimed at the guard he had pinned, and stepped over to his father. He saw the blood soaking the road beneath them.

"Get up, Father, he will do nothing now. Look at all the blood."

Chapter Ten

When Kryzzl awoke to the bouncing of his pony on a bumpy trail, he opened his eyes to see that he was being escorted by a large guard. The guard had a burn across his throat from the fight on the night before. The clear morning was bright, they would be at Fael's tower by midday. "Where have Tystyl and Wyrwood gone?" the prisoner asked, honestly confused.

"Shut it." The guard had no patience for this man.

So they rode, through the villages and back toward the tower. Kryzzl had no fear of what might befall him this day. He knew he had played his part to the best of his abilities. There would be time to get another plan together, especially with every player obviously retreating. He sat on his pony wondering why.

Stopping to relieve himself, the guard watched over his shoulder to make sure the little man was going nowhere. Kryzzl sat, watching. He knew they were close. A smile crossed his face when the faint scent of orcs rode on the breeze. He knew what this guard was in for.

They came upon the tower in just under an hour. The imposing tower was looming over the dark, dead land surrounding it. Smoke rose from the many orc camps all around the base of the structure. The guard was beginning to wonder why he agreed to do this. The painful blisters on his throat promptly reminded him. Walking through the orc encampment was easy enough. Perhaps the orcs thought he was still under Fael's control, he figured. They walked right up to the front door of Fael's tower without incident.

Climbing the spiral stairs of the tower, the guard stopped on a landing and did as he had been instructed by the king. He bent down, drew a small box out of his pack, and opened it. He then walked away from the box, prodding Kryzzl with the butt of his spear to keep moving.

The dwarves from Jire were rushing through the large tunnel. Seventeen hundred dwarves in all traveled through this corridor, a primitive tunnel that had once been used to transport ore from the only mountain in Caryn all the way back to the great workshops in Jire-Rey. With King Bareet leading the way, the army of dwarves made good time, arriving at the midway point, a large cavern filled with stores of weapons and provisions, in less than two days. "We be right under the city o' Caryn," Bareet said to Lebouf, who was huffing at this point, "The rest is easier, me friend."

The dwarves did not stop, though. They rushed along, intent on coming out of the mountain near Fael's tower very soon.

Tystyl was the first to step out of Erimas' extra-dimensional box, leading the way. Wyrwood and Lisann were out right behind him, followed by Grimm and Erimas. Adley stepped out behind Sunuva and the grunt who were hauling Sunuva's small catapult.

"Lisann, stay behind with Sunuva, no need for the catapult yet. I will take Father, Adley and Grimm to the top. We will summon you should we need you," Tystyl said as he looked the woman in the eye, a silent word from his mind to hers told her that he would protect the dwarf with his life. Up, up they went, spiraling the tower stairs until they had come to the top.

Adley pulled a wand from the folds of his black and red cloak, waved it above the group, and activated a protection spell that would stop any instant death spells Fael might

cast. Grimm prayed over the group, attuning his mind and soul to theirs so that he could better heal them when they were injured. Tystyl had his own items to help protect him.

The pendant around the king's neck was circular with a clear gem in the center. The gem began to glow with magic at his command. The armor he wore was enchanted to protect against fire spells, and his boots allowed him to move with the speed of a warhorse. He was ready, as were the rest. Now they waited for their signal.

The dwarves filed into the chamber just inside the mouth of the cave, in the mountain just west of Fael's tower. They could see the spire, could smell the orcs, could hear their constant arguing and cursing. "Foul beasts, ne'er did like 'em," coughed Lebouf, who was soon regretting this trip. The old dwarf hated orcs, had lost his children to them many years ago. Of all the creatures on the island, orcs were the worst.

The orcs were not very intelligent, but made up for that in brute strength. They killed and ate everything they could, and enslaved those they couldn't eat. Born and raised without regard to anything in their environment, they left paths of destruction anywhere the orcs would go. The tactics of the beasts were no less appalling than their manners. They would try to outnumber their opponents at least four to one, while another would try to sneak in behind for a quick kill.

"No worries, me friend. I have me plan, we're to get rid o' the orcs quickly," King Bareet told his general. "Take captain Jon to the right, a small band. Separate a bunch, and then we take the rest by surprise." This was not a new strategy while dealing with orcs.

Most other armies or factions will fall when the head is taken out, but orcs had no leaders among their ranks. They only had a master, who was usually a wizard who was pulling strings from afar.

"Aye, me king," the general nodded, and rounded up the men he would need.

Exiting the cave in a heated rush, the dwarves ran down the hill toward the orc encampment. They ran in close enough for the orcs to see them, and then off to the south from there. Predictably, a large group of orcs pursued, thinking to catch and eat the dwarves.

"This was a bad idea," Lebouf exclaimed to Captain Jon as they were running to their chosen battleground. Once in place against an overhanging cliff, the dwarves all turned and readied themselves for the coming battle.

Chapter Eleven

An alarm rang out in the tower, signaling that the battle outside had begun. Tystyl and his group silently moved into position, standing with their backs to the wall on either side of the large door, waiting for it to open.

But the door did not open. No sounds from the next room could be heard. Tystyl gave a quizzical look to Wyrnwood, who only shrugged. The king whispered to Adley, "Check it." The sorcerer nodded and began casting. Through the small portal Adley had opened, the party could clearly see into the empty room. "A trick? This is the only room in the spire, is it not?" As Tystyl spoke, the floor beneath them opened up, and the four were tumbling down a long inclined tunnel, heading straight for a pit filled with spikes. Adley hastily cast a spell upon the others to slow their descent, hoping to prevent them from meeting their doom.

Tystyl, taking advantage of the spell, drew Infernous and jabbed the magical sword into the wall, melting stone as it easily slid in. With his free hand, the king caught Wyrnwood by the collar of his breastplate, who in turn caught Grimm and Adley. There they hung, all of them, until the sorcerer produced a wand that enabled them to levitate.

Tystyl took his blade and worked fast to cut a hole in the stone just large enough to crawl through. The adjacent hallway's floor was at least ten feet below their current position. One at a time, they crawled through the hole, still under Adley's levitation spell, and floated easily to the floor.

The first orc in the group swung a mighty club with the strength of ten men, smashing the helmets of two of the dwarves and knocking them prone and to the side. Another dwarf rushed to position right in front of the orc, waving his hammer ahead of him. The orc snarled and drew back for another mighty swing. His swing never came, for he soon found a thrown axe embedded into his side. Leboouf had entered the battle.

The general drew another throwing axe, and with a twitch found another victim. Leboouf drew axe after axe, a seemingly endless supply, as he found more and more orcs to take down. He was so skilled with his weapons that he had taken out a third of the group of orcs before many of his army had even joined the fight.

"That ought to even the score," Captain Jon remarked to him.

"Aye, I hope King Bareet's doing as good," Leboouf replied.

King Bareet's troops were faring well. They had used the same tactic as Leboouf and his troops, taking a group away from the larger troupe, destroying them and going back for more. Seven times the dwarves had done this, each group taking a group of orcs to a better tactical position and destroying them, until there was only a score of orcs remaining. All the dwarves surrounded these orcs, and the beasts did not resist, each of them offering their throat to the nearest dwarf.

Once the area was secured, King Bareet took out a whistle that Horlarl had sent for him to signal the elves. As he blew a single note, a door appeared beside him, and out stepped Jak and Horlarl, along with ten elf wizards.

In a hidden room on the west side of the tower, Fael watched it all. Kryzzl, standing beside the wizard, was shaking his head. "You will not succeed, the army is too strong and the tower itself has been compromised."

"I will destroy the tower and crush them all once they breach the front door, I will

not be taken easily, my friend,” the wizard said with a wicked smile. He waved a thin hand over his crystal, causing the image to shift from outside the tower to inside, where Tystyl's group should have been. The spike pit was empty. “How in the hell do they keep punching holes in my plans?” Fael shrieked.

Chapter Twelve

Lisann was the first to hear the alarm, which made her spring into action. With bow in hand, she started to march up, followed closely by Erimas and Sunuva. A small contingent of Caryn soldiers emerged from the box, taking up arms and marching not far behind, ready to protect the trio ahead of them.

From above, all could hear shouts of the old mage Fael. The large group carefully picked their way up the stairs. Coming to a landing, Erimas held his hand up for the group to stop. The ever alert rogue listened carefully, for he heard sounds coming from the other end of the hallway to their right. He halfling reached into a pocket, fumbled with a trinket he carried, and disappeared. The others looked around warily, fearing that Fael had detected them.

Lisann felt a tug on her dress, just before she heard a whispering voice, "I am here, let me explore a bit, nothing will see me. Stay here on your guard," Erimas bade her.

"We will," came her quiet reply. Sunuva readied the catapult and his crossbow, now knowing the truth of it all.

"I hate when that little bugger does that without sayin'," the surly dwarf growled. The grunt beside him nodded his head in agreement.

Down the hallway, the halfling deactivated his invisibility enchantment, seeing clearly where the noises they heard were coming from. Wyrmwod gave a start when he saw Erimas suddenly appear in front of him.

"What're ye about, ye damned fool?" Wyrmwod belched.

"Couldn't stay back there, too vulnerable. Come, we'll all explore together. Thought Fael was on this level, heard him shouting." Erimas then nodded to Tystyl, and tuned about, back toward his group.

"Wait," came a voice behind them all. Everyone in the hallway showed their surprise as Kryzzl seemingly melted out of the wall. In truth, he had just knocked the wizard silly with a large book and then stepped out through the hidden doorway. "King Tystyl," he bowed, "The dwarves of Jire are in danger outside. But first, you should see this." He put his hand out, waving to the King to join him.

Tystyl gave a look to Adley, who was already casting a detection spell. Adley's eyes went wide, and his jaw nearly hit the floor at the realization of what Kryzzl truly was, but he quickly regained his composure, nodded to the king, and stepped through the hidden door. Erimas called down the hallway to the rest of the group to join him, and when all had arrived, they all stepped into the hidden room.

The elves, seemingly every single one from the valley, poured out of the dimensional door in front of the dwarven army. Marching in lines of two, encircling the dwarves, the elves started to sing out a war chant. Bareet watched them curiously, for the war was already finished, now all they needed the elves for was to show them the magically hidden entrances to the tower. Horlarl glided over to Bareet to stand directly in front of the dwarf king, scowling. His once-empty eyes showing rage and fire that the dwarf had not seen in two centuries.

"What're ye about, elf?"

"It's over, Bareet," Horlarl sneered. "For centuries I have watched you and your kin aligning with the damned humans. For centuries I have suffered, watching your reach grow further and further through this land. All your father and his father ever had to do was keep to one mountain, keep to one mine, keep supplying me with goods for trading.

Your father did as he should have, your father's father made the agreement with us to begin with. You, however, you were not content. You had to go and dig deeper, dig further.”

Bareet set his feet, looked the elven king square in the eye, and said, “Me father was a fool, and me grandfather, rest his soul, only agreed with yer stupid rules 'cause he feared ye elves. He didn't think we were strong enough to defy ye. Meself, I know the truth of it all, that yer magic may be powerful, but the stone that we mine and the metal me kin shapes for ye, it all makes us stronger.” He gave a snort and continued, “Ifn ye're wantin' open war, we'll be happy to fight ye, but here is not the place. Ye either come to me kingdom or I will come to yers. But King Tystyl be a good man, and a great king. He don't need me an' ye fightin' on his ground.” The dwarven king's blue beard bristled with growing anger.

With a dismissive wave of his slender hand, Horlarl turned and disappeared into the crowd of elves. A horn sounded, and suddenly thousands of arrows were in the air, closing in on the gathered dwarven army. A call came out, and every dwarf raised his shield to deflect the missiles. A split second later, the entire area exploding into battle.

Fael lay in a crumbled heap on the floor, blood trickling from one ear, barely breathing. The old mage looked quite pitiful then, his once glorious, color-shifting robe was now only a pale gray. His white hair was laying in a pool of blood from the open wound on the back of his head. “Allow me to introduce my true self,” came the words of Kryzzl as he was moving to stand in front of the group. He removed his jacket, unclasped his necklace, and sat on the floor with his legs crossed. He began to hum a soft and slow tune. As he finished his tune, red smoke began to rise and swirl all about him, then all about the room. Engulfed in the bright red smoke, the shadows of an enormous form began to take shape.

When the smoke had dissipated, the entire group in the room gasped as if of the same voice. A dragonkin! Kryzzl, this new unlikely ally and seemingly awkward human, now stood before them as a hulking dragonkin. His golden eyes looked out among the group, all were shocked at the revelation. The soldiers in the room all had their hands on weapons, but Tystyl immediately commanded them to be at ease, for he had seen the truth of it all. He knew this man, or had at least spoken to him. Here he looked at Kryzzl, at his scaly brown skin, his yellow reptilian eyes, his hulking chest. This had been the same creature that visited the king's dreams some months before, warning him of some of the coming events, informing Tystyl that the gods themselves would be part of this battle.

Adley swiftly worked his way in front of the group, checking Fael's vital signs. The old mage was still alive. Adley quickly bound the wizard with crystal chains. “He should be no problem now.”

Looking past Kryzzl, Lisann saw the crystal. She had worked with seeing crystals before, and moved to reactivate it, to attempt to get a view of the tumult they had heard outside. At her words, the crystal slowly began to pulsate and glow, the image becoming clearer as she went through several spells she had known.

Elves and dwarves were battling each other, with the fair folk winning. She could see the elves overwhelming dwarves, with more elves emerging from the portal constantly. “There's no way they can win, Tystyl. We need to get down there and close that portal,” she grimly said.

A voice came from the back of the room, a ragged, old voice. “I can close the portal,”

Fael said weakly as he was regaining consciousness. Tystyl gave a scowl to Fael, then looked at the soldier standing beside the mage. The king raised and dropped his hand quickly, and the soldier complied with a club to the back of Fael's skull. The wizard was out again.

Adley reached into his pack, pulling out an orb made of marble. He looked at Tystyl and said, "I can get us out there right now, I will also close the portal." Tystyl nodded, then turned to Wyrnwood, who had been standing beside him. Had been.

Following Lisann's gaze, Tystyl looked into the ball to see a blue-bearded dwarf crashing out of a side door of the tower, axe drawn and charging for the fight.

Chapter Thirteen

Horlarl was sitting easily on his throne, watching the battle play out in his seeing crystal, smiling wickedly. Jak, standing by his side, had a less than mirthful look on his delicate face. "My king, I beg you to end this. We do not need to destroy the dwarves to prove your point," he pleaded with Horlarl.

"Silence, fool! I will not tolerate those damned dwarves tunneling under the earth as if they owned all of it. They must all be killed." Horlarl had been waiting for this opportunity for many, many years, for he had been angry with King Bareet for expanding the kingdom of Jire diplomatically, and tunneling further and further from the Great Hill, ever seeking better ore for the goods his skilled craftsmen would make.

Centuries before, many centuries prior to humans settling on Atalmor, a young King Horlarl had made a deal with Bareet and Wyrwood's grandfather, Olf, to keep the dwarven population down and for the dwarves to stay hidden in the Great Hill mountain. Olf had agreed, mostly out of fear of the elves, for they had great magic that the dwarves did not understand and thus were very afraid of. In truth, Horlarl feared the dwarves just as much, for he had no knowledge of this new race that had arrived on his island. Dwarves were smaller, but much more confident, and loud. Very loud.

From the time the first dwarves washed up on the shores of Atalmor until Horlarl made his arrangement with Olf, the dwarves had been spreading out, digging new tunnels anywhere they pleased. Horlarl, seeing the implications, decided that they should be roped in and limited to one mountain in the area. Olf, and then his son, Osgain, had both respected the barriers set in place by the elves. However Bareet, when he took the throne about the same time humans had begun to immigrate to Atalmor, became interested in the new race of tall folk, his curiosity increasing with everything they did. Though humans lived much shorter lives than the other races on the island, they had built, in their land that became known as Caryn, a great city. The humans had also brought their knowledge of farming with them, bringing a steady, year-round supply of food for the first time to the island continent.

Humans had also brought danger, for where a dwarf or an elf had centuries to live and learn and accomplish what they may, a human typically had less than one century, so everything that was done and built by humans was done hastily, and not necessarily thought all the way through. Their cities were cramped, polluted and overall were dirty, with buildings made of wood, that generally would rot and fall. Without the patience to learn the subtle arts of true masonry, all they normally made was of wood. Also, the humans tended to master, or think they've mastered, the arts of magic and science much earlier than other races, therefore making many mistakes with those arts.

When Bareet came about, he and his master masons taught the short-lived humans how to build structures to last, how to cut stone and to fit those stones into formations of strength and durability. Bareet had befriended Tystyl's father, King Tyst, and helped him and his people build the original city of Caryn. It was for these acts, when the north half of the continent was gifted to the humans by the elves, King Tyst granted King Bareet and the dwarves half of his land. Humans kept the fertile farmlands, while handing the dwarves the ore-rich mountains to the east. It was a good trade.

Horlarl, however, did not quite see things that way. He and his people had overcome the fear they held of dwarves, thinking them more of an annoyance than anything else. Humans, the elves could relate to. Mostly. The elves loved their land and air, their trees

and animals. Humans also had a love for nature, but also had a love of farming, of making the land work for the things they needed. The elves and humans got along for the most part, elves seeing the virtues of humans, while humans saw the beautiful elves and their land as something more than natural. They seemed godly to the humans of old.

Dwarves, on the other hand, disliked any creature that would not work stone, that would not dig for the ore in the ground. Dwarves were a hard working people, and played just as hard. Many times a drunken dwarf would end up finding his way into an elven camp, only to fight his out, usually with little success. For this, Horlarl hated them. No other real reason, just that dwarves were seemingly unruly, a little gruff, and seemed to hold little respect for nature and the world above ground.

Horlarl looked back to his crystal, seeing that the fight was going well for the elves, and dismissed Jak. Jak looked at him sourly one last time before leaving the large hall. Outside the king's home, the dimensional door was still up, elves continuing to file through, bolstering the already overwhelming force on the other side. Suddenly, several elves flew back through the door, followed by a pair of blue-bearded dwarves and a dragonkin. Wyrwood gave a threatening look at Jak, who was standing just to the side of the portal, and the three stormed toward Horlarl's home. Meanwhile, the door began to shrink, being closed from the other side.

Standing in the direct center of the fray, Tystyl, Lisann, and Adley slowly began to work their way to the outer edges of the large formation of dwarves, helping where they could with a sword here, a blast of fire there. The force of elves here was astonishing. Tystyl didn't think this many elves lived on the island, but here they were. Hearing the main doors of the tower crash open, the king felt some relief, for he knew his army had entered the fight. Now if he could get the dwarves to force one side of the ring of elves to open.

“Tell them to start spreading, that we may separate the ring into a line,” he told a nearby captain. The captain in turn sent the message down the line. Very soon, the dwarves started to break formation from their protective circle into more of a line, pressing the elves into regrouping into a line themselves. Right between the dwarves and the army of Caryn.

Tystyl knew with the portal closed, he would be without Wyrwood, but also knew that the dwarf could hold his own in battle. Indeed, the surly dwarf could bring down twenty elves with that nasty axe of his before taking a single blow.

Wyrwood led the charge, swatting any elf that got in his way to the ground and daring each one to get back up. Oh, how mad this dwarf was now. For Wyrwood, loyalty was the one thing that stood above all else, and Horlarl had just shown where his loyalties truly lie. “How long I trusted that damned elf, how long I served him. His yeller arse wants to go against that, well we shall see how long he thinks to keep his course!” Bareet followed up that comment with a snort and a few curses of his own.

Coming upon the entrance to Horlarl's house, Kryzzl and the dwarves were met by several archers, letting fly as soon as the three were in range. Arrows zipped past them in the air, with only a few hitting their marks, but bouncing harmlessly off the armor. Wyrwood had his helmet on now, a minotaur's skull, and was laughing all the way to the door, felling any elf that decided to confront him.

Kryzzl warned, “Stand back,” as he took in a deep breath of air. He reared back, and

spat a great ball of flame at the elf's door, vaporizing the magical seals holding it. The dwarven brothers charged the door in unison, their short, heavy bodies reducing it to splinters in one hit.

Horlarl heard the commotion outside and retreated to a more secure room. The only stone room in the valley, which had been built by Wyrnwood during his exile, was in the exact center of the house, surrounded by a maze of vines and tangles of tree branches. Wyrnwood knew Horlarl would go there, so he headed straight down the center hallway, axe at the ready. Bareet was close behind with his axe, Kryzzl was following at a distance to fend off any ambush.

No ambush came, however, so the dwarves went to work, chopping and chopping until they reached the stone vault.

The army of Caryn, along with the Reapers of Darkness, fought well, taking almost all of the archers out within an hour. On the other side, the elven swordsmen were thinning out surprisingly fast. Most of the elves didn't even know why they were fighting, they just knew they were told to kill any dwarf they saw. Standing here before them were all the dwarves they could imagine.

Tystyl, seeing this internal conflict in many of the elven faces, decided it was time to try something. He worked his way over to Lisann, who was fighting admirably, whispered in her ear, and watched as she drew out a flute with one hand while still working her sword with the other. She raised the flute to her lips and blew out a sharp note. Seconds later, Kemda swooped down to pick her up, and she was off, flying to the other side of the fight where Erimas was directing the reapers from atop the back of one of the taller grunts.

Lisann had to yell over the clamor of battle to Erimas, "Do you think your wizard can do some 'convincing'?"

Erimas grinned and said "That's what he's best at."

Chapter Fourteen

The door was open. Wyrwood couldn't believe that the elf would just leave it open, yet there it was open wide for all to see inside. There sat Horlarl, sword across his lap, waiting. Bareet skidded to a stop when he caught up to his brother. Cautiously, the two dwarves entered the room, looking to the side for any elves that may jump out from a shadow.

"Welcome, I suppose I can grant an audience at this time," Horlarl announce as if he were in his throne room.

Bareet's face turned red as he snarled, "Damned elf! Tell me why I shouldn't kill ye right here in yer own damned house!"

"I will not, for there is no reason for you noble dwarves not to kill me," Horlarl began flatly, "but remember who gave your people a start on this forsaken island, and who tolerated your insolence when you began working so closely with humans." That last bit was directed at Wyrwood, who was becoming more and more unsettled as his stare bore into the frail elf in front of them.

Bareet shot back, "Aye, me kin remember who put us to one mountain, who told us not to make babies, 'For the greater good', ye called it! Well, ye've lost this day. Yer army of elves can't win Caryn back, can't win against what's good fer real." As he inched closer to Horlarl, the elf started to rise.

"Only one," Horlarl said to Bareet, "I will only battle one of you at a time, it only seems fair. The other can stand outside and wait until I am done with the first."

Bareet looked to Wyrwood, nodded, and stepped out of the room. Horlarl then made a sweeping gesture with his hand, closing the heavy iron door. The vent grates in the door were too high for Bareet to see through, so he motioned for Kryzzl, who then easily hoisted the dwarf to rest on his massive shoulder. "If the battle goes the wrong way..." Bareet winked at the dragonkin, who nodded knowingly.

Wyrwood dropped the head of his great axe to the floor, allowing the handle to come to rest on his shoulder while he spat on his hands. Horlarl stood easily with the tip of his sword pointing down to the floor. Once Wyrwood secured his grip, Horlarl raised his sword in a defensive posture and they began to circle about the room, each waiting for the other to make the first move. Horlarl's eyes were steady, watching the dwarf's, which were gazing determinately back.

The elf made the first move, taking his sword in a wide arc in front of him, drawing a dirk from it's sheathe in the other hand. Wyrwood raised his axe defensively, making it a barrier between himself and his opponent. The dwarf knew, from seeing Horlarl fight in the past, that even though this elf was old, he was a very accomplished swordsman. The slender blade of Horlarl's sword was working through many different thrusts and slashes, forcing the dwarf on the defensive for many minutes.

The patient Wyrwood was content to be on the defensive for the time being, watching the elf's movements closely, searching for a hole, a pattern, anything that would give the advantage back to the dwarf. After a few minutes, Wyrwood found that pattern. Horlarl seemed to have a few thrust-thrust-slash routines, that he continually and now predictably performed. Horlarl knew, too, that Wyrwood only needed one solid blow to send the elf to the grave.

The dwarf would not get that chance, by his reasoning. Horlarl thought he had been working in a difficult pattern, for it was the same one he had used to defeat a very adept

dwarf many centuries before. The only difference was the dwarf centuries before had used a pair of smaller handaxes instead of one great axe.

Wyrwood waited patiently, circling the elf, parrying the strikes. The dwarf knew his strike had to be perfect, for once he used the magic of the axe, it would drain most of his own energy, and he would be quickly out of the fight.

Bareet watched the dance, the elf moved swiftly and gracefully, Wyrwood bouncing his axe and its handle off the swords, fending off the cruelly sharp blades.

Horlarl was beginning to tire, the weight of his blade wearing down on his ancient body. He knew that if he did not get inside the dwarf's defenses, the fight would soon be over.

Wyrwood saw it, too. He knew Horlarl was tiring, could see him slowing down. Wyrwood dropped his axe to the floor, dragging it behind as he started a wide circle around the elf, gaining momentum and throwing sparks from the stone floor. A groove was being cut in the stone as he was speaking the words that would activate the axe's magic, still moving faster and faster, until he was circling the Horlarl before the elf could even turn a complete spin. Calling upon the strength of his ancestors, Wyrwood, still running, heaved the axe above his head and brought it down with a mighty swing, severing the elf's sword arm cleanly. Horlarl only stood there, knowing the battle was lost, looking down at the blood pouring from the wound.

The battle in Caryn was over, a thousand bodies or more littered the field in front of Fael's tower. Elves and dwarves alike were shaking hands and looking all about the battlefield. They had come to a quick agreement, at Tystyl's suggestion to stop fighting and talk. When not a single elf could say why they were fighting the dwarves, they conceded that this battle simply should not be. They had fair trade agreements, and the dwarves never mined very close to Strungvali, certainly not close enough to cause any alarm by the elves.

And so all had agreed, no matter what their leaders worked out back in the valley, that the elves and dwarves would not, should not, be at war, for neither side had truly wronged the other.

Tystyl's pocket began to vibrate. At first, it was a gentle humming sound, but soon grew to a violent shaking that had the king off balance, struggling to stay on his feet. Reaching into his pocket, he then remembered the gemstone he held. He removed the gem, set it upon the ground, and watched it jump like a flea on a dog's back. Omarus materialized before Tystyl could even get a sword up, but the man looked confused and dazed, as if trying to get a bearing on what was happening. He blanched as soon as he saw the stern face of Tystyl.

Omarus thought then that he surely had died, for the last time he saw the king was when Tystyl had been shot in the neck with a poisoned crossbow dart.

Tystyl reassured him that he was indeed alive, and ordered him bound until he could properly be dealt with.

An elven priest cleared a small patch of blood-soaked ground and started a spell, one that would reopen the portal back to the valley of the elves. Once the portal was opened, Tystyl, Lisann, and Erimas rushed to step through, with Lebouf and Sunuva leading the remaining elves back into the valley.

The scene was a grisly one. Elves rushed about, trying to enter the house of Horlarl, but its doors were magically sealed once again. There were several elves with long, wide

cuts along their chests and sides, bleeding out on the ground.

The priest that had opened the portal ordered his apprentices to begin healing at once, while he moved to the sealed doors to attempt to open them. Once all of the elves had come through his portal, it's magic faded away.

The doors came open with an explosion that sent all who were on the steps in front of them flying, debris raining down on them. Jak, who had been just outside the house, rushed in past Tystyl and his group, running to the center room where he knew Horlarl would have gone. The going was easy, since the dwarven brothers had cut a clear path earlier. There they all were, Wyrwood, Horlarl, Bareet, and Kryzzl. The elf was lying on the ground in front of the others. Jak jumped over to him, scooping the old elf up in his arms.

The younger elf exclaimed, "Father!", which brought surprised looks from all. "Father," he said a little more softly, "what have they done to you?"

Horlarl, still alive, replied, "It's what I have done to myself, my son. Do not avenge me, for these dwarves fought with honor and loyalty, something I should have done myself..." His voice trailed off for a moment as he looked up to his son's eyes. "May you rule this land with better intent than I did. Take my ring, may it bring you luck and peace..."

The old elf's eyes then went blank as he passed over from the mortal realm to the place of darkness.

Many questioning looks were sent Jak's way, for no one, not even the elves, had known he was the son of Horlarl.

The day of Horlarl's funeral was a very solemn one. Tystyl, Wyrwood, and Lisann attended the service early that morning. The elves laid their king beside his father in the garden next to the king's house.

Later that evening, the elves held a grand coronation for Jak, the son of Horlarl.

To Tystyl, Horlarl's death served as a reminder for himself to never let personal agendas affect his judgment while ruling his kingdom. Tystyl had never had many personal agendas anyway, except perhaps keeping his people safe from threats, outside and in.

The journey back to the City of Caryn was quiet, with Tystyl leading, Kryzzl, Lisann, Wyrwood, and Bareet following. Veering from their path only briefly to travel to Fael's tower, where the dwarves were still holding both Fael and Omarus prisoner, awaiting the return of the king and his band.

In the city of Caryn, on the Day of Court, Fael was tried for his treason. Convicted almost instantly, he was sentenced to death. Omarus was also tried and convicted of treason, however his sentence would be less lethal, though no less harsh. Omarus was sentenced to life in the mine under the city of Caryn alongside the dwarves that were soon to be at work, mining the rich veins of the same green ore from which Infernous had been forged.

Fael was hanged the next morning. He was beheaded immediately after, then his body burned, for one never truly knows with wizards, after all. His tower was also burned to the ground.

Later that evening, in the castle of Caryn, Wyrwood was dining with Lisann and Tystyl. The dwarf leaned in close to Lisann, removing a chain from his neck, revealing a

half-moon pendant he held under his tunic. He motioned for her to hand her pendant to him, and when she complied, he put the halves together to reveal the inscription: “When at last we reunite, may the gods smile and may we be Forever Happy”.

Epilogue

The knights of Caryn, who had been riding alongside Omarus on that night that he tried to murder King Tystyl had all hidden in the only place they knew. The abandoned barracks they had all grown up in just outside Lightwood was old, but well built, and large enough for half an army. They had gotten word that King Tystyl was indeed alive, and decided to go back to the city of Caryn and face their fates, whatever they might be.

The road was easy enough, and to the south and west, they could see the smoke billowing from Fael's tower, which had been set aflame soon after his execution. Arriving at the open gates of Caryn in less than a day, the knights rode into the city and were almost immediately arrested. While being led in chains down the streets of the great city, the knights were pelted with rotten fruit, stones, and animal waste. That was the worst disgrace. Soon they came upon the castle, where King Tystyl was waiting for them, the fourteen knights dropped to their knees in a line in front of their king.

No anger was on the king's face, only disappointment. As Tystyl walked from man to man, looking each squarely in the eye, he asked each and every knight the same question: "Did you know Omarus was to kill me?" Each man, in turn, gave the same honest answer: "No, my king."

That was all King Tystyl needed. He released the men of their bonds and dismissed them. The knights each lost his title that day, for though they were not involved with the assassination attempt, neither did they do anything to prevent it, or to help their fallen king.

King Bareet decided to go on an expedition overseas to the mainland in search of an old prisoner he had held for a century. He had been granted passage on Songbird, the Reapers of Darkness' airship. The journey was an easy one, and much faster than conventional ship travel.

Having some information about the whereabouts of his former prisoner, Bareet trekked to a high mountain far to the east of Costil, along with Sunuva and a group of adventurers employed by the Reapers. Having found the cave with a bit of difficulty, the group strolled into the mountain as if they belonged there.

Suvious was asleep when the dwarf and his group walked into his lair. Bareet gingerly approached the great dragon, hoping to wake him gently. As the dwarf neared the dragon, Suvious' eye snapped open, looking squarely in Bareet's eyes, noting the sudden dread that came across the dwarf's face. "And I believed we were done, dwarf!"

"W-we were, we were," replied Bareet, stammering, "I came to talk business. I think we can be o' service to one another"

"Oh? And how might you, damned dwarf, be of service to me?" the dragon roared.

"I have gold for ye. We need more o' the ore smelted."

The demand soon became so high for this 'green' steel, the vein of ore under the city of Caryn was emptied out within months. The dwarves were forced to begin mining in new directions. Always keeping away from Strungvali, the miners eventually went south from Jire, into Gumlor.

That's where the trouble began. The green ore was plentiful here, to be sure, but the dwarves were not prepared for the troubles they inadvertently brought upon themselves by opening up one of the mountains.

The digging was easy, for this mountain was formed almost entirely of soft limestone. Three days into their dig, several of the dwarves began to develop boils and lesions on

their rugged faces. Several more began to change skin color from the normal pinkish red to a dark greyish blue. "Cursed Hill" was the name many of the short folk gave this dreadful place. Most of the dwarves refused to go into the mountain out of fear. The ones already affected by the ailments simply stayed there, figuring the worst was behind them.

They could not have been more wrong..