

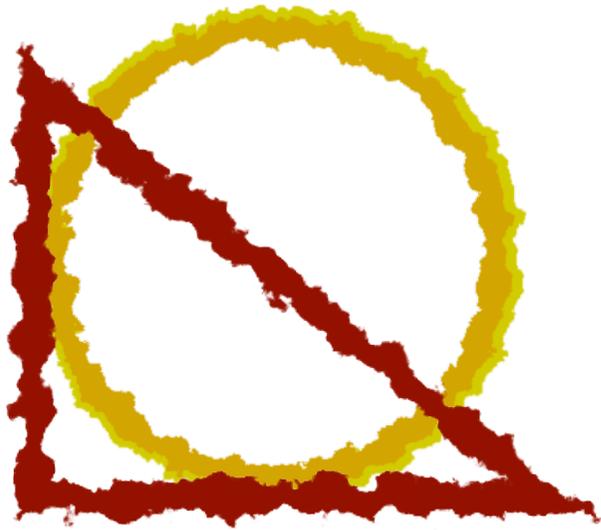
# Carpenter's Mark



*The Circle Of Light Saga*

Daniel LaFavers

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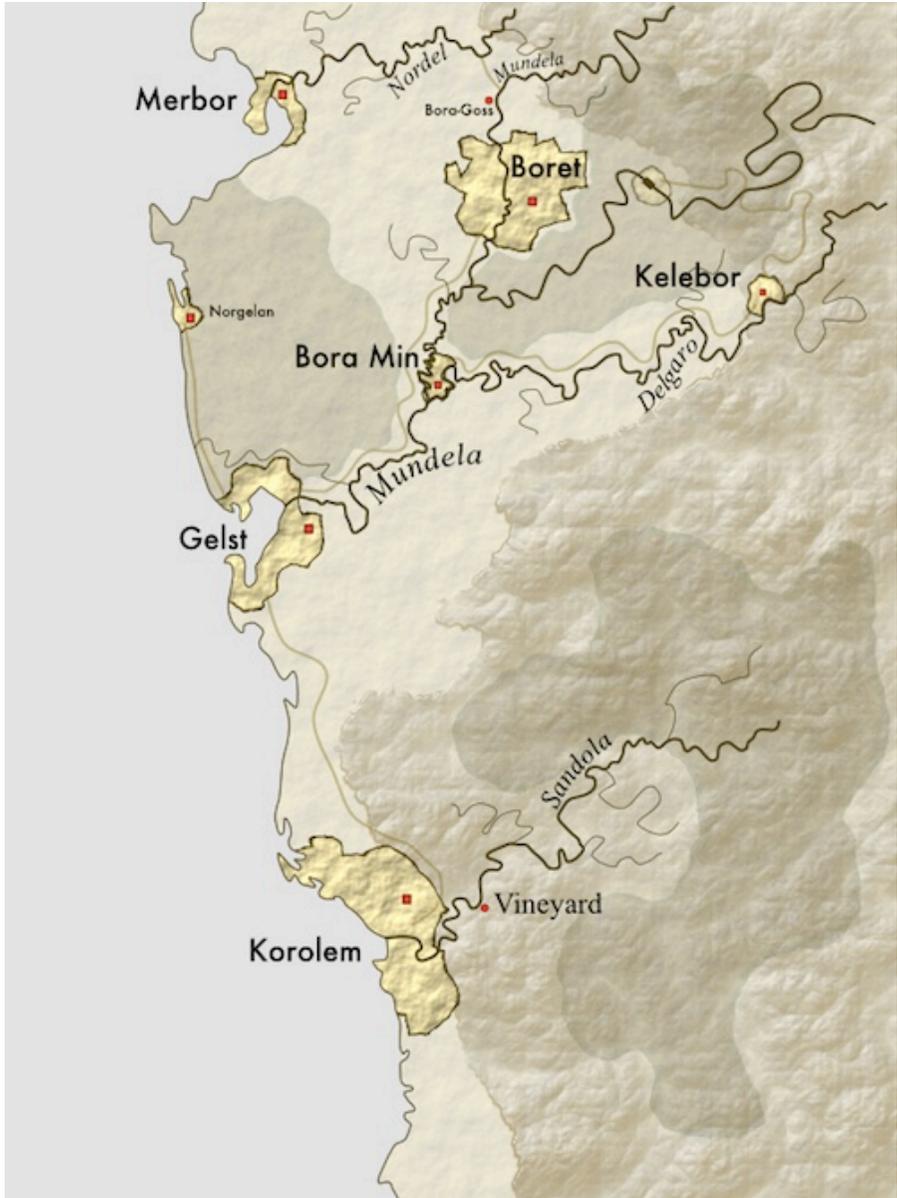
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By Daniel LaFavers.

*For Melissa, who is the magic of my life.*

*Let us all remember to unfurl our sails and to reclaim the  
magic that we are.*

## MAP OF THE TESHON AND GAELON LANDS



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I

# CHAPTER ONE

A veil of cobwebs covered the audience of roughly carved elven angels that peered down upon another ritual in the muddy, damp darkness of Kelebor's baptismal chamber. Light from the bitter, burning coal pit below painted them orange, and the rising heat coaxed them into a lazy, undulating ballet.

Below, shackled on his back to the ancient stone altar, Estus felt the relentless heat wash the side of his face and neck with its dry, penetrating intensity. His right arm, bare to the shoulder, was held fast by thick leather straps around his elbow and wrist. His knuckles ached from the burn.

Pores opened freely on his neck, his brow. Hot sweat covered the furrows between his eyes and the tight clench of his carefully shaven jaw. His eyes, watching the fire through strands of his long hair, fixed upon the glow of the branding iron heating in the forge.

Behind the wavy, watery mask of scorched air stood the senior carpenter of Kelebor, Jonathan Travers, looking pale and somewhat spherical in his white robe and red collar. He owned the mill where Estus had worked since his youth, and he would soon begin to reveal to his impatient protege the deeper secrets of their craft. Next to him, wearing black, unadorned priest garb over his tiny, gaunt form and olive-tinted skin, was the Elf Father of Kelebor, Jorel Tol-Kopel, whose pale green eyes shone cat-like through the fire.

The elf raised his arm and pushed down on the bellows, forcing a rumble of cold air across the fire that sent a plume of golden embers aloft toward the ceiling of the tall, narrow room. Travers stepped forward and pulled the hot iron out of the fire pit with long tongs, attaching a handle to its red-hot stem. As they walked around the fire to the altar, Estus could see, glowing in angry orange, the emblem of the Carpenter's Guild, a small right triangle with the magical proportions three, four, five.

Jorel came forward and stood at the head of the altar. He spoke several words in the holy elven language while he poured blessed water onto Estus's head. It flowed back into the thick mane of hair, quenching the dry ache of his scalp. He felt the elf's fingers on his forehead, and they were gentle, calming. Jorel continued reciting

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prayers in the elven tongue, and Estus felt the sign of the Holy Circle of Light being made on his brow.

The elf said in deliberate, deeply reverent tones. "Estus Arrenkyle, you have been chosen by God to bear the ancient knowledge of this guild so that you may do His work as He commands."

He laid his hands on Estus's shoulders in a kind, fatherly manner.

"As the grinder hones the chisel, so shall God sharpen your mind and reveal to you the sacred knowledge of carpentry. With your hands, God touches and shapes this world. With your heart, God touches the souls of His children with love."

Travers spoke in his deep, gruff voice from behind the priest. He was incapable of delivering the richly elegant oratory that the seven-hundred-year-old elf could summon, but even his familiar voice, echoing in the small room, carried a sense of power and reverence. "Every miter is a prayer. Every structure is a temple that brings into this world a physical incarnation of God's Wisdom through you. Your mind shall be opened to the Mind of God. You shall receive His Wisdom of structure, of the true nature of angles and measurement, of the deeper harmonies of form and the mathematics and procedures by which God's Design may be expressed among us."

The elf spoke again, almost lulling Estus into a deep trance despite the stubborn heresy that he secretly harbored in his heart. "You shall become an Appendage of God and shall carry forth the Body of Man as your own body carries forth the Spirit of the Lord. The Knowledge you will hold is a sacred trust between you and the Holy Light and must never be revealed to those dark to the miracles of carpentry, for this will bring forth false, impure forms."

Then the guildsman asked, "Estus Arrenkyle, do you swear upon your eternal soul that you will keep the honor of your guild, never revealing the sacred knowledge of carpentry?"

*Words, only words,* he reminded himself. *Hear me, God!* He called out in his mind. *Reveal yourself to me!* Despite his hollow hope, his answer still held the pungent taste of a lie. "I swear it."

"Will you bear the mark of the Carpenter's Guild, obey the laws and practices of the Guild, and study and practice the Wooden Art for as long as you shall live? Do you swear this on your eternal soul?"

"I swear it," he said again through his dry, scratchy throat.

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The elf came to the side of the altar and took the hot iron from the guild master. He laid his fist around Estus's bare arm at the elbow. Travers took his place at the head of the cold stone slab and placed a thick roll of leather between Estus's teeth. He put a dense cotton pillow under his head.

At first touch, it was almost like a sensation of cold, then numbness for a quick instant. As the elf held the glowing hot iron against the thin skin on the back of Estus's flexed bicep, he felt the deep, filthy pain of his burning flesh. Veins raged beneath his tanned skin.

He threw his head back hard against the cotton pad, revealing the rope-like muscles of his taut neck. Two low, guttural grunts forced their way through his strained throat, and he tried pulling away. The elf held him.

Estus arched his back and pulled at his leg shackles, but he was powerless against the white-hot fury of the Lord.

When the iron was pulled away, his panic was suddenly lost in a deep agony that consumed his right arm. The cold water being poured over his blistered skin took away the severe edge of the sting, but not the deeper burn that ate into his muscle and flared with each heartbeat.

Travers pulled the leather bite piece from Estus's mouth and continued pouring a steady stream of cool water over his wound. The water pooled on the stone and ran along his arm, wetting his hair, his side.

Jorel came to his side and rested the razor-sharp edge of a heavy hatchet just above the new brand. He fixed his gaze on Estus and in a most serious voice issued the warning, "If you break your oath, we will return you to this room, and we will reclaim this mark." Jorel pulled the blade quickly down and away, slicing a shallow cut into the meat of his arm.

Estus, surprised and shocked at this unexpected element of the ritual, cried out suddenly with the wail of a scared little boy.

The elven priest recited the passage of closure from the Circle Covenant, a verse that now took on its true meaning here. "And I pray that His Will be burned into my soul, to seal in that which is of God, and to seal out that which is not of God."

Estus bit down hard and forced himself to lie still, fighting the pain, fighting the anger. What does a man of faith feel here? he wondered to himself. Pride? Calm? Had he not been shackled, Estus

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would gladly have put his thick hands around the throat of the little green man.

Jorel continued. "Therefore I shall bear the Mark of my God, and He shall guide my hands in His work and grant me wisdom and peace."

"Lord be with me," said Estus. He looked over at his abused arm. Blood ran from the cut onto his blistered mark, while in the silence of his private mind, he repeated the same ending that he had added since his childhood: *but stay out of my way.*

---

"Bring him below."

The deep, gravelly voice came from a leather-skinned bulk of a man wearing a patchy white beard, a well-worn and once elegant captain's uniform, and the unashamed scent of whiskey. Lennel Gareth stood with his first officer at the bow of his double-masted brigantine, anchored in the Bay of Gelst. They were watching the approach of a small rowboat carrying a young man who had come, finally, to facilitate the assignment of the *Autarkic Maiden* to a docking berth.

Below, hidden carefully beneath the bales of cotton, were seventy barrels filled with knives, swords, axes, and arrows that he needed to deliver to the new underground without the scrutiny of the Legion guards or loyalists.

He went quickly down the steep steps to the main deck and then followed the port rail to his wardroom, where he dropped himself into his padded leather chair by the wide aft window. Sunlight from the clear afternoon sky danced on the wavelets of the rolling sea, sparkling in his eyes, which were cast upon the *Constellation*. Her nineteen square sails were neatly furled on their yards along three tall masts. The huge ship occupied two docking bays, one of which Gareth had reserved six weeks ago with the tariff board's office in Korolem. But that body, along with all other Gelst counsels and commissions, were being ignored by Boret's new administrators.

Being a small, independent merchant was all Gareth had ever known and, until recently, it had always served him well. He was branded into the Merchant's Guild over thirty-five years ago and, after a decade of study and saving, he built his brig in the Barrington Shipyards of Korolem, which earned him his red captain's sash. Now these big trading companies were playing along with the new Teshon docking and commerce regulations, and their inside deals

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and bulk discounts had kept him anchored for three days while everything from fully rigged ships to tiny sloops docked and unloaded ahead of him.

He watched the *Constellation* take on barrel after barrel of wine and beer and crates filled with fine crafts, everything from tapestries to furniture to perfumes. So it went. Raw materials flowed north to Teshon, where they were worked and refined, then sold back to Gaelon and other lands in the South.

There was a knock, and the first officer entered. Grant Fletcher was a tall, quiet man whose somber and stoic application of discipline helped maintain a manageable level of respect among the raucous and free-spirited crew. "Mister Kaff, sir."

Captain Gareth nodded as the two men entered and sat down. The young man started to speak, but the captain cut him off.

"Normally, I know what to do with bastards like you, Kaff." Gareth let his comment linger while he attempted to size up the primly dressed pimple of a boy sitting across from him. He turned to Fletcher and asked, "Will you look at what they send me? Another Teshon lackey with pretty lace and empty promises."

The young man smiled, ignoring the captain's disparagements. He answered with a disinterested, condescending politeness. "Well, let's cut to the quick, Captain. It's a very busy day. You need to dock and do business. I understand that the new procedures can be a bit daunting, but it's all for the best. Now then, I represent a consortium of investors who who have been granted intermediation rights to negotiate relationships between merchants and the land-based element, the docking companies and warehouses. We are helping to make sure that docking passes are assigned fairly and impartially. You can buy and sell your access pass and schedule your slot with us as far in advance as you like. Do you understand?"

"What I understand is that you get to make money without producing or doing anything."

"Well, Captain, you are free to refuse this offer and seek another one. I guarantee that our price is comparable with what any legitimate docking manager would have charged under the old system. Plus, once you are our customer, we can nearly always arrange a swap with another ship should your needs suddenly change. For an extra processing fee, of course."

Gareth chuckled. "Of course."

"This is your best chance, Captain. Let me arrange a pass for you."

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Gareth looked away, unable to stomach the foul sense of disgust from being played with like this by a worthless, land-locked, velvet-handed little boy with slicked-back hair, an expensive prissy suit, and an attitude that stank of new money.

"Where?"

"I can get you into Norgelan by tonight, if you sign with us."

Gareth turned to the young man and barked, "Norgelan? What bloody good does that do me? I've got cotton and tobacco, not livestock."

"There are caravans that can be hired to transport your goods to the city."

"What? Carry it half a day north so I can truck it back down the next? My load is bound inland, boy. I need barges, not shepherds and herdsmen."

There was another knock on the door.

The first officer called out, "Come."

A young ensign stepped in and saluted. He announced, "The shore leave party has returned, and we've got another twenty men ready to ship out. Also, there was a fight, sir. Miggs and Baker got tangled up with some of the boys from that Koro-Del ship."

"The *Constellation*?" Gareth interjected.

"Yes, sir."

"No. Cancel shore leave. Run some rigging and storm drills. They're just fighting out of boredom. See that those cross-eyed whelps get two lashes each."

"Aye, sir."

The ensign retreated and after he closed the door, Gareth added, "I hope our boys gave those smug bastards a few scars to remember."

He pushed his chair back with a rumble and stood. "Mister Fletcher," he said, calmly, weariness showing in his voice. "Get this snot-nosed termite away from me and prepare the captain's boat. I'm going ashore."

---

A cool breeze carried the scent of summer rain through the warm yellow sunbeams that fell into the kitchen window of the modest Arrenkyle home. Carmen Arrenkyle closed her eyes for a moment and let the country air brush across her cheeks and stir her hair.

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She worked with a joyous, unhurried precision, crushing and straining grapes for juice and a special wine syrup for making grape tea, a specialty of Kelebor and of Jorel Tol-Kopel. Her yellow maternity dress, handed down to her from her sister-in-law, almost matched the floral headband that she had tied around her fountain of fine, dark hair.

Kelebor's elf sat at the far end of the table, as comfortable as any man in his own kitchen. Of course, Jorel was equally at home in any house in Kelebor and had been for the past three hundred and fifty years, since he helped the original settlers move into the valley.

"He'll stay with Jonathan for another few hours while he rests. They have some guild business to attend to. Is he looking forward to his party tonight?"

"Well, you know Estus. I think both of us would rather just have a quiet evening to ourselves. When can I see him?"

"They should be finished around four. Are you sure I couldn't be helping you with any of this?" he asked. He was balancing on the back two legs of a wooden chair, propped against the far wall with his feet resting on the table. It was almost easy to forget Jorel was an elf. He was more like everybody's distant cousin. His sandy blond hair covered his ears, and his light complexion almost masked the greenish tint of his skin.

Carmen looked over at him through a few strands of loose hair that shone almost burgundy in the sunlight and said, "Well, I suppose you could pull off a fresh bowl of these." She took over a wooden bowl and a large stem filled with grapes. "Just be sure to leave me a few after you've eaten all the best ones."

He took the bowl and stem and started plucking grapes off gently. "I mean with any of that. You should get off your feet for a while."

She put her hand over her belly and said, "Sister Jaynes told me that it's just fine for me to keep working. I've still got at least three weeks, you old worrier. Moving around and working is just like rocking the baby, she says. But you know that. I'm fine, Jorel."

"That's just what your father's paternal grandmother told me when she was making grape juice one afternoon like this."

"What happened?"

"Well, I guess she was farther along than you are, but scant seconds after she told me 'I'm fine, Jorel,' she stopped, got this funny look on her face, and dropped her water. By the time I got her laid down and called her man in from the field, that little baby's head

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was poking right out. So there was Betty, breathing and pushing, and the baby, not even all the way out, started crying.”

Carmen looked at him, amazed, and let out a little laugh.

“Then poor Billy, he was in such a fright, and it was just about all I could do to keep him settled down to help his wife. By the time the little boy was full out, I had the three of them just wailing and carrying on.”

“Oh my. Was that Grandpa Harvey?”

“No, that was their first. Frank was his name.”

She laughed at that again. “That must be why Grandpa always said that Frank came out gabbing and didn’t shut up his whole life.”

“Yeah. He was a talker. He could get a whole room fixed on one of his silly stories.”

“I remember he would tell us kids stories to help us go to sleep in front of his big fireplace.”

“He was a lot like his great-grandfather, Calvin. But Cal was more of a singer, I suppose. You know, Carmen, we’ve had a lot of good folk in this town, but not many of them ever went on to take a Holy Trade Vow. You should be very proud of Estus.”

“Oh, you know I am. He’s been special as long as I’ve known him.”

“Indeed. I still worry about him sometimes.”

A cold shudder shocked Carmen for a second, but she asked, as calmly as she could, “What do you mean?”

“Well, you know he doesn’t come to church very regularly. Guildsmen are expected to work as elders in the church. I don’t know if he fully understands that aspect of his responsibility to the community. He’s not only going to learn his trade. He’s going to be called on for spiritual support from friends, family, and especially the children. He’s taken a Holy Vow that will open his mind to the Wisdom of God. That makes him a holy man, whether he likes it or not. You know that he has always — how should I say this — he’s always kept his relationship with the Lord a private matter in his own heart.”

Carmen looked down at her work and didn’t respond, afraid that she might betray knowledge of some of the terrible, blasphemous things she and her beloved husband had discussed in the dark security of their marriage bed.

As he continued, an edge of firmness crept into his voice that transformed him from being just a jovial friend of the family into an elf, a pure Child of God. Jorel had always preached that elves can’t

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look into your thoughts. Only God himself can do that. But at that moment she felt transparent and naked before him.

"You need to see to it, Carmen, that he understands his responsibilities. He will be expected to deliver the Harvest Benediction at the festival, but I don't think he's quite ready for that, do you?"

"I... I suppose not."

"You should help him practice tomorrow."

"I know. I will," she answered softly.

"Don't be afraid to come to me for help, or let me know if he needs additional spiritual guidance. That's what I'm here for, just as I was here for him when he was struggling with this as a child."

"Okay, Jorel. I'll do that."

He stood, set the well-plucked grape stem and bowl on the table, and went over to Carmen. He put his arms around her, touching her abdomen and resting his other arm across her breasts while he pressed his body against hers. Carmen endured his familiar closeness with the awkward acceptance of a trusting child.

"Good. I know you will."

He kissed the side of her head and left her working at the sink. With Jorel gone, the house became somber and empty again, as it had been since yesterday morning when Estus went into the sanctum. He had his mark, now, which made her not just a wife but a conventual, the wife of a deacon. She could now enter the sanctum, or at least the chapel of the Holy Sisters' convent. A little social status would be nice, but what really mattered was that Estus was finally at peace with his decision to seek out the Lord's wisdom.

As a distant peal of thunder rolled through the valley and the scent of rain started to fill the heavy summer air, Carmen looked down intently and continued smashing the grapes.

---

Bodie Challuk stood at the front of his barge, letting the wind blow his long, blond hair in a frenzied disarray around his thick, muscled shoulders while he allowed the sound of breaking water to calm the anxious knot in the middle of his chest. Behind him, two large tents covered the platform designed to carry hundreds of crates and barrels. In the foremost tent were seventy-three men with their crude homemade weapons and leather armor.

They were farmers, fishermen, and barge workers. Some had come from as far south as Korolem to fight for the rights and

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liberties their grandfathers had worked so hard to earn. They had been traveling north for two days, riding against the fast-moving water of the Mundela River. The men ate, slept, and sat quietly with their prayers. He had seen in their faces what he felt in his own deepest thoughts. He had seen fear, hope, and anger running so deep that it no longer stood apart as a separate emotion. The taste of freedom was too sweet, the return to darkness and subjugation too unthinkable.

He thought of his men, his friends. Which of them were about to die? he wondered. How many wives and children were going to cry because of the terrible, desperate hope that had been awakened in the little town of Gelst?

Their expected contact point had passed two hours ago, and they waited while endless seconds rose in ready anticipation and fell away onto a growing pile of tension and fear. They passed many barges, boats, and passenger pontoons. Each one brought Bodie closer to the edge of action when it first appeared ahead, then left him weary and impatient as it ambled south.

Finally she appeared, moving swiftly in the waters of the channel.

He felt a ping of adrenaline, and suddenly the countless hours, the long pensive days collapsed into a fragile, forgotten moment. Bodie turned and ran to the side of the tent. He threw open the canvas flap and, surprised at the lack of emotion in his voice, said, "Man your boats." They rose and moved with silent, practiced precision into the second tent, which held thirty-two rowboats of various sizes and condition.

Bodie hurried toward the stern, passing the pen with the fifteen oxen that continued their endless circles around shafts that powered the five propellers. He climbed to the rudder team's tower.

He gauged the speed of the Legion boat and held the rudder himself, ready to intercept her. He waited, holding steady, feeling the river alive below him as he watched the Legion vessel approach.

He pulled the rudder lever hard, forcing the heavy barge to begin moving toward the middle of the river. He held that angle, keeping his eyes on the smaller, more maneuverable boat ahead. He felt the subtle pitching as the barge ran oblique to the flow.

The two approached each other. The boat ahead sounded its clearing bell that claimed right of way and ordered him to clear the lane. This is it, he thought. Bodie knew that the other captain was waiting until the last possible second to select a course.

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He'll bring her inside. There it is.

He grabbed the docking lever and turned the propellers, moving the back end around and bringing the barge sideways in the lane.

He rang the bell.

The sides of the tent flew up.

In seconds, the water was filled with the small rowboats. Each boat had one man rowing and one or two men launching arrows. Legion guards returned fire, using their powerful and accurate crossbows.

He rushed back down and ran to his position.

His partner was waiting for him. They pulled their rowboat to the edge and jumped in as it slid off into the river. Already there were several men down or floating dead in the water.

Oars were cracking against each other. Arrows were flying through the air. His rower pressed on. Bodie reached down and picked up his bow and quiver of arrows. Five of his arrows were from the two hundred stolen from a Legion armory last month. These were mixed in with a couple dozen homemade arrows with sharpened spoon handles tied onto their tips. He started with these, launching them one after the other in the quick pace they had practiced. Arrows filled the air, and what they lacked in precision, they hoped to make up in quantity.

They were near. The Legion boat was moving right into the swarm of rebel rowboats. Bodie pulled out one of the finely crafted arrows. He picked his target, pulled back, held his breath, and fought to keep his aim against the motion of the boat.

He let the arrow fly.

It missed his target but struck another Legionnaire in the leg, taking him down. Some of his men were already climbing up to board the Legion vessel. His companion pulled the oars in and turned around. They both looked up at the same time into the face of one of the few Teshon men still along the rail. Bodie and the young soldier faced each other, each holding an arrow locked and ready to fly.

They both released.

Bodie's arrow sailed too high, but the practiced aim of the Legionnaire hit.

The shock of feeling the arrow drive through his shoulder like a thick nail filled his mind until cold water rushed over his head. He couldn't move his left arm. He forced his eyes open to the sting of

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the dirty river water. Between red swirls of blood, he saw the mirror surface of the river cut by the bottom of the boats.

He twisted and kicked his feet, bringing his head above water. He breathed and tried to raise his right arm over the side of one of the rowboats.

Rough hands lifted him out of the water and pulled him up. He was numb from shock but stirred out of it a bit when he felt someone grab hold of the arrow, cut off the end, and draw it out through the tortured meat under his arm. He crumpled on his side with his head halfway beneath the rower's seat.

Someone called out, "Skipper's hit."

He felt the bobbing and rocking and rhythmic banging against the other boats. Angry voices, the clang of metal, and the sick sound of wailing, wounded men fell strangely on his ears, unable to penetrate the veil of shock and disorientation that gripped him. The sky was a brilliant blue. Two lazy clouds drifted by. They seemed so patient, so wise that they could float overhead without any notice of the havoc below. But then they joined together to form an angry, shrieking face. How appropriate, he thought.

He was losing blood quickly. It was pooling in a slippery mess beneath him. He knew that he would soon be too weak to walk, much less fight. His body was drained of its energy but not his spirit.

"Help me up," he said.

With help he managed to pull himself onto the rower's seat. "Get me on board."

Most of the men had already boarded the Legion boat. The rebels outnumbered the Legion guards at least three to one, which almost made it a fair fight. He saw two of his men fall overboard and another fall under a Legion sword before they reached the side. With his good arm, Bodie grabbed hold of the rope ladder and raised his foot onto the first wooden step. With quick help above and below, he finally pulled himself over the edge.

His shoulder held pain sharper, deeper than he knew was possible. If he were to die, he thought, it should be exactly like this, filled with the same agony he had asked of so many others.

He was convinced at that moment that he would die soon, and he refused to spend the last seconds of his life examining the deck boards close up. He thrust himself erect. The strength and panic-driven determination of the rebels were a poor match against the speed and skill of men who had devoted their lives to martial training.

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"Nets!" Bodie called out angrily. "Get back!"

The world came back into focus, and he managed to step forward. They weren't fighters, but they were used to the river and the sea. The rebels threw their heavy fishing nets and bolas, snaring the fighters with skills that were better trained in their hands.

Bodie drew his knife and held it in his right hand while he moved along the rail toward the small pilot's cabin that overlooked the front deck. He forced his legs to take him up the two steep steps to the middle of the empty steering room. Blood poured from his wound in waves that matched the raging pulse of his heart.

"Skipper!"

One of his men ran to the door of the pilot's cabin.

"It got a wizard lock! We can't get it open."

"Get the Teshon men off the boat."

"I'll tell—" His voice stopped, then returned with a scared wail as he looked down at the sword that pierced him clear through. He dropped, revealing a tall Legion guard with a blue armband who pushed him forward with his boot to withdraw his sword.

The Legionnaire stepped across the dying man toward Bodie, leading with his blood-tainted steel.

Bodie's left arm hung numb and useless. He raised the knife and stood with his right foot forward.

With a casual arrogance, the soldier took a step and thrust his sword toward Bodie's chest.

Bodie spun, pivoting on his right foot, and pushed the man's thrusting hand away with his right arm, which brought him close, his back against his attacker. He pounded his fist back and felt the knife cut through the thick jacket into flesh. Without remorse or anger, but simply the methodical actions of necessity, he pulled the blade sharply up, cutting deep.

He felt the man fall against him. There was no energy left in his legs. He crumpled like a rag doll onto the floor with the weight of the Teshon Legionnaire on top of him. He was drained, unable to move. Footsteps pounded near, running along the deck. Moments later, feet passed in front of his eyes as they stepped into the steering room. The shoes were those of a Gelst countryman, not the shined, black leather of the Legion. They stopped in front of the rudder wheel.

Bodie closed his eyes and let the voices of his men, urgent and excited, lull him into a hollow black.

## CHAPTER TWO

The air in the Kelebor Valley was filled with the heavy scent of wet grass and worms, drawn out by the rainstorm that pattered on the roof of the small home that Estus had built three years ago when he married Carmen. His arm, bandaged and covered with a soothing cream, held her close as they sat together in their quiet house, listening to the rain.

He wore his white guildsman's robe. It was new and still held the awkward stiffness of its heavy fabric. He would now be expected to wear his robe, his white collar, or a white armband at any public event to mark him as anointed — lest someone miss the mutilation on his arm.

He was now officially a Woodwright, an Initiate in the Carpenter's Guild. As he gained more skill and was introduced to the deeper secrets of his trade, his collar and armband would change from white to green, and then blue, red, and finally black, if he reached the rank of Architect.

He leaned back and used the small wooden box as a footrest. It contained his first guild book, which he would be expected to study under the guidance of Jonathan Travers. It was given to him with yet more rituals during which he offered what he hoped was a convincing performance of sincerity. Finally, he was able to open and observe some of the sacred writings that Travers had always kept carefully locked in his office. This was perhaps the most devastating part of his ordeal.

The knowledge that he so desperately sought, for which he had invested a three-year journeyman'ship, still lay beyond his reach. From what he could discover while flipping through it, the book contained mostly legends about the tradition and joy of the craft. Such were their grand, sacred secrets!

There was, however, an introduction to builders' mathematics, from multiplication and long division to basic trigonometry. It was a genuine treat to see it all written down, but there was nothing even close to profound, nothing particularly unexpected.

For all his patience and study, all he got was a burnt arm and a bunch of stories. He tried to bite back his disappointment. Estus

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knew as well as anyone that guildsmen were trained over time, and only after many years were they allowed to know the deepest knowledge necessary to become masters of their trade. Two hundred pages of the wanderings of Benok only deadened his mind with bitter apathy.

What he *really* wanted to know was how the ancients were able to raise a ten-ton granite lintel.

Carmen turned and looked up at him.

“What’s bothering you?”

He smiled, brushing her hair away, and kissed her. “Nothing, really.”

“What’s wrong? Is your arm hurting?”

“It’s going to hurt for a long time, I’m afraid.”

“Sir Arrenkyle,” she said. “Deacon. I’m so proud of you. Do you know that? I love you, and I’m proud of you.”

He brushed his fingers across her chin and said, “You are the sky and the earth, my love. I don’t need you to be proud. I just need you to be with me.” She took his hand and placed it on her side so he could feel the baby’s back. He held her and thought of all the things he wanted to teach this new life they had made.

“Carmen, why must we starve for knowledge?”

“Oh, don’t say that. You’re going to know soon enough. It’s going to take time, love.”

“Wait with me. Help me wait.”

She reached up and touched his neck, and he felt her understanding, her acceptance. Words were not necessary. If love could ever be formed into a material existence, it would be exactly like his Carmen. Soft, with a fountain of dark, velvet hair, eyes of penetrating acceptance, and a womb filled with new, tender life.

“You need to get ready for your party,” she said sleepily.

“I don’t want to go.”

“I know. You want to sit around here and be mad at them, but you need to go. It’s one of many duties they’ll expect from you now. Ferris will be here in about a half hour with your sister and the kids.”

“Then I have another half hour to hold you.”

Carmen moved and twisted around, shifting her weight. “I think I want to lie down before they get here. Come to bed with me.”

He bent down and kissed her and then stood, helping her to her feet.

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She held her hand tight across her belly, as if cradling the baby, while Estus helped her to the bedroom.

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Lennel Gareth held onto the wooden seat as six of his men rowed through the choppy water beneath the tranquil mantle of yellow, humid dusk that muffled the sounds from shore, leaving only the rhythmic splash and creak of their oars to cover their heavy breaths. The captain rode with a quiet, fatigued scowl on his heavy jowls as his boat cut through the sweet, mossy brine of the bay. The men continued to row in silent unison as the gentle undulations of the sea broke into waves that rocked the small yachts and sailboats moored at the long pier ahead. When they drew close, they fell into the darkness of shadow cast by the low sun across the mighty *Constellation*.

The men brought the oars up and, when they came to the pier, two jumped up and pulled the boat in. They steadied it for the captain and started to tie it off, but Gareth told them, "Go back to the ship. If I'm not back by dawn, come to this pier."

As he waited for them to push off, he took a long pipe from his pocket and tapped it out against the wooden rail. He reached into his right jacket pocket, took out the old, worn tin of tobacco, and carefully stuffed his pipe. With his back to the wind, he struck a match, lit his pipe, and then stepped heavily through the stark, slanted shadows along the pier.

Coming ashore to settle negotiations, offer bribes, make deals had always been part of the adventure, even the joy, of his way of life. He could bluff and con his way through just about anything, and when convincing failed, there were always certain men whose favor could be bought or forced. This time was different. These new players were hard to read. Gelst's renaissance of open commerce and independence had been turned over to a web of Teshon insiders and Legion officers backing up every intrusion. It was almost intimidating.

At the end of the pier, he climbed the stair to the grand boardwalk that followed the shore. It was filled with the waning activity of a few dozen men, some still working the large cranes and ropes in the dying sunlight, loading the last few crates of the day into the massive gut of the Koro-Del trader.

Captain Gareth stood for a moment, watching them work their machines. His ship still carried barrels that were rolled up ramps

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onto deck one at a time and lowered into the hold with simple block winches. The cranes and their crew were an impressive demonstration of engineering and coordination, but that didn't change for a moment the fact that he was here first, and this should be his berth.

There were always ways. He lumbered with a heavy gait along the dock, following the long hull of the *Constellation*. He approached a group of three young sailors who were standing by the bow, talking loudly and laughing, no doubt ready to spend their day's pay at the bars and game houses that filled the mouth of the Mandela River and gave Gelst its particular charm.

The captain stepped up to the closest sailor, a large, well-built young man, full in the chest and shoulders with a short beard and closely-cropped hair.

"Hey, mate," he called out, putting his hand on the sailor's arm.

The man spun around quickly and knocked Gareth's hand away. "Careful who you go grabbing, you crusty old fuck."

Gareth's hand struck out without warning, a fast reflex that came with utter resolution and certainty, uncluttered by anything so clumsy as a second thought. It landed just below the sternum and sunk deep into the young sailor's gut before he had a chance to tense up his abdomen. Before he could even stumble into his friends, Gareth drew out his long, curved knife and said, "Any one else? I'm just in the mood!"

One of the other sailors said, "Sorry, Captain. It's been a hell of a day dealing with the inspectors."

"What's your name?" he barked at the man bent over coughing. The low sun lit the scene with an orange, angry glow.

"I'm Gavin, sir. I didn't notice your rank."

"Well, Gavin, you thick-headed son of a whore, you should watch who you mouth off to next time, unless you want to feel a whip across your back."

"Yes, sir."

Gareth eyed the others as he dropped his knife back into its scabbard.

"You," he said to the other sailor who had spoken out. "Ever been to a grog shop around here called the Broken Wing?" It had been almost a year since Gareth had been ashore in Gelst, and so much had changed. This pub he was especially worried about, and he feared the worst.

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The sailor answered, "I think so. It's by the river. It's mostly a bargeman's dive, though. They don't like sea folk up that way."

"Well, they like me. Go look for Merna. Tell her I sent you, and she'll see that they treat you well. See if you can get some ale into this termite and pop that gut of his back out."

They cast their eyes down, avoiding Gareth and his stern gaze.

"Oh, come on, boys. No hard feelings. What are your names?"

The man who had been speaking for the group answered, "I'm Davis, and that's Cody."

"Lennel Gareth."

"What ship are you with, Captain?" asked Davis.

"It's not a ship. She's a brig, the *Autarkic Maiden*. She's been anchored out in the bay while you've been docked at my berth."

"Your berth, Captain?" asked Cody.

"I'll discuss that with your captain. Trust me, kids. You'll like the Broken Wing. It's worth the walk inland for the dumpling pie alone. If you behave yourselves, you'll each have a pretty girl bringing you drinks and sitting in your lap by the end of the night."

There was a pause while they sized up that offer. "Really?" said Davis. "What do you guys think?"

Gavin said, "I don't know. It sounds like some kind of a setup."

Gareth's punch was even faster this time. He threw a left at Gavin's face and then a right that landed in his ribs, leaving Gavin grunting on the dock. Gareth stepped up and put his heavy boot on Gavin's chest, bent over, and said, "You're going to have to either learn to fight or keep that crab hole closed. Holy God in the Light, you're a stupid son of a bitch." He shook his head and said to the others, "Pick up this barnacle and get out of my way before I change my mind and dump him in the sea."

A young officer saw the commotion and hurried down from the ship. Before he could speak, Gareth called out, "I'll speak with your captain."

A moment of disorientation covered the ensign's face until he recognized the faded insignia and red armband on Captain Gareth's overcoat. He turned his eyes away from his doubled-over crew member and said, "I'm sorry, Captain, is there a problem?"

Sparring with the young sailors had left Gareth in a playful mood, so he barked out in his gruffest voice, "You've got your worm-wooded slut in my berth and an undisciplined crew not worth a briny piss, but I'll tell that to your captain."

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Gareth stood back, letting the other men help their friend to his feet and take him inland past the warehouse. He turned away and let the ensign lead him up the gangplank. When he set foot on the polished deck, the young officer nudged his elbow and pointed the way. They walked on at a good pace to the stern of the ship.

"I don't recognize your crest, sir. What's your organization?" the ensign said with forced politeness.

"I'm an independent. The *Autarkic Maiden*, or *Old Maid*. She's the brig parked out in the damn middle of the bay."

"And your name, sir?"

"Captain Lennel Gareth."

"Ah, yes. Of course. The *Old Maid*."

They ascended a wide, ornate stair, entered the officer's deck, and followed the narrow hallway to the wardroom. The ensign knocked.

A voice from inside called out, "Come."

They entered.

The captain of the *Constitution* was a sturdy, broad-shouldered man in his late forties with a well-trimmed salt-and-pepper beard. His bushy sideburns accommodated for the thinning on the top of his scalp. When they entered, he was leaning over a large, polished cedar desk. His white captain's coat was unbuttoned, revealing a formal white shirt with a red collar that hung open at the neck. He was studying a large notebook that Gareth recognized as a cargo inventory receipt log. He made a couple marks with a large quill pen and then looked up, showing an impatient, furrowed brow.

The ensign saluted by placing his hand, palm out, above his right eye. "Captain Donovan, may I present Captain Lennel Gareth of the *Autarkic Maiden*."

Donovan waved a semblance of a salute to dismiss the ensign and then stood up and straightened his cuffs. Gareth walked across the bright blue carpet, being careful not to disturb the carefully brushed fringe.

"Yes, come in." Donovan walked around the desk and adjusted his coat. "What a pleasure it is to have you drop in unexpectedly at this late hour."

"I assure you, the pleasure is mine. What an honor to be on such a grand vessel. Is she yours?"

"She belongs to the Koro-Del Trading Company, as I'm sure you might have remembered eventually. Here, come have a seat. Can I

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offer you some brandy?" Donovan moved to a cabinet and took out two glasses and a tall, narrow wooden barrel.

"Thanks, but I'll have my own," Gareth said as he took a flask from his left jacket pocket.

Donovan uncorked the brandy, poured half a shot into his tumbler, and brought that and the empty glass toward the thickly padded leather chair. Gareth took the glass and poured it a quarter full as he sat down on the embroidered sofa across from the captain. He took his pipe out of his mouth, sipped his whiskey, and reinserted his pipe.

"So, Gareth, was it? How can I help you?"

Gareth found himself feeling a bit overwhelmed by the grace and efficiency of the large ship. He found himself wanting to like Captain Donovan, so he decided to shrug that off by taking the offensive.

"I understand now why a couple of my boys found it necessary to pummel your crew."

"Ah, yes. I see. Well, I have the unfortunate responsibility of informing you that the incident to which I believe you are referring was in fact the result of an instigation by members of your own crew. My men, I assure you, are not in the habit of seeking altercations with random mariners."

"Then with whom do they seek altercations, Captain?"

"No one in particular, I must say. Unless provoked."

"I see. In fact, Captain, I had to drop one of your men on my way up to see you, but that's not my problem. Whether you choose to manage your crew is your own concern."

"Indeed."

Having set the mood and direction, Gareth whipped it back suddenly, looking for some reaction. "I want to use this dock throughout the night. I'll give you a full quarter of my take. We can be unloaded and out of your way by first light." Captain Gareth didn't expect Donovan to take his offer seriously. What he was interested in was exactly how he would be refused. Would he pretend to be insulted? Would he end the conversation right there? Or would he maybe give Gareth a clue about how to work the new system?

Donovan sat back, put his right ankle over his left knee, and took a gentle sip of his brandy.

"I'm afraid I cannot help you. Perhaps you're not fully aware that the Gelst Tariff Board and Commerce Committee has been

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disbanded. You'll need to purchase a docking pass. The problem is not the *Constellation*, but your permission to store your cargo. Have you that permission?"

"Come now, Donovan. It's an honest bribe."

Donovan laughed and shifted to put his left ankle on his right knee. He took another sip and watched Gareth, waiting for him to say something else.

"Of course I don't have that permission, nor do I intend to seek it because it has nothing to do with me. I intend to deal with the warehouse, barge, and wagon men as I have always done. I don't recognize the consuls of Teshon as having any bearing on me. I'm an independent trader, not a citizen to be taxed and directed."

"Yes, I see that. But we must deal with them, and they are bound by these new procedures."

"Are they?"

"It would appear to be so."

"A most appropriate choice of words."

Donovan took another drink of his brandy and said, "Fascinating. But what has this to do with my ship? Even if I did cast off to the bay and allow you to dock, you still would not be allowed to unload. The Legion troops are very careful to inspect the dock here at precisely half past every hour. Have you had no contact with the docking contractors?"

"Oh, yes. One came out to us yesterday. I was told that my agreement with the dock, this dock here, had been purchased by the docking consortium and would be resold to me in the form of a docking pass. And then, this afternoon, I had a most pleasant conversation with a Mister Kaff, who very nearly got thrown headfirst into the salty grave."

"Look, Gareth — Lennel — I am not unsympathetic. I understand what you're saying, and in a sense you are right to recognize that this upheaval is unsettling for all of us, but what good, really, can come from resisting this when all you need to do is get your hold unloaded? I've found that the agreement is comparable to the fees one would have to pay to the dockmaster himself, and once you get through the payoffs to assure an accurate count and delivery, you're probably in for even more than if you just played along."

Gareth sat still and unconvinced amid a plume of thick, purple smoke.

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Captain Donovan continued. "You know, my good Captain, this renovation is not an intentional affront against you or your crew. Gelst was drifting too far from the Light. Too much was falling into the hands of unbranded and untrained amateurs. It was becoming too brittle, and the bay was too clogged. The intent is to keep everything safe and orderly."

"Is it?"

The two sat together in silence for some time. Donovan sat twitching the foot that rested across his knee, while Gareth sat within the fog of his pipe and the squalor of his mood. He tipped his glass up and filled his throat with the warm burn of the whiskey. It flowed into him and spread as a flush of numb.

Captain Donovan finished his brandy and then asked directly, "Why are you here? You didn't really expect me to accept your offer. Certainly you didn't come all this way to complain about the altercation between our men." His voice bore the tone of command. "What do you want?"

Gareth raised his heavy, round chin and peered at Captain Donovan from beneath his shaggy eyebrows.

"I'm a man of the sea, not of politics. This port has been the lifeblood of Teshon for, what, almost a hundred years? From the first single sails to this," he waved his arm around to indicate the *Constellation*, "we've been driving goods in as fast as we could load the barges. We built Teshon, men like you and I."

Captain Gareth downed the last of his whiskey and found himself being unexpectedly honest. "What I want to know is, why? Why this? Why now? What do you in these fancy trading ships know about this renovation? All I know is that it stinks like a dead whale in the sun. There was nothing wrong with the way Gelst was handling business. What's it about? How far are they going to push this, and why are you going along? If anyone could stand up to them, it would be you."

Donovan put both feet on the floor and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He tapped his fingertips on the side of his brandy tumbler and thought for a moment. "When we were branded into the Merchant's Guild, we took an oath to serve God, to carry our goods and fulfill our trades for the benefit of all, and to accept the wise direction of the Elders."

There was a pause. "Go on," Gareth urged curiously.

Donovan sat back. "You're a Senior in our guild. Your experience and knowledge of the sea is no doubt unquestioned, but, well —

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how should I say this? — if you could resign yourself to becoming master of a Koro-Del trader ship, you would find a lot of these problems and questions less of a distraction. It's as simple as this. This isn't our game. We just want to move the goods in and out."

"What do you know?"

"I know that if you insist on remaining independent, you're going to find yourself increasingly left out of trading options, and not over something as trivial as a docking pass. You play along, or you don't play. Look around this bay. How many free traders do you see? You can keep your ship, but if you register it with us, you'll find another guild rank above admiral that you probably don't know about. I won't try to tell you what to do about your situation here, but I would strongly suggest that the next time you're in the Korolem Port that you seek an audience with Dylan Del-Trevia."

"Would he see me?"

"I'm sure he would. I can't grant you my rights to this dock. That's out of the question. And even if I could, I don't have time to go yanking some administrator out from between his down blankets. The winds are fair, and I intend to make sail well before dawn. If you do find a port before then, I can offer you fifty men, if that will help. Just send word."

Gareth pulled himself forward. Then he stood up, took out his pipe, and pointed it at Donovan as he said, "I spent twenty years working and saving to buy the *Maid* and another ten as her sole master. I'm not about to give up and put her in your fleet, and I'm not going to play nice with a bunch of overzealous barons." He reinserted the pipe and said, "Thank you for your offer of extra hands, my dear captain. Frankly, I wouldn't have your men wipe my ass, but if it moves you off this dock, I'll wish you sturdy winds and a calm sea."

"I thought you might."

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When Bodie looked up, he saw the dark purple hue of a fading evening sky. A cool breeze brushed across his cheek. A turn of his head brought new pain into his neck, but it also told him he was on the rear deck of the Legion transport boat. Ten or so other men lay beside him. His shoulder had been tightly bandaged, and he was covered with a red Legion jacket.

He sat up.

"Skipper!"

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"Where are we?"

"Still a few miles north of Bora-Min."

"How many?"

"Thirty-eight men were killed. We have some of them, but most were lost in the river."

"The gold?"

"We finally cut the bolts and straps around the chest and brought it up, but it's still magic-locked. And we found the papers. It's more than we thought. Three times more, if we can get to it."

"We'll get to it, but we need to get it off this boat. As soon as it gets dark, anchor along the bank and get everyone off. We're still a long way from home."

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His friends stood crowded together on the covered porch, barely out of the rain. Everyone from the mill was there, of course. Jorel was standing off to the side with a couple of the other guildsmen from Kelebor. There were only twenty or so anointed craftsmen in the entire Delgaro valley. These two were rather new to Kelebor, and Estus figured it was Jorel's way of helping to get them acquainted with everyone. Dawson, a heavyset man with big shoulders and an even bigger smile, was an agronomist — the Disciple rank in the Farmer's Guild. He was wearing his green shoulder sash over his work clothes. Beside him stood Blake, the young corporal, wearing his uniform and white armband. Blake, an Initiate of the Legion Guild, was now in charge of a single platoon that was part police force and part ceremonial adjunct.

Estus thought that this event might have drawn out Parker Shaw, Kelebor's seventy-five-year-old Sorcerer. Estus made a mental note to pay him a visit. He wondered if he would be able to pry some morsel of information about magic from him now that he was a fellow guildsman and, more importantly, now that Shaw was growing rather absent-minded.

Many others from the town had also come out, braving the rain to wish him well. He wasn't really expecting that, and it both touched him and left him feeling a little detached because he knew that this could never mean to him what it meant to them. Seeing them standing there filled him with an odd mixture of envy and relief.

Estus stepped down from the carriage amid cheers and a bit of applause. Rain tapped on the top of his heavy guild hood. Jorel,

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wearing someone's wide-brim country hat, stepped out into the rain, gave Estus a grand hug, and led him back through the crowd into the Muddy Shoe Pub.

When Estus pulled his hood back and let his eyes adjust to the dim light, he saw decorations and even more people waiting for him. It wasn't long before Travers had his arm around him, leading him to the end of the long table. The loud chatter, the stream of congratulations, pats on the back, shakes of the hand left Estus a little overwhelmed.

When they reached the head table, Jorel motioned everyone to stand. After a quick wave of rustling and shuffling, the large, crowded room became still and quiet.

He put his hand on Estus's shoulder and began a prayer.

"Lord, today we have a young man standing at the threshold of service to You and this community." A reverent hush quickly settled, freezing the large room in a pure silence broken only by the sound of the rain, falling now in heavy sheets on the roof. Jorel continued, "Guide him as he follows the path of Benok. Grant him courage, stamina, and patience as he moves toward Your Wisdom. Estus has been a skilled and dutiful craftsman for many years, and now he has decided to consecrate his craft in Your Name. We pray, Lord, that as Estus brings You into his heart and into his hands, we will all be brought closer to You through him and the structures that he will build. So this we pray, in the light of Your Holy Fire."

The crowd replied in unison, "So it is."

Then, over the din of people settling in and taking their seats, Travers called out. "Somebody bring this man a beer!"

Everyone cheered. Of course Estus would not drink the beer, or eat his cake, or partake in anything even hinting of mere physical pleasures. He was a holy man now, and if only for tonight, he would be expected to shun all such offers. Which, of course, meant that everyone would have a great deal of fun tempting him with anything they could think of.

His beer was brought by a young woman Estus recognized as the daughter of one of the workers at the mill. She was, no doubt, let into the otherwise male-only sanctuary specifically to play the part of his alluring temptress.

"Thank you, Mandy," he said, taking the cold stein.

"You're welcome, Deacon." She seemed both shy and pleased with the attention she was commanding from all the men in the room.

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Estus ignored the catcalls and suggestions of how he should thank her and said, "Um. I think a couple of buttons there have come undone. You should fix that, you know. It might cause some of these savage men to have less than pure thoughts."

"Who, them?" she said in mock shock. "You'll protect me." She made a motion to sit on his lap, and, much to the amusement of the room, Estus said, "Oh, if only I could. But I'm sure you'll be safer behind the bar. Maybe you should take this back with you."

Just before he released his beer back into her custody, he leaned in and took a quick sip. Jorel quickly reached over and pulled the glass away while the word spread across the room like a wave. Jorel broke the tension of what could have been an awkward moment by saying, "God still sees you, Estus. Even with Miss Mandy standing next to you."

There was a commotion at the door. Estus turned and saw his sister. Ferris got up from the end of the table and hurried over to her. A moment later, he motioned for Estus to join them. He jumped up and hurried across the room and through the doors onto the small covered porch.

When he saw her, he froze and locked Anoria in his gaze. She was soaked to the bone. Her bangs hung drenched and sloppy over her narrow, freckled face, which was pulled tight in some kind of desperate determination. She forced out the words "Carmen fell," before her voice broke into a watery, sibilant sob which she quickly choked back and covered with her rough, country hands.

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On a day long ago, the Kelebor sky was crowded with low, heavy clouds riding the stern autumn wind that whispered through the brittle leaves and pulled locks of long, loose hair across the face of young Estus. The persistent wind tugged at the simple, homemade dress his younger sister wore as they marched up the forest hills, wading through shin-high leaves, broken twigs, and brambly redberry bushes. Estus climbed with the joyous intensity of a nine-year-old, his eyes focused at the top of the hill. In his right hand, he wielded a dirty twig as his walking staff. His loose wool trousers, handed down from his older brother, hung heavy on their suspenders and refused to hold in the tails of his thick cotton shirt. Behind him, Anoria followed, trying to keep up. By now her favorite socks, newly knitted by their mother only last month, were already worn beige from the dirt and were covered with little sticker seeds. Her fine dark hair escaped its green ponytail ribbon and picked up its own supply of leaf bits and dust.

He led his sister into the hills of the Teshon Forest that overlooked the small town of Kelebor. What was left of the forbidden ancient city was scarcely even visible anymore among the thick vines and hundreds of years of fallen leaves and drifting dirt. There was still enough, however, to be a reminder of the times when men grew evil in their ignorance of God.

Little Anoria pushed some hair behind her ear and looked back down the trail. "I don't think we're supposed to come up this high," she reminded him.

Estus flipped the hair away from his eyes and reached his hand down to help her over a mossy tree trunk. "We're almost there. I want you to see. It's okay."

"It'll be dark in a bit."

As he moved sideways along the hill, he saw it again, and his heart began a nervous pounding. Everything he had been taught told him it was wrong, evil, but everything he knew by his own eyes told him otherwise. Perhaps that's what made its compelling beauty draw him deeper into its exploration with such a nasty thrill.

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He took her to the place where the ground sloped up suddenly, becoming almost vertical. There was a tree growing close along the side of the slope, and just beyond that was the small hole. Three weeks ago, Estus had discovered some old, roughly-formed bricks sticking out of the ground. After digging for an afternoon with a wide stick, he found that the bricks were being pushed out by the roots of the tree. He had pulled those bricks away, dug some more with his stick, and managed to pry enough of the bricks away to open a small hole that he could duck into. He had been inside several times alone. It was so beautiful and so special that he decided to finally share it with his sister, despite the taboo.

He took two small candles from his pocket, struck a match, and lit them. He kept one and gave the other to his sister.

"Come on." He took Anoria's hand and crouched down through the little hole.

The darkness was complete except for the tiny glow of their candles and the small eye of light through which they had crawled. It was shockingly silent, except for distant, whispering echoes that hinted at the cavernous void hidden ahead. Anoria started pulling back, afraid.

"It's okay. It's like a cave. This is it. This is what I told you about."

He took her hand and led her further, deeper, until they stood at the perimeter of a large rotunda.

"Be careful. There are steps here."

"I want to go."

"It's okay. I promise. I just want to show you what's at the bottom. It's just another room."

They descended into the grand underground chamber. With their eyes still set for the afternoon sun, the darkness seemed to devour the faint orange flicker of their candles. The archway at the bottom of the stairs was barely visible above them.

"Look! See these two pillars of stone?" he said, pointing to the grand columns they had just walked between. "Up there. Can you see it?" He pointed up to the enormous carved stone that sat across the pillars, forming the entrance archway. "That's got to weigh more than every house in Kelebor put together."

He let go of her hand and began to step into the deep darkness when Anoria screamed. He spun around. She was looking with wide eyes into the darkness while she drew the Circle of Light twice around her heart.

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She ran forward and grabbed at his arm. He tried to hold her, to comfort her and show her. "It's marvelous."

"It's evil! The evil ones built it."

"It's beautiful. Anoria, how did they get that stone up there? Why? What does it mean?"

"I want to go home, Estus. Take me home." She pulled away from him but held tight to his shirt, urging him back.

"It's okay. Shh. Don't be afraid."

He was disappointed but decided that maybe this was enough for today. He led Anoria back up the steps, and as soon as they could see the light through the small hole, she dropped her candle and darted through it like a scared little rabbit. When they were both back under the sky, she grabbed his hand and started running. She finally stopped and leaned against the silvery bark of a tall birch tree when they were near the mountain path that led back to Kelebor. She was pale and shaking and breathing hard from their run.

Estus stood in front of her, his hands gently holding the sides of her arms. "It's okay, Anoria."

She leaned forward and whispered to him, as if confessing something absolutely terrible, "I think I saw a ghost, Estus. Don't ever make me go back in there. Or you! I prayed when I saw it so it couldn't get us, but don't you ever, ever go there again. It's bad, and you don't pray as good as me."

"Oh, Annie, you didn't see a ghost. I promise. Those are just stones cut out to look like people. That's all. They're just like Daddy's little figures, but cut out of stone, not wood. And they're taller than real people. How did they do that, Anoria? How did they get that stone up there?"

Suddenly, Anoria jolted. She froze. Someone was coming. Heavy footsteps rustled through the carpet of leaves along the path below.

"Estus! Anoria!"

Estus turned to his sister and ordered in a raspy whisper, "Don't tell."

They saw their older brother, Baron, coming up the hill. He was fifteen that year, and he had let his kid whiskers cover his round, full cheeks. Baron had always been a husky lad, thick in the hips and back, but his adolescence was turning him quickly into a sturdy young man. When he saw Estus and their sister, Baron stopped and called out, "Here! Right now."

They sidestepped their way down a steep gully and hopped over to him.

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When they got close, he shook his head in disgust and knelt down in front of Anoria, brushing the debris from her back. "Oh, Annie, are those your new socks?"

She nodded.

"I can't hear the rocks tumble around in that tiny head of yours. Say something."

"Yes."

"Sit down," Baron said, pointing her to a large rock by the side of the path.

He walked over to Estus. "Don't you even think of running, 'cause then you'll catch hell from me as well as Dad." Then he reached at his belt and pulled it off. "Dad said to lay this on you if I found you up past the sap trees."

He grabbed Estus and held him with one arm as he gave him five sturdy smacks that carried a seriously sharp sting even through his trousers. As he was letting him go, Baron swung the strap once more. "That one's from me for making me climb all the way up here for you two."

Free of Baron's grip, Estus lunged forward and away. He stood with as much pride as he was able to muster. Anger clashed with the frustration of knowing he dare not act on it. He pushed his hands into his pockets, where they clenched into useless fists.

Baron went back to Anoria and picked her up off the rock. He sat down and put her over his knee. Anoria immediately started kicking and crying and holding her hands behind her.

Estus ran toward them but, before he got there, Baron delivered three good smacks with his hand on the back of her bare legs.

Estus grabbed his hand and pulled, but Baron just pushed him away, knocking Estus onto the dirty ground. Baron picked up Anoria and held her on his left arm, where she hung limp, arms around his neck, and whined, "He made me come up here. It's not my fault."

Baron started down the hill, ignoring Estus. "Oh, knock off that crying. You're not fooling anyone with those big cow tears. You'll be all right."

Estus watched them move down the hill. Baron never looked back to make sure he was following. Estus sat down and rubbed the back of his legs. Then, without really expecting to, he called out, "You're not gonna be able to whip me forever!"

Baron's voice came through the trees, "Don't make me come back up there and get you."

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He sat for several minutes on the hill, waiting to see if Baron would actually bother to come back and get him. He didn't. Finally, Estus stood. Sunlight warmed his back and rimmed the edges of his mane of thick hair that sagged in front of his face, masking his withered, impotent emotion. His shirt hung crooked on his shoulders, all untucked and hanging down almost to his knees. His hands, rough and dirtied, hung patiently by his side.

He wanted to go back into the old ruin, just to spite his older brother, but there was really nothing new for him to see. What he really wanted to do was find another cavern that he could study and compare with this one. He picked his hands up and dropped them into his pockets, kicked a stone, and started home.

In those days, Kelebor was a small frontier town, filled in along a single road from the barge dock at the river to the church. They had a dozen small buildings along that road, such as the Muddy Shoe Pub, the general store, and the inn. Beyond that, closer to the church, were the guild buildings — the butcher, the smith barn, the tailors, cobblers, bakers, and carpenters. There were big warehouses and the lumber mill down by the river and a schoolhouse next to the church. School was taught by the Holy Sisters once a week after church. It wasn't much, but it gave the kids a chance to get together, read Scripture, and learn about the different trades.

Their father, Doral Arrenkyle, was a retired sergeant of the Teshon Legion. He was a brutish but honest man with a solid frame, short-cropped hair, and a generous jawline. He served as an elder in the church and had a trade job loading and unloading the barges when they came in. His family had always been tradesmen — unbranded, unskilled labor. He also worked a couple acres of land behind their house, growing corn, beans, and lettuce for the family with a little left over to sell to the general store.

The weekdays were painfully slow for Estus. He had very few chores around the house, unlike the farm kids. Sometimes he would convince his father to let him take one of the horses out to visit some of the other boys, but that didn't happen as often as he liked. It was fun when they were younger, but ever since Baron had started working with their father at the docks, Estus found he had a lot of extra time. He was still a year or so from being expected to start a trade, so he bounced around the town, visiting the many craftsmen and eagerly learning from all of them. He could work a loom, set wheel spokes, tan leather, gut a river pike, and work a lathe by the time he was eight.

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He loved the smell of fresh sawdust and how the men forced the rough, gnarled trees to take on pure, beautifully straight lines — lines that would form a beam, or floor, or part of a cabinet. He loved watching the waterwheel turn the spindle that ran along the ceiling. The men were happy to let Estus work with them, giving him the job of pulling the levers that slid huge leather straps on and off the large pulley wheels to run the saws and lathes. A couple of the guildsmen, particularly the Master Blacksmith and a Seamstress in the Tailor's Guild, frowned on the way he poked around in a little bit of everything. Most of the junior guildsmen were eager to share what they knew, hoping to win Estus into their profession.

It was the men at the lumber mill whom he asked first about his discovery, and he quickly learned not to mention it to anyone. He learned that there used to be a whole city up in the mountains, but most of it had been torn down and buried when God made elves to teach men how to live right. It seemed an awful tragedy to Estus that something so grand was lost forever because of a few bad men.

Estus spent that summer being alternately fascinated by the ruins and by Mirella Jaynes. The adventure of showing the ruins to Anoria soon faded into the cloudy dusk of the late summer night, and his mind drifted away from such things as statues, huge stones, and a bossy brother and onto Mirella and her wavy blond hair. He let Baron and Anoria get way ahead of him while he walked alone, enjoying the heavy scent of the river pines carried by the moist evening wind and the sense of peaceful giddiness that overcame him whenever Mirella was in his thoughts.

He couldn't stay mad for very long, thinking about her. Even though she was almost five years older, he liked to pretend that he would someday find the courage to ask her to be his sweetheart. How nice it would be to sit behind the curtain of a willow tree, alone with Mirella, talking and discovering the world. He imagined that she would let him rest his head in her lap while she ran her fingers slowly along his brow and ears. He kept his crush to himself, afraid of the kidding he would get from Baron, afraid of actually having to confront Mirella and lay his deepest soul in front of her. He much preferred to watch her secretly when she wasn't looking, catching glimpses while he pretended to look at something else.

It was dark when he finally let himself in the heavy front door of their modest home. The rest of the family was sitting around the table while the cooking fire wore itself down into a faint orange glow that danced through the logs. The door fell closed behind him with a

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stark smack, and he started walking toward the heavy scent of honey ham, buttered corn, biscuits, and potato hash. Usually there was a lot of talk, but this time everyone ate under a cloud of nervous silence.

When Estus moved to his seat next to his mom, she said, "Wash up."

His father sat back, wiped his mouth, and told him, "Just go on to bed, 'cause you won't be eating supper tonight."

Estus turned without saying anything, climbing the ladder to the loft where he and Anoria slept. There used to be three beds up there, but last summer their father had hired Jonathan Travers to build a room on the back for Baron.

He poured some water into the wash bowl, cleaned off the first layer of dirt, and changed into his nightshirt. He sat down on his bed with his back against the wall and his arms crossed, thinking that he would have been better off just staying outside.

It wasn't too long before they all finished supper, and his father climbed up the ladder, carrying an oil lantern. He gave Estus a biscuit and said, "You can have that after I'm done talking with you."

His father sat down on the end of the bed and stayed there, shifting his weight, moving as if trying to get comfortable. He was silent long enough that Estus began to grow nervous, wondering what it was going to be about. The light from the lantern painted a yellow shine on his father's long forehead and heavy brow.

"Now, I don't want to just yell at you. I don't want to hit you, 'cause I don't think you understand that. You know if one of my men had wandered off into a sacrilege like you did, I could give him twenty lashes without hesitation. A grown man knows what evil can come from that."

He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees, looking around the room but not at Estus.

"You know, son, I'm worried, you know, about what you're thinking. I don't want to make this sound bad, but you've been, well, a bit unusual, haven't you? Your sister thinks maybe you went in there and talked to a demon or troll. Now, I'm not saying that happened."

Estus leaned forward and said, "Dad! I just wanted to see."

"Well," Doral continued, "I want you to talk to Jorel about this. I want you to spend some time with him every day for a while. Do what he tells you."

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He stood up and walked over to the ladder, still not quite looking at Estus.

“Dad!” Estus started getting scared. “I didn’t see anything. Don’t think that.”

His father said, “If you ever go back in there, I will tie you to a tree and lash you as I would any other man. It doesn’t matter right now whether or not you understand why. You’ll understand better when you grow up.”

Estus spent most of his days that summer with Jorel Tol-Kopel. Jorel was only seven hundred years old, rather young for an elf. He had helped the original settlers of Kelebor cut down trees and clear the land more than fifteen generations ago. His youthful encouragement and easygoing dedication to the town had long ago worked its way into every brick, every tree, and every wagon rut.

Jorel’s sharp ears were small for an elf, hidden under a mop of long, sandy-colored hair that he kept cut straight across his forehead. Everyone had grown up having him as teacher, playmate, and friend. He never tired of teaching the young children how to play Alley Scratch or Mayor’s Hill or teaching the new wives how to bake pies filled with summer redberries. When Jorel spoke at congregation, his gentle voice grew to fill the church, and he transformed from a wiry, playful young man into an icon of deep, ancient wisdom — as if a part of the Earth itself had taken shape to share its wisdom of the power of the Circle of Light. Jorel was the Hand of God, cradling Kelebor and her children.

Estus learned to endure the mixed blessing of Jorel’s patient but persistent explanations of why God decided to erase the evils that Man had discovered and why the ruins were taboo. What was evil about building and carving and fashioning stone, Estus wanted to know.

“It is wrong to have too much pride,” Jorel explained. “When you look around and see the trees, the birds, the ebb and flow and elegance of Nature, you see the complexity of structure that is built by the Hand of God. Can man build a tree or a river? These things are of God. When men built those cities, they were in arrogant conflict with God’s beautiful world. Then they filled those cities with sin, with debauchery and all kinds of wanton ways. Because they could not understand the new light that burned within their spirits, they placed themselves above the natural order, and they worked in isolation from God. They grew away from Him and toward all manner of evils. When God made the First Elf, Benok, and sent him

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into those cities to teach Man how to live and build in harmony with the natural world, they tried to kill him and said that they were above nature, above God. And so God took them back into nature and put their cities under the dirt.”

“But why did God let men become evil? If He made the world, and made humans, why did He make them unable to see Him?”

“God is God, my little man. You are His hands, His eyes, and you are an imperfect instrument while He is all knowledge. To touch His will upon the earth, He must cut sometimes with dull knives.”

That sort of exchange went on for days. At first Estus felt a welcome sense of release to be able to ask the questions that he had kept to himself for so long, afraid to ask openly. But his enthusiasm soon slipped back into silent frustration. As they went around and around and Estus kept trying to ask deeper and more challenging questions, Jorel simply continued to repeat the same simple explanations over and over and over with the patience of a mountain until Estus exhausted all his questions and sapped all his resistance. It was tiresome and draining, and Estus finally felt he was beginning to understand.

It was much easier, he discovered, to sit quietly and accept the patient words of the elf and let them soothe and comfort him. It became increasingly difficult to think of all those tough questions, especially when it became known among the other children that Estus had to see Jorel so often. He felt as if there was something deeply wrong with him, as if having these sorts of questions made him some sort of freak to be feared or pitied. What evil, he began to wonder, had put these questions into his mind? Was it the same sort of evil that had ruined the men from the Dark Times? He began longing to be able to see God the way he felt he should.

Eventually, they didn’t even talk about sins or building or the evils of past men. Estus didn’t want to be evil anymore, and he had begun to enjoy the sense of deep calm and warmth of knowing he was a creature of Light, that he could touch God through a gentle hug from Jorel.

Jorel took turns reading the Holy Scriptures with Estus, encouraging him. After several weeks, Estus began fearing who he had been, despising the things he had thought and felt. He grew closer to God. He could feel the goodness and love of God coming through His servant, the gentle and eternal Jorel.

He especially liked visiting during the cooling autumn months. At the harvest festival that year, his pretty Mirella had given her

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vows to the church. She came to live in the Sanctum and study to be a Holy Sister. Estus and Jorel had already talked everything to death, but discussing the ways and wonders of God seemed interesting again when Mirella was sitting at the table. He could watch her as she talked with Jorel. He could study the delicate angle of her chin, the way that her hair outlined her smile. When she and Jorel talked of the finer points of the Laws, she would focus on Jorel, and Estus could watch her for minutes at a time. Sometimes she would move in such a way that the collar of her dress would reveal her full neck and a bit of shoulder. When she spoke to Jorel, he could watch the dance of her lips or marvel at the sweet clarity of her delicate green eyes.

Even better, she was no longer just quarry for his gaze. She was sweet and kind and made Estus feel stronger and better than he ever could by himself. With his newly invigorated religion, he felt a special affinity with her, a bond that seemed to connect them with unspoken understanding.

Mirella told him one day, "I'm glad you come by so often, Estus. It's been kind of hard being away from my family."

"My dad makes me come here because, well, you know, like I told you. But I just feel comfortable here now."

She smiled, and when she smiled, the room grew warmer, the sun glowed brighter, and Estus felt it all the way through to the bottom of his spine. "I know you're going to grow up to be a Finger of God, Estus. I can feel it."

One cold, early winter afternoon, after the first snow had come and gone, replaced by a fierce and biting valley wind, Estus went into the church. He sat for a long while, but Jorel and Mirella never came up from her lessons downstairs. On any other day he would have just gone back out to play, knowing that Jorel might be busy with some other business. But it was too cold.

Estus went down to the basement.

He approached the door to the Sanctum. Of course, only elves, guildsmen, and the Holy Sisters were allowed back there without special invitation, so he didn't open the door. He heard voices laughing. Then he heard Mirella's light, happy voice, muffled from a distance.

"Jorel!" he called out. He knocked on the door.

Again, he waited for what seemed a very long time, sitting on the stairs, watching the door, waiting for it to open. It didn't.

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He wanted to go join Mirella and the elf. He felt left out after all the time the three of them had spent together. He listened at the door again, but it was quiet. Mirella had told him of some of the training that went on in the Sanctum. It was very much like a guildsman learning the secrets of his craft, so, of course, there were some things she could not divulge. Holy Sisters were counselors to families and healers of broken hearts, and they helped carry the Light of God. There were two other Holy Sisters in Kelebor. They visited the farms of those who couldn't come to town every week. They could deliver babies, set a broken leg, and nurse the sick until a wizard could be called. Holy Sisters were just as ready to walk into the middle of a fight or wipe the tears of a small child. Mirella was like that.

Estus got up again and went to the door, where he found that the latch was not locked. The door opened just like any normal door. He expected to see some kind of supernatural glow, the type of holy glimmer that he imagined would come from the Circle of Light, but all he saw was a hallway just like any other hallway.

The sanctum was a place of God. With his recent spiritual awakening, Estus felt comfortable and wanted here. He was, after all, a child of God now. His father had even come back here once to help prepare for special ceremonies at church. This was where he could reach deeper into his connection with the Almighty. He opened the door and stepped in. He was at home, finally, in the house of the Lord.

Mirella's voice urged him on. There was a curtain. He paused for a moment, wondering if Jorel might scold him. But spurred on by his new bond with all things holy, he knew that they would welcome him here. He felt a change in himself as he walked, a clarity and bliss from being in God's house.

He pushed the curtain aside and saw Mirella and Jorel naked on a large velvet sofa. Her pretty hair was in a disheveled plume, obscuring her eyes and falling over her bare shoulders and young breasts. Jorel lay on top of her and rocked back and forth. It sounded as if he were hurting her, but she pulled him close and put her delicate, ruby lips on his panting mouth.

Estus stood still, frozen by the awful image of Jorel touching his sweet Mirella, having her.

With a shaking hand, he carefully released the curtain to fall back into place. He backed up slowly all the way to the sanctum's outer door. After letting himself out as quietly as possible, he ran up the stairs, out of the church, and into the Teshon Forest as the full

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impact of what he had seen became clear to him. For the first time in four months, he ran back up the hill to the forbidden sacrilege. Without hesitation or ceremony, he scrambled through the little hole and crawled down the stairs into the dark belly of the ruins, into the pitch blackness of the ancient cavern where he fell to his knees and shook as he cried bitterly.

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Petran Vendak, Governor of Boret and commander of the Teshon Legion forces, sat stiffly, hands on his legs, ankles crossed under his chair like a schoolboy. Only two of the twenty men on the transport ship had survived the rebel attack. The boat was found adrift in the river with the safe missing. Instead of resting after this long, trying and troubling day, he was the guest of Andor Tol-Tolin in the Sanctum of the Sacred Cathedral of Boret. The formalism and divinity of the sanctum made him feel as uncomfortable as he was tired, but Victor Tol-Tolin, Andor's brother, sat with them, easing somewhat the sense of unclean failure that surrounded him like a stinking fog.

The room was very small and sparse, and the walls were covered with a fine elven moss filled with tiny blue flowers. The light came from a glowing fabric that was draped across thin bars that ran along the ceiling. It was miraculous and unfamiliar. Andor's demeanor added to the strangeness. Andor seemed upset, almost impatient, a remarkable and somewhat frightening thing to see in an elf.

"Petran," he said, "this is not a time for timidity. This is not a time for reckless tolerance."

"Of course not. I've got two hundred men riding along the river looking for any trace of the thieves, and I've established a curfew in Gelst. We'll get it back, I assure you."

"Well, yes, I'm sure that you will. You are doing very well, Petran. We just wanted to impress upon you the depth of the importance of this situation. There are many in Gelst who are not happy to see the guilds regain control of the bay. This has placed a strain on the two lands. An event like this could cause a terrible rift. You must be careful."

"I see no reason to worry," Petran answered. "I don't believe the rebel faction speaks for all of Gaelon. We've only had trouble from Gelst. As for the rest, well, Gaelon and Teshon are different, yes, culturally and ethnically, yet we are all brothers in God."

"How true," Andor said, sitting back and slouching lazily to one side. "But Petran, this isn't about the core bond that you share as

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brothers in the Circle of Light. This is not about who is more right with God. Besides, you know that not all men are as strong in the Light as God would like, and when these men steal from their brothers, set fires, and kill, they cannot be ignored or brought into your arms and simply forgiven."

"The rogues, yes, the criminals, certainly. We will find them and administer justice, but the people of Gaelon are good, are they not?"

Victor said, "My friend, Gelst is the mouth that feeds the stomach of Boret. You simply cannot maintain an indifference to that fact when Boret and so much of Teshon are utterly dependent on that port."

Andor added, "Can you be sure that the people of Gaelon, guided only by their rogue pride, will continue to feed the growth of Teshon? Could Gelst have continued to thrive on bribes, smuggling, prostitution, drunkenness, and small, amateur bargemen who steal cargo, incite insurrection, or worse, to entrench themselves in ethnic rivalries?"

"No, of course not," Petran answered. "I hope those days are forever behind us."

Andor leaned forward, fixed his gaze on Petran's right eye and kept it there as he said, "Teshon is the shining gem of humanity. Boret presides over the greatest accomplishments ever made by man. So much of the world is still savage and dark. We are nurturing here the very vision which God brought through Benok. Boret is alive in God, my child, and you must now do God's work to protect her."

Andor kept Petran in his gaze until the governor closed his eyes and moved his fist in a circle around his heart.

Victor added, "You must lead them back to God, my friend, and though their road may be rocky, whether they know it or not, they depend on you. Where will they be if Teshon becomes weak?"

The three of them sat together in silence for several moments during which Petran began to feel the calming presence of God touch his will. He prayed, and called out for guidance, as he had been taught since childhood. His discomfort melted into calm. He became aware of the importance of his position, and with that came the strength to face it.

Into the silence, Victor Tol-Tolin said, "Remember the book of the doubting soldier, and the parable of the march."

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Petran smiled and recited, "...thus we move always toward God in step with our brothers, that we may uphold his law and allow his work to be brought forth in peace upon the world."

"Would you like us to pray with you?"

"Please."

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The carriage rattled as Ferris drove the horses through the rain over the rutted dirt trail that led to the Arrenkyle house. When they were near, Estus jumped out without waiting for the carriage to stop. His feet plunged into thick mud. His eyes were focused on the door.

It flew open with the explosion of his entry, and he stood silent as his eyes swept the room. Behind him the storm drenched the landscape under brilliant flashes of lightning that painted Estus with a luminous halo.

Elia, his six year old niece, sat on the sofa by the hearth holding a pillow. Her older brother, Devin, spoke from the bedroom. "She's in here."

Estus pushed him aside and saw Carmen lying on the bed. A wet rag covered one side of her face. When she saw him come in, what little calm she had maintained for the sake of her nephew crumbled. In two quick steps he was at the bed. He sat and lifted her into his embrace while her fear and pain wailed in her strained voice.

First she said, "Love, I'm scared."

He held her. His mind was blind with the pain of unfocused panic.

Softly she confessed, with a pleading, frightened cry, "I'm hurt bad."

Jorel and Anoria came in. His sister said, "I sent for Parker."

Estus turned Carmen to the light of Jorel's candle. One side of her face was blackened with a terrible bruise that puffed her pretty cheek into a twisted lump.

"How?"

"It started to rain," Anoria explained. "I went out to get the wash in from the line. We were running around kind of in a hurry, laughing and singing that silly song about the wind and the whiskers. She came up and took a basket and was carrying that..."

Jorel moved in to the side of the bed and bent over Carmen.

Estus helped her lie back down.

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"...so she didn't get her hands out. Her fleet slipped, and she cracked her head on the stairs." Her voice began to wobble. "And I saw her tumbling and rolling down."

Jorel beckoned to her and gave the candle to Anoria. He moved his fingers firmly around Carmen's bruised skull, bringing a sharp cry when he pressed an area behind her temple.

"Estus," Jorel said sharply. "Come help me lift her shoulders."

He moved a couple pillows under her back and then crumpled a quilt under her head. Jorel came back around to the side of the bed, looked into Carmen's good eye and then pried open the puffy one. She panted and squirmed back in the bed while her hands clutched the bed cover.

"Could you see me in that eye?"

"Yes. Fuzzy."

"Come in everyone," Jorel directed. "Come on. Around the bed. Hold hands."

They all came in and formed a half circle around the bed. Estus took the hand of his little niece, Elia. The circle continued to Devin, Anoria, and Jorel.

They all bowed their heads. Estus didn't. He kept his eyes on his wife. Jorel started talking, watching the others. He caught Estus's eye as he began the prayer.

"The Light glows within us. We carry the flame of God and ask that He comfort our fears and grant us strength so that we may face the challenges He brings to us. We pray that He carry His will through us and grant comfort and healing to Carmen. Dear Lord of Light, prepare Your Holy Power so that it may be drawn forth into this world through the healing hands of our holy wizard Parker Shaw. Lord, burn Your will into our souls and seal out the unholy."

Carmen and everyone, except Estus, gave the reply, "Lord bring me into Your Holy Fire."

Estus just kept watching Jorel with curiosity. Would the light of the Holy Fire shine onto or from within Jorel? At a time like this, surely the finger of God would be strong enough to have some physical manifestation, some nascent gathering of power. But all he saw was Jorel, looking sweaty and concerned in the dim, dancing candlelight.

Finally Jorel lowered his head and began speaking a strange, lyrical language. He spoke the words with a steady, slow rhythm while his face went blank with concentration. This was neither the common tongue nor the holy elven language.

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They were magic words.

A special, deeper hush fell upon the room as the elf called forth the power of God. Estus watched his family sink into a well of reverent fear while he found himself watching and observing every nuance of the moment, hoping to see some connection between this mindless tragedy and the lessons forced on him in those small stuffy rooms at seminary.

Elves have magic, of course, because they are God's Holy angels, but their power is weak for they are bound within the profane world, apart from God. Special humans are called by God to channel His power directly, and they become his hands, and through them God touches the world. Through them God transforms the very fabric of the world, molding it as a potter molds clay.

Long ago, after God sent humans out of their evil cities, they wandered the land lost and confused. Into this world God sent Benok, His archangel, the first elf. For a thousand years Benok walked among them, lived with them, taught them right from wrong. He showed them how to turn the fleece of sheep into thread and to weave the thread into cloth. He taught them how to sing, to gather fish in nets, and to form the trees of the forest into their homes. He revealed to them all of God's trades and showed them how His divine wisdom weaves the parts together into a whole. Finally, when their minds were disciplined and they were living within God's plan, he revealed to them the Circle of Light, which is the Light of God, and which lights the soul of man.

To finish his work, God sent angels to protect and guide the humans, to bring them closer to Him that they might know the joy of sacred wisdom, the blessing of God's knowledge. The humans learned from the elves, and the humans became good, and wise. God opened their minds and they understood the extent of his holy creation. And this pleased God, for now they could see him and know that He was God. And so He granted to them a gift, his hand upon their world, guided through the minds of these most holy humans.

Wizards feel the very breath of God within the sinews of their soul.

When Jorel finished his incantation Estus could see Carmen's body ease into a deep relaxation. Her breaths became even and unstrained.

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"It dulls the pain," Jorel explained to Estus. "It will keep her still and comfortable until Shaw can begin repairing the damage. It's the best I can do for her now. What can I do for you, Estus?"

"Just leave us alone."

An hour later, Carmen remained silent and still in the middle of their bed, a soft halo in the hollow gray of the night, lit by the dim flicker of a single candle. His sopping boots and formal guild robe were sprawled in a careless tangle amid a heavy puddle that ran in a stream across the floor. Estus sat on a stiff wooden chair next to the bed, watching Carmen and holding his fingers interlocked in a tight grip to help him bear his impotent vigil. She was lying as still as possible, but she was restless, moving her hands to and then and away from her face and across her large belly.

Her face, always so sweet and round and filled with rosy, coquettish joy, was now pulled into a tight visage of poorly hidden fear and beckoning despair. Estus reached out and took her fidgety hand in his and held it, caressed it, warming it with his heavy touch.

Anoria came in carrying a freshly rinsed cool rag and placed it over Carmen's eyes, carefully avoiding the mass of blood matted hair that stained the side of her head.

"There, lie still now. It won't be long. Estus, don't you want to come wait with us in the front room? She should really get her rest."

"No. I'm fine here."

Anoria went around to the other side of the bed, picked up the crumpled blanket and pulled it up over Carmen's legs. She went over to the window and pulled the heavy curtains apart, replacing the stifling tense air of the room with a warm, freshly scrubbed summer breeze. The rain was now little more than a wandering drizzle, but a low chorus of thunder still rolled through the night sky.

She paused for a moment at her brother's side, rubbed his tired shoulders, and said, "Do you want me to bring you some redberry juice in a little bit to help you stay awake?"

"No. I won't need that."

On her way out, she picked up the sopping guild robe and closed the door behind her.

Carmen lifted the rag from her eyes and moved it along her neck and shoulders. This revealed again the purple bruise that painted the swollen orbit of her eye and the puffiness of her cheek and temple. Estus sat down on the bed next to her. He pushed her shirt up and pulled loose the tie of her trousers. He reached over her and picked

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up the cool rag and ran it gently across her tummy and down across her sides, calming her. He dropped the rag and placed his large hand on her side, feeling the form of their child inside her.

He looked at her.

They shared a terrible, intimate look that pulled them together in a casting off of pretense and tears. She put her hand over his and moved it away.

A wave of swirling despair slammed a lump into his throat. His face became flush and his eyes moist as he brought her hand up softly to his lips.

She cupped his cheek and managed to say with a weak, breaking voice, "I don't know."

Estus closed his eyes, pushing out a reluctant tear into his wife's gentle hand.

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Gareth pushed open the heavy door of the Broken Wing pub and immediately noticed that the three sailors from the *Constellation* had taken his advice. They sat at the large table in the middle of the room and busied themselves with drinking, laughing, being loud and rude, and trying to impress the three local women who were flirting for their drinks but still had not been coaxed onto their laps. It reminded him of younger days catting around on leave.

He moved to a small table in a quiet corner and caught the eye of Merna Challuk, who then moved over to join him. Merna owned the pub and was the matron of one the largest barge families on the Gelst-to-Boret run. She was tall and naturally heavy with a joyful girth and a cascade of silver gray hair that was always teased up into a tall crown that framed her chubby, wrinkled smile.

Lennel and Merna had quite a history together. The *Autarkic Maiden* had been working with Challuk barges since almost the beginning. Their love affairs had always been almost as much a matter of business as the management of their cargo. She was generous and convenient for him, and he was safer than anyone from town to give her a distraction from her drunken husband. She had taken over the business from her father, become widowed, and passed the day to day management of the business on to her son, Bodie Challuk.

Gareth hadn't seen her for several months now that most of his runs took him up to Merebor, but he and Merna had always been able to pick up where they left off as if no time had passed.

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She leaned down and gave him a big hug, then took his hand as she sat next to him. "I knew you'd be along soon. So who are those blokes you sent in here?"

"They're from one of those Koro-Del traders. I had to slug that tall one over there. I kind of felt sorry for them, and I knew you would take good care of them. They're not bad kids, really."

"We're working more and more with those big traders. One thing I can say, they're bully damn efficient. They sure have some fancy grand ships, I'll say. But they don't seem to have the salt of the deep in them, if you know what I mean."

"I do, Merna. It's a bit troubling. What do you know about them? I bullied my way onto their ship to talk with their captain. Donovan's his name. He didn't let much out, but he said this renovation is going to go hard on the independents."

"Who?"

Lennel pulled her hand closer and said, "What's troubling you, Merna?"

She drew her sad, heavy eyes to him. "It's started. He's away."

"Am I too late?"

"No. It was a unique opportunity. He had to go. But we need your cargo as soon as we can get it, and then you should disappear quick. These are grave times."

"Not too fast, I hope." Their eyes met. The relief on her face was all the answer he needed.

"What do you know about Dylan Del-Trevia?" he asked.

"Not much. Did you know he's a dark elf? The boys from the big ship don't talk about him much."

"Why don't they stop him?" Gareth asked, meaning why didn't the holy elves prevent him from interfering with a human company.

Merna leaned in and said with a lowered voice, "Some of the talk is that they're not just without the Light, but that they're led by the old forces of evil that ruled men in the Dark Times."

"Do you believe that?"

"God would not let us fall backward, Len. Our elf says that God is God, and we can't understand all He does. I don't think it's actually evil or anything like that. So you have it, then?"

Gareth looked across the table and said, "Everything you asked for in your letter, from arrows to black powder. I'm a little worried about how it's going to get through with all the new Teshon guards. Part of getting their damn docking pass is going through an

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inspection. So far I've been playing the part of the indignant independent trader."

"What do you mean playing the part?" Merna asked jokingly.

"Well, I've been covering for the fact that I don't want the inspectors on board. Listen, the *Constellation* is going to move out early. We'll have two, maybe three hours before dawn. I need you to find everyone with so much as a buggy so we can move everything off the ship and inland by dawn. I'll see that the right crates get to you."

"They won't let you unload there, Len."

"Well, I haven't had my turn cussing at them yet. We're going to unload and get out. The docking pass is supposed to replace the contract between a ship and the warehouse, but we're not going to use the warehouse. We're going to unload right onto the wagons and clear the stuff out. And we'll be doing it on what's left of the *Constellation's* time."

"They'll get you on trespass at least."

"They may. I may not be able to get away with it twice, but it's the only thing I can think of tonight. Hell, I don't even mind paying a fine or two as long as we can get the important cargo into the right hands. I doubt they'll have enough guards on hand to stop a dozen crews all loading and driving out at the same time."

Merna's face grew quite and still. "You be careful, Lennel Gareth."

"If we can get it all done before dawn, we've got a good chance. It's risky, and I'd rather just dump the stuff than put your family in danger."

There was sad acceptance in her voice when she answered, "It's past time for that kind of talk. Let me go round up some folks. They'll be more than happy to help out, especially if it means frustrating the Teshon lesions. And I'll bring payment for this shipment."

"Thank you, Merna."

She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Ever since these fellows crawled in here and threw your name around I've been having a lot of nice memories."

Gareth reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. He could still see the same sad loneliness in her pretty green eyes. He moved his hand to her cheek, but the moment was interrupted by a bit of commotion back at the other table. Gareth sat back and turned in his chair just in time to see one of the girls stand up, knocking her chair

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back. She threw her drink into Gavin's face and then swung her hand in a wide arc that landed with a loud slap across his face.

Gareth turned back to Merna with a grin and said, "You know, I think I'm starting to like him."

Merna pulled him back and kissed his grizzled old face.

---

Bodie woke with a sudden jolt that brought him upright.

He was lying on a bed of straw. It was night, but a low burning oil lamp, hanging from a post, revealed the rough shape of the barn where he and his men slept.

"Where am I?" he asked, before he was awake enough to remember on his own.

He was not the only one awake. Nearby, sitting on the treasure box sat a young girl, staring right at him. She was ten, maybe eleven. Shoulder length dark hair framed an impassive, emotionless face. Bodie sat up and pushed himself against the wall, wincing as the muscles in his shoulder screamed their despair.

"Don't move your arm. It's hurt bad." Then she added, with no change in tone, "My pa's dead. Isn't he?"

"What's his name."

"Dennis. Blackwing's our last name. My name's Adrian. But folks just call me Addy."

She looked at him with no hint of hope in her deep, dark little eyes.

"I'm sorry, Addy. He's in the light now."

"Yeah. He figured that'd happen."

"Look, I'm sorry about that, kid."

"You don't need to be sorry. He told me he was going away." She lowered her eyes to her hands where she held onto some small object. "And he was always sad since mama went into the light. They're together now. Pa said I was to go live in the south with my grandma. He told me that you would see to me getting down to the south if you could do it."

"I can do that, if that's what your father wanted. I'll see that you get there."

He looked around and watched his men. Some were sitting up, unable to sleep. He remembered carrying the casualties off the boat. He remembered setting it adrift. He was suddenly concerned about his fallen friends. They should be buried, even if they couldn't have a proper funeral in the light.

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"It's okay," Addy said. "They're going to burn them all tomorrow."

"What?"

"But my pa isn't with them. He's still in the river."

"Addy."

She looked at him.

"How did you know what I was thinking?"

She wrinkled her nose and said, "I'm sorry. I'm not supposed to do that."

She played with the thing in her hand, rolling it between her fingers. It caught the light and sparkled for a quick moment, a flash of bright gold.

He jerked forward. "What is that?"

"Oh." She held it out for him to take. It was a gold Teshon coin. "I wasn't gonna take it. I just wanted to look at it."

"Where did you get it?"

"In here," she said, tapping the chest that she was sitting on. "There's lot of 'em in here. I wasn't gonna take it. I was just lookin' at it."

He took the coin from her and said, "That chest was locked."

She shrugged and looked away from him. "I guess I should be getting inside. Just don't leave me here when you go."

Addy stood up, but Bodie reached out and took hold of her hand.

"Addy."

"Let go. I'm going in to bed. I'm tired."

"Addy. Look at me."

She didn't, but she also stopped trying to get away. Bodie couldn't quite name the look of desperation that took over her face, but it was a horrible thing to see on someone so young.

He reached out and took her other hand, holding them together in front of him, not sure if he should try to comfort her or keep her from running away.

She looked at him, and suddenly her eyes were penetrating.

Her whisper was barely audible. "My pa trusted you."

Bodie nodded.

"You can't tell anybody."

She knelt in front of him and sat that way with her head bowed and her eyes downcast.

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Bodie moved one hand up to her shoulder and pulled her closer to him so they were sitting side by side with their backs against the wall and his good arm around her shoulder.

"What is it, Addy?" But he already knew. "I won't tell anybody. As your father served me with his life. I'll serve you with mine. I swear it, Adrian."

It took her a while to bring the words out. "I can see things there. In the other world, where the wizards draw."

"Did you unlock this? In the other world?"

She nodded. "It was kind of hard. It was all tangled up."

"Can you lock it back up like that? But not so tangled?"

"If you want me to."

"If you don't," he explained, "We'll have to tell people that you opened it. And I don't think you want that. But I think you wanted me to know, didn't you."

"I did, sort of. I think pa did, too."

"Does anyone else know that you can see there?"

She shook her head. "No. Not that I know about."

"Thank you, Adrian, for trusting me." He took her hand and opened it. Then he put the coin into her hand and closed her fingers over it. "This is yours. You keep it. It's our secret."

"I don't want the elves to take me away."

"I know, Addy. I know you don't. I won't tell. I'll take care of you and see that you get down to your grandma."

She turned, hugged her arms tight around his neck, then stood up and ran out of the barn.

---

Gavin led the others back along the moonlit dirt trail that followed the Mundela River back to the bay. The air held the crisp tang of ozone from a storm somewhere up the valley. Gavin looked up again at the rumble of light dancing in the distant sky. Pretty sky. Not as pretty as what you get on the ocean, but nice. The feel of the air, the painted night clouds, and the soft crunch of land under his boots lulled Gavin into a sweet, ale-headed melancholy that reminded him of nights like this back in Korolem.

Then he heard Davis calling from behind, "Hey Gavin hold up. Cody's gonna puke."

He turned and saw the young kid squatting with his hands on the dirt. Davis was kneeling next to him with his hand on Cody's

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back. Gavin waited a moment, then shook his head and walked back with a few unsteady steps.

The kid was making awful moaning sounds and whimpering.

Gavin called out, "Come on, buddy, out with it."

"It's all right. Relax," Davis told him. "Are you gonna be all right?"

"I don't know, ow. Oh, mama. My, oh, ow."

"God damn it, boy you sound like a cat in heat. You're a sailor now. If you gotta do it, do it like a man."

Then, without any other warning, Gavin reached down, grabbed Cody by the collar and jammed his other hand into his gut. The kid gagged and then let loose with whatever was left from his six glasses of wine.

"There you go. Now you'll feel better. Shake it off before we get back to the ship."

They helped Cody along for another fifteen minutes, and soon they were on the boardwalk headed back to their dock.

It was Davis who first noticed that something wasn't right.

"Oh, fuck me!"

The others looked up. Gavin said, "Fuck me naked!"

Cody looked up, groaned and started crying.

Instead of the *Constellation*, there was some tiny half-pint brig on the port unloading barrels into a caravan of wagons.

Then Cody added, "Oops."

Gavin and Davis looked at each other over Cody's limp head and dropped him. Davis turned him over and grabbed his shirt. "What does that mean?"

"Before we left, the Ensign told me the captain ordered half leave. After that crazy salt hog came by, I forgot to mention it. Then we went to that other Broken Wing place."

"Well, nice going, kid," Gavin said. Then he added, "Let him get an eyeful of some pretty peasant poon, and his whole brain just fucking shuts down."

"Come on, Gavin. There's nothing we can do about it now."

"Sure there is. We can beat the shit out of him."

The kid fell over to his side and started crying. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Davis pulled him up and said, "Yeah, and you're also drunk."

Gavin took his other arm. "Oh, knock it off. I'm not gonna hit you. There. Stand tall. So you fucked up. We don't get paid this trip

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that's all. And maybe get blacklisted from Koro-Del for a while. Or for good. Come on."

They continued walking past the wagons and carts. When they neared the stern they heard a familiar voice calling out through a rough rumble of a laugh, "Well, look what washed up here. What are you guys still doing here?"

The three sailors turned, scowled at him, and kept walking. At that moment someone came running up past them. "Captain Gareth, there are some Legionnaires here who want to talk to you."

"I'll be there in a moment." He moved out in front of the Koro-Del sailors and said, "Hey. No hard feelings. How'd you like the Broken Wing?"

They shrugged. Gavin said, "Sure. Fine. Whatever."

The captain sized them up and said. "Hmm. I hope it was better than that considering you lost your billet over it. Okay. Look fellas, I don't know if you have already figured out what you're going to do here in this armpit of a city, but I do have extra bunks. You're welcome to go talk to my number one. If you can convince him that you're not total fuck-ups I'll let him start you off at the recruit rate."

He reached in and patted Gavin on the shoulder before turning and greeting the Legion officer with a hearty, "What the hell do you want? I'm busy here."

The officer said, "Captain, I'm Colonel Arrenkyle of the Teshon Legion. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I need to see your unloading permit and inspection seal."

The captain and Legion officer went off in the other direction. Davis looked at the other two. Gavin said, "I'm tired. If they let us grab a bunk, I'll be happy."

Cody nodded and then said, "It beats staying here. We'll be at sea."

The captain was yelling something about warehouses and wagons. Davis said, "God help us." They walked up the gangplank toward the tiny brig deck. Then he added, "Let me do the talking."

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There was an orange powder that seemed almost to glow. Estus couldn't determine whether it was reflective or was actually giving off light. He picked up the small glass vial and cupped it in his hands against his face. It didn't seem to be emitting light, but when he opened his hands it began to shine in the flickering yellow glow from the lanterns. It was one of several puzzling liquids and substances that Parker Shaw had laid out on top of the dresser.

Estus turned again and watched the old magician work. He seemed so old in his tattered and faded guild robe. Still, it was newer than his dingy fifteen-year-old blue sash that Jorel had awarded him when Kelebor had grown large enough to always need magic nearby. Shaw never seemed interested enough in his craft to earn his red or black sash, nor in having the advanced knowledge that they represented. How strange, Estus had always thought, to be so close to understanding the deep nature of that power and to be content with mending bones, finding lost children, and presiding over marriages and summer festivals.

Now Kelebor would be looking to Estus to help out with some of those ceremonial tasks. The other guildsmen would all do their best to support and encourage Estus to be a spiritual leader as well as craftsmen now that he was a Brother of Fire. Those who knew him well seemed particularly relieved when he had finally made the decision to enter the guild. His attempts to learn the more advanced details of his craft without becoming a student of Benok cost him several serious lectures from Jorel and criticism from the other guildsmen. Travers convinced Estus to go ahead and learn from God all the things he wanted to know, because men would not teach him. So a year ago Estus started going to seminary at the Sanctum where he learned how to lead prayers, sanction marriages, perform blessings, and, most importantly, to meditate and prepare his mind to accept God's wisdom.

It was like being ten again when he had to spend the summer with Jorel after wandering into the sacrilege ruins. Through that year Estus again began to find himself falling comfortably into the role that was being laid out for him so meticulously. When Carmen

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became pregnant he began praying with a devotion that surprised even himself, trying to purge the devil of doubt that still followed him from his rebellious youth. However, as he got closer to his baptism the doubt grew like sour bile in his belly that bore through his prayers, mocking his pretense of piety. In his prayers he begged God to put straight his heart.

Shaw continued his chants and strange gestures while he worked over Carmen. He stood on the far side of the bed, his back to the pine-paneled walls. In his right hand he held a large root of some kind, long and thin. His left hand traced patterns in the air that seemed to punctuate the staccato, precise words that he spoke, words that seemed similar to the words Jorel had spoken earlier that night. Estus stood by the dresser and watched as Shaw pushed the root between his hands, spoke a final word, and made it dissipate as if it were suddenly made of smoke. He held this smoky bubble between his hands and directed it down onto Carmen's face. The discoloration around her eye socket grew faint and the swelling went suddenly down.

"Estus," he said. "Behind you there is a velvet pouch with small white stones in it. Bring it to me."

Estus turned around and looked across the various bags and flasks that were in the pockets of the canvas carryall that Shaw had unrolled. He found the bag and took it over to the bed while Shaw began untying Carmen's pant belt.

He pulled Carmen's maternity pants away from her abdomen and then took two thumb-sized white stones from the velvet bag and held them in his slender, knobby fingers while he prodded Carmen's belly to find the position of the baby. When he began speaking, the stones changed from being like marble to being like clay. He kneaded them together and continued to chant until they became like a soft pudding which he then rubbed in a little circle forming a fist sized cap below her navel. When he stopped chanting the substance became rock hard once again.

He pulled his long white hair away from his angled, sun-wrinkled face and took a small wand from his robes. He placed his bony cheeks on Carmen's legs so he could examine the stone cap closely. This time when he started chanting, the small staff began ringing quietly at a very high, rising pitch that soon was inaudible. He set the wand at different points on Carmen's abdomen, and Estus could see shadowy swirling shapes forming on the stone.

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Without interrupting his chants, he beckoned to Estus to bring over the light. Estus carried the candle over to the bed and let its light fall on the magic stone. Shaw's chants changed to another series of precise, staccato words as he moved the wand to touch the view stone.

Shaw peered carefully into the strange shifting shapes while his chanting waned to a heavy whisper. Then he stopped, and the stone became white again. He kneaded it back into a little stone.

He raised his head, put the stone into his bag, and said, "I'm sorry, Estus. The baby has been in the light for several hours. I'll have to come back in a few days to deliver her. Carmen's still far too weak."

"It was going to be a girl?"

"Yes. A girl."

"How is Carmen?"

Shaw stood up and put his hand on Estus's shoulder to lead him away from the bed. He stood next to the window and Estus could see fatigue and concern across the pale, thin skin around the magician's deep set eyes.

"When Carmen fell, she began bleeding inside her skull and she suffered a fracture above her ear. I was able to mend the bone and thin the blood from the area, but there may already have been some brain damage because of the clotting inside the skull."

"I don't understand."

"Estus, I can repair the sinews and mend the bone, but I cannot undo the harm that is deeper, not now. I am not young, and I am quite tired, and a channel of that depth would be very difficult for me to sustain. Even if I could, Estus, it might do her more harm than good now. I'll cast her into a deep sleep to let the healing take its course."

He began to turn away, but Estus took a firm hold of his shoulders and pulled him around.

"Open the door, Parker. Open that door to the finger of God and beckon him in. If you can see God then find him and bring him in here to finish whatever healing she can stand."

Shaw's eyes betrayed a deep sympathy and quiet fatalism. He looked at that moment to be wearing every one of his seventy two years. "Estus, my son," he began. He met Estus's gaze but then closed his eyes and said, "I shall try, but you must open yourself to God, my friend. You too are now a door to His glory and spirit. Help me to bring Him to your wife."

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He took Estus by the elbow and led him to the foot of the bed where he directed Estus to kneel. "Pray, young man, as you have never prayed before, for I shall need the strength that you shall carry from God."

Shaw returned to his materials and began working quickly and methodically. Estus bowed his head, closed his eyes, and formed prayer words in his mind. God, if you are God, place this curse upon my head and free your innocent child who lies before me. Holy is the light that dawns in our soul to raise us into your Divine Covenant. Are you there, God? Why don't you answer? Am I supposed to hear you in my mind or feel you in my heart? Blessed is the Circle of Light that binds our hearts as one in your service. Do you wait for me, God? Show yourself so that I know I'm not just hearing my own mind. Make me believe that you are there, because I cannot do so on my own. If you are there, and would ever show yourself to my heart, I beg you now. Come into me.

The old man began speaking, quickly and fiercely. Estus waited for some sensation to tell him that God was indeed something other than an empty hope. He felt no different. Not warmer, not colder, no more or less tired. He still knew only what he had always known. No new understanding or knowledge made itself known to him. He raised his head and watched. The magician covered Carmen's head with a rough cloth and held his hands over her eyes. The cloth suddenly snapped tight across her face, molding it to her form. His eyes were closed, and his breaths were shaky, straining his words.

While he spoke, Shaw opened a tin of white powder which he put over his hands. He moved his hands along Carmen's brow and cheek. He was no longer looking down but up. He rocked with the rhythm of his chant while his fingers went through the cloth, into her head. He pulled them out, covered with brown clotted blood. The cloth grew stained as the bad blood inside her was drawn out. Shaw continued his chant though his voice was hoarse and weak. He seemed to be in pain, but still his words never wavered. His head was thrown back. His neck shook with a racing pulse.

Suddenly it all stopped, and the room filled with an eerie silence as Shaw exhaled and let himself rest on the bed.

Estus rose and went to him. He pulled the cloth away from Carmen's face and then helped Shaw to the wooden chair that was by the window. Estus returned to the bed. Carmen's face was now free of bruise or blemish, and the cloth was covered with blood and

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fluid that had been drawn from inside her. Estus took it to the window and threw it out.

"I must rest now, Estus, and so must your wife. It is still very dangerous. I carried it as well as I was able, but it flowed so quickly. God's hand can be so heavy." He rose his exhausted form, approached the dresser, and started gathering his supplies. "May I sleep here, Estus? I am faint."

"Will she be all right?"

"I don't know, Estus. I can't know that."

---

Captain Lennel Gareth, a black silhouette against the shadow of night, watched from the bow of his brigantine as the last of the barrels were rolled and stacked on the dock. The wind tugged impatiently at his jacket and hummed in his ears. The three young men from the *Constellation* were working hard to put down suggestions that they were somehow soft-handed from working with cranes instead of their own arms and backs.

"Fletcher."

"Aye?"

"Watch the crew and keep them honest. I don't want any fights on this ship. Don't let anything get out of hand."

"Of course not, sir."

"How much longer?"

"Ten minutes."

"Hoist the jibs and gaff sail. Position men on the topsail yards."

The captain turned and looked out at the bay. Three twenty-oar Legion boats had appeared in the past half hour across the edge of the bay. They were little more than dark shapes against the stars, but their shape was unmistakable to Gareth's keen eyes.

The Legion Colonel turned out to be a reasonable fellow. He merely demanded seven percent of the take. The professional Teshon Legion made a pretty good strong arm for Gelst's new protection racket. The last score of barrels were being rolled down the gangplank to be loaded onto the final large wagon.

Five horses came galloping along the boardwalk and pulled up in front of the *Autarkic Maiden*. The Legion colonel and four of his men dismounted and came aboard. They were immediately flanked by Grant Fletcher with ten other men.

Baron Arrenkyle climbed the four steps to the upper deck and approached the captain. He didn't speak at first. He watched Gareth

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and took several steps back and forth. He looked back at his men surrounded by sailors.

"You were carrying, what? Cotton and tobacco, you said?"

Gareth didn't answer. The Colonel walked over to the railing and stood, as if trying to gather his thoughts. Two lines of Legionnaires appeared, running from between the warehouses. Gareth came over to stand next to him and watch as they lined in three neat rows of at least twenty men each.

Baron then turned to the captain and said, "There was a wagon carrying barrels full of arrows, heavy chains, slings, knives and swords. Can you explain that?"

"How do you mean? If you say you saw that, I guess you did."

"Were you present when your ship was being loaded?"

"This is not a ship, colonel. She's a brig. She only has two masts."

"What was your port of origin?"

"Korolem."

"Did you make any other stops along the way?"

"What are your men doing down there?"

"What do you think?"

The wind pulled at the jibs, pushing the *Maiden* forward against her mooring ropes.

"It seems someone may have taken advantage of you, Captain Gareth. I'm going to have to ask you to stay here in Gelst for a few days. We'll need to investigate the origins of your cargo."

"Who the hell do you think you are? I've paid your bribe, now get off this deck. I don't recognize your authority over this vessel, me, or my crew. Get off before I have you put in chains and dragged below."

"There's no need to get excited, Captain. We're all doing God's work. And your confrontational manner might be interpreted as an expression of guilt. Were you aware of the contents of those barrels?"

The final barrels were unloaded, and the sailors were eyeing the soldiers on the deck.

Gareth called up to the men on the yards, "Drop the topsails and man the fore!" Then he turned back to the Legionnaire and said, "We're about to set sail. I'll give you one more chance to step down or you can stay with me for a few days."

The sail dropped and billowed full of the good wind.

"Ready the anchor!"

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Baron said, "Please, captain. We just need to get a few answers. I'm sorry that this will impact your schedule, but this, I'm afraid, is more important. I don't mean you any harm, but I don't intend to let you out of this bay."

"And I don't intend to let you waste any more time. You have twenty seconds to get ashore."

The colonel turned and motioned to the men below. One raised a bow and shot an arrow high into the air. It exploded at the top of its arch with a bright flare that traced its path into the sea.

"Fifteen seconds."

"Very well." He turned and his men followed him down the gangplank.

"Weigh anchor. Full sail!"

The other sails dropped and the *Maiden* started pulling away from the dock.

"Rudder! Clear the dock!"

The dark shapes started moving.

With an empty hull and this good wind, the *Maiden* sliced through the water like a dolphin at play. She would be faster and easier to maneuver. The Legion boats were moving to cut off the north end of the bay. To go around them Gareth would have to track into the wind. They were all racing toward a point around the north shore of the bay.

The captain came down from the bow deck and led Fletcher to the stern where they could direct the sails and rudder. Above them men were hoisting and positioning extra studding sails that hung from special extensions on the main and topgallant yards.

She grabbed the wind and skimmed across the water, charging toward the Legion boats. Fletcher called out a series of commands to adjust the sails. Then he ordered a quick turn of the rudder and cut behind them, heading out toward sea.

Within minutes the *Maiden* was flanked on both sides.

A faint orange glow, arching high like an angry firefly, caught Lennel Gareth's eye just before it sunk with a thunk on the main deck below. A few more flew in from the starboard side. Then a full volley of burning arrows floated in, striking three of his men. A couple hit the rear gaff sail and started it burning.

Gareth moved away from the stern and called out to the nearby men, ordering them to drop buckets into the sea and start dousing the fires. The heavy damp wood of the decks was slow to burn, but

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flames had engulfed the rear sail, sending a thick cloud of smoke forward with the wind into the other sails.

The captain yelled back to his first officer, "Hard port!"

Fletcher barked out a quick series of orders to the men. The ship lurched and bounced, sending a spray of mist over the side. The captain turned around to see some of the men cutting loose the gaff sail to fall behind them. Another bounce set them moving at a far clip toward the near boat on their port side. More flame arrows came from the Legionnaires.

Captain Gareth felt himself suddenly pulled to the deck where he took a hard knock on his elbow. Flaming arrows struck the hard wood of the deck near by. Gavin pulled his face over the captain's and called out, "Are you hit?"

The brig bounced again, sending another cascade of water up into the sails, challenging the flames before drenching the deck.

"Get me up!"

He stood along the side. The Legionnaires and oarsmen had only scant seconds left to jump before their boat was rammed by the brisk moving brig. The boat twisted into the water, and the *Maiden's* bow plunged sharply down. Gareth felt the deck lurch out from under his feet. He hit the rail with his knees before he tumbled down and struck the frigid water on his side, smacking his face beneath the black, salty shroud.

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It was late, maybe three or four o'clock, but still Estus could not pull himself away from the wooden chair by Carmen's bed, even though his eyes were worn scratchy from his vigil and his head felt heavy upon his shoulders. His body ached with an almost physical pain whose only relief would be to lie next to her, hold her in his arms, and stroke her head. Instead, he sat with his hands together, his fingers interlocked, amid the gray shadows and the silver halo of moonlight that fell across the foot of the bed.

Footsteps behind him tapped along the hallway with a gentle squeak or two, followed by the whisper of his sister.

"Estus."

Only the pale form of her night gown gave evidence that she was more than a voice carried on the wind into his sleepy vision.

"You should try to sleep," she said.

"Can you sleep?"

"I had a bad dream."

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"And awake now, is it any better?"

"How is she? Parker said you shouldn't bother her."

He looked back to Carmen's sweet face that was pulled into a silent frown. She never liked sleeping on her back, but that was how Shaw had left her. It seemed unnatural seeing her expressionless and still, like a paper mask.

"Anoria?"

He looked toward the doorway, seeing only a formless gray shadow against the black, and perhaps it was because at that moment she was more like a vision than his sister, or maybe it was the strange hollow of the early morning night, but Estus found himself asking aloud the question that had been boring its way through his troubled mind. Maybe all these years he was wrong. He was hoping to find an understanding that might be able to displace the sense of complete pointlessness of all this.

"Would God punish her because of me?"

Anoria was quiet for a long moment during which his question hung between them, chilling the silence. The release he had hoped would come from speaking that awful question eluded him because of all the other unasked questions that it left.

"Why would you say something like that?"

"Never mind. Go back to sleep." He turned away from her.

From over his shoulder he heard his sister repeat the same empty words that for years had been unable to move him.

"Estus, we don't know what plan God has for us. We have to accept that whatever happens has a purpose, even if we don't understand it. We can't question the mind of God."

"For a long time, I...", but he couldn't start that way. There was too much, so he told her, "I joked with Carmen about how I was proud of being able to force God to create a new soul at our bidding. I placed myself above God, as his commander, and now that soul has been taken from me. I wonder, Anoria, if a loving God, as we are always told He is, would kill my wife and my baby for that?"

She was slow in responding, and he could hear judgment in her voice when she finally answered, "I don't know."

He turned again to face his sister, then back to his wife, and he asked with a voice strained by his fatigue, "If Jorel is a Holy Angel of God, and if magic flows from God through him, then why don't they know?"

Maybe she could understand what he was never able to. He hoped that it was only his blindness, or selfishness, that hid the

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answers from his eyes. "They've done everything, Anoria. Why won't she wake up?"

His voice dropped to a raspy whisper for he was afraid his voice would break.

"She's not moved so much as a finger since he left us."

He clamped his jaw tight and closed his eyes, squeezing out a tiny, hot tear.

Anoria came into the room and put her hands on his shoulders.

"You need to sleep, Estus."

He held his hands together in a tight fist and said, "You all have prayed so well. You've done everything right. Jorel blessed everything in this house. A man who says he can channel the very power of God through his hands was here. He performed his tricks and his songs, and still nothing. Why? If God is all powerful, then her pain and our fear are by His hand, and I must wonder why we are called upon to bow to such a petty, vindictive creature who would use His great power, not to burn understanding into my mind, but to make sport of killing my wife and child before my eyes. Anoria, if He wants me to believe, then why don't I believe? Am I, in fact, more powerful than God, if he cannot force my mind to see Him?"

"Estus," she said, trying to be motherly and soothing. "You shouldn't talk that way."

He stood up, slowly, as if he were going to let her lead him away to rest, but instead he said, "Yes I should. This is exactly the way I should talk."

Without waiting for an answer, he stepped to the window and leaned into the tepid night. With his hands upon his head, with a gnawing disgust, he asked, "Why can I not pray for my wife?"

The humid air enveloped him, pressing on his temples, stifling his breath. Crickets sang their night chorus with the owls and frogs, as if mocking him in their carefree ignorance.

"God, help me pray," he said, wanting to be able to be sincere, while at the same time feeling the ugly irony of asking God to fill the emptiness of his atheism.

Was it a test to break his stubbornness? Would God release his hold on Carmen only if he would condescend to truly believe in the power and glory of the Circle Of Light and it's Fire which is God? But such thoughts only led to visions of a vain, snickering God, and how can a man worship such a pitiful thing?

Believe and I will spare her life.

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Give her life and I will believe.

Can a man live without a soul? Can a life be anything when it is drained of its love?

Images shot dream-like through his mind, images of a cool, summer day walking with his love and a rambunctious little girl that ran all around them, gathering rocks and sticks and flowers. He could almost hear her joyful giggles. He saw birthday parties, scratched knees, handmade dresses, pinwheels, and pet turtles, but always the crashing silence of the night sucked the dream away, leaving him clammy and cold and alone while his daughter lay dead in the body of his wife, a sallow sleeping coffin.

"Damn you, God," he spoke aloud. "Come out from wherever you are hiding and face me," he called out into the night. "Tell me to my face that you loathe me, that you want to hurt me." His voice became more firm, more confident, and loud. "Are you a coward, or a liar, or merely a sadist? Appear before me, if you are able." Then he added, with a voice seething with contempt, "I command you."

A faint echo returned to him before drifting broken into the heavy, warm wind, but his passion felt empty and rehearsed, and he could only mock himself for taking part in such an empty demonstration, for what he knew was as clear to him as it was hidden to everyone else. How much easier it would be to believe, or at least to be uncertain and hopeful. But he could always see through his own internal facade.

Anoria moved slowly toward him and placed a shaking hand on his shoulder.

"Shh." Her voice was unsteady when she begged, "Holy Light, burn our evil sins away. Estus, you'll bring a curse on this family."

His voice was steady and filled with longing. "If there were a God, then I could hate Him."

He bowed his head forward.

Something in him died at that moment. Always, through his doubts, his internal blasphemes, and his relentless questions and musings, there was always within him a core of hope that someday, if he kept looking, and thinking, he would one day come to see and understand the world as the elves had always explained it to him. There were times that he would have welcomed damnation if that would finally reveal God to him. He had always held the forgotten memory of a child's eyes, filled with wonder of the glory and awesome power that is God. He could remember that sublime

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comfort, and at times he could almost recapture it, but some innocence in him was forever lost.

Now, tonight, when he most wanted to be able to find that same comfort, and most sincerely wanted to be able to ask God to grant healing to his wife, he could not. Not out of anger, or fear, or spite, but for the same reason you do not ask a rock to dance. If ever there was a time that the last dying embers of his faith could rekindle, it was that moment, in the pit of the night, facing the hot wind. Even deep inside him, he could no longer pretend that he could pretend to believe.

And so what were the elves but old men, telling fables? For what purpose? How could humans ever understand the truth when elves captured them in ritual from the very day they were born?

And what of magic? What allows wizards to rise into the air or push their hands into human flesh if not the miracle of God's power? Whatever that power, he decided, it has nothing to do with the stories of faith and hope and prayer taught by the elves in their churches. He turned back to his wife, feeling the weight of his worn and weary body, feeling the burden and joy of finally having shed the last remnant of his faith. So be it. The world is what it is. "So it is," he told her.

Anoria gasped sharply and knelt at the side of the bed, holding Carmen's hand. Her quiet moan rose into a muddy litany, repeating, "Holy Circle Of Light, bless your loving children. Ever shines the light of God."

Estus closed his eyes for just a moment, remembering that he had wondered hours ago what this moment would feel like if it came. He walked past his sister and put his hands against Carmen's neck. No blood pulsed. He put his ear against her lips and felt no breath. He put his hand upon her belly.

Anoria pulled at Estus, trying to force him to kneel beside her, begging him, "Pray, Estus. Please beg God to burn your evil words away." She gnarled her fingers into the heavy fabric of his shirt and pleaded with a wavering, whispering voice, "You were upset, it wasn't a real sin. Jorel will help you. Estus, you must! Don't let your soul die with her."

He pulled away from her sharply, leaving her on her knees before him, a lump of silver gray at his feet, crying as he had not heard her cry since their childhood. He sat down on the floor and let her lurch into his arms so he could rock her and cradle her head. Through all this, Estus felt only a chilling numbness, an almost eerie

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indifference that seemed to him merely curious, and not wrong or evil as his sister would judge.

Anoria said, "I felt her presence leave the room. I know she's now a creature of Light. I could almost feel her soul pass through me."

"It didn't pass through you," he explained. "It was always there, and will remain as long as we hold her in our memories."

Together they rose from the floor and stood, and for a long moment they watched Carmen, paying silent homage to her last breath.

Finally Estus began to feel the weight of his weariness, the continuum of his loss, and he moved toward the doorway, feeling acutely his inability to summon neither penitence nor anger.

"Estus?"

He turned and Anoria asked, "Don't you want to give the blessing of her passage?"

"No."

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The Harvest Eve sun warmed the dewy sweet, mud-scented breeze that rolled along the Delgaro River Road. Little flowers opened their sleepy petals, stretching out to wash the trail with dancing blues and pale violets. The ground was still heavy with the dampness of last night's hard rain, but the humidity that had hung over the valley was now washed clean away, leaving a crisp blue sky and an invigorating calm.

Slowly the sound of unhurried horse steps broke through the rustling dance of leaves until they became a soft but distinct rhythmic cadence, ka-thum, ka-thum, ka-thum, ka-thum. Then a steady rattle of light metal joined with a percussive counter beat, ka-ching, ka-ching, ka-ching, ka-ching. As they approached, the beat was joined by the high, pure sound of a woman's voice singing a song from four thousand years ago in the ancient, formal dialect of the elves.

The words had a lisping, ethereal sound compared to the harsh gutturals of the human tongue. The complete song had sixty verses, each one well over an hour long, telling a detailed story about the daughter of a weaver who was separated from her love for over six hundred years. This particular verse was about the many scenes she wove into a tapestry for thirty-six years while she was busy directing her family's preparations for the next Gathering.

The horse wore a finely woven saddle blanket that had large squares of dark blue and forest green. The rider lifted back a delicately embroidered hood revealing the square jaw, the sharp nose, the quiet, patient eyes and pointed ears of the elven folk. The skin of the Del families was quite a bit darker than the Tol elves, almost the color of pine needles, but that's not why they were called Dark Elves. They were said to be dark to the Circle of Light, cut off from God, unholy lesser elves put here by God to serve the angels of God.

Her blouse was trim and functional, but elegant, edged with intricate lace and embroidered with spun gold. She wore studded leather armor, casually unfastened, its sides falling open, revealing the lattice of metal fibers lining the interior. On her left hip hung a

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curved sword with a blue and green velvet hilt. The scabbard was polished silver with gold inlays and matched the sheath of her knife, which she wore at her back, tucked into her belt. On her right hung a money pouch filled mostly with gold pieces and a few silver. Her trousers were dark forest green, but were mostly hidden by the leather leg armor that hung on both sides from her belt and protected the outer thigh where it was fastened to her knee-high boots.

She was as deadly as she was beautiful. Without even trying, for she was, after all, just singing to pass the time, she held long high notes of such beauty that the simple mud and twigs and buzzing bugs seemed transformed into an exquisite filigree celebrating the uncommon beauty of the natural world.

After her aria faded into low notes, becoming a soft hum that was taken away on the wind, she allowed herself to indulge in a yawn and a bit of a stretch. She reached forward, patted her mount on the neck, and said, "Did you like that, Balta?" He twitched his ears a bit, but otherwise just kept ka-thumping along the soft, sodden grass.

Ivy unfastened the large emerald clasp and removed her riding cloak with an unhurried flourish. She folded it roughly and stuffed it into the saddlebag, handling it as if it were a common fabric instead of a sturdy, beautiful elven weave depicting centuries of history and honor of the Del-Gesius clan.

The path was now noticeably wider and a little better traveled. Soon it opened up and Ivy rode across a large open field. Far ahead, above the trees, rose a column of dark gray smoke.

Balta took on a quicker gait and bobbed his head. Ivy asked him, "You want to run a bit?"

He blasted a decisive snort through his heavy horse nostrils, so she kicked her heels softly against his side, sending him into a quick cantor. Ivy rode his rhythmic rise and fall, blending her motion with his while her long black hair filled the air behind her and the wind rumbled softly into her pointed ears. As Ivy rode him across the field, her form blended with his as a silhouette backlit by the sun's sparkling reflection in the river. Eddies of floating dandelion seeds chased after them and rabbits scattered. Ivy shook her hair back out of her face, tilted her head up, and felt the sweet air rush along her neck and across her cheeks and arms.

The open field soon gave way to the curved lines of a nearly harvested wheat field. Large bundles of cut wheat were gathered

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into tall piles, and a team of men and oxen were working a cutting cart. Ivy saw them stop and watch her from the top of a small rise as Balta took her past them. It was always a bit of a challenge moving through the human lands wearing her usual traveling clothes. Not only did the Tol elves wear simple priest garb, elven women were very rarely seen. Service to humans fell to the male elves while the female elves usually remained in the elf lands where they ran their families. Not only was the work tedious and mundane, and therefore inappropriate for the female elves, it also served as an example for the patriarchal society of the humans.

Males, both human and elf, are often more proud, stubborn, concerned with status and family position, and much more likely to act on honor and take greater risks. Because of this, elven society was run by the women, and had been for as long as any elf could remember. Elven families were extensive, consisting of several related clans, and were decidedly matriarchal. It was the men who moved between families. The important lineage was on the mother's side, because these defined the family.

Female elves were usually much more rational and practical than the elven men, yet, when necessary, could be ten times as ruthless. This was precisely why the Tol families imposed a patriarchal system when they designed a new society for the humans two thousand years ago. Humans were, of course, much more primitive than the elves. The bigger and stronger would dominate the smaller and weaker, so it was rather obvious that a male-dominated culture was more natural for the immature, brutish humans. But the real reason human men were in control is that elven women knew that if the women were in charge, the human society would be much more difficult to control.

The field soon gave way to the houses and shops of Kelebor, and Ivy let Balta fall back to a slow trot. She reminded herself that she was a simple, mostly helpless woman, unwise and not very smart. Even though she was an elf, she was a female elf, and a Dark Elf at that, worthy almost of pity, if not scorn, from the humans. Her self-deprecating reminders couldn't hide the finery of her traveling outfit, but the humans usually assumed (with encouragement from the rival elf family, of course) that the Del opulence was necessary to make up for being such pitiful, unenlightened, servile creatures.

The town was bustling with preparations for the Harvest Festival. Families were busy putting up booths to trade their homemade crafts. Some still struggled with tying together their

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meager wooden frames and canvas tops. Some were already set up and selling everything from quilts to beer. One large tent was filled with children laughing at a couple of clowns and jugglers.

Ivy fell in with other traffic along the wide dirt road, passing vendors and picnics and crowds of wagons and tents. Despite all the bustle and activity, all eyes seemed to find and follow Ivy. Men noticed her long, loose hair and the outline of her dark, petite form under her sheer blouse. Women noticed the confidence and power that she carried and displayed so effortlessly.

Ivy pulled Balta to a stop in front of a small booth from which floated the marvelous scent of sweet kettle corn popping over a large fire. A tall woman with a yellow country dress and bonnet lifted the cover and started scooping the corn from the kettle into a large barrel.

Ivy took out a small silver coin and said, "It wouldn't be a fitting festival without fresh kettle corn."

The woman turned around. Ivy, ignoring the way the country woman stared, just leaned down to trade her coin for a warm sack of popped corn and some change. The woman seemed to be searching for the right thing to say when a young boy, no more than seven, said, "Are you an elf?"

Ivy sat back in her saddle, brushed her hair behind her ear, put a piece of corn in her mouth, and said, "No, of course not. I'm a frog."

"You're not a frog!" he answered, laughing.

"Are you sure?"

"You're too big to be a frog."

"Maybe I'm a crocodile."

"No," he laughed again. "You're an elf."

"Yeah. I guess I am. What's your name?"

"Tommy Thompson, what's yours?"

The woman pulled him back and said, "I'm sorry, madam. Tommy don't be so familiar."

"Oh he's all right. Is he your son?"

"Yes."

"He's a sweetheart." Then she said to the boy, "My name is Ivy Del-Gesius. And who's this?"

"That's my mom."

"My name's Kelly, madam."

The boy asked, "Are you here to take that lady into Heaven's Light?"

"What lady?"

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Kelly answered, "We've had a death in the village. Last night." The woman looked over her shoulder to the rising column of smoke. "They're going to put her into the light this evening. It's such a sad story, and on the very day of the remembrance vigil."

"What happened?"

Kelly turned back to the large kettle and started dishing more of the corn into the barrel. She seemed to be over her initial surprise and started chatting as she might to any other customer. "We finally got a new guildsman here in Kelebor. It's that carpenter fella. So he comes home, fresh in from his baptism you know, after his first day in the guild. He comes home and finds his wife with her head cut all open. She didn't make it through the night."

"Oh, how awful."

"Yeah. Well." Kelly looked up at Ivy and gave her a look that must have been intended to convey some extra information, but Ivy didn't catch it.

"What do you mean?"

"Well." Kelly dished out the final batch of corn from the large kettle then closed the lid. She sold a couple more sacks to some kids then wiped her hands and said. "This fella, that carpenter. You see, my friend, Sylvia? So, she knows the wife of a guy who works over at the mill with him. I guess Jorel had to finally make him join the guild 'cause he kept trying to do stuff on his own."

"What do you mean? What kind of stuff?"

"Well, I don't know anything about building as I can say, but he wanted to build big houses and like that, and to do that right you gotta go take the guild lessons and be right with the Lord. But he didn't want to. So, I'm just saying, it's pretty odd, you know, this fella finally goes to put his hands in the craft for the Lord and he comes back and finds his wife ready to die. Just like that. So it's sad, but if you're not right with the Lord, well, you see what can happen."

Ivy started to move on, but something caught her attention. "What do you mean he didn't want to take the guild lessons?"

"Well, I don't know too much about it, really. Sylvia, she says that he was possessed as a little boy and had to go in the sanctum with Jorel all summer. I wouldn't know about that. I grew up in Karth until Charlie brought me down here. So if that happens to you, I guess it would be pretty traumatic. This guy who works with him at the guild says it's like he's all in a hurry. You know, you can learn and do it right, or you can just stumble around in the dark. He

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started working on that new blacksmith shop down by the river, but the head of the mill made him stop because he wasn't supposed to know how to do that. That's when he made him start going to seminary last year. That's what Sylvia told me this morning."

"So, you think this woman's death has something to do with his knowing how to build a blacksmith shop without guild lessons?"

"Well, I suppose you'd know more about that than I would. It's just a shame, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Ivy answered, but in her mind the real shame was the cloud of illogic, fear, and superstition that hung so heavy over this woman's mind and the mind of all the humans under Tol control.

When the Del families were guiding the humans two thousand years ago, humans were vibrant and unfettered. There was a palpable hunger for knowledge and truth. Not far from here was once a river town named Kaylish, a small community of artists and mathematicians. Ivy, in her more optimistic youth, had spent many summers here, teaching and learning and listening to beautiful symphonies in the valley. She tugged on Balta's reins, directing him away from Kelly the Kettle Corn Lady and rode past the tent with the sideshow and slapstick clowns.

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The wide mouth of the Delgaro river joined the Mundela in a vast, raging churn that roared day and night at the base of a tall sandstone cliff. Atop that peak, near the edge, sat the Sanctum of Bora-Min, a monastery of advanced study, a retreat for the pious and the powerful. Its delicately carved edifice of polished white marble stood alone on a stark knoll well above the trees, a sentinel of the valley.

On a balcony overlooking the rivers, Baron Arrenkyle and Petran Vendak sat at a large oak table in wide, well-padded chairs. Baron, with his red Legionnaire jacket opened casually, leaned comfortably back with one foot propped up on a free chair, enjoying the breeze, the view across the river chasm, and a thick, bitter ale. The Governor tore a piece of coarse honey bread and dipped it in a mixture of melted butter and pepper spices.

Baron continued his report.

"This is the third major smuggling catch this month. This time it was weapons."

"Were you able to intercept them?"

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"Only a few barrels. They're getting bolder and more reckless. It was pretty bad last night. They got away, but not before sinking one of our transport boats. We have four of their men in the Gelst jail, and they told us that their captain was lost overboard."

Petran leaned forward to avoid dripping on himself and said, "I understand they took wind and got away with a few of our men."

"They rammed a transport. Buckled the hull. Men from both ships were in the sea. We picked up some and some grabbed hold of the brig. Our role call identified seven missing men. I can only hope, by the Light of God, that they made it out of the water, but I don't know what will become of them if they are on board that rebel brigantine."

"Any word from the scouts about the missing gold?"

"No. No word."

"We've got to bust that cell open. Get to the leaders before this gets out of hand. I have tried to be lenient. I have given them every opportunity to seek brotherhood in the light, but I see that Andor was right. I have been weak. We must put an end to this subversion."

Baron looked out over the valley that carried the Mundela River away from Teshon through several miles of wilderness before emptying into the bay of Gelst. He counted three barges moving goods back and forth between the mouth of Gelst and the stomach of Boret.

"With all respect, Governor, it's not going to be easy. This isn't a simple band of thieves. Their pride runs deep."

"That may well be, but these shipping lanes will stay open. Where will they be if Teshon becomes weak? It is our duty to bring them back into the arms of Teshon and of God. Gelst was becoming a filthy hive of pirates and all manner of godless gratification, and if that's a future worth holding onto, then I pity them. Gelst is, and shall remain, Teshon. This is Andor's decree, and I will see it done. We shall either bring them to God or send them to Him."

"Petran," Baron said with a low, serious tone. "Our hold on Gelst is dangerously narrow. They will soon discover how easy it would be for them to shut down the bay. They have thirty times more men. They grew up in those hills, and while we can secure the river, we can't patrol the miles of wilderness that look down upon it and which gives them the advantage of the high ground. We should consider negotiating some of their requests, at least to buy us some time."

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"What are you saying?"

"If we can't come to an agreement with them, we'll have to lay a heavy boot upon them. Can we do that, Petran? Can we ask Teshon boys to fight farmers and children, because that's what it will come to."

"Baron, my friend, what they want, they cannot have. The threats made against Kessel Tol-Rena broke the last of Andor's tolerance, and mine. It is not God's will for them to drift apart from their brothers."

"But if we could reinstate some level of self-rule, or reduce some of their taxes, the radicals would have less support. What am I missing? Why can't Teshon and Gaelon work together on this?"

"The security of the bay is not negotiable. Besides, it's better that the radicals show themselves. Better to get it over with quick. Korolem will not be so easy. We simply can't afford to put ourselves in a position where we have only trust and hope to keep Boret alive. Boret is the shining gem of humanity, and in whose hands would you place that trust? Men of sin and darkness? We must have Gelst, Colonel. Gaelon has always fought against the Light, but they too will come to live in God. We will keep the bay open to us, and it will be under our control. Would you place their pride above the lives of the people of Teshon? Do you think the farms of Kelebor or Toth can feed the thousands in Boret?"

"No, sir. Of course not."

"Baron, it is not a bad thing that we're doing. It's part of God's plan. Benok brought us together from roving bands of different ethnic and regional heritage and into the Circle. We must be one people. The Circle of Light must glow into the farthest reaches of the world. Their libraries and schools were born of the same kind of darkness that nearly destroyed us so long ago. We do not have the luxury of allowing them to lurch back and forth between shadow and light while they debate in their counsels whether to feed us."

Baron pulled his foot down and leaned forward to take the last chunk of sweet bread. The words were true, but they didn't quite settle his concerns. "It will not be easy to order my men to fire on angry, untrained civilians." He turned a wry smile to Petran and said, "I suppose I've been spending too much time in the South. I'm glad we had this chance to talk."

"So am I. Perhaps you should discuss this with your brother. Victor tells me that he was baptized from the Kelebor Seminary."

"Yes. I guess that would have been yesterday."

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"Give him a pat on the arm for me, eh."

Baron chuckled. "You bet."

"Which reminds me, I need to let you get going if you're going to make it home for Harvest Eve tonight."

"I know. I don't like leaving now. It's not a good time. If my brother hadn't just joined the Light I wouldn't go. I'm sure not looking forward to another ten hours in a barge cabin."

As he was starting to get up, a teenage girl, a young Holy Sister, came running over to them. "I beg your pardon, governor. I have a message for the colonel."

She handed a folded piece of parchment to Baron, gave a quick, awkward curtsey and took a couple steps backward.

The paper had an elven seal, already open, and was addressed to Elim Tol-Rena, Bora-Min. Inside was a short hand written note: "Dear cousin, Our new initiate's brother, a Colonel in the Legion Guild, will be coming through Bora-Min. You may be able to find him at the northbound passenger docs. There has been an accident, and his brother's wife was killed from injuries suffered after a fall. Please give him every assistance you can to help him return quickly to Kelebor. This is a delicate situation, and your help would be very much appreciated. J. Kopel."

Baron stood up and slowly handed the letter to Petran. "My sister in law. Oh, dear Heavenly Light."

The girl spoke up and said, "Elim said if I found you to have you follow me. He's preparing his carriage for you."

The two men stood up.

"Okay. Yes. Thank you."

The Governor started leading him away. He put his hand on Baron's shoulder and said, "Go. God be with you, colonel."

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In the crew quarters of the *Autarkic Maiden*, eighty exhausted, restless men snorted, breathed, cleared their throats, and shifted uneasily in their bunks, nervous, angry, impatient. Grant Fletcher had ordered them to get some sleep after their all-night ordeal and early morning repairs that they made while putting miles of horizon between themselves and the Bay of Gelst.

Shafts of light forced their way into the dark chamber and swept back and forth with the motion of the ship that bobbed adrift with sails furled. The motion challenged the stomachs of the new hands from the *Constellation*, which would have sat nearly steady in these

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calm waters. Cody especially was having a difficult time fighting off both a lingering hangover and shocked terror from seeing sails aflame.

Below him Gavin started snoring loudly.

It seemed almost to break the hollow, hypnotic chill of the humid chamber. Other men turned in their bunks, adjusted their straw mats and feather pillows and seemed almost capable of relaxing. One man, however, rolled out from a low bunk and walked over to Gavin's bunk, kicked it and said, "Turn over, squab. Shut that racket up."

Gavin woke suddenly and saw Scotty Miggs, shirtless and still only slightly sober, peering at him with an angry face punctuated with cold eyes and a sharp blonde goatee. Gavin looked him over and said, "What do you want?"

"Turn over."

Gavin chuckled and said, "You sick horny bitch! Get the hell away from me."

Miggs apparently wasn't amused. He grabbed Gavin by the forearm and started hauling him out of his bunk. Gavin rolled, got his feet on the floor, then rose up, pushing Miggs away. Davis jumped down from his bunk and stood next to Gavin.

"So you both want some, do you?"

Davis said, "That's the scrawny bastard that got his ass kicked by the loading crew up on the dock. He's harmless." Then he said to Miggs, "Calm down, son. It'll be all right. You want me to tuck you in? Cause I will, if you don't sit your ass down right now."

Miggs laughed and walked over to Davis. He put his hand on Davis's shoulder and said, "I'm gonna let that slide, boy, 'cause I have something to ask you. Why don't you tell us what the hell are you doing here? What kind of Legion spy filth are you?" He dug his thumb into Davis's neck above the collar bone.

Davis reached up, grabbed Miggs by the wrist and pivoted in, butting his shoulder against Miggs and breaking his weak hold. Then he pulled Miggs's arm up, planted his other arm on his elbow and cranked him over. With a couple quick steps he dragged Miggs face down on the floor, pulled his arm up behind him and twisted until he heard a muffled grunt. Miggs squirmed, but Davis had his arm held firmly, and every time he tried to move, Davis pushed his arm further back toward his head.

Another sailor jumped down and tried to grab Davis around the throat. Gavin was behind him just as fast and pulled the other sailor

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back. Then the two stood facing each other for just a second. Gavin waited for the punch. When it came, he spun to the side, grabbed the other man's arm from below and pulled it to the side. Then he stepped in, punched the man's chin with the heel of his hand and took a step, driving him back into the bunks. Before he could recover, Gavin pulled him forward, spun him to the ground and put him in the same arm lock that Davis held on his buddy.

The whole fight lasted barely twenty seconds, but that was long enough to get the attention of the first officer, who opened the door with an angry clatter, flooding the small room with the bright afternoon sun.

Grant Fletcher ducked and stepped down the steep stair.

"Get up." He said. "Get in your damn bunks."

The first officer stepped back and sat down wearily on the steps. When everyone was back in place he said quietly, "Look. I don't even want to know what this is about. I am not in the mood, and I'm damn well not going to waste my time playing daddy with you. We have better things to do. Our quarrels are not with each other or other vessels. There is only one challenge facing us right now, and that is finishing the mission of the *Autarkic Maiden*. Our captain is lost. He would ask no less from any one of you, and he wouldn't waste his time and his energy fighting like this. I have no problem sending any one of you down below to sit in irons with the Legionnaires."

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Captain Lennel Gareth sputtered through his salty beard and lifted his red, weathered head from the pillow of air trapped in the knotted legs of his trousers that he wore as a life vest. He had been able to get some fitful rest a few minutes at a time, conserving his strength while he drifted and swam throughout the night.

His legs and hands were nearly numb from the cold water, and his mouth was bitter from the salt that he had been spitting from his throat. The sun was up, but still low in the sky. He looked around, but with his eyes just barely above the waves he still could not see land.

He kicked his legs to tread water while he lifted the pants up to trap another bubble of air. With his free hand he took out his flask, twisted the cap off with his teeth, and drained the last of Merna's whiskey. Then he looked again at the sky, felt the wind, and resumed kicking his feet and pulling himself across the waves.

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It was slow going, and he kept his pace even and mechanical, being careful not to expend too much effort in the kind of quick, frantic bursts that drag men with less sea savvy into an early death. Gareth stayed calm and optimistic, but still grew tired. He alternated between kicking his feet and pulling himself forward with one arm or the other. He would swim a few strokes, make another air pillow and rest until it deflated. Then he would swim some more. Then rest. Then swim, patiently and consistently as he had done for the past five hours.

He saw floating ahead a wooden plank, flotsam from the collision with the Legion boat. He swam toward it with both arms and grabbed hold. It was small, only two feet long and a few inches wide. It wasn't enough to keep him afloat, but it let him rest his feet. He turned onto his back with his ankles over the board. He pulled the pants over his face to keep the sun out of his eyes, took a deep breath, and floated, resting, arms outstretched, as comfortable as a man in his own bathtub, moving not a muscle while he let the sea water cradle him.

He didn't let himself rest more than a few minutes. He turned and swam some more. Finally he could see the pale promise of land ahead. He was only a mile out. The current here ran north along the coast. If he didn't keep moving it would eventually turn back out to sea, and so he kept going, inch by inch, resting, swimming, floating, kicking. He used his precious piece of wood sometimes as a paddle and sometimes under his chest to give him a little extra lift.

The hint of land shifted throughout the endless morning from a hazy hope to an outline, and then a textured line of green. He continued his cycle of swimming and resting until, two more hours later, without any celebration, he pulled himself onto a deserted beach and slept with the soft sand on his cheek and the waves tickling his feet.

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Baron arrived in Kelebor late in the afternoon. The six heavy horses had kept a good pace for most of the day. The carriage was modest, being decorated with simple blue silks and velvet, but the wheels and suspension system were unlike any he had ever seen. The ride was fast, but was as smooth as floating on a river. Once they were in town he directed the driver past the Kelebor docks, which were alive with barges bringing merchants and their wares in for the harvest celebration. They had to slow to a walk while they moved through the bustle of the town toward the hill on which Carmen's funeral fire burned.

He endured the next few anxious minutes with a forced calm that he had cultivated during his years in the Legion service. When he could finally see the orange flames he closed his eyes and recited in his mind the prayer for the fallen soldier. The road wound up the side of the hill through a forest of dense trees and then opened up into a clearing that held the funeral shrine overlooking the valley below. The driver pulled the carriage to the edge of the clearing and jumped down to set the brakes. Baron pushed the lace curtain aside and saw his sister with her children and Carmen's family. On the alter lay a body wrapped in white cloth. Carmen.

He had known Carmen since she was ten. After she and her family moved out to the country from Boret, she and Anoria had become the closest of friends, playing together day and night. It seemed she was over at their house at least as much as she was at her own. It was like having another little sister around. She even brought Estus out of his sad winter days after he learned that his first big crush had given her life to the church. It was like watching his little brother come to life again. He followed the two girls around and played jump rope and bunny hop with them.

Baron saw it before anyone else, and had to work on Estus most of one summer to convince him that if he asked her for a kiss, he just might get one. He never told Estus that he and Carmen secretly schemed for that first kiss. He stayed on top of the situation for many weeks, asking Carmen how it was going and giving her tips on how to flirt and get his brother's attention. He told her things she

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could talk about that would interest Estus. He told her to get him talking, then subtly flip her hair, show a little neck, and bite her lower lip. Meanwhile he was telling Estus to take her hand when they went up a hill and find other excuses to touch her arms, shoulders, and hair. Still, he wouldn't cross that final line and get his kiss, so Baron and Carmen made their plans for the dance at the Harvest Festival.

Anoria was even more shy than Estus when it came to romance and flirting, so Carmen took the lead, making sure that both she and Anoria danced with everyone, but she wouldn't dance with Estus. All night long, Baron kept telling Estus to ask again. She kept promising the next dance for him, but kept dancing with all the other boys. "Don't worry. I think she wants to save the last slow dance for you," he told him. So Estus sat and fumed and danced with a couple of girls that Baron brought over to him. Carmen and Anoria were the center of attention that night. It was great for Anoria, especially since Baron had spent the month before with their mother teaching her the steps and moves.

Finally, when the night was nearly over, when the musicians started playing the slow Sweet River Run in waltz time, Estus started looking for Carmen. Baron paired Anoria up with a buddy of his and then found Estus at the food table, looking like a dog that just had his dish taken away.

"I thought you were going to finally have that dance with Carmen."

"She went home, I guess."

"Didn't you want to dance with her? She sure looked awful pretty in that new green dress, don't you think?"

Estus shrugged.

"All the other boys sure thought so."

"I don't know why you wanted me to keep asking her to dance. I mean, I know you didn't want her to not have someone to dance with, but I don't think that was a problem, in case you didn't notice."

"Yeah. She's probably standing in the moonlight right now, waiting for some guy to go meet her around back."

"Yeah. Six guys probably."

"Let's go see."

"No. I don't care."

Baron threw his arm around his brother's shoulder and led him out the side door to the back of the large barn. The music still seeped

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out in muted tones, mixing with the frogs and crickets hidden in the wet grass. She stood in a clearing, just outside the moon shadow of a large silver maple tree, her green dress shining like a lonely glow moth. "Well, I don't see any other guys out here, Estus. She must be waiting for you."

Just before he sent him out he turned Estus toward her, leaned in and said, "When you're dancing, if a girl reaches up and tickles the back of your neck, it means she wants to be kissed." Then he gave him a push and went back to the barn. Just before going in, Baron turned and saw them drifting into the shadows, standing together, dancing sweetly.

And now, that little bundle of giggles, that awkward love-struck little girl, that beautiful young woman who was able to reach in to their brother's strange sadness and pull out a smile when no one else could, lay cold and dead in a white shroud.

Baron opened the carriage door and stepped out into the settling cloud of dirt that the horses had stirred up. As he walked up the hill, the low yellow sun, hanging heavy and bright in the afternoon sky, threw his long shadow ahead of him. He fastened his jacket, held his bearded jaw firm, and pulled white gloves onto his hands while he made that uncomfortable march toward the shrine. He made his way among friends, accepting their kind words and pats on the shoulder. When he got near, Anoria approached him and took his hands.

"I'm so glad you made it in time."

"Where's Estus?" he asked.

She shook her head. "I don't know. He may not even come for this. It was pretty tough on him last night. We left him at the church while we brought Carmen here."

"But he's not there now?"

"No. I think I know where he is, but don't say anything to anyone. I've been telling everyone that he's home resting."

"I'll see if I can find him."

---

The entrance to the ancient ruin was easy to find. The dirt had been recently dug back and there was a large hole cut into the wooden barricade that had covered the doorway for years. The shovel and saw were propped neatly against a tree. Baron crouched down and entered. It was dark, but he could see a faint glow ahead. He waited a moment for his eyes to adjust and then walked forward

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to the wide stairway that was faintly lit by a small lantern. Baron stood at the top of the stairs and looked at Estus, who was sitting on a pedestal at the feet of a large stone statue of a naked woman.

Estus held gently in his fingers a small item, which Baron recognized as a lock of Carmen's hair, tied with a bit of the green ribbon she had been wearing the night of the Harvest Dance.

Baron ignored the twinge of discomfort that came from standing in a place that was part of an empire of dark, unholy savagery. Was this one of the places, he wondered, where children were killed as sacrifices in exchange for good crops and rain? Or was this one of the rooms where marriage relations were shared in public with strangers?

"It's almost time."

Estus turned his head and said, as Baron came down the stairs, "I know. I need to go put on a good show."

There was a long silence between them while Baron came over to Estus and sat on the base of another statue, a large naked man, uncovered and shameless.

"You don't have to go, I suppose. But the ceremony is for us all as well as for Carmen."

"She's dead, Baron. No ceremony will change that, or give me back what I'll never have again." He put the bit of his wife's hair into a pocket and then rubbed his tired eyes with trembling hands.

"I'm sorry, Estus. I know."

"No. Don't. I shouldn't have said that. It's good to see you."

"So. You're a Brother of Fire. We're all very proud. It's a big and important step."

"Is it? I suppose so. It still hurts. Bastards. What a waste of time. Two years. I studied. I jumped through all their little hoops, and now I'm anointed, and I'm allowed to learn the holy secret of the true nature of angles and measurement."

"It takes time, Estus, to absorb the brilliance of God's wisdom."

This time Estus shot back angrily, "Oh, don't give me that bullshit. You know I'm an atheist, so spare me that feel good crap."

"No. I didn't know that, but I suspected as much. So you took the mark of God with false vows? Is that why you're here, then, Estus? To have a nice home for your blasphemes? In your guild robe, no less."

Estus held back another angry reply, ran his right hand over his sloppy hair, and said, "I wish I could explain it to you. I wish I could explain it to Anoria, and to mom and dad. I wish you could

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understand how awful it is to see something as plain as my feet, then try talking to people who just refuse to face the obvious.”

Baron laughed. “I wish you could hear yourself, Estus. I don’t understand why you don’t see the obvious.”

“You believe, but you don’t know. You can’t.”

“Heavenly light above! I don’t want to do this anymore, Estus. This isn’t the time, and God knows this isn’t the place. We need to go.”

“You know the worst part of it, Baron? I could explain it all to you. I could talk to you for hours, ask you the tough questions, force you to look into that little kernel of uncertainty that everyone carries inside, but what would I accomplish but to take from you something that is precious and wonderful in your eyes?”

“Nothing you could say, Estus, would ever make me forsake my Lord. Why don’t you see that? I guess I’ll just have to have enough faith for the both of us.”

“Do you want to know why I come here? I can’t explain it, really, but in here, it’s real. It’s made of stone, and it’s honest. Out there is nothing but lies. Everything we do is infused with misdirection, half truths, lies, and make believe, and the only weapons they let us have against all that are apathy and ignorance. Faith enough for me? I need to carry curiosity and truth for an entire village.”

“Only the village? Why not the world? Is that how you see it? Maybe you shouldn’t put all of that on your shoulders. They all seem happy enough without your truth. But okay. Let’s have that talk someday if you want. I will listen. I promise. But for now, come with me to bear witness to Carmen’s ascension into the Light.”

“I don’t know if I can. I don’t want to go. That ceremony is supposed to ease my heart? Watching my love burn like kindling? Besides, there’s all that chanting and praying, and I’d be there, pretending, distracted, watching everyone watch me while they wonder if I’m going to close my eyes when Jorel leads the prayers.”

“Estus, you need to be there. I know it’s awful for you, but you decided to receive the anointment of the Lord, and you are now a disciple of His work. Maybe you’ll understand that in time, but from this day forward, people will look to you for spiritual guidance and support. You can talk like this with me, but if you start saying these sorts of things out there, your baptism can be revoked. You can be excommunicated. So you come with me. You will chant and pray with us, and, by the Light, you will close your goddamn eyes. Now come along!”

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Estus sat and stewed for a prolonged moment. Finally, he stood up, walked over to the lamp and picked it up. "Alright then," he said as he headed back toward the stairs. "That seems a fitting thing to do in the world of misdirection and lies."

Baron put his hand out and stopped him. "I mean it, Estus. Be careful."

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Ivy watched the funeral ceremony from the bottom of the hill, not wanting to cause a distraction. Many other people who were in town also came to offer their respects. The first day of the Harvest Festival was, after all, a time to remember and honor the dead. There was a rather large crowd that stood around the base of the low hill, close enough to bear witness to the event, but far enough away to avoid intruding on the very personal ceremony.

The fire that had been burning since the morning was well fed. It now burned a brilliant, wild yellow and crackled and popped as it threw burning embers into the air to dance on the rising eddies of heat. The body was wrapped in white cloth and lay away from the fire on a wooden platform atop a stone altar.

Jorel spoke beautifully, with such compassion and eloquence. He knew how to speak to humans. Ivy appreciated that. A human conversation, with its quick pacing, interruptions, quick subject changes, and rather exaggerated body language, was difficult for many elves to master. Jorel, who had been with humans every day for many of their generations, spoke that language better than most of the humans under his care.

He spoke about the woman and told stories honoring her life. Jorel's words were beautiful. The human language relied on metaphor and dual meanings much more than the elven tongue, which was very extensive and precise. Ivy had always found the human language lyrical and beautiful, despite its simple structure and tiny vocabulary.

Everyone stood while Jorel led the crowd in a hymn. Ivy took that opportunity to move around to the side and step to the front of the group so she could see. During the hymn, people in the first row stood and walked to the altar. The woman's husband was there, but he seemed lost and disinterested. A large Legionnaire kept tugging him and moving him into place.

There were six of them, four men and two women. Three stood before the altar and three behind it. A young holy sister brought over

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three long poles and gave these to the people on one side. They slid these through the wooden litter and then together they lifted the body and walked toward the fire. The platform caught fire almost immediately, and by the time they set it on the stone columns that surrounded the fire, it and the body were starting to burn. They pulled the long poles out and left them smoldering on the grass.

They continued the hymn.

The man in the guild robe fell to his knees and sat at the edge of the fire until others pulled him up and helped him away. Jorel led the group in a final prayer and it was over.

The pall bearers came back to the altar, discussing something.

The Legionnaire and another country woman were talking with the grieving husband. Ivy moved into the shadows at the side of the shrine.

"No. I'm okay. Baron, no. Let me talk to him."

Soon everyone left, and the husband and woman were alone.

"Listen to me, Estus." She tried to pull him close but he turned away.

"What would Carmen want? Estus? Be honest. What would she want you to do? She was so proud of you. She told everyone how you were going to give the Harvest Benediction. You can't just walk away."

"Why not? It's over. This was hard enough."

"Life is hard, Estus. You don't get to choose what you have to deal with."

"Of course you do."

"No you don't. Listen to me! I won't let you back out of this like a coward. You're not. Carmen would want you there, speaking for her."

"Carmen's dead."

"Oh! Estus, I know that. But she can still see you. Oh, I know you don't think she can, but you need to act as if she could, even if you don't believe. Estus, she's not just your wife. She's my friend, and I'm doing this for her. You can do this. I know you can. I want you to."

"I would have done it for her."

"Then do it for her now. Or do it for me. She and I and everyone are so proud of you. This robe is not just cloth. It means something. You can't let this day be scarred by talk about how you wouldn't honor your own wife on the most important night of your life, when

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you are called on by Jorel to honor the dead. How could you not want to do this?"

He walked away from her, following the crowd. He stopped, looked back at her and held out his hand. "Okay," he said. "Let's go. They'll be waiting for me."

---

In the hills above the Bay of Gelst, a family gathered around the hearth of their little house for the season's celebration. The flickering hearth fire painted wavering shadows on the ceiling and walls while the dim, steady light from the two oil lamps lit the simple room and the fancy sofa that they ordered from Boret last year. Father, with a four year old boy asleep in his lap, led the family in a prayer and then delivered the Harvest Benediction while a modest meal of cornbread and cabbage stew waited ready on the table.

"By the God that is in this family and in all our hearts, I bless this night that brings us together, especially our daughter with her family who are visiting from their home in the South. We pray that the God of Light watch over them while they are here and as they return home."

His son, a young lad of nine asked, "After we eat, can I take them to the bay for the lighting?"

"No," father said. "I think we should all just stay home tonight. You know that we were late with the new property tax last year, and so we weren't allowed to get a travel pass for them. It's better if they just stay here until they're ready to go back. We don't want any trouble with the Teshons."

"Why should we have to hide up here? We haven't done anything wrong."

His brother-in-law answered. "It's not that. It's just that the Teshon guards want to know who's coming and going from the South. If we got caught without a pass they would just assume that we were here to cause trouble. But you should go if you want. We'd rather stay here and visit anyway."

"It's not fair." He took off his faded brown beret and smacked it on his leg.

"Never mind that," Father said. Then he said to his wife, "Go ahead and pass out the memory candles, dear."

Mother moved to the mantle and took down five candles and passed them to her son, daughter, son-in-law, and husband. Then she took hers to one of the lamps on the dinner table and lit it,

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saying, "By the light, I bless the family that gave my husband to the world, who nurtured him and taught him to love, and now waits for us with others in the Light of our Lord."

She took her candle to her husband and lit his. Father said, "By the light, I bless the family that gave my wife to the world and to me. Bless her father, who was taken into the Light last year and who now watches over our family."

His daughter reached over and lit her candle from his. She held it a moment and looked at her husband. She closed her eyes, took a deep, shaky breath, and said, "By the light, I bless the child that I miscarried this year."

Mother gasped and went to her, "Oh, honey. Why didn't you tell us?" She sat on the edge of the sofa and put her arms around her daughter and held her. "Oh, my sweet. Let me hold your candle with you."

"Yes, mama."

With her mother's calming hand around hers, she lit the candle of her husband. He said, "By the light, I bless my dear aunt who helped us so much this year, and now looks after his little soul with God in the Light."

The son stood up from his wooden chair and came over to them and lit his own candle. "Can I do grandpa too?"

Mother nodded.

"By the light, I bless my grandpa who taught me how to whittle a wooden chair and a ball in a cage, and also let me help make the new seat for his wagon."

Father waited a moment, allowing a serene silence to settle over the room until his little grandson's innocent snores led the family to a peaceful acceptance that the coming and going of souls through life is a holy reflection of the Circle of Light which is the soul of man.

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In the church of Gelst, the young guardian elf, Kessel Tol-Rena, led the congregation in "O Holy Light" while two young holy sisters walked down the center aisle and lit the candles of the people on the end. As they sang, the flame was passed from person to person along the rows.

When the final row was lit and the sisters returned to the front, the elf moved to the podium where he waited until the end of the verse. When the song was finished he gestured for everyone to stand.

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“Let us pray.”

As everyone watched their candles he said, “Dear Lord, who fires our souls with the Light of your love, give your blessing to those who have left us to join You. Keep their light alive in our memories as we honor them and all that they left to us. We stand upon their shoulders and are better for having them in our lives. By the Light, we bless them.”

All through the room, quiet blessings were given to parents, grandparents, and friends who had recently passed on. Kessel stood in the front with his head bowed as the murmurs of blessings flowed through the church. Then he held them for some time longer until the echoes of the sniffs and gentle crying were lost in silence.

“Please be seated.”

After a quick rustling, he continued. “On my way here to the church tonight I passed all the families with the children riding the ponies, laughing at the clowns, digging for coins in the sand pile over there. I stopped and got something called a sugar pillow. Now, is that something new? Have any of you had that? Well, with a few diced strawberries and juice it was — what are the kids saying these days? It was diggity!”

The crowd laughed at hearing the ancient priest use such a silly slang word.

“Well, it’s hard sometimes trying to keep up with so many new words, new foods. But you know, life is full of change. So many new faces. Beautiful children. Souls come into this world and then pass on. Families change as babies are born, as the elderly pass into the Light, and as you reach out to bind yourself to another in love. We are all part of the family of God, and this family is also filled with change as the years pass through us. Sometimes we learn that things that seem new and strange really aren’t. Sometimes we are given the gift of tradition, of guidance from elders who will help us understand that we can no more leave the brotherhood of God than our arms could leave our bodies. We have always been one land, and all these new rules and new ways are really the legacy of our grandfathers.”

Someone in the back cleared his throat loudly.

Kessel ignored him and pointed to a man in the front row. “I was just talking about this with Bert from the Mason guild. He had a most beautiful way of explaining it. We start with stone blocks, each one individual, apart, with its own distinct size and shape. When Benok taught us to make mortar to bind the stones into a single wall,

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he was also showing us how two different lands, each one distinct and magnificent on its own, is stronger when joined together with others. Teshon and Gaelon are like two families that are joined through the city of Gelst. We are the mortar that binds these two great lands. Let us, therefore, reach our hands in all directions and remember that the we are all part of a single family.”

Several shifted heavily in their seats and sniffed.

“We must accept and rejoice in the changes that reunite us with our strength and wisdom. All families must endure disagreement from time to time, but such difficulties are fleeting. On this night we honor the past as we honor those who have passed on, and just as this helps us remember the renewal that comes from the birth of new souls and marriages, let us now remember that the bond of these two great lands will lead to a deeper harmony and love for all.”

Several more people cleared their throats loudly. Two men in the back got up and left.

“The choir will now sing God’s Will Be Done.”

As the choir began singing, six more stood and moved to the exit.

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“What lies before us.”

Estus stood on the small platform and surveyed the crowd before him. Some two hundred people sat or stood in the clearing next to the river. They had been moving toward this area ever since dusk. Now, gathered under glowing lanterns that were hung from trees and propped up on tall sticks, they waited in reverent silence for the Harvest Benediction.

It was night now. The tall Harvest Torch burned brightly at the right side of the small stage and cast a glow that deepened the far away shadows and washed the muddy, trampled grass with a monochrome hue. It left Estus feeling detached, apart not only from the crowd, but from his own body, as if he were merely observing instead of participating in this moment. The crowd seemed to stand still, like unreal flesh statues, empty husks that managed to live day after day filled with a soft pabulum reality that, even now, beckoned to him.

The funeral had been real enough. Estus was now definitely on the other side of a gateway to this new, tainted world. She was gone. Nothing more could be said or done to comfort her. All that was left was a glaring emptiness and the sour selfishness of sorrow. Beyond

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lies a deeper acceptance, Estus kept telling himself. There are no answers and none are needed. Life is change. Estus tried to wring some type of comfort from these simple facts.

Earlier that afternoon, he had written down a memory. In his pocket were words, tangible and real, which defied the pyre and still lived. It was just a sentence: "Knitting on the kitchen chair." He would fill in more details later. It was a memory from three days after they were married. The excitement of the wedding was transforming through their honeymoon into a new routine. That was the moment that he first realized his life was changed forever. This person would be a part of him, would be with him from that moment forward, and for the first time this did not make him afraid or nervous, but calm as he had never been before, as he had never known he could be.

As he watched everyone watching him, that memory seemed more real than the present from which he had become so carefully detached. Jorel had written a simple speech for Estus, but they were not his words. He knew, basically, what he had to say. He had heard Harvest Benedictions on this spot every year of his life. He knew what he was expected to say, and he knew what he wanted to say. Somewhere in the middle were the words that he spoke that night. They came easily to him, as if he were alone, walking in the wilderness, thinking private thoughts.

"What lies before us? The thin whisper of tomorrow, held delicately in our troubled hands, a vision of now folded through time. There is only this instant and the next. All else is an illusion remembered or the unknown fog of fantasies yet to come true. But we're not alone in this shifting, elusive instant. We are joined by love through countless lives fading into the forgotten past and far ahead into the future. We become waves measuring this great ocean of time.

"We are pushed, crumpled and scared, into the light of this world. And just as certainly, we will be pushed from our brief instant into someone else's memory as we enter the Light of God.

"Those memories are what connect us, weaving meaning into this otherwise chaotic and uncertain existence. Who are we, and what matters? We must each answer that in our own way.

"Tonight, as our crops lie cut and dying, waiting to become food for months to come, the past will be reborn through us, making a new world. We are both a reflection and a reformer. Tonight we look back to those who have left us. We honor them with our memories

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and our love, which keeps a part of them alive in this world. And then tomorrow, as young girls step forward to give their lives to the sisterhood of God, as new babies are affirmed in the light, and as new guildsmen take their first communion, we carry the Light forward to leave our own legacy for others to remember.

“By the god that is in me and touches us all, I bless and honor this Harvest Festival. Let us rejoice together as a single family. Let us always draw toward the Light of God so that His light will shine in our hearts as it does in heaven.”

With that final cue, the choir began singing “O Holy Light,” and Estus stepped down. He felt weak and angry for allowing himself to be used to carry words that held no meaning for him. He wished that they could touch him the way they touched other people, for they were, after all, simple, beautiful sentiments. He was shaking, as if cold.

Jorel walked over to the Harvest Torch and pulled it from the ground. He carried it away, and the crowd fell into step behind him, following him to the river and singing.

Estus scanned the crowd looking for Anoria. His eyes stopped on a beautiful woman elf. Seeing her made him think about their expansive life span, and this made the brief instant that was Carmen’s life seem even more tragic. This thought sank slowly and unforgivingly into his mind, beckoning his bitter grief.

He turned away and stepped off the small platform and into Anoria’s waiting embrace.

“That was nice,” she told him.

“Is it what they wanted to hear?” he asked with a shaky voice.

“It was short, and I think everyone appreciated that. You did very well, Estus. Thank you.”

With their arms on each other’s backs, and their other hands held together before them, Estus and his sister fell into the procession that took them between the haunting harmonies of the choir and the rippling churn of the dark river.

Jorel led the procession to a large bend in the river where the water ran shallow over a wide bank. He stopped and planted the large harvest torch next to the two barrels where holy sisters were handing out small paper boats and little candles.

One by one, they were all given a boat and candle, and as Jorel lit their candle with the flame from a slender oil lamp, they spoke the name of a lost loved one. As they approached, Estus felt Anoria lean heavier on him, and his march became heavy and deliberate. His

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body still shook, and every step was another horrid hammer pounding the unrelenting words, never again, never again.

Carmen knitting in the kitchen chair. Her fingers on his neck the night he first kissed her. The kick of their baby and the taste of her mouth when they were together.

Never again.

Estus took his hand from Anoria's grasp and reached out to take a little flat bottomed paper boat from the young woman.

"To hold the light of God," she said.

Anoria answered with a soft, strained voice, "Bless the Holy Fire."

Estus passed the boat to his sister, and after a few more heavy steps, took a candle from the other holy sister and placed it into the boat.

They carried these items to Jorel, leaning on each other, sharing their warmth against the chilly night wind that tugged at the little yellow flame of Jorel's torch.

Then, as they stood before him, Anoria looked up to Estus, questioning. He looked into the deep dancing shadows that painted the pain of her eyes. He nodded, and Anoria's face twisted and then relaxed. Estus rubbed his hand on her back, and Jorel put his hand on her shoulder.

As Jorel lowered his torch, lighting the candle, Anoria said, "For Carmen." Then they moved on, following the others toward the river.

They stopped walking and Estus took his hand from around her back so he could hold the boat. As he was lowering the boat into the river, he heard the voice of his niece, Elia. He froze. "For the baby."

Estus bowed his head and closed his eyes over a sudden flush of warm tears. He felt Anoria's hand on his shoulder, and when he opened his eyes, he saw the river filled with the flickering flames of dozens of candle boats.

He turned around and held his hand out to Elia. He took her hand and together they walked to the edge and set their paper boats on the water where they spun, bumped, and drifted away on the current.

He picked her up and carried her to the end of the shallow bank, never taking his eyes off Carmen's light. Her arms draped around his neck, and her weight fell limp on his arm while the river ran, the choir sang, and his love's light became lost in the glow of so many wandering souls.

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Lennel Gareth woke to the choking dryness of sand and salt in the darkness of Harvest Eve's waning dusk. His arms and legs were clenched into a tight suit of pain, but he managed to crawl from the sand onto a patch of pine needles in the shade.

Salt had crusted onto his lips and in his nose and hair. He forced himself to stand and face the wild sea that heaved wave after wave onto the abandoned twilight shore, hissing and rumbling in his ears. The lump two hundred yards away turned out to be his trousers. They too were stiff from sun baked sea salt, but he pulled them on and began walking south along the beach.

One thought consumed him. He had lost his command. Fletcher would most likely continue north to Merebor, load up with timber and grains before returning south. Gareth would have to make his own way to his home port in Korolem, wait for Fletcher, and hope that the new Captain of the *Autarkic Maiden* would relinquish his post. Guild rules were explicit on this. Once there is a transfer of command, the new captain, by whatever circumstances, gains full authority, even if the old captain washes up alive on a coast somewhere. The guild would no doubt approve Fletcher's field advancement to Captain. Even if Gareth did see his brigantine again, and was able to convince Fletcher to find some other vessel to command, he was now a fugitive from the Teshon Legion, and they could very well influence certain leaders in the Merchant's Guild, even in the southern reaches of Gaelon.

From the stars and the costal current that he knew so well, he figured that he was about halfway between Norgelan and Gelst. There was a small river that fed into a tiny bay near here where he would often stop and take on water if he had reason to avoid large controlled ports. He guessed it would be less than a day's walk, and so he followed the coast, walking on the soft muddy sand with waves washing over his ankles.

He walked with his head up, comforted by his guiding stars. Soon he was breathing hard, and his legs became heavier and weaker. He pushed himself onward. His back began to ache as if his muscles were in a vice tightening with each step. Images came to

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him of his friends, of his years at sea. He remembered the day Grant Fletcher came on board so many years ago. Bodie Challuk's fifth birthday party.

Little scenes ran through his mind like images reflected off the many facets of a large gem that rose and fell to the rhythm of a woman's breath. He remembered the fight he had with Merna's drunken husband years ago, and the filthy, but true, accusations that had been made. His funeral. The sparkle of candlelight that glittered off the ruby that rested between her breasts.

Images twirled and flitted in and out of him like a wild merry-go-round, and at the center always one person, with kind eyes and a plume of silver gray hair.

He rested, sometimes moving up the beach to the trees where he would chew on leaves and spit them out so he could savor the sensation of something wet inside his mouth. What little he swallowed didn't make him as sick as he feared, but he was not yet desperate enough to try eating something that might make him throw up and lose even more water. He kept walking through the sea's rolling froth. He felt as if he were drawing energy from its tireless churn, as if the waves were clearing a path for him, making his journey easier.

He wanted to stop, but his desperate need to drink would not relent. His belly fat held enough water for at least another day, he kept telling himself. As the hours went by, he kept waiting for the moment when his body would fail, and he would have to exercise his will to move his bruised muscles forward. He filled his mind with hopeful images so that they would be there when the ultimate moment of struggle would come. He imagined silly things, like growing wings or being bathed by a harem of buxom women. He tried giving them names and imagining the ideal beauty, but only one face, one form, kept coming forward to comfort him and ease him in his desperate fantasy.

He was tougher than he had expected and was a little surprised that his moment of exhaustion never came. There was only the dull, throbbing ache of his legs, shoulders, and his lower back. He waited for the pain to become unbearable, so that he could will himself onward. It became a sort of game, wondering which step would be the one that would take him to that limit. Hours continued to pass. Stars continued to spin through the night sky. He kept a slow, steady pace, never forcing himself to walk too fast. With his eyes staring

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forward and unfocused on the division of stars and sea, Captain Gareth just kept walking and remembering.

He looked up and spoke to the gallery of starlight with the rumble of his wheezing voice. "I guess you'll have to be my fire tonight." Waves washed cool over his feet that pulled him onward step by inevitable step. He cleared his throat. "By the Holy Light that is in me, I bless all the years I lost without her. I bless the love that I never thought I needed, but always had."

"Love," he said. It was a terrible confession that felt strange and warm in his mouth. "Love," he said again. Such a terrifying hope, he thought. But that no longer mattered.

"By the light, I bless the *Maiden*."

"I've been through an awful lot with her. A lot of years. Now that I have to look at it like this, it's the only place I really ever felt at home. And now, God help me, I don't know what to do. I guess I always knew that, but here, away from her, why does it hurt so much? I never thought it would feel like this."

A smile bent his cracked, salty lips. "She's so beautiful, really. There in the early morning with the ocean waves painting a backdrop for her. What a sad, lonely kind of passion that no man should ever have to face. And she doesn't belong to me, so what can I do? Can I dare try to take her, to be at home where I know I can be at peace? What am I if I can't be with her?"

On this night, one was supposed to honor the dead, those who have passed on into God's light. But Captain Gareth felt as if he had been the one to cross over, leaving behind a sadness that he assumed he should feel, but couldn't. In its place was a grim acceptance, and a doorway to a part of his wandering soul that he could no longer ignore.

He walked throughout the night, resting when he could, chewing leaves when he could no longer endure the clench of his arid throat. He began to limp when the ache in his hips grew deeper. Slowly his mind and legs and his knotted, burning shoulders faded into a timeless void that lost all meaning and context until he felt nothing, knew nothing, but the pain of mechanical, endless shuffle steps.

Time passed while his stars pulled the sky around him. He felt a change in the air just as he looked up and noticed that the trees, instead of being lost in the shadow of hidden stars, now held a faint outline against a sky that would soon hold the nascent luster of dawn. The scent of fresh water, something he never thought had

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much of an odor at all, filled his senses. He could feel it on his skin. He pulled himself toward the trees and followed the sound of running water until he came to the banks of the tiny forest brook.

He waded in, fell to his knees and drank as the cold, clear, forest water splashed against his face. He drank deeply until the muscles of his churning stomach forced it all out with a fit of gagging and coughing. And then he drank again. It washed away the salt from his hair, his beard, and from his clothes. It cooled the sunburn on his neck and arms. It pulled the throbbing cramps from his muscles, and cleansed the stink of his body. Water. Fresh water.

The man of salt air and sea, revived by the river, stood finally, and laughed with empty abandon. The river. Of course, the river. He walked inland against the slow, chest deep current of the small stream. Water. So simple. Fresh and clean and waiting for him all this time.

The stream made a perfect path through the dense woods. The ground was soft beneath his feet, and it lifted his body so he was almost floating. He moved inland slowly, winding through the back and forth bends of the river until he saw a little bridge ahead.

Where there was a bridge there would be a road, and so he pulled himself out of the water, climbed up the dirt bank, and sat down. And suddenly, as if on cue, he noticed that the forest was alive with the sound of waking birds and the songs of crickets and frogs. He waited, listening with sleepy joy, feeling both exhausted and invigorated, while all around him the world melted from formless shadows and hidden shapes, becoming a sanctuary alive with life and color.

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Gavin, leaning on the starboard bow, felt the misty wind pulling at his open jacket, just as it pulled against the sails and moved the *Autarkic Maiden* through the dancing darkness of the early morning sea with an ambling, rhythmic pitch. He watched the eastern dawn reveal streaks of ruddy clouds that wrapped themselves around the horizon, while behind him the creaking cry of seagulls accompanied the somber sounds of the funeral preparations on the main deck.

Footsteps approached behind him, and he turned to see Davis, with Cody in tow. They stood together for a bit, sharing the calm of the morning beneath the fluttering jibs.

Finally Davis broke the silence. "We need to help them. Or at least offer."

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Cody added, "They're splitting some of the barrels for the fire. We could do that at least."

They fell back into an uncomfortable silence, unsure how to fit in, afraid of crossing over some boundary and doing more harm than good, and so they waited together out of the way. Soon the matter was resolved for them. Grant Fletcher came up the narrow steps and said, "Muster below, men. You three will help lower the raft."

He looked as if he had not slept since the battle with the Teshon ships over a day ago. They went down to the main deck while the first officer took their place. Fletcher turned his back to them, peering straight out along the bowsprit.

When they approached the raft, the other sailors quietly indicated that they should help load the split wood onto the pile. When that was finished, Scotty Miggs, showing no indication of yesterday's incident, placed the three of them in position with six other men from the crew. Gavin and Cody held onto ropes that would lift the raft, and Davis was with a team that would pull it and position it over the edge.

There they waited. A silent crew, standing now at attention.

The good wind held, and the small brigantine plowed a steady course north. The men held their positions while the day's usual din was lost to the serene sounds of the sea and sails. Every squeak of timber or whip of a sail was clearly audible above the gentle thunder of their hull splitting the sea. They continued in silence for a handful of minutes until the sun rose from the water and bathed them in brilliant bright.

Fletcher turned and faced his crew. He raised his hand.

The air was suddenly filled with the sound of pulleys and rope and thick canvas moving and straining into furled position. With the sails away, the brig became nearly still, rolling side to side as she settled out of her stride. The wind now blew against them, rumbling through the ropes and the crew.

The first officer came down from the bow deck and approached a small box. He opened it and took out Captain Gareth's neatly folded dress uniform. He brought this over to the small makeshift raft and set it down with nearly steady hands.

Still kneeling, he took off his hat and placed it under his arm. He picked up the captain's hat and stood.

The early sun painted his grim, tight face with heavy shadows.

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It was the captain's duty to preside over the ascension of a lost brother of the sea, and so, with his eyes held glassy, locked on the raft, he lifted the captain's hat and placed it upon his head. Two quick strides took him to Miggs. He placed his first officer's hat upon the young lieutenant's head.

Captain Fletcher returned to his position and took his guild book from one of the men.

He read, "In the light of a new day, the fallen shall ride upon a boat of fire, and their fire will blend with the light of God that shines within us and burn the memory of their courage upon our minds. And then their fire will be drawn into the sea, and their energy will drive the waves, and their souls will fill our sails with fair winds." He closed the book.

"Those of you who knew Captain Gareth understand that I could never capture in words my deep respect and devotion to him. We will repair his *Maiden*. We will fill her hold with cargo and return home. Let us each day attempt to deserve the honor of walking upon the deck that was built and commanded by the finest sea Captain since Benok himself. In his honor, we light this fire to join his body in the gentle arms of the deep."

The fire was lit. They lifted the raft and pulled it over the edge. They lowered it and stood at attention as it drifted slowly away and became a magnificent pyramid of flame and black smoke on the dark water.

No one spoke.

Fletcher gave a quiet command to Miggs, who cried out, "Full sail!"

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Estus sat up in bed, roused by the jolt of a bitter dream that quickly faded into wisps of fluttering sadness. In its place was a sudden sting of feeling lost and disoriented.

Slowly his memory replaced the strange surroundings with the shape of his sister's house. He was in Devin's bedroom. Today was another ceremony, another ordeal. He pushed the covers back and stood up onto the squeaky old floor. Fatigue pulled at him, urging him back to sleep, and had he been home with a warm wife that he could hold, he would have wanted to sleep. But with haunting, forgotten nightmares waiting to return, he could not.

He pulled on trousers and an undershirt and walked through the sleeping house. Devin was asleep on the couch. He walked to the

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doorway of Elia's room and looked in on her. The room was silent and serene. Only pretty dreams for her. Only innocence and smiles, as soft as her hair. She was curled up in a moonbeam, lying on her side, holding her blanket close with an arm wrapped around her plush rag doll.

The image of his sweet niece tugged at his stoic resolve. She breathed as his daughter never would. The vision pounced on him with a savage force, and he turned away, his face suddenly awash in agony. He went with bare feet out of the house and walked through the wet morning grass with his hand over his eyes and his mind swirling with unfocused, boiling misery. Reality and understanding were safe harbors far away.

His hand slid up to grab his hair in desperation. He walked away from the house, pulling himself from any eyes and sleeping ears, and when he was alone he stepped into the trees and shuffled through the bitter mulch of soggy leaves.

What else could he lose, he wondered. All his life he had struggled to fill the vapid charade of the world around him with his own inner creed. Whatever faith, or beauty, or love that he had ever held had been taken from him, leaving him heavy and useless in the saccharine shadow world of the elves. His heart was an empty husk full of tinny echoes where once had thrived hope.

Next to him a cricket began its quick, rhythmic chirping. He stood up, knowing that his grief still loomed ahead, waiting for him with all its fangs and poison claws, but now the only thing on his mind was the song of the cricket, and the call of the birds, and the color of the glowing dawn sky. Estus stood and left the cricket to praise the morning, knowing that even the little bug, in its way, cherished its own life, and would just as surely lose it to the merciless hand of time. He walked, and after a few minutes found himself on the road leading to the church where he had been burned two days ago.

This was the day of his first communion. As a marked child of God he would now be allowed to take the Light of God into his own body by drinking the wine that glowed with holy essence. It was another knot in the net that covered the land with ritual and mystery. What could be achieved, Estus wondered, if humans were taught to own their minds, rather than forfeit them to the whim of elven fairy tales?

He came into view of the church. It was bathed in a silvery fog of rising dew. Somewhere in there were copies of all the guild books,

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with all the secrets of all the trades. In the sanctum were the answers to all of his questions. There would even be copies of the holiest of crafts, magic. Would Jorel be able to stop him if he went in determined to carry out those books and put them where anyone could read them?

He went to the garden in front of the church and sat on the stone bench under the apple tree. He looked at the church, and what he felt most was curiosity. Why did such a thing have to exist? He felt alone and desperate. How could they be made to understand? How could he convince them to want to own their own lives, and expand their capabilities and knowledge as far as possible?

His thoughts were interrupted by voices coming out of the church. Jorel was talking with the elf woman that was at the Harvest Benediction last night. They stood in the doorway, neither of them seeing Estus. Their voices carried through the dense morning air.

"You still don't see it, Ivy, do you? This is what's best for them. They're not ready yet for what you want."

"I thought I taught you better than that, Jojo. Your family just doesn't understand humans the way we do. But how could you, the way you treat them? You need clay, not brick. And now Andor's about to overplay his hand. You know we can't let Andor's war go on without playing our role."

"Your role? Are you sure you're not overplaying your hand, Ivy?"

She smiled, and leaned in and gave him a very familiar kiss on the mouth. "Don't worry about me, Kopel. Just tend to your flock and I'll tend to Boret. I'll see you on my way back."

She came down the steps and almost went past Estus when she suddenly noticed him.

She stopped.

"I liked your speech last night. How are you doing?"

"What did you mean, 'the way you treat them'?"

She sat down next to Estus, and instead of answering his question, she leaned over to him, turned, and pulled him into a close embrace. He was shocked at first, and uncomfortable, but as she continued to hold him, he became acutely aware of the feeling of her body against his. She was supple and soft, and had a sweet scent of some exotic spice. She held him and put her hand behind his head, supporting him, pulling him closer. Soon he relaxed and let his arms surround her with a hungry intimacy. She leaned her head against his, and he could feel her warm breath on his neck. Tears tickled his

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eyes and his throat tightened up, as if we wanted to cry. But there could be no tears with the sense of love and healing that touched him through her satin skin and cradling hands. He felt warm, secure, and understood.

She stayed with him, holding him, letting him hold her, until he felt as though some color had returned to his washed-out watercolor world. Finally she pulled away, smiled, and wiped away tears that he did not even know covered his cheeks.

She sat close with her hand on his shoulder. "Something tells me you know exactly what I meant." She had an unfamiliar accent that sounded both regal and remarkably casual. "But don't worry about that now. Take care, and whatever happens, you must allow yourself to live each day with unashamed joy." Then she leaned in and whispered, "And never let anyone treat you that way."

She kissed him on the cheek, stood up, and left him. He allowed himself the unashamed joy of watching her body as she left the garden, and a smile broke ever-so-gently on his lips.

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In her dreams the magic always had such vivid colors. Addy stretched and opened her eyes, but soon the rhythm of the horse drew her back to sleep while she nestled safe between Mister Bodie's thick arms. She dreamed about the box of gold, covered in brilliant red power magic, and her father, who wore a pale blue aura that glowed behind him. It was odd seeing him, because she knew he was gone. But in the dream it seemed so right that he should be there, working the mule team on his farm.

She dreamed that she was flying, carried by the magic fibers that ran through the world and would carry you if you could bend them down.

Then a flash of powerful green engulfed her dream, washing everything in a beacon of looking magic.

It happened again and she woke up. When she was awake, she couldn't see the colors, but she could feel the magic stirring like a vivid memory.

It happened again. She bolted suddenly upright.

"Magic is here," she said. It was all around, and so powerful she could almost smell it. Again it swept across them, and she could feel its intensity surround them. She threw her leg over the horse's mane, dropped to the ground and disappeared into the woods.

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She heard Mister Bodie calling after her, but soon, men were coming out of the trees after him. He dug his heels into the side of his horse and bolted along the road. Legionnaires emerged, chasing him with fresh, strong horses. They quickly moved in front of him, cutting him off.

Adrian ran up the hill into the woods where she fell down behind a tree and watched the struggle below. Her mind became instantly still, because it had to be quiet inside to call the magic colors. Silver was light magic color. From the place that wasn't up, or down, or inside or out, but somehow felt silver, she let the color in, and it filled her mind with the tingle of its familiar itchy power. The color waited for her until she thought of the water, flowing from her toes up through her body and out of the back of her head. If she thought of water and told the color it was okay to glow inside her skin, she could make it happen.

Lying very still, she looked down and saw that her legs and clothes were now clear, like water. If she didn't move, they couldn't see.

So she didn't move.

In one quick motion, Bodie drew his sword and brought it down on the man to his right. His blade hit the steel of the Legionnaire's sword. He brought his sword up and tried to slice down along the man's neck, but this was also blocked. He tried to turn, but more Legionnaires had moved in behind, hooves pounding the soft dirt.

After the block, the soldier grabbed Bodie's hand and brought his sword around in a fast, fierce arc into Bodie's chest, smacking him with the flat of the blade. At that moment the other soldier grabbed hold of Bodie's horse and held it still.

She felt more magic, magic that felt like the color of sunshine that was called to the flying cords. It lifted Bodie off his horse and into the air. More men in red Legion jackets closed in and took his weapons while he hung helpless in the air.

They were hurting him. She wanted to scream or run to help him, but she dare not move. She had to keep her mind still because eyes from below kept looking up at the woods, right on her, right through her wispy, transparent image.

The magician moved his hands and brought Bodie down close to the ground where he was tied and put in leg irons. Only after he was fully secured did the wizard end his spell.

Bodie fell to the ground.

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An elf, wearing a long cloak and dark priest garb approached. He lifted his shiny black boot, kicked Bodie's chin up and forced the thick heel into his throat.

Adrian felt herself seething with impotent fury. She heard them speaking below.

"This is what we're going to do to your precious Gelst, Mister Challuk. Neck by neck by stubborn neck."

Bodie managed to push grunting words past the crushing sting of the boot, "You can't control all of us, Andor. We are free men."

He lifted his foot from Bodie's throat and said, "None of you are free, Mister Challuk. If you could see that, you would not be the murdering bastard that you think makes you noble."

"We are as free as we choose to be," Bodie continued.

Now the elf knelt down and put his face close to Bodie's.

"Yes! It's about choice, and there you have already lost. You see, you must convince men to die, but we have only to convince them to be kind, and then they will give us as much of your sacred freedom as we want. But we will fight, because that is your way, and we will win, and your children's great-grandchildren will never have to know what awful things you made us do."

The elf moved away and Legionnaire soldiers pulled Bodie to his feet, put a cover over his head, and wrapped a chain around his waist to guide him while he walked in the middle of the entourage.

Adrian waited a long time after they were gone before letting her magic fade. She stood up. Grass was stuck to her cheek, and her long dark hair had come all undone and fell in a sloppy mess behind her tiny shoulders.

She stepped slowly, as quietly as she could, down the hill to the road. She twirled, looking all around, wanting desperately to cry and run away, but she forced herself still. All she heard were the calls of some birds and the rush of the river on the other side of the road. She had to get away, hide, find the Broken Wing pub that Bodie had told her so much about. Panic loomed over her, ready to pounce, but she clenched her jaw and wouldn't dare let it close, because there was only one thing she could count on now, and that was being country tough like her daddy taught her.

A single-minded focus pulled her toward the wide Mundela river. A drink, just a drink to make the awful jitters and shaking go away. Crying was for babies.

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Like her papa always told her, life is only hard if we let it be. "It don't matter whatever happen, punkin, but what you just gotta pull your head up and get a goin'."

The river trickled and bubbled nearby. Adrian crawled over to the bank and lay down so she could reach her hand down into the fast moving water. She pulled the cold water up to her mouth, and for that moment thought of nothing but the taste of the sparkling, forest fresh water.

The cold felt good in her mouth. She rinsed and spit, and drank again, feeling it cool her mouth and soothe her strained throat until her stomach no longer wanted to gag and jump. A memory got stuck in her head of sitting on her papa's lap once after she scraped her knee. He had carried her to the stream and held her while he rinsed her owie with water that was cold like this.

She made the awful mistake of wanting him to be with her now, because when he was there, so big, like a safe tent, it was okay to close your eyes. What if he could hold her now, and put his big daddy arms around her and help her? A battle waged in her for a moment. She wanted to let herself be afraid, but there was no time for that. She just needed to take another quick drink and get moving again. But it was too hard, and she gave in just a tiny bit, and when she did she rolled away from the bank into a tight little ball, biting down on that awful, mean lump in her throat.

What if it was okay to cry just a little bit? What if it wasn't always selfish and weak? What if he didn't have to be the only person she could ever count on, and go and let himself be killed like he didn't matter? Her sobs came as coughing, choking spasms, making her throat hurt and her face feel all flushed and nasty.

The panic drew closer as she relived the elf and all those men hurting Bodie and leaving her alone. Images shattered through her mind. Images of shiny boots, of brutal magic, of happy mud-covered feet, and riding on his big shoulders. Connecting them all together, like a necklace of broken glass, was the constant, burning, unsatisfied need to be held so she could cry like she wanted, and not have to groan and spit into the dirty ground.

Still crying, she made herself stand up as tall as her little body could, and the green forest light revealed her skinny legs, her dirty shorts and torn country shirt. She held her arms tight at her sides and her hands clasped in front of her, waiting for the fear to stop making her body shake, while she listened again for any sound of horse or man. There was no sound. She was alone. Alone and afraid,

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but country tough. Finally she pushed her baby crying away and began walking, following the road toward Gelst.

Her eyes shined with warm tears, but they didn't count. It only counts if crying makes your throat hurt. Anyone there would have seen a terrified, frail little girl with a trembling chin, but she didn't know any better. She didn't know that the ache that pounded through her soul was what other people call loneliness. Little Adrian just thought this was how you feel in a big scary forest on a cold morning, when people bend the world with powerful magic and hurt your friend and take him away in chains.

Her tears made little marks through the dirt on her face, but they didn't count. She didn't want to think about them. She just had to keep walking, because even though she dare not think of it, deep down where she was most afraid, she knew that in Gelst there would be somebody who could hold her.

## CHAPTER NINE

From offstage Estus could hear Jorel's muted words leading the congregation in prayer. Estus stood between Parker Shaw and Jonathan Travers. Six other guildsmen waited with them while the Holy Sisters prepared the candles and the serving cart. Estus watched their quiet, practiced movements. The two elder sisters fussed over the small details and directed the others with hushed voices. Mirella was there, of course, as were three younger women who had come to the church last year. Estus had seen them around during his training and preparations for the past few months.

Most of the men were praying silently and making the mark of the circle around their heart, preparing themselves to take the divine aura of God into their bodies. Estus stood numb and apart, consumed with sardonic indifference while he watched Mirella Jaynes work. She kept checking the robes of the men, straightening collars, folding cuffs just so. Several times her eyes darted around the room, meeting Estus's eyes for just an instant before moving on. When he wasn't watching her he felt her attention on him. She had become one of Carmen's closest friends during her pregnancy and had become a regular visitor to their home. But it was Karen, the youngest Holy Sister, only eighteen, with freckles on her round cheeks, who came to check Estus's robe and collar and fuss over his hair.

When the tower bell began ringing, Karen opened the door and they filed onto the dais behind Jorel, standing in a half circle with Estus on the end. The church was filled. People sat close together on the benches. Women held small children on their laps, and many people stood along the back. It was muggy and too warm. Several people fanned themselves with their hats or papers.

The holy guildsmen stood in their positions until the tower bell ceased its distant clamor. Jorel continued standing as the men sat on their hard wooden chairs amid sounds of shuffling, sniffs, and a cooing baby.

The elf spoke. "The Lord fills our souls with light. This is something we feel as surely as we feel the warmth of the sun. But when Benok came to bring the truth that we are all radiant beings, it

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was difficult for him to explain, and so God granted him the miracle of the communion. In the darkness of a harvest night many lives ago, the people of the first holy village feasted on their bountiful crops, and drank their fresh redberry wine until they became wild and wanton."

Estus let his thoughts wander. Two ideas crowded his mind. First was anger at himself for allowing Anoria to convince him to go through with this ceremony, but that rested as a rough backdrop to the real issue, which was how could he get out of this. Twice his leg and back muscles tightened as he came close to just standing up and walking out. But twice he forced himself to sit still and listen.

"And so Benok jumped up onto the table amid their sinful play. He grabbed one of the wine bottles and held it up. 'Behold the light of God.' And it began to glow, stronger than the moon, stronger than the candles and torches. The wine glowed brighter and brighter until it hurt the eyes to look upon it. 'Who will taste the luminance of God?' he cried."

The heavy cotton fabric of his cloak felt scratchy and stiff on his skin. He wanted to fidget. He wanted to run. But he felt all of their eyes on him. They were watching him, praying for him, waiting for the Holy Light to enter him and make him forget the pain of his harsh and meaningless loss. They were waiting for him to sanctify their fallacy. If he, the doubter, the skeptic, could drink the Lord's Light and then look upon them with that horrid expression of vapid serenity, they could bow, circle their hearts, and get on with the rest of their day, eating their mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie and never thinking about what a silly game it all is.

He tried not to show the rising disgust of his own weakness that compelled him to go along quietly. He watched as Jorel began chanting magic words over the large carafe. The red wine began to glow, filling the room with a reddish brilliance and throwing shadows on the walls. Soon it was bright enough that it easily burned purple spots on the eyes of anyone who dared to look directly upon the Lord's Light.

Jorel poured the liquid into delicate gold goblets, and the Holy Sisters brought these to the guildsmen in turn. One by one they served the men, tipping the glass so each could drink while making a circle with his hands. When they drank, the liquid glowed bright through their cheeks and was faintly visible in their necks.

Finally it was his turn.

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Mirella Jaynes walked toward him. The light from the glass lit her face and cast her shadow, large and looming, on the far wall. Finally their eyes met. He blinked, and what he saw in her face, through trails of purple and green from where he had watched the glowing glass, made him sick for what he was about to do. This was important to her. She was not just bringing him a drink. She was ready to pour her God into his throat, and when Estus saw the look of satisfaction in her beaming, trusting eyes, he knew he could not lie to her. Released from the veil of Carmen's expectations, he could refuse to endorse the lie that had pulled Mirella from him.

When the glass touched his lips, he put his hands on hers and pulled the glass away.

"No," he said. "I won't do this."

A murmur broke through the crowd and became a rustle.

Mirella looked hurt and confused. Jorel came over and put his arms around the both of them. He took the glass and said to Estus, but loud enough so others could hear. "I understand. It's too soon for this. Carrying the light is a joyful, but heavy burden."

It was exactly the right thing to say to quiet the wagging tongues. Who else but an elf would know the burden of carrying the light? But to Estus it was just another lie, and Jorel's easy manipulation transformed his passive disgust into active, focused anger. He nearly kept that anger in check until he saw, standing quiet and proud in the back of the crowd, the elf woman who had sat with him earlier that morning. She watched with a curious smile on her face, and that settled his resolve.

He smiled, finally at peace, and said, "Please. Let me try again." Jorel looked at him with gentle but seething eyes, and then he looked for a long moment precisely at the spot where he had cut Estus with the hatchet. Then he smiled and returned the glowing glass to Estus.

He raised the glass, as if for a toast, and said, "This is wine. This is not God. Light and fire are not God." He turned to Jorel and said, "A white hot branding iron is not God."

In the audience, Anoria leaned forward and put her face into her hands.

He continued, "I know it is not customary to speak here, but I need to be honest with you and admit that God has not yet called me to carry the light. I will carry truth, and knowledge, and my craft, because those are the things that I feel called upon to carry. But this," he said again, "is just wine."

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Estus turned the glass and poured the wine onto the stone floor. It spread, and its light grew faint as it flowed into a large puddle. This time what surged through the congregation was no murmur, but a wave of shock, anger, and disbelief. Some were standing. The reaction of the crowd pulled him beyond reason. Now his disgust was turned on them and their adoration of the cage in which they lived.

He turned to Jorel and met his patient, condescending stare with fierce eyes. He looked to his friend Jonathan Travers, to Parker Shaw, to the young Legionnaire Lieutenant, daring one of them to speak, to say something to resolve the situation. He would have welcomed their anger, or even attempts to drag him away. Anything would have been better than their uncomfortable, strained silence as they waited for Jorel to do something.

Estus threw the glass onto the floor near Jorel's feet, shattering the finely crafted chalice. "And you," he said, stepping close to the elf. "I don't know what you are."

He walked down the center aisle in complete silence broken only by the rustling of his heavy, stiff robe.

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Captain Lennel Gareth, barefoot and tired, limped along the road between the wagon ruts that cut a path through the wildflowers and tall grass. Despite the weariness in his legs and back, his steps felt light and easy. The world no longer pressed upon his back, and he walked with careful unhurried steps with a joy that he had not known for years. Always there was some place to be, some problem to solve, some responsibility to fulfill. But now, there was only the sound of the air waltzing through he trees, the calls of birds and crickets and frogs, and so many shades of green, from almost black to almost yellow. The sun, always bare and bright on the ocean, wove shafts of sparkling color through the leaves, drawing out the forest's muddy scent.

The sound of a horse and the rattle of a wagon grew behind him. He stopped and looked back at the curved path. A couple moments later he the saw the horse, the wagon, and their driver. As they approached the driver pulled to a stop, because Gareth was still standing in the road.

"You okay, mister?"

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Gareth looked up and said, "Well no, sir. I'm a bit far from okay. I don't supposed you'd give an old man a ride into town would you?"

The driver looked him over and said, "Where's your shoes?"

"My shoes are in the ocean."

He held the reins and considered that. He sniffed, coughed, and spit. "Where you going?"

"I just need to get to Gelst. I don't suppose you've heard of the Broken Wing Pub? I need to talk to a fellow, Bodie Challuk, or his mother."

"You a friend of Bodie? How do you know him?"

"I've known him since he was a boy." Gareth thought for a moment. With the worries of the past days replaced by a sense of calm and abandon, he added, "I've been helping him acquire some much needed tools, and that, you see, is why I have no shoes."

"Well, that don't make no sense, but if you're a friend of Bodie I'll get you some shoes and whatever else you need."

"Thank you, sir. Thank you very much. Of course I have nothing to offer you except a story that you might find interesting on your journey."

"I suppose that'll have to do until I get to my uncle's farm to load up. Hop on."

Two hours later, penniless, dirty, and wearing ill-fitting borrowed clothes, Gareth swung himself out of the wagon, biting back the soreness that still pulled every muscle tight with a pounding ache. He steadied himself by holding onto the large wheel and said, "Are you sure you won't come in and let me thank you with a drink?"

"No thanks, Captain," the driver answered. "Those damn Teshon bastards and their checkpoint set me back behind schedule. Besides, I don't think there's a man around who would not have done the same for any friend of Bodie Challuk."

Gareth stepped back and let the wagon pass. He folded his travel pass and stuffed it into his pocket. The pass, like the clothes he was wearing, belonged to the driver's uncle.

The road was quiet, and sounds from the crowd inside the pub mixed with the sound of the river and the splashing and bumping of the rafts moored along the dock. He pushed against the weak creak of the heavy door to the Broken Wing Pub. The room was filled with angry, agitated voices. Warmth of too many bodies met him as he stepped in and let the door close out the light of the late afternoon.

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Bodie's wife was there, the center of attention. He surveyed the room without being noticed, hearing disjoint phrases such as, "before sundown," and "if they know what's good for them," and "I can get twenty more men."

None of that mattered to Gareth when he saw her sitting in a far corner, awash in light from a small window that colored her forlorn expression while she rocked back and forth, holding a girl on her lap.

He pushed his way around the back of the crowd, unnoticed by the shouting men or the lone strong voice of Meredith Challuk trying to bring them all to some order.

He stopped in front of her while the determined din droned on behind him.

"Merna."

It was a cry of hope, of longing and need.

Her eyes focused on him, and without taking her arms from around the girl, or changing the rhythm of her rocking, she said in a hushed voice, "By the Heavenly Light, Lennel."

He sat down.

"We got away, but I fell over and washed ashore a few miles up. What's all this?"

"They got Bodie."

Gareth looked over his shoulder and watched Meredith. She was standing on a chair speaking angrily to a man who was standing up waving his fist. "Not now," she kept saying. "Not today. Listen!"

When he turned around the girl was looking at him with shy eyes through strands of dark hair.

"Merna, what can I do?"

"They're looking for you, Len. God only knows how you got past the guards and checkpoints. I don't know if there's anything you can do here."

"I had a pass, and I pretended to be from Boret, and a friend of one of their leaders, that Colonel Arrenkyle who nearly sank my brigantine. Listen, that's not important now. I need to go to Korolem. I need to get out of town and take care of business."

The young girl spoke, still hiding behind the veil of her brunette locks. "Korolem?"

"Shh." Merna patted her shoulder and kept rocking her.

"Come with me, Merna."

She and the girl watched him as if he had not said a word, and so he repeated his plea, "Come with me to Korolem."

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He had expected her to want to go with him, or to at least understand what he meant. Instead she seemed curious, almost hurt, and that told him more than her short response. "Why?"

"I'm sorry," he answered. "I shouldn't have said that, not now with this situation."

"Lennel," she looked at him, pulling his eyes back to her. "Why?"

"Because I want to be with you. Because when I was lost with no hope, hurting and afraid, when I was free to follow my most sacred truth, you were all I could think of. Because everything is different now, and I need to be with someone I know and love. And I know you've thought of it too. It always felt as if we should be together, but there was always something pulling me away. Now everything I feel is pulling me to you."

She sat, rocking the girl, holding her arms around her. He waited for her answer, but it never came. Instead she said, "Wait here." Merna stood and led the girl away by the hand, leaving him alone in the window's soft light.

He looked out the window and watched the river. He let its flow draw his eyes along to the bay where, through a break in the trees, he could see the tall masts and sails of the ships docked in the bay. Someone set a tall glass of beer on the table for him, and he took a slow drink while emptiness and hurt mingled with his tired pain, and hunger knotted his belly.

He slumped deeper in the chair and took another big drink, letting the bittersweet aroma fill his nostrils and pull him into a deep, reluctant sleep.

He was roused by the feeling of a woman bending down to embrace him. She kissed the side of his head and said, "Oh, Cappy. I'm so glad you're okay."

"How long was I sleeping?"

"A little over an hour. Merna said you had quite a journey."

Meredith pulled up a chair and sat close to him. "I'm so worried. I'm just so glad that he's still alive. As long as he's still alive I can do anything."

"Where's Merna?"

"She's helping Addy pack some things. She said you were going to take her to Korolem."

"She's coming then?"

"Her father was killed in the river raid, and she needs to find her grandmother in the South. The Light shines blessings in the most

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unexpected ways. Merna said that it would help your cover to be traveling with her."

"With who?"

"Addy, the girl who saw it all."

"Saw what all?"

"Didn't you talk to Merna? The little dark headed girl. She'll ride with you to Korolem."

"What about Merna."

"What do you mean?"

"Is she coming to Korolem?"

"No."

Gareth reached out for his beer and drained the last mouthful, which was now warm and sour.

"We've got a wagon for you. Some friends are filling it with food and water. I wish you could stay. Things are so frantic, but Merna says that you should get going before sundown."

"Can I see her?" He started to get up, but Meredith put her hand on his shoulder, holding him in place.

"Oh, Cappy." She lowered her voice, and looked at him with a face beaming with shared sorrow. "You crazy old curmudgeon. Who would have guessed that you had a heart in that weathered old body of yours? I think you kind of shocked her with that."

"Can't we just talk about it? I want to see her."

"She doesn't want to. Just get Addy home. That's the best way you can help right now."

She led him through the kitchen and out to the back. There was a wagon hitched to two black horses.

"They said it takes just a couple days to get down to Korolem. There's a map and some money under the seat. Take a look through everything. If there's anything else you need, let me know."

"Thank you. I don't know when I'll be able to pay this back."

Meredith took his rough, thick hand and held it. "After everything you have done, and lost, for our cause there's no way we could ever pay you back."

He pulled her into an embrace. They held each other for a long time in the back alley, soothing their fears and sorrows with the simple salve of a friend's loving touch.

When the door opened, they parted, sharing a look of understanding and hope.

The girl was dressed in denim overalls, boots, and a yellow shirt with short sleeves. Her dark hair was pulled into a ponytail and tied

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with a yellow ribbon. She carried a large cloth sack over her shoulder.

Wiping tears away, Meredith said, "This is Adrian Blackwing."

Adrian, not waiting for the introduction, said, "And what's your name."

Gareth said to Meredith, "We'll be fine, Merry. I'll be okay."

She embraced him one more time, and then knelt and put her arms around the girl.

"Take care of each other."

Gareth answered. "We will."

He took the girl's sack and put it in the wagon and helped her up to her seat. He walked around the front of the horses, checking their equipment, their feet. They were good, hearty horses. When he climbed onto the driving bench, he looked over to the girl.

"And my name is..."

He paused. He had started to say Captain Gareth of the *Autarkic Maiden*, as he had done for so many years. But that wasn't really true anymore, and so he said, "My name is Lennel Gareth."

"My name is Adrian. But you can call me Addy. What do folks call you?"

"Len, I suppose. Hey, why don't you take a look in the back and see what we've got. See if you can find us something to eat."

She climbed over the back of the bench and started going through the boxes and bags. A minute later she came back, standing behind the bench. She leaned over, shoulder to shoulder with Gareth, and held out a loaf of bread wrapped in a damp cloth.

"And there's bottles of wine and water, and jars of vegetables, and pots, and even a little tent. Looks like were all set."

She broke off a piece of bread and gave to Gareth. Then she climbed over, sat down, and broke off a piece for herself.

They sat chewing while the horses stood patiently, gnawing on the grass. Gareth picked up the reins. The wind came through the alley, blowing some of Adrian's hair into her face. She brushed it back and tucked it behind her ear.

"Well, Lenny," she said. "I guess we can go."

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Estus carried the saddle blanket and riding gear into the barn and dropped them onto the ground, causing a cloud of dust and bits of hay to rise into the air that was heavy with the stink of untended

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stalls. He took his grooming kit over to Koby, a dark gold palomino with a stark white tail and mane.

This was Carmen's horse. He knew it was silly, but if he could not be with Carmen, he wanted to care for and be with her horse, even if he wasn't as tall and strong as either of the horses from the draft team. Ferris would take them, and his house, and his land. Estus had no need for them, and no desire to return.

The horse watched Estus approach, but kept his attention on the door, waiting for the one who fed him the apples.

"She's not here anymore, Koby." He took a large sweet apple and held it out for the horse to take. Then, as he carefully brushed his mane, Estus told him, "We're going to a place called Boret. It's a large city, so we're not going to be able to go running the way we like. But we'll manage. We'll be okay, won't we Koby boy?"

His hands worked while his mind drifted. Everything was packed. Everything was settled. He lifted the horse's feet and examined the hooves. He brushed Koby's coat and worked his hands over the muscles of the legs, helping to loosen them up before their long journey. The simple work helped to hide the emptiness that his world had become. While others filled their minds with empty silly hope about living in the light, and God having some plan that gives meaning to it all, Estus filled his mind with the simple knowing that the world needs no plan, no meaning for a woman to tangle her feet and fall down. Lives change. People die, and other people have to just accept this deep cavern of loss.

The sun would still rise and the birds would still sing, both as uncaring about his loss as he was about all the hundreds of other people in the world that died that same night, or would die tonight. He felt comforted knowing that the world was not capable of sharing his loneliness. He appreciated the fact that he did not have to search for meaning.

His thoughts were interrupted by footsteps. He patted Koby and turned around to see a petite figure standing backlit in the doorway. She stepped in and he saw the beautiful mature face of Mirella Jaynes.

Estus braced himself to be lectured, or scolded, or pitied. He nodded to her, then picked up the saddle blanket and threw it across Koby's back. He waited for her to speak, but she didn't. He looked at her again, and she seemed uncharacteristically uncomfortable about something.

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He watched her, still waiting for her to say something. Their eyes met. For years he had practiced looking at her as though she were just another friend of the family, and not forever tied in love to the heart that she had broken.

"I heard you're going away."

"Boret. I'm leaving today. I think that's best, don't you?" He went back to brushing the horse.

She stepped forward again, but then stopped.

He kept working on the horse, waiting for her to say something. A long moment went past while he finished combing Koby's mane. Then he stopped, his back to her, still waiting. It was quiet, and he thought that perhaps she had left him. When he turned around he saw her standing in the threshold between sunlight and shade, watching him. Behind her the indigo clematis and the distant spruce waved in a breeze that brought autumn's sweet perfume into the dark brown shadows of the barn. The slanting sunlight painted her bright, and made her hair shine like a halo.

She was not looking directly at him, but at his shoulders, his body, his hands.

"What is it, Sister Jaynes?"

She swallowed and looked out the barn door as if expecting someone to interrupt them.

When she looked at him again, he felt a sadness coming from her, like heat from a stove.

"There's so much I want to say. I would beg you to stay if I thought it would do any good, so I could tell you in my own time."

Estus stood still, his hand still resting on the blanket on Koby's back. "Tell me what?"

She entered the barn, bringing the beauty of the sun with her. "Carmen told me how you felt, I mean about me when we were young. She didn't need to, of course. Men and boys can't keep that sort of thing from women who know them and love them."

Estus turned away and bent down to gather the tools. He brought them out of the stall to where Mirella was standing. "I was just a boy with a silly crush. I was too young to understand. What does it matter, anyway? You went to Jorel to be his..." He stopped, biting down a sudden rush of venom that surprised him. "To be a Holy Sister."

He picked up the saddle and carried it away from her.

"I know you saw us that day."

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He stopped, for just a moment, then went on to set and adjust the saddle. "I'm sorry about that. I shouldn't have been there."

She came closer, to the edge of the stall. Koby nosed forward a bit, and she stroked his nose with her knuckles. "I missed you when you left after that. I worried about it for years. I wanted to be able to say something. Carmen told me several times that it had nothing to do with, you know, the way you are. But I've always wondered."

"If it did, I'll never be able to thank you enough."

She looked away and lowered her voice. "Jorel hardly ever touches me anymore. For years I've wanted the kind of life that Carmen had. I was so young. How could I know what I was giving up? We became really close, you know."

Estus went to her and took her shoulders in his hands, careful to leave a respectable amount of space between them. "I know I'm not the only one who will miss her."

"She was so proud of you." She looked up at him, and he saw in her face the same kind of dreamy longing that he always felt when he looked at her, following her around the village so long ago.

"You're a rare and wonderful man, Estus Arrenkyle. You were a rare and wonderful child. All those things you told me when we were together that summer. I didn't understand then, but I do now. I think I do."

She rested her hands on his chest and leaned in. She spoke so softly he could barely hear her. "I want you to know that I will always be here for you, in every way that Carmen can't any more." She was silent for several breaths. Then she said, "Did you know how I felt? How I watched you? Was I careful enough?"

"I guess you were. No. I never guessed." He felt a sudden rise in passion and need, as if their bond of sorrow for Carmen drew them to each other. And then it was as if all those years had never happened, and he was watching her from afar, wanting to touch her skin, her hair, wanting to feel her close to him.

Estus put his arms around her and all pretense of holiness was dropped. She became a supple, hungry woman, holding her body against his. He felt the volume of her breasts pressing against him. He knew this was wrong. He tried to find a way to pull away from her, but such thoughts fell far away as his mouth sought her sweet lips that had haunted him for so long. He pulled those lips, her tongue, her breath into his mouth while her arms tightened around his neck and he let his hands follow the softness of her curves. Her head fell back and he possessed her neck and shoulder while her

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breath raced with desire too long contained. As she grew weak in his arms, he moved his hands to her back and his kisses to her face, her eyes. He again allowed himself to take her mouth, softly, and carefully this time.

But in the stillness of their lingering kisses, they both sensed that the moment had passed, and Estus pulled her head onto his shoulder and held her, rocking side to side. He wrapped her in his embrace and waited for her to decide when to step back. When finally she did, she looked up at him and asked with a whisper, "Can I say it? Just once? Just so I can say it after so long?"

He cupped her cheek in his hand and brushed away a tear with his thumb.

She put her hand over his, holding it to her face. "I love you. I love you Estus Arrenkyle. I'm sorry."

"I love you, Mirella. You were my first love, and you always will be. But your place is here, with Jorel, and with Kelebor."

Her eyes sought his, and she whispered, "But if you see me again, here, or wherever, someday." She pulled his hand to her lips and kissed his fingers.

He pulled her face to his and kissed her one last time.

Estus lifted the bags filled with clothes, money, and his new guild book across Koby's back behind the saddle. Then he raised his foot onto the stirrup and swung himself up onto Carmen's regal palomino.

"Goodbye, Mirella Jaynes. May your god be with you."

II

## CHAPTER TEN

Two hundred miles south of Gelst along the western coast of Gaelon, Korolem draped itself over the rolling foothills of the Kambor mountains and spilled into the sea as a network of massive piers, docks, and floating cabins. A family of clouds drifted above, outlined in orange by the morning sun that wrapped them in a waterfall halo. The hills, covered with red slate roofs and white washed stucco, overlooked a dense forest of masts and rigging of hundreds of small sailing boats and large trading ships.

The Koro-Del shipyards, an expanse of brown and dust, dominated the south end of the village near the Sandola river, which carried logs from the timber lakes to the insatiable appetite of the mills. Three large dry docks stood on the shore, rising above the grid of brick factories. Beyond them, the two story drying kiln with its tall smokestack sent a plume of disappearing gray smoke into the sky.

Many of the buildings bore guild marks. The carpenter's triangle. The blacksmith's hammer. The weaver's hash of crossed lines. Two of the dry docks held ships under construction, one complete with her three tall masts in place, and the other holding only exposed ribs attached to a massive keel.

The Barrington Shipyard, which built Captain Gareth's *Autarkic Maiden*, and two other independent builders filled an area only a quarter the size of Koro-Del's extensive operation. The Barrington Docks jutted into the water next to Thistle Quay, a long stone building facing the sea where many opulent yachts were moored while their owners visited the shops, theaters, and restaurants of Korolem. Thistle Marina was home to hundreds of small sailboats that belonged to the families and businesses that were scattered for miles up and down the coast surrounding Korolem.

Next to the Marina the two hundred foot wharf led into the heart of the fishermen's market. Large canvas tents covered the bustling rows of vendors selling all types of seafood, fresh game, and other wares from gentlemen's hats to marionettes.

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The wavy brick road that ran along the inland side of the market was littered with puddles from the early morning shower. Across the street the baker swept the water away from his doorstep, only to be splashed by the hurried foot of Hannah Henderson.

"Sorry mister Baxter!" she called over her shoulder, waving. The baker lifted his apron in mock anger, but then waved back with a smile. Hannah was not the kind of girl one could actually be angry with. She turned away from the damp sea wind onto the street that led to the Bastion, her father's theater.

Her shiny dress shoes and ruffled ankle socks danced lightly over the rough brick, kicking up the hem of her blue dress and petticoats while her dual auburn ponytails swung in rhythm to her steps. At fifteen, Hannah could quite convincingly look either ten or twenty, depending on her mood. Today her mood was as bright as the scrubbed sky, and as joyous as the little yellow canary that sang to her as she darted up the hill.

She turned a corner and saw Peter Calloway and some of their friends walking away from their favorite sweet shop. She ran into the middle of the group and threw her arms around Peter. He swung her around.

Hannah was an uncontrollable cauldron of bouncing giggles, and all she could get out was, "He's coming! I have to tell father." As she ran away, she called back, "I'll see you in the garden, Petey. I'll tell you all about it."

Two more turns and three blocks later, she reached the theater's entrance, marked by its bright blue canvas awning. She grabbed the brass handle of the heavy wooden door and leaned back to pull it open. Her heavy breaths and delicate running steps echoed in the cavernous elegance of the lobby's marble atrium and mixed with the muted sounds of rehearsal for the new comedy that would be opening next week amid a flurry of criticism and anticipation.

The theater lights were up, and workmen were taking down some of the tall curtains along the side walls for cleaning. Her mother, Susan Henderson, who starred in the play as the voluptuous veil dancer, was standing in the aisle watching the rehearsal.

Hannah ran to her and grabbed her arm, "He's coming," she cried in a loud whisper.

"Shh, Hannah. Who?" she asked, as she gave her daughter a quick hug.

Hannah whispered to her mother and then asked, "Where's daddy?"

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"Backstage. This is great news. Go tell him."

On stage the players were rehearsing. In the scene, four ex-guildsmen, all costumed to appear to have had their right arm cut off, were at a pub trying to conceive of a plan to rescue the dancer, which each of the men was involved with in some way.

"Right! Then Briggs will carry the bucket with the cats, and Thermon can release the birds."

"No. That won't work."

"Right. Briggs has got no arms, remember?"

"How's that?"

"After they let him join the desert maker's guild, he made a salmon torte with a curry ganache and they cut off his other arm."

"Damn setback there, I suppose."

Hannah ran up the side stairs and across the front of the stage. Becker Dodd, the handsome lead, playing the part of the innkeeper, smiled and waved to Hannah as she passed. She smiled back and hurried along before he could see her blush, which she always did when he smiled at her like that.

Her father was offstage in the property gallery with Garrison Calloway, reviewing the repairs that had been made to the iron candle chandelier, the distinctive centerpiece of the Bastion's elaborate decorations.

Pete's father, who had taken on the job six months ago, was a graying, thin gentleman with knobby fingers and skin that was tanned and wrinkled from spending so much time near his hot forge. On his right arm he wore a blue armband with an embroidered black hammer, marking him as a Senior Blacksmith.

There were, of course, guilds for theaters and performing arts, but they occupied themselves primarily with choirs and symphonies and religious drama. Men like Nathan Henderson preferred to carry on in the ancient tradition, providing edgy, uncensored entertainment.

"I'll expect payment in advance again, if you still want the work on the wall sconces."

"Of course. We can take care of that right away. Will you be able to have the twenty finished by next week?"

"I run a tight shop, Mister Henderson."

"Of course you do. Hannah, my dear what brings you here in such a state?"

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She ran forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Some wonderful news." Then she turned and said, "How do you do, Mister Calloway?"

He nodded.

"We just got word that Dylan Del-Trevia has decided to attend opening night. We got a letter with his seal just minutes ago."

"Well now, that'll do the trick I should say. I guess I was rather convincing after all."

"What? You knew about this? Oh! I thought it would be such a surprise."

"It is. I spoke with him two days ago and informed him honestly on the state of his investment, but all I expected was some additional help for posters, flyers, and maybe a quote that we could print. But as usual, he has found just the right thing."

"I can't wait to go tell Peter."

Garrison Calloway spoke up. "I believe Peter is busy at home, Hannah."

"No. He's in the garden waiting for me. I'll see you at supper, papa. Goodbye Mister Calloway."

The Kambor Gardens were an oasis of well manicured nature surrounding a small central lake. Pebble pathways circled the park, winding between beds of bloom and trimmed shrubbery, beneath pergolas consumed in wisteria, and through the park's tiny courtyards with sculptures and statues.

Hannah hurried to the shade-sheltered bench by the lake where she knew Peter would be waiting for her. He stood, and she ran into his arms and kissed him. They were kissing now, after seeing each other over the summer, a development that Hannah found she liked even more than she had expected.

"I don't know what has you all excited, but whatever it is I like it." He kissed her again.

She entwined her fingers in his and walked with him around the edge of the lake, enjoying the scent of flowers carried on the wind while she caught her breath.

"Well, I told you about this new play my father is producing. Last week, Jacob Tol-Westin himself called it common and beneath taste at one of his society brunches or cotillions or whatever he does with his time. People are afraid that he's going to do what the elf did in *Gelst*, and ticket sales dropped off to almost nothing."

Pete asked, "What is Korolem's guardian elf doing commenting on some burlesque comedy in the first place?"

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"Well, this one is a kind of irreverent comedy that has a bit of fun at the church's expense. With everybody getting nervous we were expecting to get only a limited run of two, maybe three weeks. But now, we just heard that Dylan Del-Trevia will be there on opening night. There's not many from that crowd who would want to be known as challenging Jacob's judgment, but with Del-Trevia there they will have their shield. It's going to be a hit, I know it."

She stopped and pulled him in front of her, dancing with him between the lake and a bed of white gladiolas. "Will you come with me to the opening? I'm going to wear the yellow dress that I got for the dance. Remember the one you said you liked, with the lace collar and open back?"

They danced, as he had taught her, moving along the pathway and onto the grass. When he stopped she could immediately see that he was worried about something.

"What is it, Peter?"

He let her go. "Hannah, I'm sorry, but we're not going to be able to go to the dance together."

"Why not?"

"We're going to have company for a while. My father's close friend, some guy from the Mason's Guild that he's known since he was a kid, is visiting for the winter."

"So you'll be busy? Why can't you just go the dance that one night?"

"Well, I will be going, but with this guy's daughter. It's no big deal. I've know her since we were five. She's more like a cousin, sort of, instead of... Well, that was along time ago."

"No big deal? Is that what you just said?" Her mood froze like a candle snuffed by an ice fingered wind. "I sure thought it was a big deal, the Harvest Festival that we've been talking about for the past month. Peter, I don't understand."

He began to look nervous and distant. "Well, my father thinks it would be best."

"Your father?" She went to him, hurt, still unable to comprehend. She put her hands on his shoulders and said, "Then tell him he's wrong. It's not best. It's not even a little bit good. Don't you see what he's trying to do?"

"Look, Hannah. It's just a dance. You're still my girl."

She pushed him away. It would have been easier if he had just punched her in the stomach, honest and clean, instead of pretending it was a caress.

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"Just a dance? Peter, this is our dance, the one we've been planning all summer. You told me your family didn't care that you were seeing a trade girl. Don't let them do this to us. To me." After a moment she added, carefully, "Or do you care?"

"If it were up to me, you know I would want to be with you."

"It is up to you."

"It's not that simple. Besides, you probably wouldn't like it anyway. It's not really your kind of thing."

Her fingers curled into fists, and then she opened her hand and slapped him hard on his face.

"I am not going to be your little gutter girl on the side. You shouldn't need your father or a bunch of elves to tell you what to think. If you can't even navigate your way through a simple dance, what good are you to me?"

"Hannah."

"Go dance with your little sweetheart. Snob around and let them brand you like a cow."

She turned and ran away before he could see the tears in her eyes. She kicked up her blue dress and petticoats, running hard until she could no longer hear him calling her name.

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Darla King, hurried and late from sleeping in, found yesterday's pants slumped over her writing desk that she had positioned under the small window overlooking the sea. She knocked over her collection of shells that she kept in a chipped porcelain cup, shook out the pants, stepped into them, and wiggled them up. She opened the top drawer of her childhood dresser, still painted with flowers and a rainbow, and pulled out a shirt and two clean socks. Her work boots were lying in a pile by the front door where she had taken them off late last night. After dropping to the floor to pull them on and lace them up, she reached over and plucked her faded blue knit hat from under the bed and pulled it over her long dark hair. She stood, put on her shirt, tied her pants, and grabbed her ten-year-old yellow jacket from its hook and threw it on as she stepped out of the tiny attic room onto the wooden balcony over her father's tiny grocery, hardware, and bait shop.

The air in Merebor was chilled by a heavy, tireless wind that blew from the north and churned the lazy fog that clogged the senses with thick smells of fish, sea salt, and fresh sawdust from the mill. She buttoned her jacket as she hurried down the rickety stair

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that was covered in scab-like patches of last year's peeling paint. The door banged behind her when she stepped into the store that was always too dry and too warm from the large wood-burning stove.

She leaned across the counter and kissed her father's gray whiskers. Her mother, like many others in town that year, died from the mountain flu when Darla was seven.

"Good morning," he greeted her with mock surprise. Actually it was closer to noon. She had worked until very late at the mill. The storm that cut through the hills last week left many trees down, and the lumberjacks moved so many into the river that for three days the mill ran around the clock turning trunks into boards.

She reached her hand into the barrel and took out a handful of cashew nuts for breakfast.

"Let me make you something," he pleaded. "You have to eat."

"I need to get the lumber over to the warehouse. I've got fourteen horses waiting for me."

"Who's going with you today?"

"Just me, and yes. I promise to be careful."

He looked up from his inventory book and said, "Nevil is coming over to supper tonight."

"Papa, no! I told you I don't need to meet him."

"He's new here. Maybe you'll like him. He's a nice lad."

"He's a barnacle."

"Bah! He's nice. We talked."

"Bah, he says. Bah on him. I have to go. You have a great day, now. And don't let Mrs. Brathon have any more credit. I saw her coming up the road with her new hat. If she thinks she can marry her debt away I might have to have a talk with her."

"Oh go on. Don't be late."

"Oh, I'll do it. I will sit that woman down, and... Good morning, Mrs. Brathon. That is a lovely hat. Did you make it?"

"Thank you, dear. My son made this for me. It's rabbit fur. It's so soft and warm. Listen, child, I have just a small question before you run along. Do you know if your father has sold any of my chocolate cluster candies?"

"Well, I don't really know. They were a little bitter this time."

Her father called over from the counter, "Don't be late, Darla."

"Yes, I really must be going. Excuse me."

Darla squeezed past Mrs. Brathon and pushed the rest of the cashews into her mouth. She brushed the nut crumbs onto her trousers while she chewed and walked along the warped boards of

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the cedar sidewalk that led around the small bay to the river mill. The water was filled with a dozen fishing boats bringing in this morning's catch.

Nevil worked on her cousin's large tuna boat. He was working the crane that lifted the tuna-filled cast net over a wagon that would take the fish to the market square where hill families would come to buy their supper. Nevil saw her and whistled to get her attention. His unshaven face was leather worn and wrinkled from spending his days in the sun, and when he twisted it to whistle out of the side of his mouth he looked like one of his caught fish, except for the dirty, bushy hair that fell down to his shoulders.

He whistled again, and Darla grudgingly looked over to him.

"Hey. I'm coming over tonight. Wear something pretty for me." He yelled it out so everyone else could hear. He had spoken to her father last week, and since then seemed to think that he had some kind of claim on her.

Darla stopped and turned to face him. She swallowed the last bit of cashews and yelled back, "Patrick over there is pretty! Go talk to his pa, and leave me alone."

Patrick leaned over the rail and shouted back, "He's not my type, sweetheart." He turned to Nevil and added, for her to hear, "Good luck with that one."

She ignored their laughs and whistles, as she always did. It meant about as much to her as the random braying of the gulls. She thought that when she passed twenty-five unmarried the men in this town would finally get the message that she wanted nothing to do with them. They stank up the town worse than the fish.

When she got to the mill she found the team bridled and ready. The freight wagon was nearly loaded, so she hurried into the office to pick up the inventory list. After a quick check to make sure the load was tied down she climbed onto the high bench and gathered the reins into her hands.

She whistled and snapped the heavy ropes, urging the horses forward onto the six mile road that led to the south Bay, which was were the big ships docked.

She settled back, letting the team fall into a steady rhythm. The wide road, made of packed dirt and sand followed the coast next to the open sea. The wind carried forest fresh air filled with dried leaves and orange lily moths, bringing a smile to Darla's lips. Lines of white, rolling waves crept steadily in, hissing as they broke against the empty white sand beach. Her eyes reached to the end of

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the horizon, where the water met the clouds, and for the rest of her trip she hovered there, in the narrow purple band between sea and sky, free and untamed.

When she came around the final bend Darla saw Katie waiting on the balcony on the top of the warehouse. When she pulled the large wagon close, Katie hurried down the stairs to meet her. A dozen boys stood up and moved along side the wagon as it came in for a stop, ready to unload it and earn another pocketful of coins. Darla left them and followed Katie into the office to pick up the payment for the load.

When the door closed behind them, Darla took Katie into her arms and kissed her hard, then slow. She rested her head on Katie's shoulder. "He's coming over tonight."

"Oh, Darla, honey. I'm sorry. Stay here tonight."

"It's too dangerous for you."

"I don't care. I've only got another year before my father marries me off to Fergus."

Darla clutched her closer. "I want to leave this place with you."

"I know."

"I can't stand it anymore. And I can't stand thinking of you with that man."

Katie took Darla's face in her hands and kissed her. "Darla darling, listen to me. None of that matters right now. I packed us a lunch. Let's go up to the white rock."

Twenty minutes later, after the climb up the steep hills, Darla and Katie huddled together under their quilt on the sea side of the chalk cliffs, their clothes rolled and packed carefully nearby. Katie, soft and warm on top of her, lay in her embrace while their mouths, filled with each other's breath, murmured in growing anticipation. Katie stopped, and lay her head down on Darla's chest, letting her brush her fine blond hair with her fingers. She said, "I'm a little bit afraid. What was it like?"

"What, honey?"

"Being with a man."

"Well, you know it will hurt. More than you expect. But don't be afraid. That won't last."

"Did you, you know. Do that a lot?"

Darla was quiet for some time. The wind blew across her bare shoulders. "Yeah." She grew a melancholy grin, remembering. "We did it a lot."

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She was seventeen when she decided to quiet the wagging tongues by letting a sailor named Ryan Connerly court her and promise to leave the Merchant Guild for her. Even if he had stayed, she figured, it would be better than being hooked by some local tuna. Her greatest relief was when he publicly broke her heart and left her tainted and alone. She pulled Katie closer to her, and whispered, "Don't worry about Fergus. He will be good to you."

They clung to each other, trying not to feel the sick necessity of letting themselves be ripped apart.

"I just don't want you to be alone."

"Don't worry about me, Katie Kaboodle. I'll be fine. I have something for you."

Darla crawled out from under their quilt and knelt in front of her clothes. The wind blew cold across her skin, pulling her hair behind her as she reached into the pocket of her trousers.

"God, you're beautiful," Katie told her.

Darla smiled and said, "And don't you forget it, sweetheart. Come here." She held out her hand and lowered a pendant on a gold chain. When Katie sat up and reached for it, Darla lowered it gently into her hand.

"What is this?" She held it up. There was a circle of diamonds, and crossing inside the circle were five overlapping bars of gold, molded to look like tree branches, forming a star. At each of the five points where the lines crossed, a small ruby was mounted.

"It belonged to my mother, and her mother. It's old."

"It's beautiful. Darla, I can't take this."

"I want you to have it. Someday, you know, if you have a daughter. Let me put it on you."

Katie sat up and lifted her hair so Darla could reach around and fasten it. It hung just above the valley of her breasts. "What is it?"

"My mother just said it was something for women, to remind us how special we are. The diamonds are the Circle of Light, and in the middle is the star of Benok that led him to bring the humans out of darkness."

"How is that a symbol for women?"

"I don't know. But it's very pretty on you." Darla put her hands on Katie's shoulders and leaned in for a kiss when she gasped, clutched Katie and said, "Look. Sails."

Following the coast was a small two-masted Brigantine.

Katie turned around and said. "They're early. They're not supposed to be here until tomorrow. I need to go tell my uncle."

“Oh no you don’t! Not yet.”

Darla pulled her back down and kissed her sweet mouth.

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Boret was a bustling, crowded metropolis that spilled outward from the Mundela River like two wings of a massive butterfly. Narrow alleys between row homes and brick apartments formed filigree patterns that radiated outward from the center of the town. Fields of thatched roofs were interrupted by gardens, small lakes, and piazzas that blended together to paint the village in muted earth tones.

One could easily get lost in the maze of roads and courts that wove between the buildings. Each plaza held restaurants, a statue or fountain, and a chapel. Here the buildings crowded together to enclose the square, leaving only three or four points where one could exit into an alley of pastry shops, barbers, tailors, china stores, and narrow doors to secluded apartments.

The largest such square was bordered to the West by the river and to the East by the Cathedral of Boret. The plaza was long and narrow, running some two hundred yards between the Seminary University to the North and the Governor’s palace to the South. Pigeons made this their home to beg from visitors who stopped to eat at the rolling food carts and haggle with the vendors who laid out their handcrafts on blankets around the perimeter.

The Cathedral formed the eastern wall of the piazza, rising two stories above a series of archways that formed the gateway to the city. Framing the sky above was the skeleton of the new third story. At the southern end, where it joined with the governor’s palace, it towered eighty feet above the ground. A grand vaulted arch rose between sculpted stone towers, which tapered to sky scraping copper spires. The grand mosaic of Benok delivering God’s knowledge to the humans filled the pediment above a row of blue windows. Marble steps led to the second story where the oversized wooden doors were swung open.

The chapel of the old church was decorated with more carved limestone and columns supporting massive wooden beams. Tapestries and red curtains decorated the sides, and running between them were twenty rows of wooden pews that faced the

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raised pulpit and the back wall where the ring of God's Holy Fire burned eternal.

At the far end of the second pew, Glen Dawson, the architect for the Cathedral's expansion, sat alone with his hands clasped and his eyes closed in silent prayer for the nation. News had arrived that morning about the rebels of Gelst who had attacked a Legion boat. His whispered voice touched the thick silence that hung heavy beneath the vaulted ceiling. When he finished, Glen opened his eyes and turned his face upward. A smile of peace and hope etched lines upon his elderly face, which was awash in light from the blue windows above the Circle of Light.

He stood up, lifted his carpenter's medallion to his lips, and kissed it while he gave a reverent bow to the front of the church. He dropped the pendent beneath his rough work clothes as he turned and began walking down the side aisle, making loud echoes with his work boots. Standing at the top of the wide stairway, he watched the busting crowd of the plaza. The sun stood bright in a clear sky. The temperature was low, with just the hint of an autumn chill.

A movement of the crowd pulled his attention, subtly at first. Instead of the random bobbing and weaving of dozens of busy people, the motion seemed to be sliding to the South. Near the river, heads and then bodies turned. The effect flowed back through the plaza. Arms were pointing. People were stopping to look. Those along the river began running. The wave of motion fell quickly across the plaza until it consumed everyone in a charge toward the smoke.

Glen ran down the stairs and wove a dancing path through the crowd. The river road was chaos, filled with onlookers who had become numb statues.

The governor's palace was consumed in flames.

Glen joined those running to help, but the road was quickly clogged with a confined mob closing in on itself and on several frightened horses that reared up and kicked. Glen called out with his arms raised. People saw his black guild armband and listened as he cried, "Back! Get back! Make way!" He began pulling men and women by the arm, yelling for them to get out of the road.

The river face of the palace was boiling with black smoke accented with fingers of orange fire. Even this far away he could feel its brutal heat. He made eye contact with other guildsmen and some of the more restrained among the crowd, all of who were urging

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everyone back. People began pushing with mad abandon through the mess, fleeing the heat, causing others to fall.

The fire continued to grow at an alarming rate, filling the road. Some who could not get away began jumping into the river. Above the cries and desperate screams, the fire cracked and exploded, and muted the surreal image with a constant, thunderous roar. A sudden loud snap, followed quickly by a second and then a tearing of wood, drew eyes upward as the balcony gave way and fell into the midst of the panic. The platform seemed to drop in nightmare slow motion, knocking the lucky ones into the river before devouring a team of horses, a wagon, and at least fifty souls beneath its billowing shroud of black smoke and gray dust. It hit and released a shower of burning shards that scattered the onlookers.

The remaining horses bolted with everyone else. Glen barely missed being trampled, unlike the man behind him. Glen saw him fall, and watched as the horses dragged the wagon wheels across his legs. The next man was not as lucky. Others were thrown like twisted rag dolls, and anyone remaining was either dragged away or crushed.

Now the fire had crept around to the plaza side of the palace. Smoke and fire poured from the windows.

Glen ran into the intense oven of scorched air. A young child sat crying. He picked her up. A man, crawling and coughing, was calling out to God. Glen took him by the collar and helped him up. The heat was too much. He turned back, past a woman who was pulling herself forward, her legs broken, her skin baking in the heat. There was profound crash from within the building, and an avalanche of black, burning air covered the street.

He ran, and wasn't aware that he was still holding onto the other man's collar until his feet tripped on the edge of the road and they all tumbled into the shallow edge of the river.

Glen threw both arms around the child and fell backward. Water, sweetly cool, covered his head. He managed to stand, and finally he breathed as he walked through the hip deep water, his eyes and nose burning from the smoke. Anonymous hands were pulling him, helping him. Someone took the child from his arms and helped him to the bank where he collapsed coughing. He soon rolled over and pulled his face out of the muddy grass and saw birds flying across the clear blue of this afternoon's cloudless sky, away from unrelenting stink of burning smoke.

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He managed to stand. The wind carried the rising smoke away from the plaza, which was now filled with shock and angry tears. Voices chattered, cursing the rebels from Gelst, and repeating ominous reports that the fire was spreading to the apartments and homes to the South.

People stood with numb eyes, unable to move or believe. Desperate faces appeared in the palace windows. Some were jumping two and three stories. Sometimes others ran to help them. Sometimes not. Some of them got up and ran. Some lay broken. A canopy of rolling black covered the palace and dirtied the sky while the fire roared inside like a hungry dragon, creeping closer to the Cathedral.

Glen moved through the madness, adding his voice to the other deacons and Legionnaires that continued to urge everyone to move back, out of the plaza. Another cry of fear rippled through the crowd. The Cathedral arch was a shadow amidst a halo of fire that was attacking its wooden roof.

Floating high above the Cathedral, between the copper spires, a figure appeared. Black robes blew in the wind. Flames parted beneath him, repelled as if by a preternatural wind. Some in the crowd stopped to notice, and when the scene became bathed in flashes of brilliant pink light, a brief moment of stillness erupted into a mob stampede out of the plaza.

Amid the screams and shouts could be heard the name, "Kendrick", shouted in fear or as a curse.

Glen stood back and watched the magician fly through the sky, leaving smoldering smoke where before had been furious fire.

Voices echoed, "Kendrick!"

"He's burning the church!"

"God save us!"

People ran.

Glen stood his ground, keeping his eyes on the black hooded figure walking the sky as easily as a fish in water. A sphere of shimmer surrounded him, and when he flew into a burning window of the palace, the fire choked and died, leaving a ghost of rolling gray smoke.

Glen ran again to the river.

The street was empty now except for the bodies lying burnt and broken.

Heat warped the air.

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More wizards were arriving. They ran past Glen into the scorched air, unaffected. They stood just outside the churning smoke and gestured as the roar of the fire swallowed their magical chants.

Water rose, cresting the banks of the river. They drew the water over their feet in a high spray that became a waterfall, plunging into the fire where it boiled, making steam that swirled within the rising black cloud. Wizards dotted the sky, flying fast from the West. Some pulled more water from the river. Some held their hands forward and summoned energy that weakened the flames.

From the center of the palace wall flew the black robed wizard. Kendrick circled the other wizards. As he flew overhead, Glen caught a glimpse of his face, which was calm, lost in the deep thought of summoning. He gestured as he flew, using only his left arm. His right arm had been taken four years ago when he was excommunicated from the Magicians Guild for the crime of dishonoring God through his studies of black magic.

Kendrick perched above the other wizards. He became still for several seconds.

The air around him began glowing pink, then shook red. Suddenly the breath was pulled from Glen's lungs by a strange, sudden wind that left him and the other wizards gasping on the ground.

When he rolled over, Glen turned his eyes to the palace. It stood burnt and blackened within rising eddies of spent smoke. As the other wizards raced to control the fire along the rest of the palace, Kendrick, alone in sky, folded into a speck, and was gone.

Glen felt tears flush into his eyes. Such loss. Images of people crushed underneath the balcony mixed with the sudden relief of seeing the fire conquered. He fell forward with his forearms resting on the bricks that were still warm.

He cried for the dead and their horror. He cried for what he knew would come next for the rebels. He cried for the things he had seen and the burns and sprains in his body. In his mind, however, all of that was secondary to the words, "Lord, take these gentle souls into your grace."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Under the moonlight on the top of an outcropping of rocks that overlooked the ocean, Lennel Gareth packed his pipe. Below him, down a steep, grassy slope, the waves broke on a narrow, isolated shore. The vision of the dark endless sea was too beautiful, too painful for him to watch, and so he turned his back to the rolling moonlit whitecaps, struck a match, and sucked the smoky flavor through his pipe before returning to the twigs and branches that Adrian had gathered here beside the road to Korolem.

The girl was rummaging around the back of the wagon looking for something for them to eat. "Do you like beef jerky?" she called out to him, hidden amid the supplies.

"Anything."

He knelt and lit another match to set the brown leaves and dried grass on fire. When the kindling began burning well, he settled himself heavily onto the blanket and poked at the fire with a long stick as he drew the pleasant, acrid flavor of warm tobacco into his mouth. The cold, salty breath of the sea blew inland, tugging at his whiskers and shredding the plumes of heavy smoke that he exhaled.

She hopped down from the back of the wagon and carried over a basket that she had filled.

"I brought some bread and red jelly — I think it's strawberry — and the rest of that round loaf that we had for lunch. I put a bunch of jerky in here. I don't know how much you want. And some cider. There's also some cheese, but I didn't think it would go good with the jelly. But I'll go get it if you want. Do you want some cheese?"

He shook his head no.

Adrian sat next to him on the blanket, her shoulder brushing against his arm. She broke off a large piece of bread, spread a thick layer of jam on it with a spoon, and passed it over to him. He took his pipe out with one hand and fed himself with the other. The taste of the jelly didn't mix well with the flavor of his pipe, but he didn't much care. He swallowed hard and drew on his pipe again before lifting the bottle to drink the sweet cider in large gulps. Night settled over their tiny camp while they ate together in dark country silence

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that was hushed by the hidden calls of crickets, owls, and the eternal whisper of the waves.

Finally Adrian's soft voice struck tentatively into the settled quiet.

"You don't much like children, do you?"

She handed him a long jerky strip which he began gnawing quietly.

"It's okay if you don't. I know I talk too much sometimes."

It made the old man smile. "Don't worry, kid. I don't mind you talking. I like you well enough. In fact, I like you better than most grown ups I know."

She smiled. "I like you too, Lenny."

She bit off a big piece of jerky and chewed it while she said, "If we find my grandma, maybe you can stay with us. Until you can get back on your brigantine again, I mean."

"I would like to meet her, but don't worry about me. I'll be okay. I have many friends in Korolem and I can always make more."

With a soft, plaintive voice, she told him, "But you need to be careful."

"I always am, kid."

Wind tugged the weak fire from the kindling twigs, and the larger logs were slow to take up the burn. Again, Gareth stirred the glowing pile with his stick. "We need more small wood here if the fire's going to last."

Adrian looked over to the fire and her face went slack. Her shoulders tightened.

"We need more little twigs," he said again, trying to get her attention.

"Adrian?"

Waves of dry heat began pulsing from the small campfire. The large log began taking the flame, glowing red from the inside as it began cracking and burning bright.

"The fire's okay I think," she said.

Gareth sat back and reinserted the pipe into his mouth. "Caught a fair breath of that sturdy sea air, no doubt." Her face, lit by restless orange light, held a look of sudden fatigue, or worry.

"What's wrong, Addy?"

Her eyes darted to him, and a smile broke too suddenly and too large on her round little cheeks. "Nothing."

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"You're not a very good liar. I meant to tell you that this afternoon when you told me that you hadn't been into the wine. I need to teach you what to do with your eyes when you lie."

That made the girl laugh. "I thought grown ups were supposed to tell children not to lie."

He put his thick arm carefully around her little shoulders. "Well, I never had any children of my own, so I don't know what I'm supposed to say. But I figure you might as well learn the skills that will do you well in life."

She yawned, and told him, "The ground is cold."

Gareth stretched out his legs and pulled Adrian onto his lap. She curled her arms up in front of her and nuzzled her head on his shoulder. He held her close and rocked her gently for many minutes until he heard her breathing change to a gentle snore. She was pleasant and soft, like a little lost kitten.

When her sleep was deep enough that he didn't fear waking her, he carried her to the wagon where she had made a small nest of quilts and pillows. With a small protest whine and a half-awake heavy sigh, she settled under the covers. He watched her sleep amid the waving shadows from the strong fire. Watching her, he felt a longing for lost years that was almost as painful as facing the beckoning sea.

He bent over her and took the pipe from his mouth, and then the gruff old sea captain kissed her temple with the prickly hairs of his unkempt mustache.

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The three sailors waited in the captain's ready room. Cody sat on the edge of his chair, looking between his feet and rocking slowly, trying to still the butterfly swarm in his belly. Davis sat well back in the upholstered visitor's chair, sinking deeper into his simmering ire. Gavin stood behind the captain's desk squinting out at the wharf where they were docked.

"By the light, Gavin, you clumsy oaf. Why don't you sit down?"

He ignored Davis and kept examining the dark, deserted port through his good eye. "Yeah," he said. "This is Merebor. That's the warehouse where we unloaded all those rugs and spice crates."

Cody finally found his voice, though it was shaking from trying to keep his gut steady. "What are they going to do to us?"

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gavin turned and leaned on the back of the captain's leather chair. "There probably aren't too many stinger fish this far north. We might make it."

Cody looked to Davis, even more pale than he had been since the fight. Davis snapped at him, "Why? Why do you step right in his shit every time? I don't know what's going to happen, but if anyone is getting dropped it's that stupid son of a bitch with the black eye."

"They don't drop you if it's an accident. It could have been one of the other guys just as easily. I wasn't aiming for him. There was no way I could know he would be dumb enough to jump into the middle."

"That's your captain, mister. Just get over here and sit down. You're making me nervous."

Footsteps pounded near and the door opened with a raucous rattle. Captain Fletcher stood in the doorway, painted yellow by the oil lamps that flanked the door. The sallow shine caused the bruise on his brow to appear black, as if he had run his face into a bucket of tar. For a moment the room was draped in a thick silence that rang in the ears. Sounds of men working on deck drummed and thumped through the timbers.

"Follow me."

The captain led them up to the deck where they were greeted by the angry crew, who formed a crowded alley of fierce eyes that glowed through the midnight mist. When they headed down the unloading ramp the crew broke into whistles, jeers, and curses. He led them to the back of the warehouse, out of sight of the men. They stood in darkness, lit only by the weak gray light of the moon.

"I know this wasn't completely your fault, but I don't care about that." He took from inside his coat three cloth bags with coins in them. "This is your pay for your time, plus a little to help you get back home. We'll be at sea by noon tomorrow. Stay out of sight."

Fletcher spun around, his cloak flaring out behind him, and walked away. Before he turned around the corner Gavin called out. "Captain."

He stopped and looked over his shoulder.

"They're edgy. Watch your back."

The captain turned and left them, with echoes of his footsteps fading into the night.

"Well," Davis said. "Shit."

Cody added, "Why does this keep happening to us?"

"Fate," Gavin told him with a slap on the back, "is a fickle bitch. Think we can find us some beer this time of night? Damn. If we had just stayed there in Gelst we could get back in touch with those fine ladies at the pub."

"Let's get out of here." Davis led them away through the dark alley to the far side of the warehouse. The open field ahead revealed lights from the small sea town. "Well, mates. There's home for a while."

They took as wide a path as possible around the torches that had been lit on the dock and soon were walking along a wide paved road toward Merebor. The sea rolled against the shore below them, speaking in long soft whispers and exhaling a fine, salty mist. After an hour of walking, when the warehouse lights were like tiny candles behind them, the sound of their footsteps were joined by the pounding of horse hooves and the growing rattle of a cargo wagon.

They stood aside when it got close and pulled to a stop.

The driver was a woman whose dark hair poked out above a light jacket. The horses pulled forward suddenly. She whistled and pulled back on the lines to set them still.

"Which one of you is Davis?"

"I am." He stepped forward.

"You're with me. The others can ride in the back."

Cody and Gavin jumped up onto the empty cargo platform, and Davis climbed up the steps onto the seat next to the driver. She reached over, grabbed his neck and pulled him forward into a probing kiss, full of lip and tongue. As he reached to her with his hand, she pushed him back and said, "You'll do."

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Bodie lay huddled on the bare dirt floor of the Gelst prison. His leg irons were bolted to an iron shaft driven into the bedrock. There were a few other poor souls coughing and wailing in the other cells near by. His shoulder wound had opened again. Any movement on that side was torture, and he was carrying a fever from its infection. The stench around him was bitter and strong, as if his nostrils were painted with filth. It was impossible to track the hours between the crashing, nonsense hallucinations that passed for sleep. In his more lucid moments, he would lay still, focusing his mind on one thing, the image of a clear sky cradling a single cloud. He focused on that, ignoring the jaws of hunger that chewed at his gut, and the viscous phlegm that coated his thirsty throat.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

When he could focus his attention on the cloud, and summon a sense of calm for thirty breaths, he allowed himself to consider his position, being careful to form his ideas as words, as if he were lecturing a room full of attentive supporters. His moved his lips in a silent whisper, starting always with his inspiration. "I am free. I am well. I am clear, and I am not alone."

The stolen gold was safe. Before departing to the south with the girl, he left it to be hidden in a place that he did not know. "As we speak," he whispered to his imagined audience, "It is being divided among the four anchor teams. The first team will hold the south side of the river. They will travel the roads and the land and turn back all travelers and wagons. The second team will watch the north. The third team patrols the river itself, ready with thirty men per barge. Each barge holds ten boats and the armory. The fourth mans the bay and attacks the Legion oar boats when they sleep."

Plans for shutting down the bay continued in his head. Warehouses would be burned. Old barges would be chained across the river and used to support a log jam of newly felled trees. That should create enough still water to let that part of the river ice over in the winter. Wagon trails would be watched and barricaded. But that was just the start. They would have to train farmers and children to attack and then retreat, all while tending their farms and helping other fighters hide among them. No fortification would hold if the men protecting them were outnumbered and overcome, and so he had to coordinate his offensive attacks against the administrative infrastructure of the Legion troops in Gelst. Twenty men had been training for a month, watching Kessel Tol-Rena, noting his patterns, and preparing to take the elf captive.

A smile covered his dry lips as he imagined Boret trying to contain the panic of thousands of Teshons without any grains or flour or dried meat from the warm fields in the south. The cry of every hungry child would be another voice calling for Andor to finally recognize Gelst's liberty from Teshon rule.

His mind began to drift and wander again, and he felt the infected cuts around his ankles. Images of war gave way to more disturbing, disjointed dreams. When he saw light spill from the end of the hallway into the portal of his heavy door, his wandering mind first imagined it to be far away fires of Teshon scouts. He forced his head off the ground and saw two Legion officers open the door to let in a third man who approached him and said, "Mister Challuk. Can you understand me?"

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

He tried to speak, but his throat closed up, and he motioned for something to drink. One of the guards said, "They get water tomorrow."

"I need to speak with him. Water him now."

He took the torch around a hidden corner and returned with a dirty cup full of warm water. Bodie took it and pulled a little bit into his mouth and swished it around his mouth and lips, then he drank the rest.

"Answer me."

"I understand you." Bodie was shocked at how weak his voice sounded.

"I am Colonel Arrenkyle of the Teshon Legion. A magician will be here soon to question you, and I'm sure you know that he will be able to compel you to release everything you know. Your cooperation with me now will help you avoid some of his more drastic techniques, and may lessen your punishment."

Bodie said nothing.

"Where is the gold?"

"I want more water."

"What do you intend to buy with it?"

"We have no gold."

The colonel knelt in front of him and said, "Bodie, there is nothing you can do except incite men to hurt and kill each other, like you did when you attacked the Legion transport boat. Gelst will never be free. Not the way you mean it. There is no way to undo the interrelationships that have existed between our two lands for two thousand years. Would you deny the wisdom of your ancestors? Do you really believe that separation will bring peace? Let's find a way to move forward together. You can help us do that."

"It's not about separation, and you know it. It's about being free, being allowed to learn and live as we wish. Why must it only be your way, ancient and backward? You know what we had here, and you're killing it. We're not your puppets any longer. Kill us, if you must and just take it, but don't insult us by offering another two thousand years of Teshon slavery as peace."

"How are you going to do it? You have no army. No weapons. You won't last the winter."

For only an instant, Bodie felt the urge to challenge that lie, to brag about what they had and were prepared to do, but he caught himself. Instead, he said, "The land is ours. Our freedom is ours."

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“Mister Challuk, if you want to negotiate some level of self-rule, we can consider that, but not if you continue these attacks. Call them off and we can talk.”

“Attacks? You march in with an infestation of Teshon arrogance, destroy everything we have worked for, and call me the attacker? No more talk. No more lies. We would have talked, but not now. You ruined that. We will not stop until you withdraw every Teshon bureaucrat and Legion officer, until Vendak recognizes Gelst as a separate and independent territory and offers complete autonomy and authority over the trades.”

Colonel Arrenkyle stood and said, “The wizard will be here tomorrow.”

Bodie forced himself to stand. “You know that doesn’t matter. For every one of us that you capture, you know there are twenty ready to take his place. Capture us. Torture us. You can’t sweep back the tide of destiny and liberty that burns stronger than the Holy Fire. This is our land. We know it and you know it. You can end this now or suffer our hatred for the next hundred generations. Andor will never be safe, because we only have to be lucky once, but he has to be careful for the next thousand years.”

Nothing more was said. The colonel and his two officers took the light out of the room, closed and locked the heavy door, and left him alone in the dark.

---

Peter approached his father’s work barn, gravel crunching under his feet, stars watching from above. The wide door was pulled half open, revealing the chamber drenched in hot red, like the belly of a dragon. The high, staccato beat of ringing iron matched the pace of his footsteps.

When he entered, the heat from the pit pulled the moisture from his face, leaving him dry and scratchy. He stepped through the veil of furnace air as his father looked up to catch his eye.

“Stoke that a few times, Petey.”

The son walked around to the back and lifted his arms to the bellows lever. He pulled it down, throwing wind across the glowing coals. When they started glowing from red to yellow, the father pushed his metal into the fire. As it settled in, he said, “So, what’s on your mind? You didn’t say three words at supper, and now you’re out here instead of helping your mom get the guest rooms ready.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

He took out the hot metal and started banging it again, curving it with practiced ease around the point of the anvil. Peter watched his father work. The metal, warm and weak, bent easily to his father's blows. He stepped back toward the open door and let the cool breeze blow his hair around on the back of his neck.

"Speak up, boy."

"I'm thinking of skipping the celebrations this year, father."

"You are, eh?"

"I am."

"Well, think all you want. You're going. Bert is ready to take you on as an apprentice journeyman up in Gelst. You need to start thinking about your trade. You need to let him get a good look at you."

"Masonry?"

"Well, you don't have much interest in smithing. You've made that clear enough. I'm not about to let you drift along without affiliation. You're not a boy any more, Petey. You need to pick a guild."

"I'm not moving to Gelst."

His father didn't respond to that. Instead, he set down the curved iron bar and picked up another piece and took it to the forge. "So what put that idea in your head? What were you planning on doing with yourself that night?" His father raised a stern eye and pierced his gaze through his son.

"I don't want to go."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to go with her. With Becky."

"You're supposed to call her Rebecca. She's grown up now you know, with a little help from you." He smiled, but it wasn't a warm or friendly smile. There was something smug and salacious about it, as if Peter's play kissing with Becky when they were eight had been indecent in some mysterious way. He couldn't tell if his father was trying to bond on some level as one of the guys, or if he still enjoyed trying to embarrass him about it.

Through the sharp pings of his hammer strikes, his father said, "You could be well placed, Peter. Bert Benson is a professor in his Guild. He is very well respected in Gelst."

"So?"

The hammer came down with a fierce strike. Garrison Calloway looked up and measured Peter with tired, fierce eyes.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“So you will show yourself at the celebrations, and you will dance with his daughter, and you will give him the courtesy of listening to his proposal for your career.”

Challenging words leapt into Peter’s throat, and there they choked as they always did. He wanted desperately to know whether his father’s words were wise or wrong. Peter felt his life balancing on the edge of a hardened steel knife. If only it could cut him in two. Seconds waited for him to find his voice one final time, but the moment grew thin until he felt spent and confused against his father’s certainty.

“Go help your mom.”

He backed into the cool night air and walked wearily away until the hammer strikes softened into tinny echoes piercing the dark.

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Dusk pulled the evening fog from the damp sinews of the woods, making the air clammy and tight around Estus and Koby as they neared the end of their first day riding through the hills of the Teshon Forest. Once well traveled and wide, the old road was barely visible, its stone and pavement now consumed by the insatiable indifference of tree and vine. Though broken and forgotten, it still led the way through narrow passes and around steep ravines, and more than once Estus felt himself nearly overcome with humility and gratitude to the minds that dared to challenge this vast wilderness.

His back and legs bore the ache of a full day’s travel, and even Koby’s proud steps were beginning to slow. As the air became heavy with night, and his mount’s steady footsteps rustled through the tall, damp grass, the forest night began to come alive around him with the calls of owls, distant wolves, and the persistent ringing of crickets. Since early afternoon they had been climbing along the side of a tall hill, and now they were nearly at its crest. He pressed on, still feeling the painful closeness of Kelebor behind him like a steaming, open wound. Travel provided a salve of distraction, but as the hours drained away, the pain of his stuttering dreams began to burn, and he very much wanted this mountain between himself and his recent days.

The path finally broke through the trees to the top of a wide knoll overlooking the unbroken canopy of the Teshon Forest. He pulled Koby to a stop, and without taking his eyes off the glint of fading light that brushed the sea of leaves, he dismounted and

stepped slowly toward the edge. He breathed in the sweet air, which held the rich tang of distant pine, and finally allowed the day to calm. His time here would do him good. Already he could feel the tense mantel of brave resolve begin to slide from his shoulders. For the first time in several days he was alone to feel.

As Koby began feeding on the rich, moist grass, Estus surveyed the valley below him. Here was the forbidden land that legend had filled with demons of humanity's evil past, and yet before him it was exalted. His eyes followed the flow of foliage down to a deep ravine nearly hidden in shadow, and there he saw one of their ghosts. It fooled his eyes at first, for it was almost too remarkable, too grand. Across the craggy canyon below spanned a stone bridge that must have arched at least two hundred feet. He held his gaze upon it for a prolonged moment while curiosity mixed with wonder and excitement that nearly pulled him to mount Koby on the small chance that he could ride to it in the dark. Soon, however, it was swallowed by deepening twilight, and his thoughts turned to anger that such things of simple utility and beauty would ever be maligned by the pandering, self-serving elves.

Estus shook those thoughts away and returned his attention to the simple beauty around him. The chilled night folded in twilight shades of gray and brown, while the last proud light of the day crouched bright on the horizon, holding blue against the stars. Sunfire clouds harkened the end behind tall silhouette trees as the sky above opened itself to infinity.

Estus fell to his knees, frozen, unable to move amid such a sacred vision. Here, he thought, is God. Not a faceless power or some burning mythical energy, not even the depths of the sky or the mysterious power of the forest, but his witnessing of it all, the knowing of the world and its loveliness, and the conquering of it by men unashamed of their power. The eager, blissful feeling of being in and belonging to the world was more powerful than any hymn that ever pushed a man to bow before some harsh invisible magistrate.

With his legs growing wet in the dewy grass, his eyes rose to the constellations and the sheer wisps of moonlit clouds hovering languidly below them. He stared, in exhausted shock, until their splendor cradled his heart and began to draw from him his pain, like a spear pulled from his side. His eyes became wet, and his throat thick, as he drowned in beauty unknown to him since he had last

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

looked into Carmen's eyes, or felt the gentle touch of her hand upon his neck.

How she would have loved this, if only he could have shown it to her. Even Carmen, wise and understanding as she was, would not have wandered this far because of the poisonous ideas fed to her all her life. He ached for all the things she could never know because of the spiny cocoon that choked the world.

In an instant, his resolve crashed, and his thoughts raced through a haunted maze of selfish agony. The world lurched, the sun died, and a grave, heavy wind pushed at his back, chilling his wet cheeks and rumbling in his ears. He sobbed in heaving spasms that crowded one over the other amid a thousand tortured wails that burst painfully through the narrow channel of a single throat. He beat his fists once forward, then dug his fingers into the weeds as his gut shook. Emptiness burned him to the marrow, and when finally he found his voice amid his own distracted noise, he pushed a furious cry to the ends of the forest. Echoes of his agony called back, as if the valley itself were sharing his pain. New cries mixed with the old until the air shook alive with his torment and longing.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

In the pre-dawn twilight, Dylan Del-Treva stood alone upon the newly finished deck of the next ship that would soon be released from the Korolem shipyards. Thunder rumbled inland from a storm that lit the dark sea sky with ripples of cloud lightening. To the east the sky was beginning to show hints of color behind the backlit Kambor mountains, yet between the two Korolem still slept in chilled darkness.

This was the third ship, nearly finished after rising over the past two years in her Koro-Del dock. In another two months she would be ready to carry her new name, *The Corona*. The first ship, launched over four years ago, was the *Horizon*, then came the *Constellation*. In the next dock rose the mighty ribs of the forth ship that still had no name.

He walked along the newly polished boards and ran his hand over the harsh cold of the brass and steel fixtures. The sound of his footsteps were pulled almost dead in the storm heavy wind that would soon deliver another morning rain shower. He walked to the bow that overlooked the ocean, and he leaned forward, his hands resting on the polished mahogany rail, waiting for his visitor.

He felt at ease, comfortable, riding the wheel of time at his own pace instead of being carried forward by the relentless wash of days that so often blurred together like hungry hummingbird wings. The touch of the damp wind crawled into the open collar of his red satin shirt and blended with the subtle scent of sea rain. Together they soothed him and slowed the spinning stars. He cherished these rare times when he was able to live gentle in the frozen moments of twilight.

Behind him he heard his name. He turned and saw Jacob Tol-Weston coming on board from the platform that ran along the top of the dry dock wall. The dark morning nearly hid him in his black priest garb as he descended the wide construction stairs with elven grace.

“Good morning, West.”

Jacob approached unhurried through the misty fog to join Dylan at the rail. Together they shared a moment of stillness beneath the

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purpling dawn while they enjoyed the storm's majestic show. The elf of Korolem stood a thin six feet tall and wore a goatee that complemented the sharp angle of his nose and his long pointed ears. His voice was crisp and staccato, but his tone was somber. "It looks as if you reached a little too far this time. Andor is quite upset."

"Andor can be upset if it pleases him. It seems to be his new hobby. What does that have to do with me?"

"I'm shutting down the Bastion. I'm tired of you stirring up trouble, distracting them. The theater guild has a performance opening next month celebrating the third revelation of Benok. That is what they need right now."

Dylan chuckled loudly. "Not everyone shares Boret's taste in high art, Jacob. Some people like a good comedy. Maybe it's Andor who is reaching too far. This isn't Gelst."

"If you would keep them in line, I wouldn't have to do this. With the trouble in the North we need to slow things down a bit. This is a place of civilization and art, not political dissent. Let Korolem be. We have Gelst to draw that element out."

"Do you?"

"Just let them be. After we get Gelst under control we can ease some of the tensions here, then we'll let them settle for a few generations."

Dylan's laugh rose slowly and heartily. He lifted his hand into the rough rolling breeze. He turned to Jacob and said, "Go ahead. Command the wind to settle down." Then he lowered his arms and crossed them over his chest, leaning casually against the rail. "You know this will only make them more sought after, more popular. There's nothing more savory than forbidden laughter."

"There's been too much of that lately, thanks to your troupe."

"Jacob." Dylan's voice took on a quiet, kind tone. "You can't close them down. I'm sorry, but you're too late."

"This is bigger than one man's misdirected career. I'm sure you can find some decent line of work for your Mister Henderson."

"That's not what I mean, Jacob!"

"It's final, I'm afraid. I have Andor's backing on this."

Dylan paused and studied the tall mentor elf for a prolonged moment. He repeated himself, "It's too late, my old friend. Closing one independent theater will only bring ten more, and closing them would transform Saturday evening comedies into a social movement that you're not ready to handle. The sentiments of this play are already alive, churning among the people."

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“Yes, thanks to you. I intend not to let that go on. I have allowed you to coerce and contaminate them long enough with these heretical farces. It stirs ideas into them that they don’t need. We need to rein that in.”

“Jacob, the plays are not causing those ideas. They are only mirrors that reflect ideas that are already in them, ideas that are in all humans no matter how hard you try to bury them under a veil of shadow and myth.”

Jacob’s voice rose in impatience. “We know very well what type of ideas they carry around in their minds. Cruelty, fear, hatred, greed. Never forget, Dylan, they are brutish, dangerous animals. We are trying to give them a soul and the tools to find their peace with each other and with us. When they hear that this vulgar play has been canceled, there will be a great sigh of relief throughout the city. Decent people will no longer have to worry about whether they should try to appear fashionable by attending a performance that their gut tells them is wrong. They will focus their attentions on the harvest celebrations and their preparations for winter.”

Dylan took in a deep breath and then released it slowly. He looked up at the Kambor mountains, black against the coming light. He shook his head, amused. “Jacob, what are you prepared to do to close them down? Arrest them? Or me?”

“If necessary. If you want to play it that way. You must have known that we wouldn’t let you go on indefinitely.”

“But now is when you must let them have their voice. After what happened up North a move like this will be amplified against the fear and uncertainties you have already created. You must see that. This is not going to calm anything down. It’s going to do exactly the opposite. What angle are you playing here?”

“No angle, Dylan. I’ve turned a blind eye too long. I wanted you to hear it from me before I make the proclamation this morning.”

“Jacob, you don’t understand. It doesn’t matter any more if the play runs or not. It’s already over. We can’t let you do this. Your plan is failing. We won’t allow Andor to push them through war after war. This stops. Now.”

“That is already out of our hands.”

“It’s not out of ours,” Dylan answered sharply. “Make your proclamation if you must, it doesn’t matter.”

Their eyes locked for a heavy moment. Wind whistled through the rigging and around the tall masts. Sea gulls barked overhead as the silence grew thin, like a wire pulled too tight.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

It was Ivy who first recognized the problem. There was hardly an elf alive who knew humans better than she did. The Tol families had turned the humans away from their civilization on the brink of unchecked magical capabilities and managed to return them to a bucolic and sufficiently restrained lifestyle. Most of the elves from both clans considered this to be a very successful transition, but only three hundred years into their plan she recognized their fundamental flaw.

Dylan continued, "We have been waiting for your clan to recognize the instability and to make things right, but you have never adjusted to the one basic fact that will unravel it all."

Jacob raised his eyebrows and waited for Dylan to continue.

"Humans are not elves. The very attribute of humanity that you are counting on to bring about this age of peace and security shall be the undoing of your carefully devised plans. Your Circle of Light, dear Tol, has blinded even you."

"Is this supposed to be a riddle?"

"It's time for you to hear this," Dylan said. "Humans have no memory. They live and die in a wink, and so they only know what they're told. That's the key that you have been exploiting for generations. But that same attribute enables them to change in a flash. Their whole reality can stretch into grotesque shapes and implausible certainties, and they don't even notice it. The fabric of their world can turn inside out in as little as two generations, and their children have no knowledge, and could never care, that the world was ever any different than the reality into which they were born.

"You hope to give them peace and continuity, but that can never happen. They are as unsettled as an earthquake, and as driven as the wind. No matter how much you try to bury that passion under religious fear and threats of eternal darkness, it will break through. Once there is so much as a crack your careful world will crumble because it is based on lies, and deep down they all know it. They will be left to invent their own realities, and those new realities may hold no place for the elves. They are fast, and fierce, and they have no mercy for tradition or morals when their backs are against the wall. Our only choice would be to destroy them before they destroy us. You have no idea how close we are to that.

"You cannot brush away reason with religion forever. You can never capture the mind of every child. And what do you expect to do on that day when they rise up in rebellion against the chains with

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which you have shackled their minds, or the brands that you have burned upon their skin?

"It can happen in a flash. They could slip away from us and become unmanageable. We will never succeed in slowing them down to our time. We have to run with them, stay ahead of them and steer them. That's what we're doing. That's why we're back.

"It's time now to move them out of this choking cradle of theocracy. They must learn to manage their own affairs and their own minds or they will always remain untamed beasts wrapped in a veil of superstition that you can only hope stays their brutal hand.

"Andor believes that he can turn off their spirit as easily as blowing out a candle, and that their great-grandchildren will never know that they were ever anything but one nation under his god.

"But that's not what will happen. You continue to uphold the guilds as elite and rare in an expanding population that has a greater need for commerce and craftsmanship than the guild programs alone can provide. Andor has tied Teshon rule to the power of the guilds, and now any attempt to grow and learn on their own means attacking Andor's entire political system, the very system you are using to keep them in check. They will fight to win. They will use everything within their reach, including magic, and once that is unleashed they will not stop at conquering your human puppets and governors.

"These plays are essential, not because they stir up trouble, but because they allow the humans to begin rebuilding their world with belly laughs and debate instead of with spells and arrows. The plays will go on."

Dylan took tickets from his back pocket.

"First balcony. Stage left. I'll see you there."

"We'll see about that."

"Jacob, look under your feet. Who do you think is running this city?"

"Let us determine that," Jacob answered. He turned and walked away into the mist as tiny raindrops begin sprinkling on the deck.

---

Hannah held her eyes on the kitchen window watching the morning rainbow that cut across the pane and disappeared into the sea. She yawned and spread blueberry jam on her bagel as a nearby mourning dove broke the blanket stillness of the rain soaked morning.

She took another sip of her hot lemon tea to sooth her hunching heart.

It didn't work.

She was still fiercely disappointed with Peter Calloway. Hannah tried never to be actually angry at someone, because what did that ever solve? She could only control herself. That's what her parents had always taught her. Being one of the few families that never went to church, one of the even fewer families that worked in a non-guild business, made them all a little thicker skinned. It helped when people hurt you.

Nathan and Susan Henderson entered from the front room. They were quiet and tense. Her father let his hand run along Hannah's shoulders as he sat down at the table.

"What's the matter, Honey Bee?" he asked. "You look about as miserable as I feel."

Of course she felt miserable. She had been waiting for a day and a half for Peter to apologize, accept the ice cold intensity of her punishing glare, and agree to take her to the Harvest Ball. But so far, nothing. On top of all that the damp air had put her hair into an impossible mood.

She put down her bagel and said, "What's wrong, daddy? Why are you miserable?"

Her mother took a muffin from the basket and said, "Things are about to get very interesting in Korolem."

"With the play?"

Her father continued, "Jacob Tol-Westin has issued a formal proclamation canceling all theatrical performances until next month. And then, only performances by the Theater Guild will be allowed until sometime next year. He has closed us down."

She cast her eyes down onto the intricate stitching that made purple and yellow flowers on the tablecloth. Her mind cast about for something good to hold on to, some small gem of hope or happiness. This might mean more time that the family would be able to spend together. Perhaps they could spend more time on their yacht, or take another trip. Forcing itself through all of that, however, was the harsh, penetrating truth that rode in the channel of her sadness. She was outcast, alone, different.

She felt her father's hand lifting her chin.

"It gets better," he said.

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"Dylan himself just left here. He has instructed me that we will challenge this edict. The show shall go on, even if it plays to an empty house."

She felt sickened by all this. She tried a sip of juice, but even its sweetness couldn't compete with the sourness of such dramatic, foreboding news. She quickly summoned images of kittens drinking milk, and managed a small smile.

"It's going to be okay, isn't it, daddy?"

He paused. Then he forced a smile and said, "The show will go on."

"Let's eat," her mother said. "Mister Dodd will be here in a little bit."

She felt herself turn slightly pink. She was wearing short pants with sandals and a pull over shirt, and her hair had only been slightly tamed by the sloppy bun that she had constructed. She turned to her father. "He's coming here?"

"Yes."

"Soon?"

There was a knock at the front door. Hannah moved her chair back.

"Susan, would you see him in?"

Hannah took another dainty bite of her bagel, caught her father's eye, and said, "You'll probably want to talk."

She rose with forced grace and went around the table with her eyes glued to the arched doorway to the parlor. She bumped into her father, said a startled, "Oh," and then saw her mother open the front door. "Oh!" she repeated, and ran up the back stairs two at a time. She hurried into her room and closed the door. First things first. She sat down at her dressing table and began brushing her long hair. Imagine having visitors over so early. Not that it mattered, really. It just would not do to be seen flopping around in pajamas.

As she sat and looked at herself in the mirror, she saw the unwelcome sadness that had been hovering over her the past two days. She wished sometimes that their family had some kind of legitimate trade, or at least something normal. She thought of Becker Dodd, a well-known actor who never played on a guild stage. He could get away with it. His family had been making wine in Gaelon for ten generations. He had been branded into the Vintner Guild as a young man, and now he ran one of the most successful restaurants in town. Becker was rich, well known, and a Senior in his guild. He

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could afford to play actor in modern theater. The Henderson family had no such cover. They were always on the outside.

It seemed like the more she brushed, the frizzier her hair became.

"It's not fair," she told her reflection.

She was a mess. Her shoulders were slumped. Her hair was frightful. Her body was taking way too long to turn into a woman. Was it her social status or her inability to fill out an evening gown that had sent Peter away?

The one thing that she had going for her she wasn't allowed to access. What good was all the training? The lessons and secret practicing away from the city?

She summoned the magical state.

Her head fell back and her eyes closed. It felt so good, so awfully rich to feel the energy come to her, to become part of her, ready to bend to her will. She cupped her hands before her, as if holding an invisible ball. She nurtured and coaxed the energy and began channeling the power in her mind. She bent forward, lowered her head into her hands, and pulled the energy through her hair while chanting softly under her breath. As her fingers brushed through the ends, the energy dissipated, leaving her long locks fresh, curled, and soft.

No pony tails today. She opened her drawer and took out a cloth ribbon, robin's egg blue, and tied it around her head. She pulled it down to her neck, shook out her hair, and positioned it over her brow, framing her determined smile.

She stood up with calm confidence and went to the closet. After changing into her pretty green dress and white shoes she felt a whole world better.

There was a knock on her door."

"Yes?"

Her father opened the door and said, "Hannah, there's someone here who would like to see you."

She felt perfectly poised, but he must have seen something. He gave her a reassuring smile, took her hand and told her, "Mister Peter Calloway is waiting for you on the front porch."

She wanted this to be good news, wonderful news. Her stomach wanted to do flip flops, but she held her smile and her butterflies in check until she heard what he had come to say.

Hannah stepped out into the morning sunlight that slanted low under the porch roof. "Good morning, Peter," she said quite

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pleasantly. He was smiling. That was a good sign. She walked with him to the edge of the porch and sat on the bench in the shade of a rose bush climbing on its trellis and blooming pink.

She let him take her hand in his.

"I'm sorry, Hannah. I didn't handle this very well."

She glared at him with her eyes firm and her jaw tight while she waited for him to continue.

"I spoke to my father about the dance. He's trying to push me into the Masonry Guild with a friend of his in Gelst. It's that guy's daughter that he wants me to take."

"Really? Hmm."

"But I'm not going to take her."

A smile began to form at the corners of her mouth.

"I told my father that I'm just not going to go. I'd rather spend that time with you."

Her smile disappeared.

"And what will we be doing while everyone else is at the Harvest Ball?"

"Whatever you want."

"I want you to take me to the Harvest Ball, like you said you would."

"I don't know if I can do that."

She took back her hand and crossed her arms. "Why not, Peter? We made plans. You taught me all those dances, and you kissed me and told me it was going to be okay. So is it? Tell me right now, because I will not just sit around and wait to take my place as your second chance."

"Hannah, it's not like that."

There was silence between them. She watched him closely, waiting for him to rescue them from this awful, wrong moment. His eyes were looking away. His brow was tense. "This is very important to my father."

"Your father?" She stood up, took a step and pierced his helpless, confused eyes with a burning stare.

He was rescued from the sting of her response by the arrival of a tall, comfortably polished man wearing a crisp white shirt with a black guild arm band. The man stepped with a spring onto the porch and said, "Good morning, Miss Henderson."

She blushed, smiled, and tilted her head. "Good morning Mister Dodd. Daddy is expecting you. You can go on in."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

He lifted his hand and pulled the screen door open, but then he stopped and watched Hannah for a moment. "You changed your hair. It looks very nice."

Hannah beamed, smiled, then turned quickly to scowl at Peter. She returned her smile to Becker Dodd and said, "Thank you for noticing."

He smiled back, and the world seemed to darken, leaving the dreamy pools of his eyes and his cute confident smirk to brighten the day. With his eyes still on hers, Becker reached for the door and let himself in.

From behind her, she heard Peter say, "Hannah, I'm still here, you know."

She turned to him, fists resting on her hips. "Are you? I wonder why." Then she turned, stepped off the porch, and went around the house to the tulip garden that overlooked the sea.

---

Estus stood in the middle of the long stone bridge, overlooking the deep valley and river hundreds of feet below him. The air, crisp and filled with gentle mist, blew cool on his neck and hissed through the pines. His shirt felt heavy and hot in the late morning sun, and so he untied the drawstring and pulled it over his head, letting the air caress the dampness of his body and pull him peacefully into a dreamy quiet. He leaned on the side and watched the white foam of the churning river below, which he could hear if he held still. Below him a dozen bright indigo buntings chased each other across the valley.

He reached over to scratch his right shoulder. The wound of his brand was almost healed. With a tug and a rip, he pulled the bandage free and dropped it over the edge. He brushed his fingers lightly over the raised welts that formed a triangle, the mark of a carpenter.

It was commonly understood that the shape represented half of a building, the half provided by the carpenter, with the other half inspired by God. Actually, it was the basis of carpenter's math, a system for measuring angles, lengths, and the relationships between them based on the fact that the sum of the squares of the two perpendicular sides is exactly the same as the square of the long side. This relationship, called the divine equilibrium, was the first sacred tenet revealed in his guild book.

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What would the world be like, he wondered, if divine equilibrium were taught to every child. What energy could be unleashed if knowledge were shared, and not kept in elite cabals?

A large part of this desire was selfish. The mystery of this bridge was maddening to him. The final form was sturdy and self-supporting upon a massive foundation at either side and a graceful sloping arch between them. But how was it done, and how did they compute the circumference of the arch, or was it perhaps oval, or some other shape?

He wanted the formulas, the divine equations. He wanted to know everything.

How were the stones moved and set with such precision? It would probably be impossible today. Carpenters would have to build the scaffolding. Weavers would make the ropes. Masons would carve and set stones, and there were many other guilds, from foresters to chefs and smiths, that would all have to work together much more closely than allowed. Perhaps even wizards were involved spanning the initial gap or helping maneuver the larger boulders. This was an artifact of another age, one of knowledge and power.

What a shame, Estus thought, to have been born into a world of clouded mysticism that made truth an enemy and turned questions into demons.

Here he was at home among the work of his peers, not in the secret dark of some forbidden hideaway but standing proud under the bright sky. Smiling, he put on his shirt, lifted himself onto Koby's saddle, and crossed the bridge.

Over the next hour, the road wound up around the steep hills on the other side of the valley, and when he was at the peak Estus pulled Koby to a stop, a wide grin pulling at his face and lifting his soul. Before him lay the remains of a grand stone city, covering the hills around a large central lake. Tall buildings, once majestic, now bowed to the heavy hand of time. The elves would no doubt say that they were rotting in the stink of old sin, but Estus felt their shame as his own. White domes and ivy covered towers broke through the yellow boughs of Autumn trees. Marble and crumbling brick met vines and eager saplings. Tall buildings challenged the forest, pushing through the canopy. Forgotten to history and hidden from all but animal eyes, this city of the ancients waited with somber dignity.

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It would take days, maybe weeks, to explore it and to discover its stories. Would he be missed, he wondered, if he abandoned Boret and his guild to stay here, at home in this magnificent sacrilege? Pride filled his heart with a giddy glee. This is what men could do when their minds were free.

He urged Koby forward into the city where the trees were crowded aside by rows of stone structures. Estus led Koby through a maze of dim streets and forgotten intersections almost lost to the wild forest. For the rest of the afternoon he wandered among the ruins, lost in a reverent hush. In some areas the ground had grown, like drifting dunes, to cover all but the tops of doorways and broken windows. Avenues and alleys, once filled with the busy feet of forgotten souls, now were home to shrubbery and trees, and the rabbits and squirrels hiding among them.

He stopped in the shadow of a tower that rose high above the nearby buildings. On its front were stone carvings, geometric shapes that seemed to be woven and twined together. He drew Koby close and touched it, caressing the worn shapes with gentle fingers. The surface was hard and warm from the sun. It was real, not a dream or a legend.

Estus dismounted and left Koby to graze on the tall grasses. He followed the ground up a slope to a tree that had broken through a high window. He raised his hands and took hold of a sturdy branch. When he lifted his foot and braced it on the trunk he felt the long forgotten joy of being a young Autumn-clad boy, free in time and joined with the day. He pushed his foot against the trunk and swung his other up and over the branch. He stood, holding onto the higher branches as he walked along the limb. With careless confidence, he scrambled higher, stepping up to a high branch that pushed against the wall of the tower. Close by, another limb pushed its way through a window. Estus stepped from the tree onto the wide sill and, steadying himself against the arch of weathered brick, he ducked inside and stepped down onto the floor.

Sunlight slanted through the windows, shining white through dust flurries. Birds fluttered away, leaving him alone in the musty quiet. The floor was covered with leaves and dirt, and where the sun fell, wildflowers had taken root.

The room was large, with brick walls and an arched doorway opposite the windows. This led to an atrium and dirty marble stairs leading up and down. Estus went up. He followed the stairs back and forth, higher and higher, until he found himself in a grand

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circular room, thirty feet across at least, under a high dome of more carved stone. Wind blew sternly across the room through open doors on all sides that led to a square roof balcony.

Estus approached the edge and looked over the city. The lake was rectangular, settled in the middle of a park with ancient grand trees. From here, most of the city was only visible through breaks in the rich golden canopy of falling leaves.

He breathed in fresh sweet air as his eyes tried to take in the grandness and scale of lost time.

When his gaze fell again on the far side of the lake, he saw a horse drinking at the edge, and for a moment he feared Koby had run off. When he looked down, he saw that Koby was still lurching on long grass across the street. He looked again to the lake and saw a small camp with a tent and the remains of a fire. Suddenly, the world fell back upon him and he turned to find his way back down so he could hide until night and find his way around whoever was here.

He returned to the stairs but stopped halfway across the room. Standing outside at the far rail stood a woman wearing high suede boots, a green jacket, and a sword at her side.

She faced him and stood still while the wind pulled her long black hair billowing behind her, hiding and then revealing her pointed ears. She did not move or speak. She waited, watching Estus and smiling. He stood still for several heartbeats and then went to her. When he stepped through the doorway into the wind, she turned, keeping her eyes on him, inviting him to join her at the rail.

They stood together in silence for some time. She seemed ethereal, yet familiar. She held her eyes upon his and they were soft and welcoming. Finally, Estus remembered her, and when he showed an ever slight nod she smiled.

“Jorel called you Ivy.”

She nodded without saying anything.

He reached out and took her hand in his. She neither resisted nor encouraged him. A kind of intimacy of understanding grew between them which he could not quite name. She seemed to know it, but kept it behind silent lips. When the intimacy became uncomfortable to him, he pulled his hand away, bringing a smile to the corners of her mouth.

“How are you here?” he finally managed to ask.

“Like you, I am going to Boret. I heard you and watched you and followed you.”

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Her voice was soft, like a down pillow, but was tilted a bit with a song-like lilt. Next to her, he felt like an awkward, clumsy little boy, yet her presence and manner seemed to accept that and make it okay. Because of that he felt able, even encouraged, to admit something he would never say to any other elf.

His eyes panned across the trees, then came again to rest in the understanding softness of her eyes.

"It's beautiful."

She smiled.

"What is this place?"

"This was known as Antellem." Her smile faded ever so slightly. "Our city," she said quietly.

Before he could say anything else, she said, "Come, Estus. We can talk more at the lake."

She walked away from him, back inside to the top of the stairs. There she stopped, turned around, and said, "Come along."

---

Dirty horse feet clopped with a steady cadence over the wet, uneven brick road that hugged the Kambor foothills above red clay roofs and tiny courtyard gardens. The city was bigger and browner than she had imagined, and the ocean went on and on until it ran clear off into the sky. Three days on a wobbly wagon had put aches into Adrian's back and legs, but worse was the constant drizzle. The heavy clouds didn't even have the courtesy to come out and rain proper. They just made everything damp and sticky and cold.

With a heavy sigh, she pulled the cover over her head and nuzzled closer to the captain. He was wearing a wide-brimmed country hat that he had found in the back, and instead of his captain's jacket he wore a long black wool coat. There was no coat for Adrian, and so she sat wrapped in a blanket under a piece of the canvas tarp. Even shrouded like a little caterpillar the cold still seeped in. He rested his arm around her shoulders and told her, "Not much longer, Addy."

Her eyes were drawn to the water making white waves on the beach far below. The horses rattled the wagon around a bend that drew the wind more to their backs.

"Lenny, how big is the ocean?"

"It's big. Very, very big."

"How big is that?"

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He grunted and was quiet for a moment. When she poked her finger on his arm, he answered quietly. "You can travel for months without seeing land. Out there, out away from the continent, you can forget that there is even such a thing as steady ground. There's more water than land. Did you know that? It's very, very big."

"What's out there? Are there other lands like this? With people?"

"Yes, many. If you travel for ten weeks north and out to the west, there is another land much like this, but they speak with a heavy twist to their speech. They grow sweet fruits and make beautiful glass sculptures. If you follow the coast to the south, it gets bitter cold, and ice floats like mountains in the sea. The people there wear bearskins and carve huge statues out of a hard wood they call *chopega*."

"Are the elves there too?"

"The elves are everywhere, but they also have their own land where there are as many elves as we have humans."

"What's that like?"

"I don't know. Nobody knows for sure, and humans are not allowed to go there. It's far, far away."

"Is this the city where you grew up?"

"Korolem? Yes. I was born here."

"It's too big."

He held her close with the ease of a grandfather. She lowered her head, hiding behind the cowl of her blanket with eyes closed tight to make the world go away. She could almost believe that if she stayed under the blanket and tried very hard, she could pull the magic that would make her father come back to her. She could see it, almost, when she looked into her magic colors, but it was only a whisper of hope so very far away.

"Addy, honey, we're going to be okay." His voice rumbled in his chest when he spoke. "Remember how we talked about being watchful and always staying together? We need to find your grandmother without anyone else finding us."

The rain picked up and began pattering on her covers.

"And remember to call me grandfather, or pappy."

"I know."

The road narrowed, and finally the houses with their tiny gardens and clotheslines gave way to large quiet fields of orchards and vines. Lush hills fell from the mountains on one side and gave way to the crowded city and the boats on the other. The road made a wide spiral around the mountain and carried them into the southern

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part of the city. As they got closer the road widened, and soon they were surrounded by dozens of wagons and trucks and buggies in the heart of Korolem's industrial district. The smell of mud and wet horses blended with the caustic stench of drifting gray smoke that hung in the sky and burned her nose. It was coming from a tall smokestack in the middle of a large, dirty field below them. The city smelled like a stew of burnt wood and garbage, and everything was sharp and dirty, stone and sticky brick.

They turned from the big road and wove a crooked path through a maze of narrow courtyards and alleys clogged with people who managed somehow to step clear whenever the wagon came up behind them. Most of them were men, wearing work clothes and carrying bags and tools.

Finally the captain pulled the cart to the edge of the road by a rail fence next to the ocean. The air was heavy with briny cold, and just below them the water rose and fell, pulling smelly, stringy green moss up and down.

"It stinks," she said, with her soft nose all wrinkled tight.

"The ocean? Have you no sense of esthetic, child?" he said, as he lowered himself from the driver's seat and began tying the reins to the fence. "But I guess your country nose prefers the smell of horse shit and mud."

"Better horse shit than fish shit."

He came around to her side and told her, "The sea must be calling you. You're talking like a sailor already. Remember to stay with me."

"I know, pappy. You told me like a hundred times." She took his hand and hopped down.

"What's that?" she pointed to the large field with brick buildings and the tall smokestack.

"That is the Koro-Del Shipyards. Those large boxes are called dry docks. That's where they build the big ships.

"It stinks, too. It smells like dirty feet."

"Well then, moppet, let's go where the smells are better, like the market where we can get some food." The road led them between the water and warehouses until they turned onto a busy street filled with vendors and a bustle of people under a large tent.

"This is Thistle Quay. People dock their boats here to come shop."

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He held her hand tightly and pulled her past the beckoning scents of sausages and cinnamon rolls and buttered whitefish steaming in pepper sauce.

"I'm hungry," she announced.

He led her between a row of vendors and a collection of small round tables. "What would you like?"

"Candy!"

Lenny smiled. It was good to see. Adrian smiled too and felt almost comfortable in the warm sea breeze that blew her hair about. She asked, "Can I have a sausage and sweetbread?"

"Of course, and some berry juice. And candy." Adrian held tightly onto his hand while they stood in line.

Something began bothering Adrian, making her uncomfortable. She felt restless, and wanted suddenly to run and hide. She huddled closer to the Captain's long coat and looked around her. Everything was calm, but still she felt exposed and suddenly afraid. A moment later, her fear began to feel like a very pale green. Looking magic.

Once the sensation locked in her mind as magic, she felt it all around her. She also felt it growing like a wind blowing at her from all directions. She tugged on his coat and said, "Somebody's looking for us."

Her eyes darted all around. She could feel it, coming closer, the source of the looking spell, from the alley where their wagon was parked.

She grabbed his arm and pulled him away from the sausage stand.

"Addy! What are you doing." He let her pull him away a few steps, but then he stopped her.

The magic was bright, and falling on them like a pale green waterfall.

She tried to keep her voice as a whisper, "They know you're here. They're close."

"Who?"

She saw them and pointed. Two men in bright red coats and an older man wearing a robe and a blue collar sash.

The captain picked her up and ran.

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Gareth moved quickly, but he knew there was no way to outrun them. A quick glance over his shoulder told him all he needed to know. They were on him and had probably been following him for some time.

He ran, pounding his feet on the uneven brick road.

Adrian's voice chirped in his ear. "Go into the alley."

He started into a bakery shop, but she cried out urgently, "Not here! The alley ahead."

He charged ahead. He could hear them calling his name, commanding him to stop.

Others were starting to take notice. One man tried to grab hold of the captain, but Gareth leaned his shoulder into him and knocked him down.

"Here!" she called out.

He looked and saw a small open gate leading to a tiny passage way between the buildings.

He ducked in and ran. The alley was narrow and dark, running between tall brick walls covered in a brown dust and moss. What he thought was a turn onto another alley turned out to be a dead end, a small alcove that was heavy with the stink of grease and old food. He turned around and looked directly into the eyes of a Legionnaire Marshall. The officer looked around the area and then continued down the alley. Other men ran by, shouting to each other.

After they passed, Gareth let his breath out and took deep, fast breaths, his head swimming with panic and relief. He looked down to step around the corner and almost stumbled because he had no feet. There were no legs, no arms, no body. He looked down and saw only the dirty cobbled ground. He closed his eyes, and for a moment the world made sense again. He felt the cold brick against his back, Adrian's body in his arms. When he opened his eyes, he almost fell over from vertigo. It was not so bad as long as he looked forward, only forward.

He stared to walk, but Adrian whispered, "Wait."

More men ran by, and each of them looked right through him.

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Adrian's voice whispered in his ear, "He knows I'm here. He can see us."

"What's happening?" he whispered. "Are you doing this?"

There was a long pause. She began shivering. "Yes."

His heart was pounding, and his breath was labored, but controlled. The madness of a hunted animal pulled at his resolve, begging him to run hard. He forced his steps to be even and swift, taking him back to the street. Legionnaires on horseback were patrolling.

"What do we do?"

"I'm scared," she told him.

"I know. We're in a tight spot. Can you keep this magic over us?"

"It's hard." She cried, clutching him tightly around his neck.

"Shh. Can you do it?"

"I'm so tired."

Oh, Len, what have you got a hold of, he wondered to himself. A little wizard girl, on the way to visit her grandma. For a moment he wondered who they were really chasing. When a young boy is found to have magical abilities he is taken into his town's sanctum and told about his gift. He becomes a scribe of the sanctum, and he lives there with the elf and the holy sisters until he is old enough to enter the guild. Women don't enter the guilds, and so if a young girl shows magical abilities she is taken to serve the elves in their homeland. A girl of Adrian's age able to do magic this powerful would certainly be taken away if they caught her, something he intended never to allow.

He leaned out and looked at the shop across the street. It was a store selling women's hats and chocolates. He ducked back. Where was he? Who did he know? This was the Quay, full of bistros and pubs. He had plenty of coins to buy a few minutes of hiding time, but where? He felt time slipping away. Barrington Street to the Marina. There was a downstairs pub where he had spent many a free hour.

"I need you, Adrian. Just a little more."

"I'll try." She hugged her arms around his neck and put her head next to his. She took a deep breath, held it, then took another.

He went into the street. There were four Legionnaires on the corners waiting for him. He didn't know how long she could last, so he hurried across the street, walking behind a small family carriage.

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He watched the scanning eyes of the soldiers. One seemed to take notice of them for a moment, but when Gareth moved, the Legionnaire lost him and looked farther up the street. It was not much farther. He walked in the street to avoid the people on the sidewalk. Legionnaires rode by him on horseback as he turned the corner. Adrian started breathing with little gasps, making noise as if in pain.

When he turned, he saw, walking directly toward them, a wizard. With a wave of his hand, Gareth and Adrian fell fully visible. Adrian lurched as if hit, but he held on to her and started running away.

Soon they were overcome, and the crowd scattered away from the running squad of Legionnaires.

They pounced like hungry buzzards. Hands started pulling him to the ground, trying to tear Adrian from his arms.

"I'm sorry," he told her.

Adrian didn't say anything. She was limp. Her eyes were closed. As Legion hands pulled at her she tensed, opened her eyes, and screamed. Her voice was piercing, haunting, unnatural. With it he felt a wave of fire pulse through him. For an instant his world was overcome with bright burning orange that covered them like a canopy. They were alone. No one touched them. The fireball collapsed into a ring, and people cried out in pain as it grew in size and burned its way through them, forcing them back. It hung there in the air, boiling and pushing waves of heat that sent everyone in the street running away. For several seconds it hovered unmoving, a ring of rolling, boiling fire. Slowly it compressed into the size of a small rope. Just as it seemed ready to wink out, there was a powerful explosion, and all the compressed energy released in a spray of fire that set trees, canopies, and clothing on fire.

Amid the quiet of the street, one man ran toward them from around the corner, ignoring the hot cobbles and burning wagons. He ran, not to them, but to the wizard that lay covered in his robe nearby. The wizard turned over and started to get up, but with the wave of his hand the man caused the wizard to collapse like a rag doll. He then took two steps toward the captain and Adrian.

"We need to go," was all he said.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Becker Dodd."

Suddenly, the world flipped, lurched, and turned to black. Everything was deathly quiet and pitch black. Adrian was still with

him, but her breathing was labored. Footsteps broke the silence, and when the lights came on, Captain Gareth found himself center stage looking out at an empty theater.

---

Baron Arrenkyle entered the Gelst sanctum with careful, reverent steps. He folded and dropped the message into his pocket as he started up the steps to the tower. He passed the level with the guardian elf's private quarters and kept going to the upper balcony where he found Kessel Tol-Rena looking over the bay. Baron saw six Legion boats crowded around the mouth of the Mundela river.

Kessel said, "The rebels managed to set fire to the Governor's palace in Boret. Petran is dead. Andor has sent the northern division to the bay to secure the Mundela rout."

"How many?"

"More than four hundred men, including officers and unbranded soldiers."

"That's not enough."

"You over estimate these rebels, Baron. Most of the people in Gelst have no interest in fighting Teshon rule."

"Those who do fight will not be frightened by uniforms."

"The few who infect the others will be found and separated in time."

"Wanting to be free. Is that an infection?"

Kessel turned to Baron and told him, "Quarter the men, and have them secure the area. Then locate Colonel Thomas Barton, advise him of your plans and the operational situation in Gelst."

Baron looked again over the bay. The boats had docked, and already Legion soldiers and officers were gathering near a warehouse where they were unloading crates of supplies and weapons.

"Any questions?" Kessel asked.

Baron had no end of questions regarding the political and military wisdom of this move, not to mention why it was underway without his supervision, but the mission itself was clear, and so he said, "No. By the light, it will be done."

When he stepped outside and rejoined his senior officers, he took the young ensign by the shoulder and said, "Take a message to Colonel Barton at the river. Tell him to get those men back on their boats on my order. Hurry." He mounted with the rest of his entourage, and sent another man to double up the head count along

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the northern pass. They rode through the streets of Gelst, following the flag that ordered all to give way.

The explosion shook the air as they approached the river warehouses. Baron jumped down from his horse and ran against the tide of people fleeing the area. The small bomb had taken out part of the warehouse wall, and near the corner of the building ten Legion soldiers lay still along with their Colonel.

Baron started pointing at random to the remaining Legionnaires and yelling quick orders. "Secure the back alley! Bowmen watch the roofs! Get these men onto their boats! You three, around that way!"

The few remaining Legion officers next found themselves surrounded by at least fifty civilians with slings and stones. Bowmen dropped four of them right away, but before Baron and the others could advance on them, they raided the warehouse and ran off with the few crates that had been unloaded.

Legion soldiers started to follow after them, but Baron called them back. He pulled the rest of the men onto the remaining boat with the wounded, and said to another anonymous young man, "What did they get? Supplies? Weapons?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Report back when you do."

Baron pushed his way to the helm and said, "Turn around. We need to go into the river."

"The river?"

Baron pushed the man back and barked at him, "Ask another question and see what happens. Turn us around!"

Over the next ten minutes, Baron managed to lead the boats at full speed back up the river to the northern base, which he had kept very well defended for the past two months. Baron maintained heavy patrols along the horseshoe shaped valley, controlling both the high ground and the river in this region.

He unloaded the men and supplies one boat at a time and sent orders to the officers to have them set up a temporary camp. He had four major concerns. One, maintain security and clear the area of possible rebel sentries. Two, make sure the men set up camp and got fed. Three, secure a temporary headquarters for the operation closer to the bay. Four, review the inventory of weapons and skills of the men so he could manage their deployment into an already compromised situation.

The ensign returned and reported that no weapons had been unloaded, only some rations and medical supplies. "Very good,"

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Baron told him. "Where's your Colonel? He was wounded in the blast. I need to speak with him."

"He didn't make it, sir. He's gone."

"Who ordered you to start unloading there?"

"Colonel Barton."

Baron reviewed the operation and sent senior officers to take care of his tasks. When he returned to the commander's tent, Baron noticed an elf sitting in the large chair. The elf stood and Baron recognized Victor Tol-Tolin, Andor's brother.

Victor stood and came over to Baron and took his hands. "What a tragedy it is to lose a brother in the light. Colonel Barton was very brave, and he will be remembered for his sacrifice today."

"What happened? Why did he try to unload without my supervision?"

"Baron, we thought you had the Bay secured. Isn't that what you told Governor Vendak in your report?"

"Not exactly."

"This incident should not reflect on the work you have done here, Colonel Arrenkyle. You have done better than any one else could have in this difficult situation."

"Thank you."

"Still, Andor is concerned with the pace of the operation. Have you heard about the tragedy in Boret?"

"The fire?"

"Yes. We are still trying to figure out how the rebels slipped through your operation. We were hoping you would have been able to learn more from Bodie Challuk."

"Mister Challuk has no real military skills."

"His attack on the Legion transport boat was quite a success."

Baron didn't reply for a prolonged moment. Something about this situation made him very uneasy. He chose his words carefully. "What I said to Petran was that the situation here was going to be more difficult than expected. The bay operations are secure, and no other shipments have been lost. I made it clear that more troops would help, but that we would be fighting against civilian irregulars. If I had been consulted on the deployment of these new troops, I'm sure this attack would have been avoided."

"Yes. Mostly likely it would have. Still, Andor would like to speak with you. I shall accompany you to Boret immediately."

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Ivy walked beside Estus, who pulled his horse gently by the reins. She led them through the streets, so familiar to her. She lived here for over four hundred years and watched it grow from a small collection of awkward timber to the magnificent granite maze that now stood frozen and waiting.

In her memory it was so alive, as if it might suddenly reveal crowds of eager citizens instead of hiding their haunting echoes beneath the dust.

She took them around the lake, through the heart of the city, which was a display of some of the grandest architectural accomplishments in human history. Between the street and the lake was the park, a wide area filled with tall waving grass turned harvest brown and highlighted by stalks of bending goldenrod. The trees that shaded the bank had long fallen to time and decay, and in their places stood great-granddaughter trees.

"I used to feed the ducks here," Ivy said. "I would buy a cream-filled biscuit for myself and day-old baguettes for them." Ivy stopped, twirled around to examine the avenues and pointed forward. "Up there. That's where the singers performed."

The city was always alive with the gentle sound of harmony and song. Traveling quartets, brass ensembles, or even young a cappella divas would roam the city, as natural in their joy as the cardinals and meadowlarks.

"In hills where you grew up, Estus, there were symphonies and artists."

He turned to her suddenly, as if to speak, but caught himself. Estus looked down and seemed agitated. Ivy waited for him to respond to her prompt. From hearing his benediction, and from his bold actions at his first communion, she knew he would not let the questions in his mind go unasked.

She could have just told him, but she enjoyed the bravado and confidence of this man. He would ask, and she would tell him. Men like Estus were rare, even among the members of her secret groups and hidden societies. Here was a man born to the wrong age, with the energy to pull the world toward him.

Last week, Jorel, had shown her the designs Estus made as a young boy of the things he wanted to build. They were unique and brilliant. After watching Estus's display at the communion, Jorel had asked her to keep an eye on him in Boret.

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"You know humans better than I do, Ivy. I've had to retrain and redirect many a stray, but this one just won't respond. I probably should have put him down when he was a child."

"Why didn't you?"

"I liked him. I wanted him to make it."

"So how did you handle it?"

"I just kept trying, but it just didn't take with him."

"Jorel, it doesn't take with a lot of them. I told Benok to make himself a god. Most humans never leave the mythic cradle, and personifying the divine might have allowed the Tol plan to actually work."

"You don't think its working?"

"Why do you think I'm here?"

"I don't know, and the less I know probably the better."

"So tell me, what did you do with young Estus?"

"I finally convinced him to at least stop talking with other people, that it put their souls in danger. Finally we got him married and I convinced him that the answers he wanted were to be found in the guilds."

"Ouch. That didn't quite work."

"I almost had him. In another ten years, he would have been giving powerful sermons for me, but now this. He's going to Boret. Maybe when you get there you can look him up and guide him. I don't want to see him get hurt, and my cousin Andor, I'm afraid, is not going to be as generous as I might have been."

"I'll take care of it."

That short conversation showed many things to Ivy, most importantly and surprisingly, that the Tols really had no idea how completely their plans had failed, or how deeply Dylan and the other Dels had infiltrated their cities and guilds. Centuries of power had blinded them, and they were absolutely convinced that they could direct the short lives of the humans with a series of contrived wars and keep them docile and ignorant with religion.

But the spark remained. The human spirit cannot be forever crippled by fear. Their magic still burned strong in them, and even culling the spontaneous manifestations of magical ability left a dangerous number undiscovered.

Estus finally won his internal battle and said, "There is a place near where I used to go as a child, up in the hills. It was built by the ancients, and we're supposed to call it a sacrilege."

"Supposed to? What else would you call it?"

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Estus walked several paces before saying quietly, "Sanctuary." A moment later he went on. "There are stairs that lead down to a circular area surrounded by statues and carved designs."

Ivy remained quiet, leaving it to Estus to set the pace of their discussion. They passed three tall buildings and turned the corner around the lake before he said, "What was that place?"

"That was probably the Kaylish Bath. Water from the river was diverted into a heating pool and then drawn through fountains into the basin in the middle. People would gather there to relax, share stories, or just play games.

Without hesitation, Estus asked, "Why is it wrong to go in there?"

Ivy decided to meet the question head on. "Making places like that and this city taboo helps reinforce their version of history."

"Whose version?"

"Andor and his family."

"They call it evil."

"Of course they do. Fear is a very powerful manipulator."

"For some," he answered.

"And what moves you, Estus?"

"At first it was innocent curiosity. Then when I sensed that Jorel was not being forthright, it became like a game. But the lies kept coming, and I got angry, and the more I asked, the deeper and more bizarre his stories became. I tried believing for awhile, but I always knew I was turning a blind eye to the obvious reality around me."

"And now?" she asked.

Estus turned and locked a gaze upon her that was filled with unbridled fury. Finally she understood Jorel's dilemma. This man would not be stopped or contained. For a moment she questioned the wisdom of meeting him in such an isolated place, and her hand rose to rest on the scabbard of her sword.

Estus contained himself and answered quietly, "No more lies." She knew that he meant to include her.

"I won't lie to you, Estus. Do you know that your life is in danger?"

He met her eyes with a challenge.

"Not today," she warned. "But the things you want to know and reveal are not intended to be known. There are powers and forces at work that you do not understand."

"Explain them to me."

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This time Ivy's voice took on a commanding tone. "I will help you, human, but don't make the mistake of thinking that I will allow you to disrupt the delicate balance of this time."

He stopped, took a step toward her and wrapped his heavy hand around her wrist. He pulled her close and put his other hand on her shoulder.

"What do you want?" he barked at her. "You followed me here, sought me out. What is going on?" A second drew out between them. He gulped a chest full of air and released it with a sudden cry. "Enough!" The word echoed against the ancient stone ruins, accompanied by the fluttering of startled blackbird wings. He let her go and turned away from her, walking alone, his feet crunching the long forgotten pebbles.

Ivy let him take a few steps and then jogged toward him with a gentle grin on her face, as she called out, "Estus, wait. I should not have said that to you."

As he turned to her, Ivy planted her foot in the horse's stirrup and swung her leg over. Before he could protest, she said, "I want to show you something."

Estus held the reins and met Ivy's eyes. She found it difficult to read his expression, but his fatigue and stress burned through.

Ivy leaned over to him and put her hand on his cheek. He accepted her touch, but didn't respond. "You'll like it," she teased. This time his expression was as easy to read as any man's. She smiled. He smiled and laughed.

"What do you want me to see?"

"A special place. A sanctuary around the corner."

She rode and he followed her to a tall building. Wide stone steps across the entire front led to a long patio behind tall columns that rose to support massive stones on which were carved the words, *Carry forth the flame of knowledge into the darkness of the unknown.*

"What is it?"

"A library."

"Books?"

"Here we kept all the books for anyone to see."

As the meaning of her words settled over him, Estus became withdrawn and quiet. He reached out to Ivy. She dismounted to steady him. He opened his mouth, voiceless. He took a breath and finally managed to say, "Are they..."

Tears welled in Ivy's dark eyes. She shook her head no.

Estus ran up the stairs, Ivy at his side.

They entered the library on the main floor at the bottom of a spacious atrium. Only broken shards remained of the glass ceiling through which the afternoon sun slanted against the third floor balconies.

To the left and right were stairs to the second floor. Ivy took her companion's hand and led him upstairs. It was cold and empty, and stank of animal urine. Two thousand years ago the large upholstered chairs that lined the second floor balcony rails were always filled with patrons reading and studying. If anything remained of those chairs and the tables and the rows of cedar bookshelves, it was as blowing debris. The last remnants of the long oak table lay rotten under a window with only an undulating spider web as a pane.

Estus looked all around. "Is nothing left?" he asked.

Ivy pointed to the atrium wall between the second and third floors. On large tiles were carved all the guild symbols.

"These used to represent the disciplines. All the knowledge acquired for each of them was kept here. Some of it rivaled the archives of elven science. Over there. Do you see? The carpenter's triangle."

It was almost a whisper when Estus asked, "Why?"

Ivy now pointed to the single larger tile that was duplicated over both sets of stairs. Into that tile was carved a large pentacle, the mark of the wizard's guild.

"Magic." In a moment he understood. "As a discipline."

"Estus, I can tell you everything you want to know. I can tell you even more than you want to know. But you need to understand that it will make you even more different than everyone around you. It will be dangerous to you, and you will have to live as though you don't know anything special. You are in the carpenter's guild, and so things that you could get away with before will not be tolerated. Andor would not hesitate to kill you if he thinks you are a threat to him. He would probably have killed you already if Jorel told him everything that went on in Kelebor."

Ivy turned to him and took his hands in hers. She stood close to him, holding his hands up between them. "Estus, you need to understand that what most people think of as truth, as their reality, has little or nothing to do with what is actually happening and why. People like you are dangerous to them, because you can get in the way of powerful plans. You need to either forget all of this, or you need to cross over into a very perilous arena. There can be no middle ground. You will be changed beyond what you can imagine."

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The crowd gathered in the piazza of the Cathedral of Boret was alive in hate. As Glen Dawson squeezed his way through the aisles toward the deacon gallery at the front, he heard language that surely displeased the Holy Father of Light. The men of the town were assembled next to the burnt husk of the destroyed governor's palace to hear Andor's speech, and the images of blackened windows showing sky through a crumbled roof were like gateways drawing them into a new, sour reality.

The afternoon held a sharp, chilled bite, and the heat from the still-smoldering building washed across the crowd and filled the air with the bitter aroma of charred timbers.

Glen noted with humble pride that the tarps covering the new construction of the sanctum's new north wing created a clean backdrop to the speaker's balcony. As he took his seat in a large upholstered chair among the other guildsmen from Boret, the tower bell began to sound, and the din from the crowd began to soften. By the fifth and final deep, resounding ring, the angry hundreds were settled onto their wooden benches.

When Andor Tol-Tolin stepped onto the speaking platform a wave of silence flowed outward from him, leaving the area as quiet as midnight. Seagulls by the river filled the quiet with their creaking calls. Then they too were gone, leaving only the sigh of the cold autumn wind.

When Andor spoke, his voice resonated against the stone and brick, echoing with tinny clarity.

"Yesterday our brave governor led sixty-eight souls into the light of God's gentle heart. These were our brothers, sisters, children, parents, and our dear friends. They were pulled from us by this horrid tragedy, and we must let our heavy hearts be lifted knowing that they are in God's eternal embrace."

Glen lost two of his close friends. One was a young man, newly branded to the guild only last week who was doing some repairs on some window casings. The other was a clerk in the records division who was married to a dear friend of Glen's wife. As Andor spoke, Glen closed his eyes and said a prayer for the families and friends left behind that they could carry the burden of separation until they were rejoined in the Light.

"I have heard words spoken on this day against Gaelon and her proud city of Gelst. We must never forget that the people of Gelst are brothers with us in the light, and that the actions of a few dark souls do not speak for all of them. The people of Gelst are, like us, victims

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of those who live only to pull apart the growing union of these two lands.”

Murmurs erupted through the deacon’s gallery, filled with curses against Gelst and sentiments that challenged the wisdom of the elf. Glen stood and whispered loudly, “Please, let us hear and understand.” He received angry looks, but the chatter faded.

“This was an act of evil, which hides in cowardice and strikes at innocent souls. This aggression against Boret will not stand. We will not allow our people to suffer the fear of wondering where will be the next fire, or the next attack. We will pursue them until they have no safe quarter. Today their leader sits in a Gelst prison, yet his followers, blinded by their twisted cultish devotion to him, continue to fight in his name. We must stand together in support of the courageous men who place themselves between this evil incursion and the families and children of the Teshon lands.”

Glen began a small round of applause by clapping vigorously.

“But this is only the beginning. The infection of this evil influence has extended to boys and even women who are preparing to fight against God and His mission of peace. The brave men in red who protect our streets and are prepared to put their sword in the service of the Lord can not fight this evil alone while we hide in our cellars and hope they can win. They need your hands, your eyes, and the fire of God that burns in your heart. Are you content to let them fight and die at the hands of this evil influence while you eat the bread and drink the wine that they allow to come to you through the blood filled battles on the Mundela River?”

Shouts peppered the crowd. Glen turned to see some of the men standing and shaking their fists. Andor pointed to the governor’s mansion, and yelled, “Look at it. Will that be your house next? Or the home of your fathers and sons? Look at the wrath of the evil influence, and smell the death that they have brought to us.” Now the crowd was shouting their curses in a mob chorus.

At the podium ahead, Andor motioned for them to sit down. “Let us not be driven by hate,” he called out. “Hate is not the work of God, but of those who trade in evil and want to tear us away from the Holy Light of God. Let us be driven by love. Let us carry the Light of God’s heart with us as we fight the influence of evil that has blackened the souls of the lost brothers of Gelst. It is time to stand with the Lord and let your hands and courage do His work. Our Legion brothers are trained to maintain God’s order in our cities, but against this evil influence, which has darkened the souls in Gelst as

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black as the burnt ash beside us, they need your help. They need men who carry God's Fire in their belly, and who will suffer no evil heart to influence even one more good man. Better a blackened heart be pierced by honest steel, than to be free to curse God by doing any more harm to this city and our families and our children. Your brothers need your hands, your courage, and your devotion to God's Holy Light."

Now the crowd came alive with applause and cheers. Glen stood and turned. Legion officers were already collecting volunteers off to the side. The fear that had been burning quietly in his gut suddenly vanished, and a smile covered his face as he stood with his brothers in the Light, clapping so powerfully and long that his hands started to hurt.

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The large rowboat bobbed up and down, pulling against its moorings, as Darla King loaded it with food and supplies for their journey inland up the Nordel river. Davis stood on the dock, handing boxes and bags to Darla, who stowed them in the crate at the tiny boat's stern. As the other sailors were carrying the last of the boxes she had marked out of her father's store, Darla whispered, "Here we go."

Nevil, followed by her cousin, Patrick, and two other men, walked quickly toward her, ignoring the others.

"Where were you last night?" Nevil demanded.

Darla reached into the crate and pulled out a smoked fish and threw it at him.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you're an asshole. Leave me alone!"

"Your father and I had an arrangement." He started to step down into the boat, but Davis stepped in front of him. He tried to push the sailor aside, but Davis stepped in and pulled Nevil's arm around with him, sending him stumbling back toward his friends. Gavin and Cody immediately came to Davis's side as Darla stepped up from the boat.

"Nevil," she said, "calm down. You don't love me. You don't even want me. You want the store and the warehouse. Just accept you're not going to get them. You're just going to be another smelly fish farmer with chapped hands and sunburn. I'm getting out of this town with my new friends. And this one," she said, throwing her arm around Davis, "I'm going to marry."

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"Him?"

"Me," Davis said.

Nevil approached him and thrust a finger toward his face. "This isn't over!"

Davis grabbed his hand, and with his free hand struck Nevil's elbow, pushing it down and his shoulder with it. Davis stepped forward, turned, and pushed Nevil down, pinning his shoulders on the wood deck. Four seconds later, there was a splash, then two more, as Cody and Gavin met the attacks of the others and redirected them into the river.

Gavin knelt down so he was face to face with Nevil. "Stand up. Your turn."

He grabbed Nevil by the shoulders and heaved him up to his feet, then he shoved him forward and pushed him over the edge with a foot to his rear.

Darla called out to the men in the water, "Just keep swimming that way. Shoo." Then she said to Cody and the others, "Get the last of the boxes in, and get started. I'll meet you up the river."

She stepped into the back of her father's shop and fell into his arms. "I thought they would never show up. Tell Patrick thank you for me."

He held her and said, "I don't understand, darling child. So sudden you're leaving."

She rested in his arms for several of her quick heartbeats. "Papa," she said as a tiny whisper. She pulled away and took his face in her hands. "Papa, listen. I'm not going to marry any of those sailors. I just want everyone around here to think that."

"But why?"

"Papa. I have to tell you something. Something about me."

"Anything, Darla."

"I don't want to be married. Ever."

"No, Darla. Don't say never. Never is very long."

"Papa, listen." She closed her eyes and said the words that she had practiced so many times in her head. "I'm in love with Katie. Do you understand?"

It took just a moment for his concerned expression to melt to a knowing smile. "Ah." He said. Then he leaned in and said quietly, "I never asked, but I thought, maybe, since you were young even."

"You understand?"

He kissed her cheek. "Now I do. But why are you leaving?"

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"She's coming too. We're going to Boret. It's a bigger city. It will be easier." She wasn't quite sure that he really did understand.

He held her tight and said, "So, which one is she going to marry?"

"Um. Papa, she's not really going to marry anyone either."

"Look at your papa." She looked up and met his eyes. "I know," he said.

"The tall one, I suppose. The other one is too young."

"Okay. The tall one, then." He pulled her into his embrace and rocked her back and forth. "I'll tell them."

"Papa?"

"Yes?"

"If you suspected, why did you let Nevil come to court me?"

"He came asking. Nobody comes asking anymore."

"Now you know why."

He lifted his hand to her cheek. "Now I know."

"I love you, papa. I have to go. Don't marry Mrs. Brathon."

He held her by the shoulders and looked at her. "Go. I am fine here. Take Katie and run to Boret. Be careful, and you will find a good home there. And then some day I will see you again."

"Yes, papa. Soon."

"Go, and may God always light your way with his Holy Fire."

She kissed him and left with tears covering her cheeks. She pushed her legs forward, one after the other, up the trail that followed the wide Nordel river. She broke into a run, and soon passed the three men rowing. Her world seemed to be spinning like a hurricane, bringing wave after wave of hopes crashing against worries. She kept running. Happiness, anger, and fear followed her, filling her imagination with bizarre scenes and leaving a tense, fluttering knot growing inside her belly as the emotional storms washed over her. She ran through them, pushing her legs and her body harder over the rough trail through the low branches and high weeds.

When the storm felt as if it would overcome her and wash away what was left of her resolve, she broke through to a clearing where the river ran by a shallow bank. Katie stood watching the river, standing in the light of the warm morning sun. She ran to Katie and took her in her arms, and as she felt her body close to hers, the storms melted away as if she had broken through to the eye of the hurricane.

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They held each other without speaking for several minutes while Darla's breath and her mind slowly calmed. Their eyes met, and their smiles brushed away all the difficulties that still stood before them. Then their eyes closed, and their mouths met in a kiss that grew like the rising storm on the other side of the eye. The splashes in the river and the sound of the boat being dragged onto the grass pulled them toward the soft morning atmosphere, but it was Gavin's voice that blew their storming desire away like wafting smoke.

"See Davis. Look at that. What'd I tell you? Not a chance. Shit."

"What are they doing?" Cody asked.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Estus floated naked on his back in the large rectangular pool in the middle of the forbidden hidden city of Antellem. He rested, moving his arms gently in the cool water while he floated in the shade of a large oak tree and watched the sun sparkle between its yellow leaves. The water seemed to soothe more than his tired body. It calmed his spirit, letting a gentle smile rest at the corners of his mouth. Here was peace, nestled among the chattering song of a thousand birds.

Fresh water flowed through a fountain at the far end of the long pool, filling the granite basin with a lazy current and sweeping it clean. After many hundreds of years the design was still sound and still serving the empty city.

He lifted his head and saw Ivy swimming on the other side of the pool. Refreshed and clean, Estus stood in the waist-deep water and walked toward the edge where he pulled himself over the wide stone wall and onto the grass. His clothes hung warm and dry at the campsite, and once he was dressed he began to notice his hunger and the smell of Ivy's wild root and vegetable stew that was simmering in its pot over the fire.

He sat on his blanket and watched Ivy swim beneath the violet and orange glow of the evening sky. She swam strong, with ease and grace, moving her body in and out of the water. Her skin was a rich olive color, dark and sleek, soft and fluid over powerful muscles. Estus watched as she swam to the edge of the pool and rose from the water with her long black hair falling loosely across her shoulders and breasts. As she approached the fire, a dark silhouette against the water, the slow rolling wave of her uncovered hips drew his eyes down to her legs and the shadow of her thighs.

He pulled his eyes away when she stepped into the ring of campfire light and pulled a loose white linen gown over her head. When he returned his eyes to her, he found her smiling at him. He returned the smile as she pulled two bowls from her pack and filled them full of her stew from the pot. She brought his over to him with a golden spoon and told him, "Careful. It's hot."

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He expected the bowl to be hot, but it was cool to the touch. The stew, however, was steaming. Estus sipped a small spoonful into his mouth and said, "This is really good. Is it just roots and berries you collected here?"

"Thank you. It's mostly from the land. Leaves and some wild fruit. A little bark. This and that. The dried herbs and spices really help bring out the flavor."

Ivy settled on the other side of the fire, resting on a yellow blanket, and for a few moments they ate together in comfortable silence. Wind tugged at the fire and blew cool across their little campsite. As the sky turned dark the setting sun reflecting on the sides of the buildings was as beautiful a sight as he had ever seen.

"What happened, Ivy? What happened to this city?"

Ivy brought the spoon to her lips and blew softly on the steaming stew before drawing it carefully into her mouth. She looked at him, her eyes glowing in the light of the fire, and with her face half hidden in flickering shadows, told him, "Humanity became a threat to the elves."

"What kind of a threat? What could be so bad that you had to take this away from us?"

His question hung in the chilled air while crickets and croaking frogs filled the darkening silence. Ivy set down her stew and stood up, her white linen shirt clinging to her damp body. She picked up a thick branch, and when she leaned over to set it onto the fire, Estus let his eyes follow the line of her neck down into the open front of her shirt. Before returning to her seat, she raised her head to meet his eyes, and through the flickering flames, she said, "Magic."

"Magic," Estus repeated. "I used to believe magic was a gift from God, granted to the most devout and wise."

"Used to believe? And now?"

"It's not that easy, knowing what to believe, especially about magic. What do you believe?"

She sat down again on the elven cloth, picked up her bowl, and took another unhurried bite before continuing. "Magic is potential, or possibility, and can be accessed at different levels of power and abstraction. Every creature that has the capability of making choices lives within a field of magical potential. A field mouse, as you can imagine, is much more constrained in his options than a human, and so lives at a much lower level of magical capability."

"Every creature can do magic?"

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"I'm using the term magic in a more general sense than you are probably used to. I'm not only talking about wizards in the guild, but everyone. Everyone can do magic, but some people have more ability and can access the higher levels."

"Everyone? I can't. Maybe I don't understand what you mean."

Ivy paused, wrinkled her brow, and said, "Magic is not just one thing. Here, watch this." She spoke a few steady words, monotone yet lyrical, and suddenly the fire grew in size, forming a tall plume with dancing blue tips. Dry heat, almost too hot to bear, washed across Estus's face. He leaned back and turned away. After a moment it went back to being just a small, ordinary camp fire.

"I could have done that by building a bellows and feeding the fire. Building a bellows is an example of rudimentary control magic, which just means using knowledge, skills, and material to make a device to change the world in some way. It begins with an image in the mind, and then becomes realized in the physical world. Once you have access to higher levels of power you can use focused imagination to create the same effect directly."

"And that's magic?"

"Both of them are magic. The first is called mundane or control magic, and the second is called direct magic. There are also realms beyond that, but it's too early to talk about those. Humans are taught that these two types of magic are very different and that only the second type is part of the wizard's craft, but they are really just the same thing at different intensities. This is very important because that is the key to understanding what happened to this city."

"The use of magic is what made the humans a threat to the elves?"

"The problem is that elves are limited to only the lower levels of direct magic, whereas the human capability for magic, from what we have been able to discover, seems to be boundless. Don't let your stew get too cold."

With Ivy's comment, Estus realized that he hadn't touched his meal since she began talking. He fished out a large bit of soft root and ate it. Yet his appetite for understanding was running far ahead of his appetite for his bowl of stew.

"So, what happened twenty-two hundred years ago," Ivy continued, "was that the scientific exploration of human magical capability increased to a point that some of us felt it could present a very serious threat to the lives of all the elves."

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This matched what he had been taught. All his life he was told that some humans were granted special powers to channel the finger of God. Humans, not elves, had the more powerful magic.

“Why?” he asked.

“Why is that a threat?”

“No. Why can’t elves do more powerful magic?”

“It seems to be a limit on the level of complexity that elves can maintain during the summoning and focusing stages.”

Estus looked at her, not understanding.

“Compared to elves, humans live incredibly short lives. Without going into a lot of biological specifics, it is more or less accurate to say that elves have to use more of their brains for memory, and so there’s not as much detail. Humans, because they have so little to experience and remember compared to elves, are able to create richer and much more detailed memories, and that means that they are able to notice and process more information. It is their ability to quickly distinguish detail and complexity that allows humans to control magic at the higher, faster, and more powerful frequencies. Elves think slow and deep. With enough time we can solve anything, but humans, being quick and broad thinkers, are better able to manage the complex mental interactions at speeds necessary for stronger magic.”

“But why change everything? Why destroy this beautiful city and make it an evil thing?”

“That was not my choice. I believed then, and I still believe, that we must work together, humans and elves, toward whatever destiny awaits us. Partners. The Tols weren’t comfortable with that, and so they took over.”

“Took over what?”

“It would be folly for elves to allow humans to live without our help and guidance. The only question is the mechanism and the extent of the control. My family believes that humans must be matured so that they are emotionally capable of managing the dangerous magical capability that each human possesses. This is of course difficult, but we believe that it offers a more stable long-term solution. The problem is the timing. We need to establish emotional, political, and cultural maturity before we allow the humans to master their power.”

“Otherwise we could destroy you.”

“And yourselves.”

“But what happened?”

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“It turns out that emotional maturity is usually a necessary prerequisite for a human to discover his or her magical capabilities. In other words, you don’t really need all of human society to be mature in its laws and manners, because it will naturally form itself into hierarchical structures where the more advanced, mature people will guide and manage those unable or unwilling to discover their own power.”

Ivy paused a moment to pull a drink from her water flask. Some flowed from her mouth and down the side of her neck, distracting Estus for a moment. He lifted another spoonful of leaf bits from his stew, swallowed, and asked, “If society is self-organizing, why did you interfere?”

“Although it is rare, some humans are particularly attuned to direct magic and can learn to manipulate magic potential without first mastering responsible control magic. A powerful, but spiritually immature person, wielding powerful direct magic would be great risk to everyone. Even control magic can be misused to harm or deceive others, so we monitored cultural maturity, which indicates how a group will behave if left on its own. It varies based on the size of the group, or more accurately, the number of possible interactions, and predicts the probability that any particular interaction will be mutually beneficial, rather than one party harming the other.”

Estus asked, “Does it measure interactions between elves and humans?”

Ivy grinned at his question and said, “No. It could, I supposed, but it doesn’t really make much sense. Because elves live so long, major conflict among the elves tends to be very distasteful. Not so with humans, who will sometimes argue to the death. That is unthinkable to elves. Anyway, when this city was alive, we were guiding the humans into art, music, management, and negotiation skills. We were attempting to raise the cultural maturity level. Unfortunately power struggles among the human leadership was a constant distraction, and meanwhile, their ability to use direct magic was increasing. The Dels, who were shepherding the humans during that time, decided to take over more political control for a few centuries, and keep them focused on art and law while teaching them the responsible use of control magic.”

“You keep talking about control magic, but I don’t really understand what you mean by that.”

“Control magic is really just the ability to control your own life, or perhaps the lives of others, by focusing on a particular desired

outcome. You make something real in your mind, and that image becomes real."

"People do that all the time."

"But some do it better than others, and mastering that is the beginning of magic. Repetition is the key. If you stay focused on something against all obstacles you will eventually achieve it. A clear committed decision, followed by repetitive reinforcement, will define and then manifest a new reality."

"I guess the Del plan didn't work out so well?"

"It would have, but the Tols were not willing to accept the risk, and so they decided to dramatically reduce human's access to magic across the board while attempting to increase their cultural maturity."

"So that's when the Tols took over?"

"Yes."

"Who made the final decision for that change?"

"Oh, I wasn't clear on that. We never agreed with their plan, and so we just kept pursuing our own plans. They went ahead on their own, and won over human support without us. Eventually we had to back out for a while or risk losing all of our work. We went underground and had to work slowly to regain our influence."

"What was the Tol plan?"

"You know it very well. They created the Circle of Light, which was designed to separate humans from their magic and teach only love, brotherhood, and obedience. By crippling their control magic, and preaching love, the intent was to hold off the danger of direct magic until their cultural maturity could be increased. Anyone discovering their magic abilities on their own are directed into the magician's guild, where they can be very carefully indoctrinated and constrained."

"But the guilds take only men. Why are girls not allowed to learn magic? Why take them away?"

"Well, that's a different story altogether. Women are actually more adept at magic than men. This is true for both elves and humans. So, one of the best ways to manage that is to make any kind of magic taboo for women. The Tols therefore created a strictly patriarchal society. This limits women's control magic, and taking girls away who show magical ability encourages any who do discover their power to suppress it."

Estus felt as if he were being pulled along a fast river with his head barely above water. The fissures he had managed to place into

his reality were pulling his world apart, leaving him isolated in a cocoon of Ivy's voice.

She continued. "Once you understand control magic I can show you how the religion of light undermines that."

"I'm ready."

"Language is how magic was first discovered. It enables history, continuity, and a sense of self that extends beyond our physical bodies. Without language there is no god, no laws, no guilds, no nations. There would be trees, food, children, and today, but these things would not be bound within any meaningful context."

"But those things have meaning to me whether I talk about them or not. I don't need words to know how it feels to be a part of a family."

"Yes, but without language you are not able to effectively share that meaning with anyone else, and you would know nothing of your great grandfather. More importantly, language allows your own meaning to be more complex, because words and their concepts create an anchor to those images, allowing them to persist over time and beyond yourself."

"Because I can tell you about it. Concepts can move from my mind to yours."

"Yes, but the word and the concept are separate things, just as language and magic are distinct. Language is like the road to magic, but it's not really a part of magic."

"I don't understand."

Ivy finished her meal and set her bowl and spoon to the side. She picked up a stick and said, "This is the speaking staff. Only the person holding the staff may speak."

"Really?" he asked with a challenging grin.

Ivy pointed the stick at him and declared loudly, "Out of order! You are banished from the speaking circle." Without waiting for Estus to respond, she tossed the stick onto the fire and said, "Language allows us to create laws and protocol. A speaking staff is a very useful tool when a group of excited people have much to discuss, but without the shared understanding the stick is no more than kindling. When it has meaning, people might hurt each other fighting to hold the stick. It's no longer just a stick. It's the right to be heard."

"A lot of time and effort goes into trying to get everyone to understand a concept, even with language. In fact, language often gets in the way."

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"That's a good point. The important thing is the shared mental models. Communication can only take place between people who understand how the world and its various meanings are reflected in each other's minds. Once you have that, the words don't really matter. Do you see that?"

"I think so. When I'm with other carpenters I can discuss the need for a truss-supported lintel, but if I'm talking with others, I would first have to explain those words, and probably draw a picture."

"Exactly. You have a set of images and intuition about carpentry that mirrors the actual world of wood and beams and the forces that are part of a physical structure. You can imagine a cabinet, and with that image in your mind you can build it. Yes?"

"Yes, with the right tools."

"That process of imagining a cabinet and then creating it is control magic. Any time you create something with your imagination and then manifest that image into the world, you are doing magic."

"Okay."

"Each of us creates a complete realm in our minds that parallels the realm of the body. Humans are taught that the physical world should dictate and constrain the mind. But this is not true. The realm of the mind is limitless and unbound, and can be changed in any way. Actually, it is the other way around. The mental realm, through visualizations, expectations, and decisions defines and then motivates the physical realm. The body can't help but follow the mind. This is the foundation of magic, and it is the fundamental truth that worshipping the Holy Circle of Light is designed to hide."

Estus rubbed his hands over his eyes. The river of new ideas sweeping him forward seemed about ready to toss him over a waterfall. With eyes closed and his palms over his eyes, he said, "Praise language if you must, but it seems terribly inadequate for what you are trying to show me."

He heard Ivy's footsteps approach him through the grass. She sat next to him and rubbed her hand on his back. "I can stop if this is making you uncomfortable," she told him gently.

Estus spun his head to her and begged, "No! Please." The moment felt fragile, as if the wind could carry away the genesis of his new understanding. "Go on." It was the plea of a drowning man gasping for air, for salvation against the bitter world that had tried to pull him under.

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She sat in front of him, sitting casually with her knees tucked under her to one side. She smelled pretty and soft, and Estus focused his attention on her words to avoid the distraction of her closeness.

“Just as you can hold a mental image of a cabinet or a house in your mind, you also build mental images for every part of your life. These create the fabric of your world, and it is all, every bit of it, imaginary and unreal. Who you are, the confines of your culture and the limits and demands on your spirit are all make believe. The only inflexible reality is your flesh. Where you take that flesh, why, and to what end, is an illusion entirely of your own making.”

“But it’s not of my making. I’ve been fighting it as long as I can remember.”

“That’s right. You fought it because the world around you was different from the expectations you built in your own mind. In your society you are an outcast. But if we could change the expectations and decisions of everyone else, you would be the norm. You see, some of the most important mental models we build are the reflection of our world and of our selves within that world. Our internal image of ourselves is just as changeable as the image of the house you want to build, and it is just as imaginary. There is no yesterday. Yesterday is part of the illusion we call memory. What is tomorrow? Who you are tomorrow is the illusion we call destiny. The only thing unchangeable is that right now you are sitting here with me, on the dewy grass, next to a campfire. You get to choose what that means.”

“But see, that’s not true. I mean, I don’t see that. If I changed my own self image to convince myself that I could rewrite the guild rules, that doesn’t suddenly change anything. I don’t have any more power than I did when I was just an initiate.”

“If you truly believe that you can do that, then you will set into motion a new meaning for your life. Whether you ultimately attain that vision is to be determined by what you do and how you do it, and what you do is governed completely by the expectations you have of yourself. Those expectations are defined by the imaginary reflection you carry of yourself in your mind. Either you control that image, or someone else controls it for you. You are either in control of who and what you are and will become, or you give that to someone else, someone like Benok Tol-Tolin and his grandson, Andor.”

“Benok? The first elf?”

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“Are you beginning to understand control magic? With control over language, history, rules, and role models, you can turn everyone into your puppet. Pray. Worry. Fight. Lie on the slab and let the brand remind you of what you are and who is your master.”

“I was never his puppet,” Estus answered angrily.

“No. You weren’t. I knew that when I first saw you. That is why we are together this night.”

“So I think I’m getting it. The religion inhibits magic by defining everyone’s social roles. By telling everyone what they should do and how, we are cut off from the control magic that would allow us to seek our own ways.”

“Exactly. But the social roles and limits to knowledge are only a part of it. The real attack on magic is the nature of the religion itself.”

“I can see how separating practical knowledge into different guild organizations inhibits our ability to build advanced mental models, but how does the religion attack our ability to learn magic?”

“The ability to master your own image of yourself is a deeply personal and internal thing. In other words, the magic begins inside of you. Each of us has access to this most intimate and secret part of ourselves, and mastering that private self through the words we choose to define us and the stories we tell ourselves, is the key to control magic. In Benok’s religion, the key to power is purposefully defined as detached and unattainable. You are taught to worship an abstract form, and that salvation only comes from looking away from yourself, where the magic truly lives, and toward an external image which, if it were real, would actually harm you. Anything of the body is cast as profane, and only the Holy Fire can burn away the mortal sins. The image of fire, and being burned, is horribly frightening, and yet this is the image you are taught to worship.”

Estus replied, “It is like forcing a child to love a father who beats him.”

“With unimaginably painful punishment if you refuse, or even question. Humans are kept in a constant state of near panic, and are told from the day they are born to worship the means of their punishment. Love and fear, instead of being opposites, become interchangeable. Most humans are so busy embracing this spiritual branding iron, ready to flinch from the threat of punishment, that it never occurs to them that they can do or be anything other than what their holy father of light tells them. As long as they’re looking up, they won’t look in.”

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“And this is supposed to make them mature?”

“Actually, no. It’s supposed to keep things manageable so that the Tols can set up their culture of brotherhood and service.”

“And what’s that?”

“It’s what they teach in the social, spiritual part of the guilds. The guilds serve two purposes. First, of course, they limit and control practical knowledge, keeping technological and magical growth under control, but they also focus a lot on community service, leadership, patience, respect, and other traits to increase cultural maturity. The problem is that their plan is now about twelve hundred years overdue, and they’re no closer to providing a secure, sustainable human society than they were when they started.”

The night closed around the small circle of their campfire. Estus stood up and pulled another log onto the fire. When it dropped, a spray of dancing orange ashes fell into the air where they fluttered and drifted away. “Wow,” he said quietly. He turned to Ivy and repeated, “Wow. This is a lot to take in.” He sat back down next to her on his blanket.

Ivy reached out and put her hand on his shoulder. “I know. What do you think?”

Estus sat in a swirling fume. “It just seems so pointless and unfair. Over two thousand years, and it’s not working. How could it work? Maturity and magic can’t be separated like that. From what you have explained, they’re fundamentally related. You can’t expect people to grow in responsibility and wisdom when you teach them that those things are not part of them, that they belong only to the God of light. But there’s something I don’t understand.”

“What’s that?”

“If there’s so much effort put into cutting off magic, how is it that the wizard’s guild keeps finding young boys who can do direct magic? How do some humans skip over mastery of what you call control magic?”

“Once your mind has touched the source of magic, it can flow through you, whether you understand how to direct its power or not. It can happen in a moment of sudden crisis, when your entire attention, your entire being becomes focused on one critical task. That sometimes sets the conditions to open your mind to the source. In that state people can do remarkable and unexpected things. The veil of doubt, of fear is ripped apart, and in that moment when you become the knowing, the magic awakens. But when the crisis is over the conditioning usually takes over and the moment is lost. With

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children, sometimes the vividness of their own imagination triggers it, and they just never lose it. When that happens the boy is taken to the guild so he can be trained and watched."

"And girls can do this to? Even stronger you said."

"Yes. The Tols are very afraid of female magic, or any type of feminine power. Without the influence of the Tol families men and women would have complementary roles in society, supporting each other. Didn't it ever strike you as odd that men control everything and that women are expected to offer nothing but their bodies for enjoyment or babies?"

"Sometimes. Carmen and I were never like that. Is female magic different from male magic?"

"Not in type, but in intensity. Women are more naturally in tune with the energies. They can sense and control deeper channels of both control magic and direct magic."

"Closer to the source?"

"Yes."

"What does that mean, exactly, to open your mind to the source?"

"I can show you, if you want."

"What do you mean?"

"I can open your mind to the source of magic."

"How?"

Ivy laughed and reached out to put her hand on his shoulder. "Don't worry. It doesn't hurt."

Estus took a deep breath and prepared himself for whatever it was. "Okay. I want to do that."

Ivy smiled and moved to sit in front of him. She closed her eyes, started muttering soft, strange words. She seemed to grow calm and very relaxed, and when she opened her eyes, it was as if they were able to look through his every thought. Her intense gaze made him uncomfortable, until she reached out and pulled his hands toward her. Ivy placed his hands on her face. She reached out and put her palms against his cheeks. Her eyes beckoned him to meet her stare, and when he did, his vision tunneled until all he could see were her powerful, knowing eyes.

He tried to observe and analyze what was happening, but his plan soon melted away, taking with it the constant chatter of ideas and random thought that usually filled his mind. The silence of his mind seemed foreign and strange, and soon even that observation was lost. It didn't matter. He didn't need examination or words,

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because his mind was understanding this moment with a clarity and speed that defied any attempt he might have made to reflect upon it. Without any need to translate or remember this moment, he was free to just exist, in as pure and simple a state as he had ever known. He felt peaceful and calm, but beyond those concepts. His feeling was not an example of any known or expected mood. It simply was. All feedback and scrutiny were gone, and in their place was pure focus and understanding.

Slowly his vision returned, and he looked away from Ivy. Still, his mind was quiet. No word, no thought distracted him. His eyes fell onto his hand, and he noticed every wrinkle, every tiny scar, and he was acutely aware that he was made of living tissue, filled with blood, and bone, and obedient meat. Next his vision drifted to the fire. He saw it burning, and heard the most subtle crackle of its consumption. He felt the heat on his face, and the cold air on his neck. He breathed in, and was able to sense that part of the world outside had been taken into his body. He exhaled, knowing that he had warmed the air, much as the fire took in cold air, burned it, and changed it. As he exhaled, he sensed how the cold air swirled around his breath, and he tasted the fire's hunger for more.

No thought or observation was left to penetrate the focus of his mind. He extended his hands toward the fire, and just as he might pick up a stone or a stick, he felt the cold night air in his hands. He opened his palms to drop the air onto the fire, and with an awareness that surpassed the deepest conviction he had ever experienced, he knew that more air had to follow in its wake. Cold air rushed past his hands to the base of the fire, feeding it, bringing the glow of the logs to a deeper red. He pushed more air, and heard the fire crackle and pop as it flames grew hotter and higher.

It reminded him of what Ivy had done earlier, and with that realization, another followed. His hands felt cold. The word cold came to his mind, and when he brought his hands together to warm them, he began to notice his surroundings. The brilliant, focused clarity dropped, the mental chatter returned, and Estus again felt himself sitting on the cold ground, thinking about and remembering what had just happened.

He looked up into Ivy's eyes. They were watching him. His mind, though sharp and aware, felt sluggish and drunk compared to a moment ago. He had seen clarity and knowing as he never

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imagined he could. The chatter in his mind raced to find the words to describe his experience, and soon he found it. The one word that captured the power and capability that he now knew was a part of him.

“Magic,” he said.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Becker Dodd held the kerosene lamp behind him so the man and girl could follow him down the narrow back stairs of the Bastion theater. Their feet stirred the musty dust and sent tiny eyes to scurry under the wooden steps that creaked and bent with their descent. At the bottom, Becker led them to a corner of the property warehouse where there were chairs for them to sit. He directed the man to a large overstuffed sofa and sat on its companion chair across from them.

He set the lamp on the small table at his right and finally spoke. "You're both safe here."

The man's eyes looked suspicious, and the girl's face, mostly hidden as she rested on his shoulder, was tight and concentrating. Becker turned his attention to the panorama of knowing that by now had become as familiar to him as the sound of his own voice in his head. After years of study and continual practice, he could now maintain his connection with the magical state indefinitely. Spells were now as natural a part of him as his confident stride. He existed in two worlds, and in some ways the world of his magical knowing was more real than the world that had prepared him. When everything is possible, living within the constraints of confused flesh was almost a burden. Energy was his voice, and light flowed through him as breath to his lungs.

His perception of magic had taken a very strange turn a year ago, a turn that he had so far discussed only with Kendrick, who had hinted of it himself some time before that. He found himself edging beyond the need to anchor the complex mental matrix of the transcendent protocols with words. Something as clumsy as language was now an impediment to the quick, deep connection he had with realities that now bent to his simple will.

Kendrick told him that in the Wizard's Guild this is called *cupping*, and they are taught that losing the anchorage of ritual words will pull their soul away from their bodies and into God, leaving them a useless, deranged husk. Even the most powerful Guild magicians lock their magic firmly within the bounds of an increasingly complex and arcane language so that they can deal with

the many interdependencies and dimensions of an advanced conjuring.

But words are no more an appropriate vehicle for magic than they would be for music, or wind in your face. Magic begs to be as free as the lilt of a flute, or as powerful as the bellow of a cello. Magic is knowing that everything is possible, coupled with the subtle understanding of why.

Moving through the cusp did indeed beckon the soul, but not as taught in the guilds. It was freedom and patience, power and silence. At all times, Becker knew anything that happened around him. He could feel other magicians struggling their way through the fibrous core of the sources. He felt the world around him like the beat of his own heart.

He folded time back and saw images of these two running through the street, invisible by the girl's awkward magic. He saw flames and water and thirst. A chest was locked with a simple wizard spell. He saw them riding in a wagon behind two black horses. The guild wizards were looking for them. Becker twisted the energy surrounding the theater into a mask, then he placed a web to absorb any magic the young girl might suddenly do. He watched the mystery that was this girl. She was familiar, and the magic he felt was strong, from a deep channel.

He pushed through more images. The barn. Men sleeping. Playing in the sun. Doing magic by the river. Her father. Dennis. Of course! This was the daughter he took north when Susan's sister died. Of course magic would be strong in her. Adrian was the baby's name, and no doubt the name of this scared child.

He spoke to her. "Their looking magic can't find us here. Can you see the spell work?"

Her voice was tiny and scared, and muffled against the man's shoulder. "It's blue. And soft," she said.

"Yes. That's the local shell around us to hold magic in."

"It's pretty," she said.

"Can you see beyond that? The wall?"

"There's more green. Ripples sort of."

"You're safe here, Adrian," he repeated. Now he turned his attention to the man and said, "My name is Becker Dodd. I brought you here using a portal spell. Are you or the girl hurt?"

The old man shook his head no. Becker also examined them with magical clarity that came to him now as easily as his own vision. They were both agitated and scared, with elevated heart rates and

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quick breaths. He sensed a little bit of discomfort in the man's arms, probably from carrying the girl as they were running. The girl was dehydrated and had a scrape on her leg, but there were no broken bones, internal bleeding, or severe injuries.

"What is your name?"

"Lennel Gareth. Do you know this child?"

"Yes, but I have not seen her since she was two months old. I'm a friend, Lennel. I'm going to help you, whatever you need."

"Do you have any whiskey?"

Becker laughed quietly. "Not here, but I know someone who does." He stood and came over to them, knelt by the sofa, and put his hand on the girl's back. "We've been waiting for you to come home, Adrian."

She raised her eyes to him and said, "I'm looking for my grandma."

"Adrian, I know you don't remember me, but when you were very young, you used to sleep on my belly. I knew your mother very well, and her sister, who lives very close to here."

"And my grandma?"

"She died a long time ago, sweetheart. But your aunt and her family are here." He turned to Gareth and asked, "What happened to her father?"

She answered. "My daddy went into the Light helping Mister Bodie on the river."

Gareth filled in, "Bodie Challuk is fighting for the liberation of Gelst."

Becker nodded to him. That name was familiar in the news of the underground groups. The locked treasure he saw must have been the gold taken from the Legion transport by Boret.

"How is it that she is with you?"

"Bodie is a close friend of mine. I'm fulfilling his promise to bring her home."

"Your name is familiar to me." Becker thought a moment. He performed what was usually called a memory spell, but without the preparation, incantation, or ritual. His memory was now clear and complete, a perfect image. This was the smuggler who was thought to be lost at sea. No wonder they were greeted with the full force of the Legion guards in Korolem.

"You two are in danger. We need to get you home without anyone finding you. The wizards are using strong watcher spells.

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We're shielded in here, but as soon as we leave they'll be able to see you."

"What do we do?"

"Worry not, dear captain. The magic they are using lets them see only what their eyes could see if they were near."

"Is that why we're downstairs in the dark?" he asked.

"They can't see here," Becker told them. He rubbed his hand on Adrian's back and told her, "You won't need your magic. You can rest now." He saw her face relax, and just as easily he felt her pull away from the source. "That's good," he told her. Again he turned to the older man and said, "I could cover you with illusions or invisibility, but what we need is some simple theater magic."

Becker stood and told them, "If you will follow me, I will help Lennel and Adrian disappear and bring a gentleman investor and his daughter to life in their place."

They both looked up at him.

"Come, let me show you."

When Gareth stood and lowered Adrian to the floor, Becker led them to the wardrobe room. He opened the door and picked up the long lighter torch, and with a simple twist of his fingers he scorched the air on its tip and set it afire.

"Find something you like," he told them as he walked around the perimeter of the room to light the many oil lamp sconces, slowly revealing a dozen long racks filled with clothes and costumes.

He returned to find Adrian looking at a backless green summer dress with a white hem and sash. "You like that?" he asked.

She pushed it away, shrugged her shoulders and said, "It won't fit me."

Becker took her hands and turned her toward him. He tweaked her chin and said, "Leave that to me, button." Then he turned around and said to the captain, "Perhaps a tuxedo and overcoat. We'll have to shave your beard and dye your mustache."

"Are you sure that's necessary?"

"Absolutely! The captain and the mystery girl are about to vanish into the thin wisp of history. We shall make brand new people from the fragile illusion of tomorrow."

"But I grew up in this town. I have old friends."

"Once we're finished they won't know you. Not until all this blows over. From now on, you are friends of friends from out of town. Nobody knows everybody, and that leaves a lot of space for us to fill. You'll blend in at the ball right under their noses."

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"If you say so."

"I do, most emphatically. If you believe it, they will too. In that corner is a dressing table with scissors, blades, cream, and some towels. Call out if you need anything." Becker spun back to Adrian, took the green dress from the rack and laid it across her. "Beautiful," he told her. Then he put his fingers into her hair and said, "I'd like to cut this. Something cute, to your cheeks, with just an ever so soft curl."

Becker led her to a dressing table next to the captain, put her in a chair and draped a cloth over her. He cut her hair with quick confident precision. When he was done and the captain was finished shaving, he threw the cloth around Lennel and cropped the tangled bush of his hair close to his head.

Adrian watched, and near the end she said, "My gosh, Lenny, you look fabulous!"

He sneered and said, "I'd rather not think about it."

Becker took off the barber bib and looked at the captain. He tilted his head and said, "Okay, gray to brown." Then he turned to Adrian and said, "And black to, hmm." He pictured her in the green dress and said, "Black to red."

Another station had the dyes and implements. He reclined them both back, resting their heads in the sinks. First he bleached Adrian's hair, then he colored the captain's hair and took him to find a black suit and overcoat.

When they returned, Adrian was standing looking at her short, white hair in the mirror. Becker stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. He brushed his fingers through her hair and told her, "You look so much like your mother."

She spun around and said, "You knew her?"

"We were good friends. You probably don't remember much about her."

She shook her head no.

"There is much to tell," he told her. "But I'll leave that to your aunt."

"My aunt?"

"Your mother's sister. She has a daughter about your age. Your cousin, Hannah."

"Really?"

"You didn't know, did you?"

"No."

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"You come from a family that is strong in all kinds of magic. That's why you can conjure, and make yourself invisible."

"It's supposed to be a secret."

"Yes, but with me, and with your family, you can talk about it. But don't use it until they can teach you more about it. You're going to learn a whole new level of your power."

"They all do magic like me?"

"All of them," Becker answered. "I'll take you there as soon as I finish with you here."

He colored her hair a dark chestnut red, then took her to the dressing room where with a little padding he added enough curves so that the dress was a perfect fit. With shoes, makeup, and a matching hat, the ten year old girl was indistinguishable from a young society lady ready for the ball.

Becker escorted her out to reunite her with the captain who was now dressed in his new clothes. Their reactions with each other were enough to remove any doubt that they were safe from prying wizard eyes and watchful Legionnaires. After turning off all the lamps, he led them upstairs, through the lobby, and out the front door of the Bastion Theater. He felt the watching magic sweep over them, but he ignored it and kept walking. He told them all about the new play that was going to open that weekend after the harvest festival ball. He saw more than one Legionnaire watch them go by. Most admired the illusion of the young woman he had just created, never suspecting that she was the source of the fire magic drama that had erupted in the street that morning.

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The Legion boat pitched up and down, pulling against its moorings as it sat docked in Boret amid the choppy, busy waters of the Mundela river. Baron Arrenkyle stood on the deck while the crew secured the plank for him. Ahead, waiting in his oversized mahogany carriage sat Andor Tol-Tolin, tall and gaunt, hidden in the shadows behind his silk lace curtains.

He forced his mind to be still. Most of the trip he had sat brooding on the forward deck trying to imagine what he could say about the escape of the smuggler ship. The incident haunted him. Everything had been done according to the correct tactical requirements within the constraint of the law. Still, there had been the opportunity to board the ship to take control of her, or at least force her anchor down. It was a bitter failure, and now it had led to

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loss of his Gelst command. All that was left was to face the punishment with as much honor and grace as expected of a servant in the Lord's work.

Baron let his attention slide beyond the carriage to the Governor's quarters. Fire had blackened the window sills and consumed the roof. Scaffolding covered the outside of the building, and already new joists were being covered with lumber and a new slate roof.

"Here you go, Sir."

Baron placed his foot on the plank and took hold of the hand rail just as the boat pitched down, almost causing him to trip. He took the five steps quickly to the wooden dock, straightened his red jacket, and climbed the stairs to the road level. The carriage door swung open for him, and he pulled himself onto the plush seat across from the elf. Beside the elf was a wooden guild box on which was carved the crossed swords of the Legion Guild.

"You are well overdue, Colonel, for advancement in your Guild. You have done very well in difficult times."

"By God's grace."

Andor nodded. "You have been performing at the level of General for some time, and I have no doubt that you are ready for your next assignment."

"It is my honor to serve."

"You are to become Governor of Boret."

Baron felt time hang and then freeze. He knew what he had heard, but it was so bizarre, so wrong, that he had to listen to the echo of the words in his mind several times before he could believe it. "Andor, I'm sorry, but I can't accept this."

"You have been reassigned. The post is filled, and it rests now upon your shoulders."

His mind raced. There were several other operations and conflicts of which he had no current knowledge. He would have to meet with Petran's staff and hear extensive briefings. There were political concerns and issues of city security that he would have to master in short time. He took a deep breath, feeling within himself a sudden clarity, and he noticed a surprising calm of confidence come over him. "I need to schedule briefings throughout the day, starting with an overview of Boret operations." His mind raced forward. He needed a secretary to help him organize it all. He started to ask Andor for the list of his senior staff when he was interrupted.

"Don't worry, Baron. I will guide you through it all."

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"There's not much time. The situation I just left in Gelst is very volatile."

"Baron, relax! There is plenty of time. This afternoon there will be an inauguration ceremony. You will read a short prepared statement. Then we will tour your new home. Tomorrow there will be several executive orders for you to issue. You will be quite busy. When the time is right, you will meet your staff."

"I'm concerned about the fire. Who is leading the investigation into how the rebels were able to do this?"

"Baron, how is your brother?"

"My brother?"

"I understand he was marked into the carpenter's guild."

"Yes."

"If his first communion demonstrates his commitment to our Lord, he shall have an interesting career."

"I'm sure that with his mind open to the teachings of God he will serve his guild well."

"Are you? I certainly am not. In fact, there's a very good chance he'll soon have to hold his chisel with his feet. Perhaps while he's here you can keep him on the Lord's path."

"I trust my brother to do the right thing. He is a student of Benok now, and whatever your worries are, please put them to rest."

"Your brother is a heretic, a blasphemer, and a liar. Do not insult me by pretending otherwise. He has taken his vow falsely, and he does not deserve to wear the mark of God's grace. He will soon be here, in the holiest gem of God's works, spoiling those around him with the stench of his arrogance and evil thoughts."

Baron met Andor's gaze for a few short seconds, but turned away in shame. His hope for Estus to understand and accept God's gifts did not take away what he was. With a stuttering whisper, Baron told Andor, "I will see that he is true to his guild. I will look after him."

"Do that, but do not let him poison you. You have much to account for yourself, you know. The rebels in Gelst are now better armed because of your failure to enforce proper inspections and docking regulations. If you had captured the captain, we could have discovered his connections or learned something of their operations. But without him, much damage has been done."

Baron felt his confidence break. He felt ugly and incompetent.

"But you are now in a position to redeem yourself," Andor went on. "Let me reveal to you what must be done now."

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“Yes, Andor.”

“Serve me well, Baron, and you may be able to redeem your brother as well. If you fail me, I don’t know how I could save your brother from God’s justice. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

The carriage began to move, turning to take them through the gate of the Governor’s palace. Baron felt suddenly hollow, as if he were made of sticks and old string. He could not stand to meet Andor’s eyes. He could not even bear to keep them open.

---

When Estus woke by the Antellem pool he became aware of two things. First he realized that he had slept better and more soundly than he ever had. He was refreshed and totally awake. When he took his first deep breath into his lungs he felt himself become filled with the richness and splendor of the pine scented air. When he stretched and rolled over he noticed the second thing. He was alone.

There was no sign of the elf.

For a quick second he almost considered debating with himself about what had happened yesterday. That was folly, of course. He knew what he knew.

So he pulled himself up into a comfortable sitting position, focused his eyes on the clover bloom in front of him and tried once again to empty his mind and draw into his awareness the sharp and profound clarity that he had experienced last night.

Instead of clearing and becoming still his mind began exploring the implications of Ivy’s lesson on human and elf relations. It was hard for him to turn away from the visions of deep, beckoning hope. Everyone should hear the lecture of the hidden games that controlled their world. What a deluge of creativity and energy it would enable. As he stared at the clover he became enchanted with the hapless meandering of a dozen ants, and in his mind they seemed better directed and wise than most humans.

He began to laugh. He forgot about his attempt to summon the magical state. There was magic enough all around him. The morning was clear and fresh. The sky was a deep forever blue and the herd of clouds that eased across the sky were full of soft pillow curves shining a brilliant shade of honey along their edge. Estus rose, folded up his bedroll and blanket. After packing up he let Koby trot quickly out of the forgotten city, and soon they were following the old road toward Boret.

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He let his eyes wander through the forest canopy, the bare limbs, the rich pallet of orange, bright yellow moss, brown hanging vines. The autumn colors and textures were a celebration to his eyes, and the sight brought songs to his lips. Estus didn't know too many songs, and so he found himself singing old church songs with a voice hanging on the verge of belly laughs. Sometimes the words felt like the punch line of the Tol's magnificent, invisible veil of lies, and he couldn't keep the giggles in. He felt giddy and alive. The day passed effortlessly, and by dusk he was on the streets of Boret.

The city grew around him until he became lost in narrow corridors and alleys, filled with stores, craft shops, and homes. Riding among carriages, horses, and pedestrians that flowed in crowded masses through the stone capillaries, Estus explored aimlessly, taking turns without a care of where they would take him. One road led him into an open piazza behind a crowd that was gathered in front of a large splashing fountain. Closed in between the crowd and the restless water a pair of jugglers performed. Everyone gasped in unison when the small wooden bats that they were throwing between them suddenly took fire at one end.

Estus saw that one man in the crowd was wearing a white guild collar sash with the carpenter's emblem. After a brief introduction and directions, Estus left the man to his amusement and went in search of the governor's palace to find Glen Dawson, the chief architect of Boret.

He stopped at a stand for some corn-battered sausages, then found the main river and the large plaza next to the burned face of the palace. The daylight was giving way to the gray cover of dusk, and only one worker remained, a master carpenter with a blue armband. Estus hitched his horse and walked over to the scaffolding.

Estus called to him. "Excuse me. Is Professor Dawson still here? I'm supposed to see him."

"He's here. Hold on a minute."

A moment later, he came to the street and escorted Estus in past the Legion guards.

"What happened here?" Estus asked him.

"What do you mean? You didn't know about the fire?"

"No."

"Bastard rebels from Gelst tried to burn it to the ground."

"Was anybody hurt?"

"Hurt? Don't you know?"

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"I've been traveling for several days."

"They killed the governor. Looks like they tied him up and started the fire right there in his bed. That was the first time I regretted guilding myself as a carpenter. If I were not already branded to do God's construction, I would have enlisted as a Legion fighter just to put a knife through one of their necks."

"I'm sure that would please God."

"Damn right! Godless traitors. So now we need to get the palace ready for the next governor. Did you see the speech?"

"No. I just got into town about an hour ago."

"I've never heard of the man, but he was running the Gelst operation for the last year, so he knows how to handle those southern devils. He's going to give them what's coming. You don't do this to Boret."

"The Gelst operation? What's his name?"

"Baron Harcort, or Argyle or something like that. I was in the back."

"Arrenkyle?"

"That's it."

Estus stopped. They were in standing in front of the grand stairway that led from the front celebration hall to the business offices on the next floor. "Baron Arrenkyle? Are you sure?"

"Yeah. That was the name."

"Is he here?"

"I suppose."

"I need to see him."

A voice from the landing above called down, "You shall do no such thing. Kenneth, thank you. You can go home for the night."

His guide looked confused for a moment, then patted Estus on the shoulder and said, "Okay then. This is Glen Dawson. I'll see you around on the job."

"Good night, then," Estus told him. When he turned his attention up the stairs, he saw Glen coming down. He hurried to Estus, said, "Follow me," and then walked quickly to an exit at the side of the room.

"I need to see my brother."

Glen stopped and said, "He's busy, and I need to talk with you first. Come with me and keep quiet." He started walking, and Estus stood still and watched him while he considered searching for Baron on his own. It was a big place, and he needed to meet with Dawson anyway, so he decided to follow him and see what he had to say.

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Glen led him to the stables where there were piles of wood and supplies. The stall on the end next to the window had been converted to a temporary construction office. They went in and Glen closed the door behind them and took his seat at the small wooden desk that was covered with pages of drawings, schedules, progress reports, and guild books. Estus remained standing by the door.

"Sit down," Glen told him.

Estus watched him for a moment, measuring the situation. He took a slow step, then another, and settled himself onto the small wooden stool.

"The first thing you need to know is that you will get no special treatment because of your relationship with the governor. He has given me complete authority regarding your training and work here, and he gave me a message for you. He said, 'Tell him I'm through chasing him down rabbit holes.' And then he told me to keep you away from him for a while."

Estus pushed his curiosity and impatience aside and decided to ignore this strange turn of events for now. It was too heavy, and he knew that he dare not ask the kind of questions that boiled in his mind. He said, "Jonathan Travers told me you would help me find a place to stay."

"Did you hear what I just said?"

"I don't need much, just a small room with a bed and a place for my horse."

"Answer me!"

"Professor Dawson, I didn't come here to cause any trouble. I'm here to work. I want to begin my craft here in Boret. I know you're the damn boss. You don't have to pour it all over me."

"No, I don't think you do know. I don't think you know the first thing about what it means to bear the mark of your craft. I think you are condescending, crude, and ignorant. You sit there wearing a guild mark and speak to me with foul words and this grotesque arrogance. When you earn your black sash, maybe you could speak to me like that, but of course if you ever make it that far you'll learn that no man should put himself above another, and that we all serve the Lord with humility and grace."

Estus took a deep breath and looked out the window, wishing that he had prepared himself more carefully to rejoin the society that swam on the surface of the thin facade. This was not going well.

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"Professor, I truly did not mean any disrespect to you, to the Lord, or to our craft. I have been traveling for several days. I am tired, weary, and a little disoriented. Forgive me if I spoke to you as a friend, instead of my mentor. I am at your service. What will you have me do?"

"Estus, I hope you can think of me as your friend. I understand that you are troubled. I know the loss you have suffered and how it must be weighing on your mind. Perhaps you have questions about why this happened, and what course God has now granted to you. But understand, these are dangerous times. We are at war. We must all do our best as we are called. I have very specific instructions about what you are allowed to do. I have seldom seen a man as angry as your brother when he spoke about you. I do not have any interest in interfering with your family relationship, but his orders were clear and made most powerfully."

Estus stood, and said, "I think we understand each other. I will find a place to stay and I will be here in your office early tomorrow ready to work."

"Here," Glen said. He wrote on a small sheet of paper and handed it to Estus. "You can stay with Madam Collins. Be here at first light. I'll put you on Kenneth's team."

"Thank you," Estus said, taking the paper.

"I'll walk you out," Glen told him.

A carriage had been pulled into the stables. Attendants were brushing the horses. Guards were waiting by it. The exit to the street was blocked by the activity, and so Estus followed Glen around back into the palace.

They turned the corner into a group of Legionnaires led by Baron with a tall elf at his side.

He noticed Estus, but looked away.

"Baron!" Estus called out. He stopped. They all stopped and turned toward Estus.

"Get him out of here," the governor ordered.

Suddenly Estus was surrounded by large powerful men pulling him away.

"Stop!"

They stopped. Baron walked down the hallway, his heavy boots pounding sharp echoes against the stone floor. He came to stand in front of Estus. The men still held him tightly.

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"I'll send for you in a few days," he told him. He lowered his voice and added, "It's over. No more. You used it all up, and now I'm all you've got."

Estus answered quietly, "I'll await your call."

Baron stepped back, turned, and walked away.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A salty breeze charged inland from the Korolem bay, rustling through the brittle, yellowing remains of the Kambor Garden canopy. Adrian sat with her cousin, Hannah, watching the leaves as they floated down to the ankle deep Autumn carpet where the squirrels and chipmunks played. She swung her feet back and forth under the bench, scraping her toes through the loose gravel, trying to ignore how exposed and vulnerable she felt here. Becker had told her not to worry, but it was difficult not to reach into her magic colors to hide or watch.

After the brief introductions yesterday that drifted past her almost unnoticed, she and Lenny had spent a soft hour in the cozy darkness of the Henderson kitchen eating a slow supper of ham steak, peas, and cornbread. Aunt Susan had taken her upstairs, helped her change out of the theater costume Becker had made for her, and tucked her early into bed. She had cried some, all curled up with her aunt wrapped around her until she fell asleep.

This morning was a little better. Uncle Nathan and Becker and the captain were talking very seriously about something and did not want to be disturbed, and so Hannah took Adrian out to get muffins for breakfast and show her the garden.

Hannah tightened Adrian's scarf and then reached her arm around her. "Do you want to go back home, Addy?"

"I don't know." She felt numb, as if the wind could pluck her from the bench and send her floating though the air onto the wet ground where she could close her eyes and rest, used up, like all the leaves around her. "I'm just so tired. I miss my papa, and it's still so big I can hardly cry."

"I know, sweetheart. Someday, when you're ready, I want you to tell me all about him."

They sat for another minute while the wind blew around them. A couple walked by them, holding their gloved hands together and their heads near. Hannah said, "They're probably going to go to the dance. I was going to, but Peter! Why do boys have to be like that, Addy? I really like him."

Adrian turned to her, curious. "What dance?"

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"The harvest celebration. I don't really care about it. It's all fancy and snobbish. All anybody cares about is how much money you spent on your dress and if you have pearls sewn onto your collar."

"I've never been to a dance before. I don't even know how."

"Peter taught me. We were going to go together, but his father wants him to take some little chippie from up north."

Adrian looked at Hannah confused. "Why wouldn't he go with you? You're really pretty."

"Oh, I don't know. It's that whole class thing. They're in the guilds so they think it's horrid to mingle with people like us."

"There are a few people up North like that. My father never liked the guilds. He was a farmer and did whatever he needed on his own."

Hannah pulled Adrian closer and told her, "I like that. He must have been a great man."

"He was." Adrian felt her throat tighten up to cry, so she pushed her mind empty again, as if she were going to do magic, but she didn't. She just let the quiet take her mind away for a while so she wouldn't start crying again. "Is there someone else you can go to the dance with?" she asked.

"No. I'm not going to go. Peter said he wasn't going to go either, but then Sally said she heard from Bobby that he told Bruce that he was going with that other girl. Bruce is his best friend since forever, so he probably knows."

"Do you want to go?"

"I did. But I don't really care about the dance. I wanted to go because I was with Peter."

"You really like him."

"I know. And it's not really his fault. His father's a bully."

"You should go with someone else."

"No. It doesn't matter."

"If you're there then maybe you can dance with Peter anyway."

"No. That wouldn't be right."

"You should ask Becker."

"Oh! No, Addy. I can't ask him."

"Why? He's nice."

Hannah laughed and shook her head. "Well. Yeah! He's nice. He's also, like, the most..."

"What?"

"He's a star! He's a senior in his guild! He could go with any woman in this town, married or not I would guess."

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"But he does," Adrian lowered her voice to a whisper and said, "magic." She went on, "You know. Like us."

"Well, sure. But they don't know that. They all expect him to be with the latest, hottest, debuskank. And .. and ... and there's another reason it wouldn't work. He wouldn't want them to see that he's, you know. What you said. With us."

"I can ask him for you."

"Don't you dare." Here eyes were big and ominous.

"Okay. I'm sorry."

Hannah hugged her. "Oh, honey. Don't be sorry. It's a fine idea. I just couldn't. How could I? That would be just... No." But then she suddenly giggled, pulled her hair and said, "I'd just die! I couldn't."

Adrian said, "It's kind of cold. Maybe we should get back to the house." A small grin found the corners of her mouth, and suddenly the day seemed almost interesting.

---

Estus stood naked in the tiny washtub that sat in the corner of the room that he had rented last night. He had only enough coins for one week, but his guild mark was guarantee enough that he could be trusted for the rest. Koby was in the Governor's stable. It was Glen Dawson's idea, and Estus was not able to determine whether it was a kindness offered to him as Baron's brother, or was designed to deprive him of travel. He ran his hand over his right shoulder. The brand was mostly healed, finally. He was a carpenter now, and would be expected to be nothing else for the rest of his life.

Carmen used to keep water boiling on the stove to pour into his bath. This morning he had to walk ten minutes in the pre-dawn twilight to fill his own pot of washing water from the Mundela river. The tiny wash tub, which was not even large enough to kneel in, was helpful only in that it kept the chilly dribbles from running between the rough, unfinished floorboards.

Since leaving Kelebor he had been unable to think of Carmen without being aware of the avalanche of grief that still awaited him. He had pushed all thoughts of her aside, but here, penned in this tiny room, missing the luxury of her laughs and her understanding eyes, he knew that he would not be able to escape for long the deluge of his loss.

He stepped out of the little tub and into a dim ray of the morning sun that pushed through the tiny window, darkened by the layers of dirt that smudged its pane. Dust danced thick in the beam.

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He picked up his shirt and used it to wipe the cold, dirty water from his skin.

The room was barely big enough for the bed, which was hardly big enough for him. Next to the door was a woman's dressing table, minus its drawers. The chair, made of worn pine, was missing two of the back slats, and the rope intended to hold the lower frame together dangled loose with a clumsy assortment of ineffective knots. On its seat rested the burlap pouch with what was left of his traveling rations, nuts, dried fruit, and some jerky meat. His canteen, slung over the back of the chair, still held clear mountain water from the pool of Antellem. The cabinet was in decent condition. It had three drawers and a shelf, which now held the bulk of canvas in which his tools were carefully wrapped. The shelf over the bed held only one item, the small box with Benok's first book of carpentry.

Spread out on the straw-filled mattress was his only other change of clothes. He pulled on the cotton trousers and dark shirt and wrapped his white carpenter's armband around his arm. After pushing his feet into dirty socks and boots and picking up his tools he stood, ready to work.

His hair was too long, and his face needed a shave, but those would have to wait. He needed to get to work and find Kenneth where they were going to work on the new cathedral's third story. Before he opened the narrow door, he paused and said to himself, "Be careful."

Until Baron sent for him he needed to play it very safe. He knew what to do and what words to wear as a costume of penitence and servility. The stairs creaked as he went quickly down to the ground floor where he was stopped by his landlord, a hunched older woman with gentle eyes and silver streaks in her hair, which she kept pulled back in a pony tail.

"Good morning, Deacon," she said. She approached, blocking his way, and put her hand in his. "Is the room to your liking?"

"It's perfect, Madam Collins. Thank you for inquiring."

"I was wondering, if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

"Yes?"

"I hate to impose, but my sister's granddaughter has taken sick, and I was wondering if you might have a prayer with me this morning?"

Estus set his tools on the stairs, smiled, and hugged her warmly. After a quiet moment, he stepped back, took her hands, bowed his head, closed his eyes and said, "Lord, who has granted us another

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beautiful morning, place your healing will upon this child, and guide her family through their worries. We know that all work done by your hand is holy and good, so let us not fear. Let us not despair. As her mother and family carry this sweet girl through her illness, let us know that she is in the warmth of your bright care. Through all things, Lord be with us."

"Lord be with me," she repeated. She breathed a heavy sigh of relief and then said, "Thank you for that. I've been fretting about her since yesterday when I heard the news."

"Let me know how she's doing."

"Of course. Bless you, Sir."

Ivy's words returned to him. They created the Circle of Light, which was designed to separate humans from their magic. Estus released her hands and grabbed his tools before ducking under the low doorway. He felt both sickened by what he had just done, and warmed by his ability to soothe her worries. The two swirled together, like oil and water, until they settled into two distinct layers. Whatever he knew about the truth of their religion, he would have to keep it to himself for now. Playing along helped both him and, in small ways, other people like Madam Collins.

He arrived early in the piazza by the river and walked past the governor's palace as the early sun glinted on the tall twin spires over the church. Polished marble window sills, framed by thick curtains, led his eye into dark cavities that hinted at gold candlesticks and ruby chandeliers. He stopped and purchased a corn muffin and finished it as he climbed the wide granite stairway to the second-story entrance of the grand cathedral. Estus paused and looked at the mosaic of Benok, reaching down to deliver God's law to the humans. Benok was Andor Tol-Tolin's grandfather. He was just another elf, and on the face of his church was the simple truth for everyone to see, dramatic and obvious. The law came from Benok's hand, by his decree. Estus stifled a laugh and stepped inside.

A hallway to the left led to a set of stairs. The door at the top was blocked by a large wooden gate. Estus stepped through this onto the unfinished third floor. Carpenters were already working, laying slats across the roof rafters. The smell of fresh sawed wood and wet brick mortar filled the floor. Canvas tarps and carts with supplies crowded the area. Men went about their work without noticing him. He found Kenneth at a doorway, fitting a wooden jamb into the brick archway.

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“Good morning, Estus. Hold on just a moment.” He set the door frame aside and stepped out. “Glen wanted to see you this morning.”

“Okay.” Be patient, be careful, he told himself.

The architect was overseeing the construction of a complex section of roof trusses that covered the large hall. Tall windows of pale blue glass overlooked the middle of the piazza. When Kenneth and Estus arrived, he turned to them and greeted Estus. “Good morning, young woodwright.”

“Good morning, sir.”

“Been reading your carpentry book?”

Estus nodded and said, “I read through most of the first two chapters, and skimmed through the rest. I read how Benok felled a tree and used a stone to cut off its bark.”

“You only read the beginning?” Glen looked puzzled, and a little disturbed.

“Well, I’ve been traveling, and there were a lot of distractions with the funeral and the benediction speech.”

Glen’s face took on a sympathetic concern as he said, “Yes. Your wife. I’m so sorry. Of course you haven’t been studying. However, the books are a comfort, especially in times like these. She’s with the Lord now, and I’m sure Benok is building a beautiful house for her.”

Estus nodded. He couldn’t bring himself to speak the bitter lies on the subject of his Carmen. He blinked, cleared his throat, and said, “But I did review most of the math sections and the tables of stress loads for different types of wood. Most of that I knew already, but I promise I’ll read through it all now that I’m settled here in Boret.”

Again Glen’s expression changed. Now he was angry. “You already knew what?”

“Excuse me?”

“What did you know already about the nature of angles and measurement? Who revealed that to you?”

Be careful, he reminded himself. “No. It’s not like that. I worked on a lot of projects with the carpenters in Kelebor when I was just a boy. I just picked up on some of the techniques, but I never saw it all written down and explained like that before. The covenant was never broken.”

Glen paused a moment in thought. He suddenly left them, picked up a broom and handed it to Estus. “Until you study that book cover to cover, and know it to my satisfaction, I don’t want you

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touching a ruler or saw. Put your tools down. Clean up this area. We're going to be showing the work to a very special guest and I want it clean." With that, he walked away from Estus and climbed up the scaffolding.

Kenneth said, "Well then. You can leave your tools with me. I'll keep them safe. Let me show you where the dust bins and dumpsters are."

Estus handed over his tools to Kenneth. He dared not look at him, because he could feel the fire in his eyes. Eat it, he told himself. Just swallow it and keep going. He did as he was told, carrying the broom as if he had been given a very special privilege.

---

Katie sat huddled next to Darla on the sandy grass bank of the Nordel river, sharing with her the soft, unhurried wind wisps that pulled cold through her silk shirt and mixed their hair together into a nervous tangle. They sat watching the fast churn of the river as it splash danced around the tight curve. Here, between the thick curtains of thorn vines and centuries of fallen rotted limbs, was the leaf path to the valley trail. They sat, backs to the woods, huddled against the nipping air and a world frozen in ancient bigotry.

"It will be better in Boret," Katie whispered. It was a thin whisper, beckoning even thinner hope.

"It's better already," Darla reassured her. To prove her point she lifted Katie's chin and drew her face close into a kiss. As their lips parted, and their tongues met each other's warm breath, Darla's fingers rose to Katie's round reddening cheeks, then slid down below her collar. They kissed, drowning their worries in the closeness their bodies. With her head resting on Darla's shoulder, Katie said, "I hope they didn't tip over or something."

Darla stood and stepped out to the edge of the grassy drop above the river. She could see far along the curved arms of the river. "We should have stopped with them," she said.

Katie walked out to join her and wrapped her arms around Darla's waist. "They're sailors. I thought they'd be better on the water than this."

"I hope they didn't make camp and have lunch already."

"Should we put the boat back in the water? We could go get them. It's down river. We should be able to find them."

"No. Let's wait a little while longer."

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They stood, side by side, watching the empty river for several minutes in the comfort of their unhurried embrace. The pleasure of not having to listen or watch for someone near pulled their hungry arms tight around each other. Voices finally announced their arrival around the bend, and soon the large rowboat, filled with supplies and three angry male voices, came into view.

They kissed, smiled, and parted. Darla raised her hand and called out to them. They saw her and rowed along the far side of the river, away from the fast moving channel.

Davis called out, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Darla answered. "This is where we get out of the river."

"Get out?"

"Yes! Go upstream a bit and turn around." She turned to Katie and said, "Get the rope."

They rowed around the bend and turned into the channel. Darla tied the rope to a large tree, and when they came toward the bank, she threw the rope out to them. Davis caught it and pulled the boat to a stop.

"What do you mean out of the river?" Gavin asked.

"What do you mean, 'What do you mean'?" Darla countered.

Davis said, "We're still going to Boret, right?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't this river meet the Mundela?"

"No."

Silence fell between them. The men looked at the women, waiting for an answer to some unasked question. Darla waited for the question to form. It never did, and so she finally just said, "Oh, just unload. I'll show you."

Twenty minutes later, with boxes and bags unloaded and their boats dragged onto the bank, Darla led the group through the shallow sage bushes and juniper trees of the desert region below the North Kambor mountains. The closeness of the men made Darla fall easily into the old habit of pretending, and when she realized what she was doing she reached out and took Katie's hand. The path widened and showed worn wagon ruts in the dusty brown ground, which they followed around a steep outcropping until they saw, sitting atop a modest knoll, a house and barn, both made of rough cut timbers.

"What's this?" Davis asked.

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"Nigel Whiskel, but don't call him Nigel. He's got the wagon we need."

Gavin said, "Wagon? With Horses?"

"Unless you want to pull it," Darla answered. "Don't you like horses?"

"They smell."

Cody told him, "Well, we all have to smell you."

"Knock it off you two," Davis warned. "Do you want us to come along or wait here?"

"Let's go." Darla nodded them all to follow.

Gavin grumbled under his breath, "You knock it off."

When they arrived, Darla went up to the front door and pulled the cord to ring the small brass bell. They all waited. She knocked, and this time they heard floorboards creaking toward the door. It opened, draping a swatch of bright light across the old man's wrinkled brow and his gray curly mane of hair and beard. He looked up at them without speaking.

"We're going to Boret. Can you have your wagon ready today?"

He looked at the crowd at his front door and asked, "You have money?"

Darla handed him a bag of coins. He opened it, fished around a little bit, and dropped it in his pocket. "You have a boat?"

"Two," she answered.

"Humph." He looked at the men and said, "They'll have to walk."

After returning to the river and having a quick lunch of jerky meat and tea, they heard the wagon, led by two swayback mares, plodding along the packed dirt. They loaded their supplies onto the wagon, then lifted and tied the two boats on top of them. Whiskers sat glum and disinterested on the driver's bench through the whole process. When they were done, Darla climbed onto the bench next to the old man, and Katie sat next to her at the end.

"All set then?" Darla called down to the men. "We can trade off walking and riding. Let us know when you get tired."

Gavin asked, "How long is this going to take?"

"Not long."

Gavin put his arm around Cody's shoulder and said, "I sure hope you liked that Gelst shore leave, matey."

"Knock it off," Davis said.

"Oh knock this, Captain Mouth," he replied, along with a cupping gesture between his legs.

Davis stepped in and delivered a stern punch where Gavin was cupping.

Darla shook her head and put her arm around Katie as the horses drove forward through the sweet tang of the chilled Autumn air.

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The curtains were drawn in the Henderson parlor, leaving Gareth, Becker Dodd, and their hosts in hushed afternoon twilight of the large, quite house. Their voices filled the little corner of the room with gentle, unhurried words, but the current of those words swept through them quick and nervous.

Gareth pulled the cup to his lips and sipped the last cooling remains of his milky chai tea. He inhaled and answered the question put to him by Nathan.

"The weapons and explosives were made here, in Korolem, somewhere up in the hills, I believe. I don't know the exact location. He's a blacksmith whom I only knew as The Builder. I was given a time to meet another man, a man from Gelst, at the Barrington Docks. We loaded their barrels the day before my scheduled shipment. Everything went well until we ran into the new docking regulations. They wanted me to purchase a docking pass, which would include inspections and inventory, so I just waited for an empty spot and unloaded."

Susan asked, "And that's when you were discovered?"

"Yes. We were almost finished, but they must have been watching, because there were three Legion boats in the bay to cut us off. I expect they made it out, but I missed all that."

"When you went overboard," she added, in a dramatic whisper.

Nathan then asked, "How do you feel about what you did with respect to your guild oaths, and the promises you made to God to trade honestly, and by His grace?"

Gareth faced Nathan with a brow heavy with old weariness, and eyes that flashed impatience. He took a deep breath and looked away. They had been dropping hints for him to talk about Benok, the first sailor, and what he thought about the stories from the guild books. He finally answered, "I don't know about any of that. I have a brand and a red sash because that's what you have to do to be a merchant captain. I studied the craft in seminary, and took all the classes and lessons, and worked through the ranks, but I tried to stay away from the ministry side of the trade. It has nothing to do with

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sailing or charting the stars, or keeping the crew in order during a thunderstorm.”

“Was your crew religious?” Susan asked.

“I don’t know, and I can’t see why it should matter to me one way or the other. A man is of no use to me unless he can follow orders on a snap, do his job sharp and clean, and earn his rations. Whatever compels him to do that, I don’t care.”

Susan pressed him farther, asking, “What I would like to know is, did you practice your role of spiritual guide, as well as captain?”

Gareth shifted in his seat. He turned and reached to put his mug on the table next to his chair. He sat with his hands resting on his knees. Doubts began to form in his mind about whether these were the right people to leave Adrian with. He watched Nathan and his wife and Becker Dodd for a heavy, extended moment. They sat, patient but insistent.

He drew a deep bellow of a breath, exhaled quickly and then said, “I don’t really know what you want me to say. I don’t know anything about God or burning circles of light beyond the sky. I let the elves worry about those things. For me, every breath I take is sacred. It belongs to me and to the world that gives me air. Every word I speak is like a prayer, because every word gets something done for me in the best way I know how. Every time I move my hand, it is done with honor to the forces inside me that make everything I do possible. Every movement, every step, and every word either enriches my life and the lives of those around me, or they don’t. That is my choice, every second I live, right or wrong. I don’t need a lot of stories and pretty mosaics to know that. If you don’t feel it in your balls, the only thing their singing and fancy prancing does is give them an excuse to look down on everyone else. They don’t get it and they never will, because all they care about is making sure everyone falls for their pretense of righteousness. That, and looking good in their imported back strap double weave fabrics and sheepskin shoes. I have no use for religion, and it has no use for me. If that offends any of you, well so be it.”

Becker Dodd said, “It does not offend us, Captain, it comforts us. We have learned not to trust too far anyone deeply attached with the ministries.”

Gareth shrugged and finished his tea. “Well, if you didn’t trust me, you would have turned me in long ago.”

Nathan said, “In the coming battles, there will be many opportunities for men to face the question of their loyalties.”

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"And this is a religion question?" Gareth asked.

"No, not directly. It's more a question of allegiance to the old guild power structure on one hand, which presumes to hold authority granted by God, and on the other hand the belief that humans can enjoy a direct relationship with the divine without relying on elven guidance and control."

Becker added, "Gelst has been a leader in demonstrating that humans are not only capable of self organization and leadership, we can actually achieve more than we ever could living within the constraints of the guild system."

"The people of Gelst are well organized and justified, which is why I decided to help. I think they have a pretty good chance at pushing the Teshons back north where they belong."

"Captain," Becker explained, "There is more at stake here than a battle over the docking offices and procedures of the bay. Andor and his Teshon army are not looking for compromise on issues or protocol. Their intent is to completely reclaim dominion over Gelst and to destroy any hope of human independence. This move is designed to draw out the strongest patriots, the free thinkers and the leaders, and to eliminate them. And then, after they establish complete control of Gelst and discredit the idea of human self-determination, they will move south to Korolem and undo all that we have done to encourage the movement here. We will see the return of severe punishments for heresy and for practicing any business or trade without permission from the guild ministers."

"And what does this all have to do with Koro-Del?"

"They have been trying to avoid this sort of move from Teshon by improving trade volume with Boret. This has worked very well, actually. People enjoyed an abundance of raw materials and food. Boret grew, and new trades were born, and nobody cared much for the politics of the port as long as the barges kept feeding their increasing diet for goods and grain."

Nathan added, "But it seems the plan worked too well, and the success of that plan is what led Teshon to strike back. The wealth of new trade helped encourage a sense of excitement and opportunity in Gelst, and the limits of the guilds were simply ignored. The renaissance of human self-determination became well known to the people of Boret, and those ideas began to infiltrate Teshon society. This was more than the elves were willing to tolerate, and so they intend to restore their control, brutally and completely, until

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everyone who stands against them will become an example of the failure of human self-control.”

Gareth felt his stomach tighten. “I have helped condemn them.”

Becker was quick to reply, “It was inevitable, Len. All of this was well underway and would have played out more or less the same whether you helped them or not. In fact, your help may be what gives them a chance to survive through the winter until we can all help them.”

“What do you mean?”

Becker continued, “We intend to engage the Teshon forces on two fronts. If we allow them to secure Gelst it will be all but impossible to endure a sustained military effort against them on our own, both in manpower and in the war of ideas. Without Gelst Andor will be forced to send forces overland, and we have a very good chance of turning a military victory into a victory of human independence and reason over the lies and limits of a crumbling theocracy.”

Nathan added, “And we are hoping that you can help up, as you helped our friends in Gelst. Dylan Del-Trevia would like to speak with you about how you can help.”

At that moment the front door opened and the girls returned. Adrian, with rosy cold cheeks peeking out over her scarf, ran over to Gareth and stood by his knee. She leaned in, kissed his face, and said, “Lenny, we have to go back there. It was yummy. They have donuts with cream, and little chocolates with cherries in them. Rum kisses and cherry lime aids.”

“I’ll go if it’s safe. We still need to be careful.”

She turned to Becker and said, “Please? I want him to go.”

Gareth told her, “We’ll go. No worries. No more worries. We have good friends here.” He leaned in and hugged her, then she ran back to the front door where Hannah was still standing, peeking carefully around the corner.

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Cold stone ate at the warmth that was left in Bodie’s weak body while the stink of damp clay filled his nostrils, taunting him with the sense of water somewhere. He lay still, an empty husk, with his face against the rough rock, seeking some comfort from the pulsing ache in his head. His throat was sore and dry, and whenever he tried to swallow what little moisture he was able to work onto his tongue, he

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was rewarded only with a raspy red pain that gagged him. He shifted, and heard the echo of his chains.

He had long since lost track of time. Sometimes torchlight would flicker, reflected from a distant hallway beyond the thick door's iron bar window, and it would play with the colors that swam across his vision. The ringing in his ears refused to stop.

Things he had done, and even who he had been, were distant dreams to him. Such dreams will follow fools when their bellies are full and they can hear the night crickets sing. Memories ran like frightened cats through the churning turmoil of his mind, a flashing black streak caught for an instant in the twilight shadow of a crescent moon. His memories became legends from a time long ago when heroes were possible, a time before the darkness and the emphy cold, and the burning throat that tortured his every breath.

He felt vile and unworthy of the straining effort of his heart. How many men had he drawn to their early death? How many boys and girls would now have to stomp through a life in a family shredded by war? Because of him. Bodie Challuk. History is a wild horse, and will quickly drag eager fools through the mud of too many hopes. People ride the heavy heard, lucky if they have half a grip on the wild beast of their time. How could any man dare to stand upon the pounding shoulders of his angry steed and attempt to pull the herd around? Why shouldn't he be thrown into a stinking pit where he has to listen to the thunderous hooves receding into someone else's time?

Time cares nothing for hope, for freedom, for wants, or for rights. It runs, dragging the stupid and the brave into the same charge. What evil had he done, telling men to let go their ride, and try to grab at the thinning air of liberty? It was lost. Their time had now only to crack and fade, and be forgotten by their children's great grandchildren, who might someday forgive his trying to bend the world.

Bodie rolled his head back, feeling the rock roll harsh under his tender head. He closed his eyes and begged the world to release him. He felt his heart beating stubbornly in his chest, unwilling to follow the mind into despair. His heart would draw life from his arms, his belly, even from the meat of his sunken face, to keep beating, to keep living. Dreams die an easier death, because they are shallow illusions of the mind. If he could give his dreams to his heart, they might live still, but in the black hollow of his tired eyes, the last candle of his dream shrank to a pin of orange and died, and

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he slept for several hours, alone in the naked pit with his stubborn heart.

When voices rose, Bodie was slow to wake. They blended into the nightmare voices that tortured him. When the door broke open, he lifted his eyes to see fast moving torches moving down the stairs. Voices were calling to him, searching among the lost souls. A man Bodie knew as Tom knelt in front of him for a second, and in a voice shaken with hurried fear, called out loudly, "He's here. He's alive!"

The pain of metal pounding on metal drove hurtful into his ears. Bodie scrunched his face, but it pounded like a knuckle on his temple. As he was freed and lifted, he began to understand that the voices were speaking to him.

"We have three hundred more men, and still more come to us every day."

He lay limp and hurting across a big man's back, and was taken up those stairs and through the bitter wooden door that closed the prisoners into their grave. He was lowered to the floor, and cold water was being poured into his mouth. He choked, and then drank, and then leaned back against the stone wall and watched the dancing shadows.

He gasped, sharply. Then he took in a deep breath. What was in was now out. What was down was now up. His world shifted in that instant, and he felt himself holding the reins of a thousand horses, and he felt their powerful backs charging now to his command.

"Well done!" His throat was still a raw fire of pain, but he rose it to as loud a cry as he could find. "Let's move." He tried to stand, and hands huddled around him to lift him up.

Someone called out, "It's clear."

Bodie was picked up again, and he ran with the help of two men. Black was white, emptiness became hope once again, and hope burst into a bright flame as the world once again took on the shape of his destiny. He found the eyes of one of the men and called out to him, "We have to block the river!" He pulled the last of his strength to tell him, "If we have to tear apart every house in Gelst, we need men and we need wood, and we need to shut their hungry mouths!"

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Hannah stood by the front door, just outside the parlor where the adults were still talking. She turned away from their voices and looked out across the yellowing autumn grass and the gray, gloomy sky. She felt very tiny at that moment, but when she looked over and saw Adrian's cheeks pulled into a tight, excited smile, when she saw the eagerness in her little eyes, she felt a little older, and maybe just a little bit bigger.

"Go on!" Adrian whispered.

Adrian tugged at her arm and pulled her toward the parlor. Hannah pulled back, trying not to let the butterflies in her tummy sneak out as fluttering giggles. "Stop!" she whispered back. "Okay." She put her smile away, and fixed on her face her best confident, sophisticated expression. "I'm going." She patted down her hair, smoothed her dress, and stepped among the adults.

They were all standing. Her mother and father were gathering up plates while the captain and Becker Dodd were speaking together in the archway between the parlor and the dining room. She found herself standing alone and still in the middle of the room.

Her mother saw her and said, "Hello, Hannah. Can you take these into the kitchen for me?" Hannah started to reach for the plates, then stopped, and looked back toward the dining room. She started to speak, but all that came out was, "Umma."

Hannah pulled her hands together, clasping them in front of her waist. She looked at her mother, then her father, then back. They watched, waiting for her to say something. She watched them watching her for a moment before she realized that she hadn't actually started speaking. She took a deep breath, and said, "I was wondering if I might speak to Mister Dodd for a moment."

Her parents looked at each other, then her mother answered. "He's speaking with the captain right now, but I'm sure you can catch him before he leaves. Is it something I can help you with?"

"Um." Again she found herself wondering who had taken away her ability to speak. She wondered for just an instant if Adrian had done a bit of magic on her, but that was silly. Adrian was right there

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peeking around the corner, watching. She wouldn't do anything like that. Words! Her mother was still watching her. Say something!

Another deep breath preceded her finally answering, "Thank you, but no. I'll just, with him, ask, to speak, um, no. I'm fine. Thank you."

Her mother said, with a voice just a little too cheerful, "Okay then. We'll take these." After her parents disappeared through the door to the kitchen at the end of the room, Hannah looked back to Adrian. Her cousin mouthed, "Do it."

Hannah turned around and found both Captain Gareth and Becker Dodd watching her.

The captain leaned to the side to look around her toward where Adrian was standing. "Is everything okay, Miss Hannah?" the captain asked.

"Yes. Oh yes. I'm sorry. Umma."

She felt her face flush as a small shiver went through her. She mentally rolled her eyes at herself and decided to be grand, even if she didn't feel like it yet. She dropped her hands comfortably to her side, took a step forward, and finally her words began flowing with ease and confidence. "If I'm not interrupting, I would like to borrow a moment of Mister Dodd's time."

Becker stepped forward and said, "Of course you're not interrupting. Let's have a seat."

He took her hand and led her to the large stuffed chairs in front of the fireplace. She sat proper and straight with her ankles crossed and her hands resting on her leg, one over the other. Becker sat down across from her and waited for her to speak.

"I am so sorry to impose upon you like this, but I find myself in a rather, well, difficult position, and I was wondering if I could perhaps seek some small bit of advice."

"I am at your service, my Dear Hannah."

It would help, she thought, if he wouldn't say things like that with such a smooth and inviting voice. Her heart bounced and twittered a bit, but then she blinked and continued.

"I recently learned that Peter Calloway, who had promised to take me to the Harvest Ball, has given in to pressure from his father to take a different girl, whose father is in the Masonry Guild." She hesitated. Becker was listening, and nodding. He was so patient, and kind. And so tall. She suddenly felt as if she had climbed out onto a very thin limb, one that was about to snap off and tumble her into a very fast river.

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"But I still want to go," she managed to say. "I know that this is very short notice, but I was wondering if you..." She watched his eyes. They told her nothing, except that he was listening to her. She continued, "...might know someone, maybe from your Guild or the theater, who would be able to, possibly, if it's not too late, to maybe..." She heard her voice asking this, and it suddenly sounded meek and pathetic. Still, she forced out the final words, "To go with me. Tomorrow. To take me."

Becker leaned back in his chair, interlaced his fingers, with his index fingers pointing up, which he tapped against his lips. "Hmm," was all he said.

Hannah felt herself fall into a whirlpool of lost words and violent, beckoning silence. She added, "Maybe a friend of yours who wasn't going to go. Maybe we could all go together?"

He furrowed his brow, and added, "Uh. Hmm. Let's see."

She felt suddenly very stupid and small, to have put him in the awful awkward position of having to tell her no. Of course he couldn't do this. She waited while her mind swam in furious circles trying to find the words to let them both escape gracefully from this moment. She felt the icy silence wash over her head. Before she could find any words he said, "Now, there's a small problem with that."

Of course there was. Silly girl. Hannah pulled her lips tight and looked at the floor. She had bothered him, embarrassed him, and forced him to have to deflect her intrusive question. She wanted to run away, but knew that she would have to smile and endure the embarrassment of being just another pleading, fawning fan. She started to stand up and offer her apologies when he said, "I would love to find a young man to escort you, so that we could all ride together. I really would like that very much. But the problem is, with all the planning, and rehearsing, and worry over the play, I forgot that the Ball was here already. I don't have anyone to go with either. But, if you like, I'll try to find someone to accompany you. If that's what you want."

He watched her, smiling, waiting for her to speak next. Something about the way his eyes sparkled drew the corners of her mouth back and up. "You really don't? You don't have someone you want to go with?"

"I seldom have that luxury anymore. I have to ask myself, with whom should I be seen? Who will be good publicity for the next play? I seldom get to dance with someone I actually like. But I think

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I can help. I know of many men who would rush to accompany you. If you want me to."

"What I want?"

"Yes."

Hannah knew what he was saying, but she couldn't quite believe it. She imagined what Peter would think of seeing her arrive, not defeated, not hurt, but walking proud on the arm of Becker Dodd. She imagined dancing with Becker, his arms around her waist, his hand resting lightly on the small of her back. Hannah took a deep breath. In her mind, she saw herself dancing with Becker Dodd, a pool of bright colors against which everything else fell dark. She let out her breath in an explosion of sudden confidence and hope.

"Take me!"

The moment passed before she realized that her voice was too breathy, and her posture a bit too hungry. She sat back in her chair, looked at the floor and added, "To the dance." She felt a hot blush pull into her cheeks when she realized how that must have sounded, and how many times he must have heard words like that. "Umma. Well. If that's what you want."

When she looked up, he was grinning in a warm, welcoming way.

"Can you dance?"

"Oh yes! Peter taught me. I know. Yes. I can dance. A little."

"Well then, Hannah, may I request the honor of accompanying you to the Korolem Harvest Dance?"

"Oh, yes. Really?"

He laughed, and answered kindly, "Really. How could I pass up the opportunity, granted to me by young Mister Calloway's horrible mistake, to present to Korolem's supercilious society one of their finest, most beautiful young women?"

"Thank you, Mister Dodd."

"No, Hannah. Thank you." He stood and reached his hands out to her. She rose, and when he took her hands he leaned in and said, "But if you call me Mister Dodd again, I shall be terribly disappointed." He kissed her cheek and then led her by the hand to the front door where he said, "My carriage will arrive to pick you up tomorrow at seven."

"Okay," she answered quietly.

He turned to go, and as he was halfway out the door, she added, "It's yellow!" He looked back at her. "My gown. It's yellow."

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His eyes moved down and across her body, as if imagining her in a yellow party dress. "Of course it would be," he answered. When he noticed Adrian peeking out from behind the stairs he pointed to her and said, "You'll be there too."

Adrian stepped out into the hall and answered, almost as if she had been scolded, "Okay."

"Good day, ladies."

After he let himself out Adrian came over to her and said, "See! He's nice. Peter is going to just fall down. He's going to just flat fall down."

Hannah was leaning back against the doorway, enjoying being able to breath again. "What?" She said to Adrian.

Adrian took her hand and pulled her upstairs.

---

Estus carried the large dust pail loaded with scrap wood and sawdust to the large wagon that was nestled in the narrow alley behind the cathedral. He dumped the dust into one of the large barrels and stopped to notice the fog of particles that flew up and hung in the evening air. He moved his hand through them and smiled as the bits danced and played in the eddies of wind that followed his arm. He stopped and watched them glittering and spinning in the sun, as a smile broke slowly over his rigid face and his cheeks melted softly under his eyes. It was simple, and beautiful, and made him think of the dust blown city of Antellem that lingered in the secret places of his memory.

The air, heavy with dusk, carried a mockingbird's song above the hushed hum of voices from the piazza. Estus closed his eyes and rested from his day, which had been long and filled with the kind of mindless drudgery that replaces forgotten hours with stiff muscles and sore legs. The featureless calm of unmarked hours had carried him forward through the aimless stupor of looming grief. Now that his long journey was behind him there were too many opportunities to remember that his wife was dead, that he had banished himself from his childhood village, and that he was now a prisoner of the priesthood in service to a choking lie. It was a long road, he kept telling himself, and there was too much to feel all at once. All that was left was to carry trash, push his broom, and allow himself the luxury of being empty and small.

Estus roused himself, tapped the pail empty, and carried it back inside for the next load. He walked through the back hallway and

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into the chamber behind the altar. The doors still had not been installed, but the tall curtains hung from the ceiling, one on either side of the altar. He walked across the tiled platform and crossed the main hall where guild men were finishing their work or talking in small groups. Some had spoken brief introductions to Estus, but he had given them only polite, disinterested replies, even as he scolded himself for not taking the time to settle himself into new friendships. That will come, he had told himself.

He passed under the large arches and entered the foyer, which overlooked the piazza through wide pillars. To the left and right were the stairs to the balcony where he had been working. The stairs seemed taller each time he went up. Already his legs were beginning to burn with a gentle stiffening that promised to drag his muscles into a powerful ache by tomorrow. He had nearly finished cleaning the entire balcony. Without the piles of cut lumber, loose shavings, and the carpet of sawdust, the artistry of the design became apparent to his eye. When standing, the carvings on the rafters demanded inspection, and when seated, the eyes were drawn down the tall curtains to the pattern of tile on the altar.

Glen Dawson hurried from behind the far curtain leading a tall elf, Andor Tol-Tolin. Estus had seen him once when he was very young, when the elf had traveled to Kelebor. From the balcony the elf seemed small, a bare wisp of a man. His movements seemed odd, a little too dramatic and slow as he turned to beckon Ivy Del-Gesius from behind the curtain.

She stepped with unhurried confidence, examining the artistry of the design and its many decorations. Her hair, braided into a long weave, fell across her bare back. She was wearing a loose, dark green fabric that tied behind her neck and flowed around to her back where it became part of a short skirt that showed off her legs and suede knee boots.

Estus watched as Glen showed off the tall blue windows behind the altar that matched the ancient windows of the old church. He showed her the carvings and statues, the intricate tiled floor, the balcony. Their gaze passed through Estus, but Ivy stopped and held her eyes on him for a prolonged moment. She smiled. He grinned and bowed his head forward in recognition. He bent to pick up a few final boards that needed to be thrown out and hurried back down the stairs and through the foyer.

Ivy was standing back while Glen explained to Boret's master elf the system of rafters that allowed such an expanse beneath the steep

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sloping roof. She saw him and followed his movement across the floor with an expression of amused interest. Andor turned and looked back at Ivy, then reached back and put his hand on her shoulder to draw her closer to Glen's presentation. Estus watched Andor's hand move from her bare shoulders slowly down her back in a possessive manner.

She turned away from him and walked toward one of the statues to ask a question that Estus couldn't hear. He carried his boards past them, keeping enough distance to be ignored by Glen, but close enough that he could hear Ivy saying, in her gentle accent, "This one reminds me of the work of a man in a city long forgotten." As he passed, she danced her eyes to Estus for just a second.

He ducked around the corner and set the boards down. He watched from the shadows for some time while they walked around the main floor. Finally, Ivy stepped away from the others and came back to examine the statues.

The other workers were gone now, and a calm had settled into the atmosphere of the new cathedral hall. Glen's voice echoed as a wordless murmur, quiet and far away. Ivy stood still, awash in the evening's last light that fell through the tall altar windows. She glowed indigo against the deepening dark that swallowed the irrelevant ornamentations around her. Watching her he felt the kind of beckoning peace that others spoke of when they talked of their god. The image of her, ancient and graceful, was so perfect, so alluring to Estus, that he felt a sudden stab of guilt for seeing another woman, besides his cherished Carmen, with such unrestrained desire. She beckoned him toward a world deeper than he had ever known he could want. She stirred in him a longing to be more than any human was supposed to feel.

She turned to face him, and the flirt of her eyes and the curl of her smile pulled him from the shadows into the halo around her. Ivy greeted him casually. "How are you liking Boret, Estus?"

"It's tolerable. Almost."

She nodded, and he felt completely understood. Nothing else of his troubles needed to be spoken.

"I want to see you."

Ivy smiled, but shook her head very gently. "You must be careful."

"I can be careful."

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This time she smiled brightly, tilting her head so that her hair fell across her eyes. She pulled it back and said, "I'm not so sure that you even know how to be careful."

"Maybe not. I don't care."

"Okay then. I'll see you tonight on the bridge."

She turned away from him and pulled her eyes again to the wood carved statue of a robed woman with arms and head raised upward in reverent longing. "They are all lovely. The craftsmanship is quite good."

It took him a moment to realize that her last words were not for him, but for the footsteps approaching.

"Arrenkyle!" Glen's voice called out sharply. His face appeared gray in the shadows. "Madam Del-Gesius, please accept my apology for this intrusion." He turned to Estus and said, "Get out, and remember your place here." He grabbed Estus by the arm and led him away into the darkness, as he growled a harsh whisper. "Your brother will hear about this. Stay out of things that don't concern you." He pushed Estus away and returned to Ivy.

Estus waited a moment, cautioned himself to consider his actions very carefully. He breathed deeply. Then again. There was nothing more to be done here. When he turned to leave, he almost ran into a shadow behind him. He looked up into the narrow, unsmiling face of Andor Tol-Tolin. They stood, face to face for a moment. Andor smiled, ever so slightly, and stepped aside to let Estus pass. Estus took three steps, stopped, and turned around to find Andor still watching him with eyes that were like black pits in the dark shadows of his face.

Estus turned his back to Andor's gaze and walked out.

---

Nigel's wagon was well ahead of the *Constellation's* lost sailors, who walked through the pain in their legs and the blisters on their toes under the tireless blue sky. The wagon, loaded with two small boats, one whiskered old man, and two tempting young women, drove on hour after hour, becoming a small silhouette beneath the line of mountains that faded purple gray across the horizon. Somewhere before those mountains was the network of streams that fed the Mundela River and would carry them finally to Boret.

They walked on in silence, conserving their energy after having exhausted both conversation and their bodies.

"I think they stopped," said Cody.

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Gavin added, "They better take their turns walking."

They walked on for several moments along the cold, sandy trail. Cody said, "Well, if they're not going to open their legs, they might as well put them to some good use."

"Oh those legs open," Davis told him. "Just not for what you've got."

"Katie's really pretty," Cody said quietly.

"Give it up, Cody," Gavin said. "You picked the wrong bit of girl flesh to fall for. It's a god damned waste of perfectly good poon." They walked on, kicking up dust between the scattered rocks and pale green sage bushes. "Don't think about her hair, or the back of her neck, or that line between her ankles and those round, meaty calves."

"Okay. I'll try. And I won't think about how soft the skin of her wrist is, or how she's smooth all the way up her arm, like a silk pillow the color of warm butter cream."

"You two fight over Katie if you want. But if we're picking the unpluckable, I'll take Darla for myself, with her dark hair and coffee colored eyes."

Gavin laughed and said, "Fine. You take her. She's the mean one. Just like you."

"Not mean. Fiery. Strong."

Soon they caught up to the wagon, facing the women, seeing their faces and their hands, smelling them, tasting their salty necks in their minds.

"How much farther?" Davis asked.

Darla looked to the mountains, then to Whiskers, then to Davis, and said, "I think we're about halfway through the first day."

"The first day?" Gavin asked.

"It usually takes about two days. We'll camp tonight. Nigel brings food and tents."

"Two days? Oh hell no!" Gavin cried out.

"Relax, salty Joe," Darla told him. "We said we'd take our share."

"Yeah," he muttered. "I wish you would share."

"What does that mean?" Darla asked sharply.

Davis answered, "It doesn't mean anything. Let's eat, then we need to rearrange these boats. We need to all be able to ride somehow."

"I'd like a ride," Gavin said, looking at Katie.

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"Ride your little buddy there," Katie said, pointing her thumb at Cody.

"It's too much weight." The gruff old voice of Nigel Whiskel cut into the conversation and brought it to a halt. "Leave one of the boats if you want to ride. I can take two at a time. No more." He left them and started unhitching the old mares so they could chew on the scattered clumps of tall yellow grass.

Gavin clapped his hands and said, "Okay then, let's dump one of the boats."

Darla argued, "You're not leaving one of my boats here."

Katie added, "We won't all fit in one boat."

"Sure we can," Gavin said. "We'll just have to get close and cozy."

"In your dreams."

"And such a sweet dream, Katie doll."

Davis reached out and smacked Gavin on the back of the head. "Cool it!"

Gavin spun and threw a punch at Davis, who deflected his hand, stepped in, and pushed Gavin toward Darla. She caught him by the shoulders and said, "Leave her alone, or you're going to end up close and cozy with the steel of my knife."

Gavin looked at her, squinted, and said, "You're right, Davis. She does have coffee colored eyes."

Katie pulled him away from her, put her arms around Darla's neck, and said, "Not coffee. My Darla's eyes are exactly the color of cinnamon tea." She kissed Darla on the cheek.

"Whatever," Gavin said. "I'm hungry. Let's eat."

---

Gareth leaned to look out the lace curtains of Becker Dodd's opulent carriage. He sat back and said, "They're still looking for me."

"Of course they are. Jacob is desperate. He can't allow an open display of rogue magic like that to go unanswered. The stories about that are already spreading through the town. You're becoming quite the legend"

"I don't like any of this. There are people here who know me, who would recognize me."

"Don't worry."

Gareth furrowed his brow and grunted. "I'm the one they're coming for, so I hope you'll understand if I go ahead a worry a bit."

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Becker smiled. As the carriage pulled to a stop four Legionnaire guards and a guild magician approached. Gareth braced himself to run, or attack, or at least get in a clean punch, but Becker held a gentle hand on his shoulder. The doors opened.

Two sun-reddened, wrinkled faces looked Gareth over.

"I'm so sorry, Deacon," the captain said on the other side of the carriage. "We're looking for someone. It's just routine."

Gareth wondered if they would remember that it was Becker himself who appeared in the middle of the magic circle of fire and pulled them away. He sat back, uncomfortable with the way everyone was watching him, not sure if he should sit tight and trust Becker or try to make a run for it somehow. His heart began pounding heavy in his chest, until he saw his reflection in the glass of the window beside him. Looking back was a glamorous, buxom young woman with long red hair flowing in soft curls around her shoulders.

The magician came over to his side and began a soft, slow chant. Gareth caught his eyes and smiled.

"It's too bad about the play," one of the Legionnaires said to Becker. "I wouldn't see it, of course, but my brother's a big fan of yours. Wait until I tell him I met you. He had tickets for the opening night for that burlesque of yours. Hey, do you know if he can get a refund now that it's shut down?"

"I really wouldn't know about that," Becker told him as the magician finished his spell. Gareth looked through the window at the Koro-Del ship yards, watching his reflection and waiting for it to change back to his own face.

"And what's your name, pretty?" One of them asked. Gareth looked over to Becker, who took his hand and said, "It's okay, dear. They're looking out for us. You can tell them your name."

Gareth had a sudden and urgent thought, like the lyric of some intrusive sea shanty that gets caught in a loop. This wasn't a song, but a name, resounding powerfully in his mind.

"Mallory Hannigan," he said. He heard his own voice in his head, along with the echo of a high pitched woman's voice with a heavy northern accent.

The magician smiled and stepped back, waving them forward.

"Thank you," Becker told them. The doors closed and the driver pulled them into the Koro-Del compound.

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Gareth sat back in his seat and looked over to Becker, who was calm and undisturbed. "Okay, first of all, who is Mallory Hannigan?" His voice was now his own.

Becker smiled and said, "She's a very fond memory."

"I'll bet she was." After a moment, he asked, "They really don't know, do they? What you can do?"

"No. They have no idea."

"How did you learn? You were never in the guild, I imagine."

"No. Not the wizard's guild. I am a senior in the Vintner guild. That's the family business. I learned magic from my mother. I guess you could say that's the family's other business."

"A very quiet business."

Becker nodded, and seemed a little sad when he said, "It's hard sometimes to remind myself how the world looks through the eyes of all those people. It's almost painful to me when I let myself think about what it does to them, how trapped they are."

The carriage wove a path between the brick factory buildings and emerged next to the massive dry dock in which the *Corona* stood proud. Gareth turned the handle on the carriage door and pushed it open, and as he was stepping out, he said, "You couldn't have done Tom Hannigan? Or Patrick?"

Becker laughed and stepped down onto the rough cobbled bricks. As the carriage pulled away, Gareth looked up at the long flight of wooden steps that rose along the side of the massive stone wall. When Becker came over to him, Gareth put a hand on his shoulder and told him, "Thank you. I appreciate that I am under your protection, and for that I owe you a debt."

"Please don't think about that. Bringing Adrian back to her family more than pays back whatever help I can give you."

"Yes, but there is more to this than favors of that kind."

"There certainly is."

"It feels as if there is darkness all over this."

"Not darkness, dear Captain. Shadows. There are reasons for us to avoid too much light now. I think after you speak with him, you will understand that. But if you would like, I will answer any question you might have."

Gareth took hold of Becker's forearm in a friendly manner and said, "I will hold you to that promise. You seem to know a good many things that I do not. You may grow hoarse." He smiled beneath his bushy mustache and said, "Okay then. Up we go."

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Despite his age, Gareth climbed the long wooden stairs at a steady pace. The higher he was, the more of the fantastic ship he was able to see. It was complete and ready to sail. Everything was in place, polished, and clean.

The cranes were stowed and secured along the main deck. The sails were furled. Every rope was neatly coiled. All that it lacked was a crew, cargo, and a mission. At the top of the stairs was a platform that was built along the top of the stone wall of the dock. Captain Gareth and Becker Dodd walked slowly through the rigging shadows cast by the afternoon sun. The air was calm, with a steady northern breeze that carried a family of gulls inland to the ship's top yard where they perched. As the sea wind filled Gareth's nostrils, he felt the call of the horizon rise in him, only to fade under the smack of knowing that his life belonged to the first Teshon guard that set hands on him.

He stood resting against the wooden rail and studied the new ship.

"I dare not hope," he admitted quietly to Becker. "I can not imagine."

"You will see."

A figure came from the wardroom door and stood on the small platform overlooking the mid deck. It was an elf. Dylan Del-Trevia, the dark elf. For the first time in many long years, Gareth felt reluctant to step forward into negotiations. There are always ways to get done those things that need to be done. There is always some pressure or gift that can be hidden or revealed, but against an elf dark to the light of God, ancient in his wisdom with no ethic to guide him, Gareth found himself tied by uncertainly and, he hated to admit, a large dose of amorphous fear.

Then he felt himself uncertain with his uncertainty. The world as he had always known it was falling away. Solid truths were blowing away like old leaves. He looked again at the ship, at its expert craftsmanship. It was sturdy and true, and whatever were the motives that crafted this ship, she stood honest, solid, and proud. This comforted him enough to say to Becker, "Okay then."

They walked down a ramp to the main deck, and Becker led him up the narrow stairs to meet the elf. Dylan reached out and took Gareth's hand in a firm, warm handshake. "It's good to meet you, Captain."

Gareth nodded.

"I'd like to hire you to captain the *Corona*."

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Gareth felt the balance of power shift. The elf's offer, plain and unhidden, offered before any questions or discussion, left him vulnerable to Gareth's response. He felt a surge of confidence. And then caution.

"So I hear," he answered. "What terms are you offering?"

"Name them."

There it was. Now it was Gareth's turn to express his desire and to give the momentum back to the elf. Not yet, though.

"I guess that will depend on the details of my service to you."

"If you wish."

Gareth felt the play of bargaining ease his tension. There were hints given by Captain Donovan which he needed to explore. He had spoken of guild levels, insider deals.

"I'm used to running things my own way, with my own ship. If I am to consider this offer, there is much I need to learn."

Dylan smiled and glanced over at Becker Dodd. "Oh, we'll see to that. You will learn, and you will unlearn. That will come in time, but let me set the foundation so that we understand each other."

Gareth crossed his arms and leaned back on the curved railing that overlooked the main deck.

Dylan stood to the side, casual and confident, with his hand resting on the carved finial at the top of the stairway. Becker leaned into the doorway that led into the officer's quarters behind him.

"You are wanted for smuggling weapons to the Gelst traitors, for breaking your guild vows, and for practicing the black arts. If you are captured, your brand will be taken, you will be excommunicated, and what's left of you will be publicly burned as a dark wizard."

"I know nothing of magic! Dark or otherwise. Do you intend to have me by blackmail?"

Dylan ignored his accusation and continued calmly, "It was the girl, Adrian. But they don't know that. I want you to know that you will have protection from me whether you take this command or not. You are in grave danger, Captain, but if you can imagine it, I need you even more than you need me."

"That is difficult to imagine."

"I need you because you are one of the few men capable of this challenge. You have experience that is unchallenged with both the sea and with a crew. You have endured as a profitable independent trader when other men have given up. You have succeeded because you will do what needs to be done without looking back or

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worrying what others might do. I already know that you are not loyal to Teshon rule, and you are aware of the magic underground.

“I need the kind of man who can be lost at sea and live to continue the cause.

“I need a man on my flagship who can be a fearsome pirate to his enemies and a legend to his men.

“The conflict in Gelst will become a battle for the destiny of humanity. Not only Gelst, but all men must be led free from the tyranny of ignorance that binds men in service to lies. The men of Gelst are being pushed into war so that they can be conquered and united with Teshon to overcome the resistance that lies hidden here in the South.

“We will fight Andor Tol-Tolin in Gelst, and in Korolem, we will push him back to Boret, then out of Teshon, and his darkness will end.

“I need a man who can look beyond the truth as he knows it, to see the world beyond the shadows and to never look back. I need you because I know that I can pull back the curtain, and you will not look away.”

Gareth took out his pipe, lit the half burnt tobacco with a match and drew in a couple deep mouthfuls of harsh smoke.

He blew a thick cloud of smoke into the wind and said. “Yeah. We’re going to need to go over some of those details.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Hannah watched the girl standing in the mirror before her. Her hair, crowned by a circlet braid of ribbons and yellow rose petals, flowed in a gentle cascade over her bare shoulders. She seemed so tiny, so young, so out-of-place in the elegant, strapless gown. She looked at the pearls hanging low around her neck and noticed how noticeable her body was. She felt exposed and on display, but that was sort of the point with a gown like this. Her lips and eyes were gently painted, and her cheeks held a genuine blush that came from wearing nothing but shoes and a bit of thin yellow fabric.

"Wow." Adrian, wearing her young woman costume, stood next to her in the mirror.

"I feel naked."

"Oh no," Adrian told her. "You're better than naked."

She took a deep breath. The pearls rose and fell with her breathing.

"I think I'm ready."

"I'll go tell them."

Hannah turned from the mirror, walked across her room to the window and looked out to a sky that held the slightest hint of dusk. A large family of clouds hung low behind the trees, shining with crisp, round edges, the whitest white against the deepest blue. She smiled because she knew that tonight she was prettier than those clouds.

She turned and walked slowly from her room to the stairs, aware of how the dress played over and around her legs. She put her hand on the railing and stepped down to the gallery of attentive eyes.

Her father, who looked dashing in his trim tuxedo, watched with an expression somewhere between pride and uncomfortable surprise. The captain, looking very uncomfortable in his long coat and necktie, froze with unmasked appreciation of her entrance. Adrian stood beside him, looking years too old, but smiling like a little girl. Her mother caught her eye, and with a tiny nod told Hannah she knew how wonderful this moment was for her.

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Becker stood by the front door, behind the others. He looked at her exactly the way she expected the men to look at her tonight, and she liked it. Part of her was glad that she trusted him, and that he had known her since before she was born, because there was another part of her that wanted to discover the mysteries that lurked behind his dark eyes and his smiling lips.

---

Estus stood with his back against the solid stone of the tailor's shop waiting for the crowds to clear. This street, like every other in Boret tonight was clogged with laughter and loud conversation. Groups of gowns, tuxedos, and cigars huddled around wine vendors and bread carts to celebrate the harvest before making their way to the grand ball.

One man, already a little drunk, bumped into Estus. The man turned and said, "Whoa! Sorry there, Sir. I didn't see you. Bless the Light." Without waiting for a response he wandered off and disappeared into the press of the party parade.

Estus hated the wide, white arm band that was sewn around the arm of his new suit. He pushed himself into the crowded street. Before he could take fifty steps he felt an arm around his shoulder. Wine breath barked in his ear, "Here's a brother. Bring him a glass!" Estus stepped away from the old man and hurried away muttering some apologies to the garish green sash.

He followed the flow of the crowd beneath the strings of candle lanterns that bathed them in soft orange light and painted a shifting quilt of shadows across the old cobbled street. At the river the people were compressed into a knot around the lines of couples waiting for their turn to be delivered by decorated gondola to the piazza.

Across the river stood the governor's palace, still surrounded by scaffolding to repair its fire-scorched face. Estus stopped, resting his hands on the low stone wall, and watched the river drain the party noise into the dark forest beyond the city. In Kelebor the harvest barn would be alive with music, punch, apple pie, and the cozy scent of kerosene lanterns. It was difficult to keep his mind off of that night, lost in the old world of faded days when Carmen danced with him in the moon shadow.

Carmen! Again the world flipped inside out to the wrong, rough side that never should be. Suddenly the days ahead loomed like a sloppy charcoal sketch, ugly, unreal and filled with too many shadows in all the wrong places. He recognized the effort of will that

he would need to force himself through this broken reality where he was made to wander in the suffocating maze of arbitrary guild protocols and endure the bitter stench of bowing to the dominion of blind men. Their world, their most proud truths, faded to black against the fantasy of a distant campfire in forgotten Antellem when he held the power of magic in his hands.

The wind, cool on his cheeks, stirred his eyes open. The night was his, and for now none of that mattered. He pulled himself back into the flowing mob and let his feet carry him forward. His pulse quickened as he moved closer to the stone arch bridge, and when he saw Ivy standing at the rail he had to stop and steady himself. Beautiful women walked in a parade of finery behind her, but her simple dress, her loose hair, and her casual confidence made them all seem dull and desperate by comparison.

Her hair hung loose behind her, except for a single braid from her right temple that fell across her shoulder and along her side. She wore a kind of velvet green halter that crossed over her breasts and became a thin ribbon tied behind her back. Her skirt was nothing but strands of long fringe hanging from a belt tied low around her hips. She wore no jewelry. Her only ornamentation were the curves of her skin and the fire of her eyes.

She saw him, and her smile beckoned him forward. Estus hurried to the bridge, and as he climbed up the stone steps she came toward him. With each step her knee and a bit of thigh cut through the fringe that danced around her bare hips. When they met he bowed slightly and said, "Good evening, Ivy."

She nodded and said, "I was worried you might not come. I'm glad you did." For a moment her eyes dropped from his gaze. He felt her attention on his suit, his body. He stepped forward, offered his arm, and when she rested her hand on his elbow he led her back across the bridge.

He led Ivy around the perimeter of the festivities to a bar cart that had been set up by the fountain pool near the entrance to the seminary.

Estus ordered a double shot of whiskey. Ivy asked for a chilled mint tea which was served in a tall ceramic cup with a glass straw. They sat together on the fountain ledge between the rumble of jumbled voices and the soothing splash of falling water. He took a sip and let the alcohol flush warm in his throat. When he turned to Ivy, he saw her watching him with an amused, gentle expression. He

shifted to turn toward her and then noticed how the fringe of her dress fell away from her crossed legs.

He put his hand on the ledge near her and leaned close, cheek to cheek, his lips poised near the side of her neck. He spoke in a voice loud enough for only her to hear. "I want to know more about magic." He sat back and said, louder, "I want to learn."

She smiled, took a sip of her tea, and reached her hand out to cup his cheek and tickled her fingers behind his ear. "Is that why you wanted to see me?" she asked.

Estus closed his eyes and let himself rest in the sweet assurance of her touch. He opened his eyes and saw her leaning near. "You have been on my mind," he said.

Her smile told him that she already knew that. What she said was, "It is a very dangerous thing that you ask of me. Dangerous for you."

Estus took her other hand in his and said, "You know I'm serious."

She tilted her head and leaned forward, almost touching her head to his. "I know, Estus. I know that you are desperate to find a way to stand amid all that has fallen around you. But there is much that you need to learn about what you want to learn. You must be patient."

"How can I be patient when everything is fading so fast? It's like trying to hold onto smoke. How can I live with these sleeping stick figures in Benok's storybook shadow?"

She lifted her fingers to his lips and said, "Estus, your words can be like knives. They can cut you." She moved her hand to his arm and said, "They can kill you. Words are power, my friend. Words are the thread from which the fabric of magic is woven. They deserve your deepest respect."

He lifted his troubled eyes to her and felt a softening of his desperation. "I will try to be patient, as long as I don't have to go back. I can never be as they are."

"You never were as they are."

His eyes drew to the crowds in the piazza, and he drank another generous sip of his whiskey. He pulled a chest full of cool evening air through his nostrils and watched them the way one watches a gathering of birds on a field, knowing that some instinct is pulling them together to fly away to a faraway land that only they know. The city felt as empty to him as the dusty streets of Antellem.

He looked back to Ivy and said quietly, "So, what do I do now?"

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She smiled and stood up, taking his hand in hers. He gulped down the rest of his drink in one hot swallow and followed her. Soon they fell into the flow of the crowd, surrounded by the hum of voices and the soft melodies of the musicians.

The dancers were finishing a routine called "The Gathering of Friends." When the orchestra began "Under the Brilliant Moon," Estus and Ivy stepped into position in the large circle.

Her right hand came to his left palm. He wrapped his fingers over hers and let his right hand cup the skin above her left hip. She rested her other hand on his white guild armband, and there they waited, eyes locked together. He was aware of her breathing and the pleasant motion of her body that accompanied the rise and fall of her shoulders. He marveled at how easy it was to forget the depth of history carried by this elf woman when she stood with a smile that was as fresh and sweet as a freshly plucked plumb.

On cue they began to dance.

Estus was familiar with this dance, but not well practiced. Ivy knew each movement and every nuance. When Estus hesitated, she led him. When he missed a step, she compensated and kept them in place. He enjoyed the soft warmth of her dark skin, the ease with which they danced together, and the attention of her eyes on him. His steps grew more confident bringing grace and energy into their movements.

When the next dance started they moved away from the others and ignored the careful choreography in favor of swaying together, wrapped in the closeness of their touch and the slow throb of the music. Their eyes fused together. Ivy moved her hand to his shoulder, then to his neck. "I want you to be very careful." She told him. "You are more powerful than you fully understand."

"Will you teach me?"

"I have taught you all that I can, but I will send you to Kendrick. Remember, you are not alone, Estus. There are others like you, secretly alive in their power. You must put your trust in them and let them guide you."

"It sounds like another guild."

"Knowledge will not be withheld from you, Estus. Not any more. I can get you whatever you want. Would you like to read all of the covenant books in the carpenter's library? You can read them, or those of any guild. I can get those for you. Someday I will show you the old books. I'll show you anything you want to see. I will tell you anything you want to know."

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Estus pulled her close, held his hands behind her shoulders and pressed his cheek to hers. All of his questions fell away. All the things he knew he should ask didn't matter now. Only this. Her body next to his, warm and open to his touch.

Her breath was warm against his neck when she asked, "What do you want to know?"

His cheek slid against hers. With his eyes closed and his senses filled with her, his lips found hers. He circled his arms tight around her and felt her body rest intimately against his.

Ivy's thigh rose along his hip.

He bent her back with a kiss filled with the soft warmth of her mouth.

---

Adrian's back was to the crowd. Her eyes were fixed on the slices of apple floating and spinning in the hot cider punch. Music from the orchestra drifted over the murmur of laughing loud voices and mixed with the orange bright shadows from the many candle chandeliers, making everything feel hollow and distant, as if she were still home, far away, and only borrowing some else's senses.

She wanted to stand there, frozen, locked in her statue gaze and miss her father. There was no time. There was never any time for her to really believe that the past weeks were as real as a river flood that drowns familiar ground and turns tomorrow's treasures into a useless muddy mess.

She was now deep in that river, floating with her new family and with the captain. She reached for the crystal cups, turned two over and dipped out cider into them. She picked them up, careful not to spill, and turned and pushed herself to keep going. The flood was bigger than one little girl. The whole town was standing on crumbling shores.

It was difficult for her to walk in the shoes Becker had given her. They pushed her heel so high to make her look taller and older. When she passed a mirror, she had to stop and look at the woman on the other side of the glass. *This is what I'm going to look like when I grow up.* She smiled. The woman smiled. *I'm going to be beautiful, and I'm going to be a powerful wizard.*

She moved through the crowd with confidence, playing the part, swimming with the current.

When she got back to the captain, he took his drink, put his arm around her and said, "They're here." At the end of the room, at the

top of the stairs, Becker Dodd stood with Hannah Henderson at his side. Heads began to turn, and the rumble of voices dimmed, revealing the music that became a processional march as they came down the stairs.

Adrian's eyes joined the audience watching the senior guildsman, stage star, and most sought after bachelor of Korolem escort a young unknown debutante into the season's most carefully measured social event. Hannah was beautiful, so graceful and poised and proud. She instantly became the focus of inquiry among the other young women who could only dream of talking to Becker Dodd, much less being his for an evening.

Adrian saw them move toward the dance floor before she lost them in the crowd. She set her drink down and pulled on the captain's hand. "Come dance! I want to see."

"Just a moment," he told her. She tugged on his big hand with both arms. He stood firm while he finished his punch, then let her pull them to the center of the hall where the couples were dancing.

The dancers silently deferred to Becker and his unknown ingenue. He took advantage of the extra space and made a show of twirling Hannah with a flourish. She seemed as comfortable with their audience as Becker was on any stage.

Adrian was probably the only one who knew that she didn't even notice the other girls. Adrian saw Hannah's eyes seeking out another couple dancing by the orchestra stand, Peter and that other girl. She draped herself sloppy over Peter, not so much dancing as possessing him, with her hands behind his neck and her head nestled on his chest. Peter's hands rested on her hips, but his eyes never left Hannah.

Adrian turned her attention to her own dancing partner, who seemed about as uncomfortable as any land dancing fish. "You're doing just fine, Lenny. Twirl me." She lifted his arm and ducked under it, spinning, running, and bouncing back into place. Then she took the Captain's hand and tried to mimic the other couples. Dancing wasn't so hard. When the music came to a stop, Adrian copied the other couples, clapping softly and nodding her head. Hannah caught her eye and grinned excitedly. She said something to Becker and then came over and gave her young cousin a grand hug.

"Wow," Adrian told her.

"Yeah!"

"You look!"

"I know! And you. That is really..."

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"It is pretty. But these shoes."

"They can pinch your toes. Do you want to sit down?"

"They have these little cakes."

"The vanilla and blueberry ones?"

"Divine."

"Let's get some. I'm so nervous, I could just fall down right here."

They picked up little plates with the petit fours and took them to a bench along the wall, forgetting that they had abandoned their escorts.

Hannah asked, "Did you see him?"

Adrian scowled. "And her."

"Did Becker tell you what we're going to be doing next week?"

"What?"

"He wants to start training you in our special craft. He says you have a great talent, and it's good that you came to him when you did."

"Are you sure nobody knows? That it's really okay for the captain and me to be here?"

"Not even a hint of a shred of a doubt. You're exactly where you need to be right now."

"I'll try to be brave."

Hannah took her hands and said, "You're my cousin, my sister, and my dearest friend. I promise that we'll be okay. You're home, Addy."

Their attention was pulled toward a murmur that fell to a hush that washed through the crowd leaving little islands of left-over conversation and shushing.

Jacob Tol-Westin stood at the top of the stairs to address the hall. He stood without speaking for several moments, looking through the crowd. Adrian squeezed Hannah's hand, but kept still. She tried to find the captain in the crowd, but all she saw were the backs of strangers.

He spoke.

"I want to welcome each of you to the family of Korolem's Harvest Festival Ball. On behalf of the people of this beautiful and gentle city, I welcome friends, family, and visitors to join our celebration of this season of plenty.

"As many of you know, this season's joy is mixed with the sadness of news from our brothers in the North. The rebels of Gelst,

that band of thieves, murderers, and traitors, have been holding the city hostage under a campaign of fear.

“These men, who have embraced darkness and have become blind to the Light of God, have murdered the Governor of Boret by burning him in his bed while he slept. They have attacked Legion patrols and stolen fortunes in gold to fuel their mission of evil.

“They corrupt God’s sacred gift by calling forth the power of magic and denying God’s guiding hand.

“Their leader, a devil named Bodie Challuk, was captured, and there was hope that the people of Gelst would be able to sleep in peace, but his band of godless monsters killed dozens of God’s Legion servants to set him once again upon his ruinous rampage.”

Adrian shuddered. She remembered riding with Mister Bodie and knowing that her father had loved and trusted him. She remembered his box of gold that she had opened for him. He was no monster, no devil. She looked around the room and felt awake in a sea of nightmares that drained from everyone the desire and hope to understand or care if what they knew was right. She remembered the darkness of Andor Tol-Tolin when he choked and hurt Mister Bodie.

She sought Hannah’s reassuring eyes. Hannah put her hand on Adrian’s back.

The Elf continued. “The evil that has infected Gelst will soon be driven away by the light of God’s powerful hand. I ask that each of you pray that their dark tyranny will soon end, and that our brothers in Gelst will be able to join us in celebration of the Lord’s will for our two lands.”

As soon as he turned away, the great hall erupted in a clamor of angry, agitated voices, cursing the rebels, arguing, crying. Adrian sat still. She was shaking. She could not bring her eyes from the floor in front of her. She was afraid that if she looked up, everyone would be watching her and that they would know that she was the one who opened the box of gold, using magic without the guidance of God’s hand. Her head felt dizzy, and the raging flood threatened to drown her. She couldn’t breathe.

Someone approached. Heavy shoes, shiny black. He knelt in front of her. Becker Dodd lifted her chin and looked into her wide frightened eyes. He was smiling. He looked up to the wall behind her. Adrian managed to turn and look. Around one of the candle sconces was a flutter of butterflies. They began flying away from the light, circling in the air. Becker held out his hand, and three flew to

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him, landing on his fingers. He held them for Adrian to see. They were beautiful, so delicate, opening and closing their little orange and black wings. She reached out her hand, and they flew to her, tickling her palm and fingers with their tiny feet.

One by one, they finished their visit and flew away. Becker reached out and held her shoulder.

She looked back to Hannah, then to Becker. The captain came over with Hannah's mother and father. No one said anything. No one had to. Surrounded by their love, their understanding, she felt confident and safe and a bit silly.

Another figure approached their little circle. Peter stood and peered around the captain.

Hannah looked up. Everyone waited quietly, noticing him. He moved forward with halting, careful steps.

He spoke to her father.

"Good evening, Mister Henderson. I'm sorry to interrupt. But if it's okay, I would like to speak with Hannah."

Nathan Henderson said nothing. He nodded his head toward his daughter. Peter turned to her.

"What do you want, Peter?"

"I wanted to ask if I may have this next dance with you."

"Why?"

Peter's eyes were moist and worried and never left Hannah. He breathed several shallow, unsteady breaths.

"Why should I dance with you, Peter?"

"Maybe you shouldn't," was his weak reply. "I was horrible to you. But..." He stopped, his brow furrowed. "I don't know how to put this. There are these times when you're standing in the empty middle between two completely different worlds, and you realize that you're living the entire rest of your life in that one moment. Tonight is forever, and it's all collapsed into every word. I just know that if I dance with you right now, I will never stop dancing with you. And if I can't, then I'll never dance again, because every moment for the rest of my life will be the night that I didn't tell you how sorry I am. I don't want this to be the night that I didn't tell you how desperately in love with you I am, and that I can't be away from you, not even for one more dance."

He stood with tears on his cheeks.

Hannah rose slowly. She reached out to him, and they embraced, close, tight.

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When the music started, Becker reached down his hand to Adrian.

"Come on, Addy my dear. I don't think the captain will mind if I steal you away for dance or two."

"Okay." She let him lead her through the crowd with her hand in his. "Will you spin me around?"

"I'll spin you around."

---

Peter's grip was firm, almost too tight. He moved with a determined hurry, his arm trailing behind him, pulling Hannah to the very middle of the room. Her heart began to race, and her fingers trembled.

The music was slow and full. They nestled into the thick press of couples. Peter turned around. His eyes were distant and determined. Hannah raised her hand to his cheek and said, "Peter, are you sure?"

His face softened. He looked down into her eyes and said, "I've always been sure. I just haven't been very strong." His arms wrapped around her, rising slowly between her bare shoulder blades and then to her neck, her hair, cradling her head against his chest. Hannah pulled her arms tightly around his waist and closed her eyes, hearing the quick beat of his heart above the dull, distant hum of the music.

In her mind, they were dancing alone in the park with the leaves playing around them in the chill blown wind and the birds gathering in a shifting cloud against the rain white sky. All of the worry and anger of the past week, all the excitement and flutters of this night, fell away like melting snow off an unwrapped scarf. His arms were like a blanket around her, warmed by the furnace of his body.

They swayed gently, clutching each other in the warm bumping press of the crowded dance floor.

What she noticed first was a rush of cold air against her arms. Then she heard voices and the sound of feet shuffling away. Reluctantly she opened her eyes to see a corridor opening to make way for Peter's father. She tried to move away from him, but his iron fingers grabbed her shoulder and pulled her back. His next move was to grab Peter by the neck, but before he could take a step, Peter spun around and his arm, aiming to knock the grabbing hand away, landed with a firm backhand across his father's jaw.

The crowd fell back.

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Mr. Calloway, his fist still clutching Peter's collar, pulled his son around, pushing him away. Peter planted his feet and turned and pushed back. There was a quick struggle of pushing and spinning until Peter moved both of his hands to his father's chest, took a step forward and sent his father tripping backward into the retreating circle that had formed around them.

The music stopped.

Peter's voice filled the silence with the angry word, "Stop!"

Hannah stood among the ring of witnesses. Peter looked over to her and then back to his father, who was being helped to his feet.

"Stop!" he said again. "I am so sick of all of this! Of all of you!" He raised his head and his arms in a desperate plea. "I can't. I won't do this." He stood firm and faced his father.

"I love Hannah. I love her so much I can barely breathe when I think of losing her. I have this scar, this deep festering pain for what I let you make me do to her. I can't take that away." His voice began wavering. "I can never undo that, and it's killing me." He began walking, stumbling. He paused for a moment, his eyes reaching out to Hannah. "I'm sorry," he told her.

He looked back to his father and said, "Why can't you just let me be what I am? I love her. I don't care what you think about that. I'm sick to my soul of your two-faced posturing. You know it's a lie. You're empty inside, so you spend all your time pushing other people down if they don't wear the right thing or go to the right church. You're always so busy trying to be better than other people. Doesn't it ever occur to you to just be good? It's not about pushing other people down, but about rising yourself up. I'm in love with Hannah Henderson, who you hate because she and her family don't bother to play these games that you trap yourself in. They live their own lives, and you resent it because you know that you're not strong enough to do what you want because someone else might make fun of you. They're the mirror that shows you how shallow and pathetic you really are."

He stared and looked around at the faces watching him, and he seemed suddenly aware of what he had done. He found Hannah. Then his gaze fell on Jacob Tol-Weston who stood quietly among the others.

Hannah walked out to him and took his hand in hers. She looked into his anger fire eyes and saw them soften into a pained mask of fatigue. She smiled and felt his trembling hand relax and then cling to her.

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"Let's go for a little walk," she told him.

As they approached the ring of the crowd Jacob took a step toward them. Before he could speak, Dylan Del-Trevisia grabbed the elf and pulled him back, clearing their way. They walked hand in hand up the grand stairs and through the arched foyer until they stood in each other's hungry embrace under the canopy of stars.

---

A dark cloud, heavy with rain, blew over the Bay of Gelst, soaking the sails of the Teshon ships that guarded the harbor. The rain pushed inland, wetting the brick-cobbled streets of the city, sending the town folk indoors to the pubs and shops, leaving the Legionnaires alone to soak in their patrol. Thunder rolled over the roofs and into the hills where the rain brought the withering canopy of golden leaves alive with a hissing cry and carried the sopping leaves to the ground where they became part of the carpet under Bodie Challuk's heavy steps. He walked with his wife between two pairs of men who had shadowed him since his rescue from the Gelst jail. Ahead of them stood the cabin, filled with the men who had fought with him and who would do so again.

He turned to Meredith and cupped her cheek in his wet hand. Her eyes, weary with worry, met his and gave him strength. He leaned forward and pressed his temple to hers. He kissed her round, rosy cheek and whispered, "I don't want to leave you again."

Her voice was quiet, but steady. She told him, "Nobody else can do it."

He leaned back and met her eyes. "I'm sorry," he told her.

She put her fingers over his lips and told him, "You can do this, only you. I am so proud of you, Bodie. I love you, but right now you belong to them, to this."

He rested in her embrace for another moment. When the hard rain started he stood back with his hands on her shoulders, rested for one final moment in her soft eyes, then led the group into the small, crowded cabin.

He left Meredith and took his place on the stone hearth between the fire and the eyes of fifty determined men, each one representing at least fifty other men whom they would lead according to the decisions made here today.

The room grew quiet, not a shuffle, not a sniff. Only the sound of the crackling fire blended with the wind and rain that hummed on the roof.

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"We can win," Bodie told them. "We are more powerful than we can imagine. Our lives are guided by the assumptions we carry, and Boret and the Teshon Legion forces need us to believe in their power over us. I do not.

"They are in disarray. Their new governor, a man named Baron Arrenkyle, is desperate for us to behave and accept his rule. We won't do that because we cannot.

"We are who we are. Our fathers' free blood runs in our veins. We cannot live in a Teshon cage any more than we could live without our beating hearts.

"The burden falls to us. We cannot be the generation that allows tyranny to spread, or misguided dogma to steal from us the knowledge that we are free, and that we must live in partnership with Boret, and not as its slave.

"They need us to feed them.

"They need us to clothe them, and for hundreds of years we have flourished because they need our barges, just as we need their payments to us. We have grown in our wisdom and our capabilities and now they want us to forget that we no longer need their rules or their whips to live.

"You are the men who remember being free. Now our lives and our trade are considered criminal unless we have this paper or that, and unless we pay more taxes to them and let them control all of what we do and how we do it.

"They want our children to never learn that their lives and their fortune belong to themselves.

"We are not the property of the Teshon governor to be pushed and pulled at his whim. He does not know the best way to transport goods through the rivers. We do. He doesn't know how to build a barge, or to train our oxen, or travel safely in a storm. We do. He doesn't know how to be a free man. But we do.

"We cannot be the link in our heritage that breaks. Our grandchildren must not look back at us as the men who allowed their spirits to be pinned under Teshon's boot.

Bodie looked around the room at his fellow guildsmen, from deck hand to river master, sitting beside unbranded men willing to die with them. They all watched him, waiting for his command, and he became suddenly aware of his oath to keep the wisdom of Benok pure and not share it with other tradesmen or with the uninitiated. The thought came to him, passed through him, and left, and he shared his words with all of them.

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“In the Third Book of the River, Benok teaches us about the channel and how a river cuts through the land. He teaches us how to steer against a strong river and how to seek the bank in a storm.

“This is just another storm, my friends. As I took my oath to serve Benok’s river, I now swear to you that I will keep the river free from the hands of the North. Benok teaches us that river work is a sacred trust, connecting the lives of God’s children. But I would rather see this river dry than allow tyranny to drain the life from Gelst.

“Our schools and counsels have been banished. They have stolen our lives from us, and they want to sell them back to us as passes and permits and Teshon warriors in our streets. It is our right and our duty to throw off those who would reduce us under a reign of despotism. Teshon has stolen our destiny from us, and has denied us any voice in the laws they wish to impose. The governor has sent his Teshon army to live among us, answerable to him alone. He has sent a swarm of officers to harass our people, and inflict upon us a multitude of new regulations and punishments.

“I was taken without trial or jury, and others have suffered imprisonment for infractions imagined by these new Teshon officials. Boret has perverted the sanctity of our guilds by using them as political tools against us.

“Gelst is and shall remain free. This is my oath to you, and by the light of God, we will show Governor Arrenkyle that he shall not tread upon this land.

“As long as we control the river, we control our destiny, and the hand of Teshon will wither and then fall.

“My friends, the time is upon us. History rests with us. It is war.”

# III

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Snow poured thick from the blackened canopy of Boret's pre-dawn sky, rushing in a fast slant through the flickering halo of a solitary gas lantern. Flocks of shifting flurries swept across the cobbled stones, leaping through the light into the deserted dark valley of cold city brick. The rushing wind stole the footsteps of a cloaked figure who brushed the edge of the light before taking his long shadow into the alley behind the Crimson Curtain theater. He hurried down the thin passage, sweeping his cloak against the old stone until he came to the heavy wooden door marked with a star.

The frigid wind pulled at his fingers as Estus held the thin fabric tight around him. He knocked and pulled the collar up to shield his face from the needle cold snow that dusted his shoulders, eyebrows, and his mane of thick hair. His breath billowed into the cold night like steam from a kettle. Time began to crawl. Seconds stretched into long moments, each of which threatened to bring curious eyes upon him.

He knocked again and pushed on the door, rattling it against the bolt. No answer. He pounded with the meat of his fist, making a loud thud that rattled the cold air of the back alley. He placed his ear to the door, listening while he watched blowing snow play across his boots and the bitter cold chewed away at the last lingering heat from his face, numbing his ears. What if he had been followed?

He pushed again at the door and it fell open, as though it had never been locked. He quickly ducked in and closed the door behind him. Enough light seeped in to reveal the basic shape of the hallway.

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The faint promise of a silvery glow ahead drew him forward to the backstage area where reflected lantern light, carried by the blowing snow past the row of third-story windows, was just enough for Estus to find his way through the kaleidoscope of mottled shadows.

As his eyes adjusted and the warm air pushed into his clothing, the boxes, racks of costumes, and tall shelves began to take shape. The dressing tables looked lived in, with jackets hung over the backs of chairs, and flowers, letters, and jewelry mixed in with face paints and bits of costumes in front of dark mirrors.

He caught a glimpse of candlelight playing on a curtain ahead. It seemed kind and welcoming, compared to the snow shadows and cavernous echoes backstage. The moment froze, and in a quick stab of disorientation the evening felt suddenly ominous and impossible. Estus reminded himself that whatever lay ahead was by his choice, by his intent, and so with a heavy breath he walked forward upon the footsteps of countless theater players and up the wide carpet-covered steps to the hardwood floor where his footsteps finally rang out into the grand auditorium before him.

The stage was empty except for a candelabra holding several tall candles lit between two high-backed chairs that were upholstered in purple velvet and set facing each other. The stage was quiet, except for his slow footsteps and the distant echo of the wind's heavy howl. What must it be like, he wondered, to stand under the eyes of hundreds of souls, all waiting for your next word. As he circled the back of the closer chair he saw Kendrick look up at him and wave his hand, inviting Estus to sit down.

Kendrick seemed both old and youthful. His gray streaked hair was neatly trimmed, and he wore a simple white shirt with the collar casually unbuttoned. His left hand rested on his knee, but there was no right arm. Ivy had warned him of this, but the sight was startling, and it touched a channel of fury as he remembered the cut Jorel had made next to his own brand.

Kendrick spoke. His voice was clear, gentle, powerful. "Be comfortable. You're safe here."

Estus took off his cloak and laid it slowly upon the floor. He sat down and closed his eyes while he took a few more deep, slow breaths.

"You are not alone, Estus. There are many who share the knowledge and power that I will help you discover. We lie below the Guilds, as we must. They don't know our numbers or our capabilities, nor shall you. You will speak of these things only with

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me. As far as you are concerned, I am the only soul to ever touch magic outside of the laws of the guilds. You must study your new guild book and be an eager student of Benok. You must numb your mind to the questions you seek and glow in the bliss of Benok's gifts. Glen Dawson is a kind and devout man, and he does not need to know that his God is Andor's puppet. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"I am a student of Benok. I have one Lord, the God of Fire, who shines the light of understanding into the minds of his children. I will carry the secrets of carpentry, as I carry the light of God within me."

"You will keep going to church. You will keep saying your prayers. You will sing, and you will drink the light of god." Kendrick smiled, and added, "And try not to spill any more, okay?"

"I know."

"Do you? Do you know what they would do if they knew you were here right now? If you were not the brother of the new Governor you would probably find yourself repeating seminary until they could break you. Let them break you, Estus. Be their lamb. You are going to learn that when you know the truth behind the truth, and when you have mastered all of the tricks that they are trying to use against you, it won't hurt quite so much to paste that empty stare into your eyes, to drop Benok's name into every other sentence, and to praise an imagined god for everything that you make happen. Soon, none of that will matter."

"That's what I want."

"Estus, you are your own slave master and your own wings. You can do and be and obtain anything. You stand every moment at the juncture between being awake and hiding within the twilight of other people's intentions. Magic comes alive and breathes through you the moment you stop living inside the small clay statue of yourself. At that point your body and your energy can't help but expand to fill your wildest dreams. You don't have to push magic out of yourself like a sapling in the mud. Know that you are the forest, and you will find yourself carried among the highest branches. Once you break that frightened, angry image of yourself, magic will flow through you. It carries you higher and higher, and the only limits are false shadows that you create. You are like that empty chamber waiting for the show. When you know what you truly want, your internal spotlight will pierce the darkness and

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everyone around you will see the play unfold at your feet. Once you step upon magic's stage you will be carried by the power of the inevitable consequences that flow like a deluge through a dry river. You are the rain.

"Magic is not something that can be written down, or etched in stone any more than you can paint the rush of joy you feel when you are with your truest love. We must all discover our love affair with the magic of our lives. There is no book that defines it. No doctrine that can explain it. I can not teach you, but I can guide you.

"Like love, magic is for each new mind to seek and discover, just like a heartsick songwriter who sits alone on the rumpled sheets of his lonesome bed, holding his lute in the slanted sunlight, trying to push his pain through the inky scratches of his quill as if he were the first to ever experience these feelings. But his words connect to the same deep sea of hope and despair as everyone who has ever come to the shores to draw the water to him, to bathe in the peace of understanding, only to have it return to the eternity of longing, there to wait for the next hungry heart. Magic isn't the song that you sing. Magic is what draws you to the water. Magic isn't what you do, but why you do it."

Kendrick fell silent and watched Estus, waiting for him to answer. The words were beautiful and poetic, but not very specific. Estus said, "I don't quite understand."

Kendrick smiled, and said, "What do you think magic is, Estus?"

"Making things happen with your mind."

"Okay. What else?"

"Directing energy."

Again Kendrick waited, silent, watching Estus patiently. Estus let himself slow down a little. He thought about the question. His descriptions so far could be applied to everyday things, such as building a book shelf or planting a garden. What is the essence of magic that makes it different from those things?

Estus continued his answer, "I know that magic can be thought of in terms of different levels of energy. I suppose that when I make a table I'm making something happen with my mind, and I'm directing the energy of my own hands toward that purpose. But there are deeper channels of energy that are beyond my reach. I want to learn, and I want to know. I don't quite know what it is, or how to reach it. But learning about it just feels right, and everything else feels crooked and unbalanced. It was taken away from me and I want it back. I want to know."

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“What is it that you want to know?”

“Everything.”

Kendrick smiled, but then Estus gave him a specific question. “How would you describe the difference between what Ivy called control magic, which includes things like making a table, and direct magic where you float up without any strings or support?”

“The difference is only one of perspective. There is no fundamental distinction. It only seems that way at lower energies. But the answer you’re looking for is that direct magic is the ability to tune your mind to attach to external energies and to direct them as easily as you direct your own internal thoughts and your own body.”

“But if I ask a friend to build a shelf, am I not manipulating external energy?”

“Yes! With enough of that type of magic you can direct entire nations as though they were fitted with a bit and a bridle.”

“Or the religion of Benok.”

“Or any institution designed to shape the truth into carefully carved channels. Energy is always in motion, Estus, and once a path is worn through the wild forest of what might be, energy and intent will follow and reinforce that path. Magic happens when you are able to make new paths. Your own paths. Most people walk well known trails and deny that any other way could ever exist. They will do whatever they can to justify their choice, then turn their energy in the direction of those ideas until it’s easier to punish anyone who steps off their path than to decide for themselves.”

Estus let his eyes fall on Kendrick’s right shoulder, missing its arm.

“Exactly.”

“It’s almost as if ideas themselves are a sort of magic, in that they direct external energies.”

“It’s more than that. Ideas are not only powerful magic. Knowing is the ocean in which magic swims.”

“Ivy told me that words are the fabric from which magic is woven. Then it’s a new path. Now magic is swimming in an ocean of ideas. Is there any way to talk about magic in its most pure, direct form, without all the metaphors?”

Kendrick smiled and said, “Magic is, in its most fundamental essence, an act of imagination, of mind, and because most of our thoughts exist as metaphor it is actually quite difficult to talk of magic except as it relates to other things. The mind’s intent is the

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medium of magic, and just as there is no sound without the air, there is no magic without meaning and purpose." Kendrick chuckled and added, "There's another one for you. Magic is the ocean, fabric, a path, and now the air."

"Or fire," Estus added, thinking of the elven imagery.

Kendrick nodded. He said, "Let me try to be a bit more specific. Magic is with us when we are fully awake. Most people understand the difference between being in a dream and being awake, but they don't realize that even during what they would call being awake they can still be trapped in a dream. Our dreaming mind is with us in sleep and in our waking time as we wander through the wilderness maze of our thoughts. In a dream, you can be looking for a lost item, but never quite find it. You just get pushed from one strange image to the next. This can happen when we are awake. We wander the same maze of old habits, reenacting the same dramas, seeking something that we can't find, or trying to satisfy some impossible specter. To do magic we must first wake up and become our own dream. When you recognize the patterns and habits that ensnare you, when you can finally step outside of those illusions and understand that they are as empty as any night vision, you will wake up to an even deeper knowing of what is true and possible. This is when magic happens."

"How do I get there?"

"That will come. Here's what I want you to do, Estus. Every day, without fail, you must find time that is yours alone. Do nothing important with this time. Sit, or walk, be anywhere you wish. In this time there are no debts, nothing urgent, no demands, no shoulds. Only you, open to the simple bliss of being. Do this every day until we meet again. At that time I will give you an exercise to prepare your mind to become open to the channels of magic that are within you. But until then, learn to live each day with a vibrant and alive joy."

"And what will that do?"

Kendrick laughed, and told him, "Try it. And then you tell me. Now go to work. Next time we'll see if I can teach you how to call the fire."

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Between the low boiling sky and the wrinkled face of the churning sea, frigid wind tumbled ashore, biting and dry, through the city of Korolem. The snow-dusted peaks of the Kambor

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mountains, lost in a canopy of restless gray clouds, trapped the wind and sent it north as a rowdy band of icy blasts.

The clean morning wind pulled at Captain Gareth's collar as he stood high on the dry dock wall, watching the *Corona's* new crew battle the deepening cold, loading crate after enormous crate into the ship's belly.

He stood above the activity, aware that the men were aware of his vigil, knowing that they knew nothing of him except for a few exaggerated rumors. He felt both distant and connected with them. They were all strangers to him. The roster and cargo had all been arranged and paid for long ago. The voyage belonged to Koro-Del. Gareth felt more like a barrel of cargo than the master of this beautiful beast. He could feel her painful urge for the sea, heightened by the beckoning wind that was wasted on the tightly furled sails of a ship out of water. The time would soon come that he and his crew would learn whether he could lead them.

He moved away from the rail and walked along the top of the massive stone wall toward the well worn oak ramp that led to the rear deck. He could feel their furtive attention following him, but they all continued steadily at their tasks. When his right foot fell onto the deck boards, a loud pipe squealed and time seemed to stop, frozen and silent, as men became statues to the cry, "Captain on deck!"

The only sound was the rumble of the wind. Gareth stepped quickly to the balcony overlooking the main deck where he was met with the attentive stare of hundreds of careful eyes.

He called out in his commanding voice, "Prescott!"

A sturdy man, dressed in the simple work clothes of all the others, passed the rope he was holding to another man so he could run across the deck and up the stairs. He saluted and said, "Christopher Prescott. Welcome aboard, sir."

Gareth returned the salute and offered his hand, which the full young man shook firmly. The captain ordered, "Starting tomorrow have all officers in uniform with guild rank displayed."

"Aye, sir."

"And I'll see you in the wardroom in ten minutes. Carry on."

The first officer turned to the men and called out, "As you were!" Then suddenly, "Blake, careful with that tackle! It's turning on you." He bounded down the narrow stairs and was lost again amid the sudden volume of voices. The captain descended casually,

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as if he were alone on the ship and not being examined by every other eye.

The wardroom was sheltered from the merciless wind, a bubble of quiet amid the muted sound of a ship alive. It was an exact copy of Donovan's room on the *Constellation*, down to the carpet fringe rug and the padded arm chairs. On the cherry wood desk he found the box that Dylan had told him would be waiting there for him.

He walked to the desk. The box was wide. Three feet of dark polished oak between square ends. He opened the lid and let it rest open on sturdy chains of bright brass.

Inside was a complete set of Merchant Guild books. The volumes from ensign to captain, so familiar to him, where bound in rich red leather. There were four other books. The book for admiral, forbidden to him by guild rules, and three others that were untitled. He drew one of these out and read enough to determine that it was a history of the land before Benok. He flipped through the book and to a map, familiar in form but showing the location of the ancient towns. Also in the box were docking permits, log books, Koro-Del stationary and seal. The regulation manual contained details of every aspect of the ship from navigation maps to gallery operations. He closed the lid. A quiet rattle of the brass chains preceded the secure thunk of wood on wood.

The shelves were bare. The narrow door led to his chamber with a large, plush bed hanging from the ceiling and resting on four sturdy springs. The cabinet behind the desk was part safe and part dumbwaiter. Gareth opened the left desk drawer. From his pockets he took his pipe, tobacco, and matches. After he lit the pipe, he set the matches, tobacco tin, and his nearly empty whiskey flask into the drawer and closed it. The sweet smoke filled his mouth and nostrils, calming him. He suddenly felt very old.

A loud knock shook the warm silence. "Yes. Come in."

Christopher Prescott let himself in. He still wore his work clothes, but his hands and face were clean. He entered and closed the door with a gentle, unhurried manner. He stood near the captain and offered a respectful salute.

Gareth waved his hand and said, "Oh don't start doing that every time you see me." Prescott smiled and nodded. There was something about him, the way he stood and held his head, the way his eyes neither intruded nor evaded, the brace of his shoulders, that together projected an unquestionable sense of confidence and leadership, protective but not overbearing. He stood as a captain

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should stand, as a father stands over the bed of a sleeping child, or an older brother who walks with you through dark alleys.

"This was to be your command," Gareth said.

"Aye."

"The men know you, respect you. They were ready to serve under you. I'm told that several requested transfers to this ship because she was to be your first command."

"A few of them. Yes sir."

Gareth leaned against the desk. "And here I show up and blow that all to shit."

Prescott smiled in quiet acknowledgment, offering neither contradiction nor flattery, as most men would have done.

Gareth told him, "There will be no trouble over this. Not from you or any man on board. I may ask for your opinion, and sometimes, in private, you may offer it, but there will be no hint, no question of the command of this operation. If you can't show complete confidence in my wildest order, I will bust you to deck swap or toss you overboard, whatever the situation calls for."

Prescott answered with a soft tone, and the hint of indulgence one might give to a child asking a silly question. "Captain, probably no one understands better than I that I could be either your greatest asset or your biggest problem. I intend to be the former. If I may speak freely, sir, you are advanced in your years, and your command here poses no threat to my career. I will have a command when the time for that unfolds. Until then, I welcome the opportunity to deepen my wisdom of the sea through your eyes and experience. I and the crew are yours, Captain."

"Humph. I pegged you as being above idle flattery."

"I am, sir." His answer held such simple confidence and conviction that it struck Gareth still in a moment of unexpected pride. He cleared his throat, took a couple steps away from the desk, and stood solid in the middle of the room.

"We're moving up the launch to day after tomorrow at dawn. Dylan wants us at sea as soon as possible."

Prescott nodded. "The cargo is mostly loaded. We can finish that tomorrow, and I'll rush the provisions and cancel shore leave."

"You need to know something, if you don't already. This is for your ears only. Our cargo consists mostly of weapons and equipment to support the rebels in Gelst. The crew will be facing a decision of loyalty between Koro-Del and my command on one side and Legion soldiers on the other. That decision will go in favor of

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Koro-Del, which opposes Teshon influence in the south. Teshon ships will attempt to control the southern seas to prevent any help to the rebels. We will have to fight them, and there will be bloodshed. We shall be a combat vessel. Some of the crew may think that this will make pirates of us."

"No sir. That's for history to decide, not the crew."

"They will fight?"

"We are trained to fight. Once underway I will run the drills for your review. I will have the ship and the men ready."

There was nothing more to say except, "Dismissed."

Prescott nodded and left. The room was once again too quiet. He walked among the echoes of his footsteps to his desk where he opened the left desk drawer. He took out and drained the last of his whiskey.

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Wrapped in a halo burst of light, Ivy stood still at the end of a narrow arched hallway looking out the tall window. She wore only a short robe of blue and green silk draped across her bare olive skin. Inside the air was warm and moist. The piazza three stories down was smothered in fresh snow that hid all detail under gentle white curves. The plush elven moss covering the floor and the lattice of vines that filled the walls with round leaves and tiny white petals consumed nearly every sound, leaving only the whisper of her slow breaths and the faint hint of the howling wind that swept past the untouched snow dunes below.

The hallway led to Andor Tol-Tolin's private bath chamber and the trickling echoes from its large basin.

She turned from the brilliant glare and stepped through the arch, pulling the door closed behind her. The air inside the botanical bath swam with the heavy scents of elven blooms that flourished beneath a canopy of vines glowing in the late afternoon light of the greenhouse dome.

The splash of the fountain led her forward along the polished wood floor through a short maze of wide fan leaves and a shower of dark purple clematis.

Carved columns circled the round pool, each one wearing a crown of green flame that burned scented oils. Andor was not yet here. Ivy opened her robe and let the gentle silk slide down her back. She hung the robe on the column's hook and stepped into the wide bowl of welcoming warm water. She walked slowly down the

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incline to the ring of reclined stone seats and floated into one of them. Water undulated just under her chin. She leaned back and relaxed, her arms floating in the mineral rich water, letting her mind calm.

Here she sat for several minutes, alone, comfortable, in a state of still meditation.

Andor's arrival was announced by the heavy splashes of water as he pushed through the basin. His splashes became turbulent waves as he settled into the seat across from her.

"Welcome back, Ivy."

She opened her eyes and nodded her greeting to him. "My family is prepared to allow you to be a part of the next transition. I believe that we can find an appropriate arrangement, if you cooperate."

"They're nowhere near ready, Ivy."

"Under your care, they never will be. However, ready or not, they are approaching a threshold. For decades they have been stitching together awkward pieces of their magic, and we believe that under the pressure of another war they will abandon your control structures. Without an alternate framework in place they will create their own, and that would present unexpected difficulties. The Tol plan is unworkable going forward, and so we have returned."

Andor smiled, as if amused. "You always did overestimate them, and your time away has allowed you to forget what humble and dim creatures most of them really are. You have always assumed that these brutes want to be self-sufficient. I used to believe that too, but I was wrong. Most humans are simply too lazy, too bored, too impenetrably miserable, to be a threat to anything but the fresh air around them. They are incapable of wanting, much less achieving, any level of power that would become a difficulty for us. Watch them, Ivy. See how their jealousies and anger and fear tear at every part of their lives."

"You teach them to be afraid. You are not describing the nature of the humans. You are describing what you have turned them into. Humans are just as capable of mastering peace and compassion as we are. But they lack the proper schemas."

"Some of them, perhaps. But a threshold? That is simply preposterous. The mob will always enslave men of the mind, because a thousand good sticks will beat the snot out of an enlightened peace preacher every time. Violence, and an autocratic, hierarchical control structure is just our way of speaking their

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language. That's how they are wired. If we give them enlightening methodologies, we will only be lifting them above their capabilities, and when they do awaken to their magic it will be cast within their same violence-based, alpha-seeking protocols."

"Well, that's the trick isn't it, Andor. Unguided, that's exactly where they always end up. Unless we want to give up and just keep them enslaved forever, we must create for them the proper context of thought so that when their magic does crest, it doesn't eclipse their understanding of it. Your system is failing because it is built on a contradiction."

"Where is the contradiction? I have been listening to that argument for twenty centuries. The proof is in the stability of their culture and in my ability to maintain that. There is no uprising here. No risk of unchecked societal awakening, except for what you and Dylan have instigated in Gelst and Korolem."

"You cannot build an efficient nexus of responsible intent when the context of the divine is perceived to be external. Their magic is in them, but it's hobbled under the Circle Of Light."

"Which was the point."

"But you can't cultivate an enlightened societal ethic without triggering a corresponding elevation of magical capacity, because those are fundamentally the same thing. And so what's happening now is that the humans are discovering their own paths toward the divine. Their art, their plays, their crude democratic canons, are bringing them to their center. It was only with our help that these early attempts were guided. We did not cause Gelst. It happened because every human has the innate capability to live a creative, nurturing life in a sphere of connected magical potential."

"But you speak as if this is natural. If you have to pull them away from their own base impulses, it's not their true nature. Some can do as you say, of course, but most of them will never come close. When you try to make your assumptions universal, you are forcing an unstable elevation. Some humans are naturally drawn to unification. They are the ones we groom in the guilds. Humans instinctively gather into distinct layers of leaders and followers. We are in tune with that."

"They are waking up faster than your guilds can process them. The guild system is inadequate today, and certainly for the future, and I mean in human time. Within two hundred years, your guilds will be gone, unless you begin to change them right now. And because you have locked your political power to the same guild

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structure, there is no way for them to reject guild dogma without challenging everything from grocer to governor.”

“But Ivy, that is exactly why the structure is holistically integrated. One man can never challenge the premise of his society. Once you control the paradigm, you control everyone in it.”

“I’m not talking about one man, but thousands, who can all decide tomorrow that there must be a new way. Once that idea catches hold, your paradigm will crumble to dust no matter how many zealots you have screaming about your god, or how many times they burn a circle of thorns around the neck of some poor blasphemer.”

“And what would make these thousands of spontaneous sorcerers suddenly appear? What mechanism could they possibly use to rouse the deadened minds around them? I have seen stunningly brilliant humans come and go, but they are freaks, special pets at best. What in all your experience allows you to believe that these fatuous food tubes have any chance of finding any sort of way unless we give it to them?”

“Because, Andor, it is happening! Collective wisdom grows with increasing velocity as the lattice of fundamental knowledge is interconnected. At first you may have one singularly brilliant mind in a century, then the next has something to build on, then the next synthesizes the two, and others can learn from all of them. The amount of individual contribution necessary to advance a particular discipline decreases as the number of new minds connect on an issue. Two thousand years ago, you divided the world into scholars and farmers. Then the farmers learned from the scholars, and they increased their average agricultural output, leaving more sons to be scholars. Two hundred years ago we began seeing more leaders and thinkers than you could absorb into the guilds, and you have done nothing to change this fundamental shift in proportion.”

“I am doing something! There is no better means to achieve social reconditioning than by war. I have no intent of letting a conflagration of rogue magic sweep the unsuspecting masses into an unstable political oligarchy, where men can consume and control the lives of other men. Until they are all able to carry the burden of their awakening, there will always be a tendency for power to flow to those willing to abuse it, and Ivy, that’s all they really want, the bullies and their willing victims. I have come to accept that any sort of essential elevation is simply impossible.”

“Not under this system.”

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"The system protects the masses. They're happier without the burden of magical enlightenment, and ultimately that is the measure of our success. Without us they would still be suffering in warring enclaves under despotic monarchs. Now it's better, more balanced. Everyone has a chance to learn, to aspire, to even awaken their magical mind. If you try to raise all of them, or allow the strong to rise unfettered against the weak, you keep coming back to the same basic instabilities. This is their state, Ivy, and the best we can do for them is keep them from destroying themselves. Yet you insist on seeing yourself as their miracle, their salvation."

"You still have it backward, Andor. The instability is not in the humans themselves, but in the structures you have written into their minds. They are never going to mature when the locus of divinity is externalized. I'm telling you that, not only is it possible to allow their magic and technology to accelerate, we must allow it, because short of seeding them with a virus to kill nine out of ten, you are not going to undo the lattice of leveraged information that has been formed. You are incubating exactly the scenario to unleash the leviathan of unchecked human magic."

"And you have the answer to this?"

"We do."

"So I ask again, do you think that they are ready to be allowed access to their power?"

"You know what they are capable of. You have seen it. You helped your grandfather to crush it. Yes, we believe that humans, in general, can sustain a level of advanced magic, and that their lack of progress has been systemic, and is not intrinsic to their nature. They are seeking this out in clumsy ways. We are prepared to lay a path for the humans that will allow them to explore new art, governmental protocols, science, and direct magic, without becoming a risk to themselves or to us. We need a system of feedback and reward that naturally encourages centered, enlightened interactions, one that is in alignment with their alpha-seeking instinct, yet punishes the destructive use of their energies."

"And you want me to be a part of this new plan?"

"The plan has already been in place for sixty years. We are not seeking your approval or your permission, and if you were not staging a war that could threaten the foundation of social stability, I would have allowed you to continue thinking that you and your eroded plans still maintained some vestige of relevance. But then you caused trouble. Still, you are welcome to play the role we assign

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you, or you can allow yourself to be destroyed along with your failed experiment and its final senseless war.”

After several long moments she continued. “We offer you two paths. If you insist on pushing this war, you will be fighting against the greatest military, economic, and anthropological skills that the Del clan has assembled for the past two thousand years. We will pull Korolem into the conflict before you are able to establish a secure Teshon position in the bay of Gelst. Dylan’s merchant fleet will easily obtain complete dominance of the southern seas.

“We will begin a systematic process of disclosure that will reveal corruption and dissent in the highest ranks of the guilds, and demonstrate that they have been subverted by you against your own God’s good work. We will expose the true history of man and show that you have hidden, rather than revealed the truth.

“Our wizards will rekindle the age of mystery and magic, and show themselves to be more competent and powerful than those in thrall to the tenets of your magician’s guild. They will learn how you discover the blossom of magic in their daughters and steal them away as your concubines, subverting their magic to the prurience of their father elves.

“Every foothold of power you think you can claim will be turned against you. The fact that you murdered Petran Vendak will be a trivial footnote to the despotic tyranny that your reign will become in the history of the humans. The secrets and treasures that you took from them, their music, their symphonies, their engineering, and their magic will be restored to them. Your elves will be lucky to leave their villages alive, and Tol will become their word for the most vile, evil filth that haunts their souls.”

Ivy let only a brief pause pass before she continued.

“Or you can work with us. Allow the renaissance of Gelst to continue. Cooperate with Koro-Del to establish lending banks and a new currency.

“Eliminate the practice of guild branding, and end the monopoly segregation of disciplines. We will establish a new publishing industry, and release the guild books for public review. We will help you establish an effective primary education system and a series of universities, while you maintain the seminaries and preside over the transition of Benok’s god from an authoritarian monster to a partner of enlightenment.

“We will replace elf fathers with human governmental groups and establish formal declarations of property and legal rights. Magic

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will be taught as a discipline to every human within the framework of empowerment and responsibility.

“We have not spent the last two thousand years waiting for you. We have infiltrated deep into your cities, your guilds, and into the very livelihood of the humans. In the shadow of your Circle of Light, we have shaped their economy, cultivated the counterculture, and brought into our confidence the most powerful rogue magicians.

“It is now time to eliminate any pretense that you are acting in the interest of the humans, or of our relationship with them. You have selected slavery. We choose to explore a partnership.”

Andor answered, “Ivy, you know that matters such as these must play out to determine which of us is right. I am sorry that you have chosen to work against us. But we managed to purge your reckless influence before, and for the good of the humans for whom I have devoted my life, I cannot allow you disrupt them again.”

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The storm rolled down the valley from Boret, pushing bitter cold patches of dry wind ahead of it. As evening fell the final echoes of warmth died, yet the job was not finished.

Bodie pulled the last two barges together himself. He drew the rope steadily through the stiff and complaining pulley, fighting against the churning river that charged between the closing gap at the north end of the horseshoe valley. His rough gloves thrashed across the aching joints in his hands, and the unrelenting wind numbed his wrists and face, but slowly his barge and three others chained behind it stuttered closer to the link of four barges from the other side of the river.

When the river pushed in a white churn through the gap and would not allow him to pull them any closer, Bodie wrapped the rope around his forearm and set his feet. “Bring it over!” He shouted. His men from the other barge threw across a large coil of mooring rope into the wind and onto the deck near him where it was quickly wrapped around a makeshift capstan. Two men, one on each end of the long lever that ran through the pole, start walking, winding the rope around and around, forcing the river’s run down below the barges.

Soon the final two were chained together, and after being buffeted about by unsteady water that racked and rattled the deck, the river finally pulled the link of barges into a steady arch.

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Bodie stood, face into the wind, and waved his arm to the troupe of boys ready to carry large bundles of limbs and deadwood collected from the forest. They had been working all day in the abandoned Legion camp gathering bundles of twigs, bales of grass, old clothes, anything that would float and help form pools of still water on the surface of the river.

On they came from both sides, carrying their loads across the wide planks from barge to barge, dropping whatever they could into the river. Bodie fell into the ant line. He picked up an armful of material and carried it across the barges to the next spot. Men and boys worked side by side, faces and ears numb, hands brittle, skin chapped and bruised, legs weary and feet like clubs. For another half hour the lines went on. Bodie couldn't count how many had come. Eighty or more. Probably much more.

When the storm finally brought the curtain of thick powder snow, Bodie ordered everyone to the far bank where they climbed in frozen silence up the steep rise until they all stood together along the narrow valley road.

For him they had done this. For his cause and their honor, for their liberty, for the spirit of hope and freedom still alive in them as free men, they placed this noose around the neck of their river, hoping that Boret would choke before Gelst died.

Already pools of still water were swirling around the barges, losing their momentum to the icy clutch of the wind and the fog of falling snow.

They stood together, bound by their desperate belief in a frail and dangerous idea, clutching and huddling themselves. They watched the snow begin to turn their river into a barricade of growing ice, a thin bridge of hope riding atop the fierce deep channels of the river.

By morning the river would be an impassable frozen lake at this point, and the battles to shut the hungry mouths of Boret would begin. Finally the sun, hidden behind the glowing wall of pouring snow, began to fade into a starless night. Bodie ordered the men onto their wagons.

He followed, riding along on his horse, following the pale flicker of the caravan lamps.

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The bright moon beckoned Peter to the window to stand again, as he had stood every night since the Harvest Ball, as a prisoner in his room, a guardian of the town's icy shadows. His eyes traced the path of shining silver and black rooftops to the Henderson house, where she slept.

After he and Hannah left the Harvest Ball they had walked, hand in hungry hand, floating in private bliss for hours. They had walked down to Thistle Quay, to the end of the pier where they sat hip to hip amid the boats sloshing softly against their moorings. With her head resting on his chest, and his arm holding her close against the chilly sea breeze, they watched the sky spin her dazzle of stars until they were dizzy drunk with sleepy love.

At the bistro she sat on a cold wooden table overlooking the dark ocean, and held his body close to hers. They kissed with the patience and eagerness of lost time and the privacy of the open sea until new, forceful desires awakened in them. Her hands found willing flesh under his shirt, and her legs trembled with the touch of his hands on her knees.

They walked along the moon shadow streets, drowsy and drained, until they came to Hannah's house where, in the dew sprinkled haze of the full moon, his fingers brushed her smiling cheeks as he drew her into a lingering kiss beside the rose trellis.

The sweet taste of her mouth remained vivid in his mind all the way home, and even through the strap beating his father had given him when he got in.

Since then, his father had not let him out of his sight. He screamed at Peter that he would never see, "that godless little tramp" again, and had forbidden him to leave the house.

Standing by the window, watching Hannah's roof sleep, none of that mattered. His fingers traced a little heart on the frost of the window pane. His father's anger was lost somewhere far away, too far to penetrate beyond the sweet pang of missing his Hannah.

His hand reached for the latch, just to let some cool air in, he thought. But his hand shook with anticipation as he imagined climbing down like he used to do we he was just a wiry little boy.

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His heavy jacket was crumpled on the desk. He took two careful steps across the creaking floor and threw it over his shoulders. Against his father's orders, he pushed the window open and looked down. His eyes caught a flash of movement a second before a batch of metal scrap exploded with a raucous clamor on the brick walk below.

Footsteps pounded from the hall. He considered for a moment whether he could jump the ten feet to the pavement, but the thought of landing on the rough iron gave him enough pause that the moment was lost amid another harsh rattle. This time it was keys and a turning bolt and the sudden burst of the door.

His rush of anticipation evaporated in a sudden boil of anger. Words nearly leapt from his mouth, but Peter froze, and his father said. "Close the window, son."

Peter looked away from his father, away from the window, into the black emptiness of his sleepless night. He pulled the window closed and latched it.

"Step back." his father commanded. Peter stepped away from the window and planted himself uneasily on the edge of his mattress, still wearing his heavy coat on his shoulders. His father thumped his heavy feet across the floor and stood in front of the window. Peter endured the sight of his father pausing to sneer at his drawing. He had with him a metal lock, which he arranged around the latch.

Without a word he pounded back to the door. As it was closing behind him, Peter heard his own voice speaking calmly and unexpectedly. "I'll just break the glass."

"No you won't." And the door closed.

Peter sat unmoving for many morose minutes, until his body felt weary and filled with sand. Finally, he let himself fall down to the bed where he lay sleepless, watching the moon fly past his window, dragging the dim glow of dawn behind it.

He slept, or thought perhaps that he did, but he was awake when his father rattled his keys again and pushed into his room.

"Get dressed."

"What?"

"Your nice pants and a white shirt."

"Where are we going?"

The door closed.

Peter lay back on the bed and squinted at the first, low-slanted rays of the sun that washed blinding over his face. He rested only a

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moment and then pushed himself like a limp puppet through the motions of dressing and hefting his feet down the stairs.

Without explanation, his father grabbed Peter by the arm and led him out to the front of the house where the small buggy had been hitched behind their draft horse, a pretty black mare with white patches.

“What’s wrong?” Peter asked.

“Get in the buggy.”

“No.”

“What?” He rushed over and grabbed the fabric of Peter’s shoulder and pushed him backward into the large wheel. “You wanted out, we’re going out.”

“Where?”

“The church.” He pulled Peter roughly to the side and put his iron fingers on his son’s back, pushing him up into the seat. He hurried around and took the driver’s seat, and soon they were clattering over the rough bricks through the slumbering streets of Korolem.

There were a dozen or so other wagons at the church, and groups of older boys waiting outside. Peter’s father didn’t say anything. He pulled the buggy next to another, hitched the horse ropes and motioned Peter to follow him in.

Their feet crunched across the pebble gravel walk, through clouds of hushed conversation. Some of the boys were drinking steaming cups of coffee. Others were eating some kind of tart. Several were reading small parchments.

Inside, they walked along the hallway in the dim glow and pungent odor of kerosene lamps and took their place in the short line. “Stay here,” his father told him. He returned soon with two mugs of coffee and tarts. The little pie was dry and sweet, with cinnamon and butter. The coffee was strong and black and bitter burnt, and its only virtue was that it kept him from choking on the dry pastry.

“Peter, you know that I have been on you to pick a trade. I think I found what you need right now, probably as much as this trade needs you.”

Peter looked up to the table they were approaching. Only then did he see the brisk young men wearing flawless red jackets and blue berets. He turned his stunned gaze back to his father. The moment was strange and disconnected to anything Peter could have

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understood as actually happening. "The Legion? You think I want to do that?"

"I'll tell you what you want."

"Not this!"

"No? What do you think you want?"

The moment moved even farther into a strange dream. "I don't know."

His father stood close, with his hand on Peter's arm. "Look, son. That girl. I know she's a pretty little thing. You think I don't understand, but I do. I know what big brown eyes can do to a young boy. But you're a Calloway man. You are going to matter in this world, and you can't do that without proper affiliation, without a place in a guild. And this one really needs young men like you right now. Ready to go take a bite out of the world. Someone ready to make a name for himself. See what the world has for him. They've got a new program. You enlist for two years, and you qualify for officer training. That'll be a walk downhill for you. You'll have your brand before you're twenty, son!"

He leaned in close and put his other hand on Peter's chest, patting it in rhythm with his harsh coffee breath. "And if in a couple years you come back, and you still think you need to be with this," he paused, "Henderson girl, then okay. But you'll still need a trade, and this way you'll be able to see if that is really what's going to be best for you."

They were at the table. His turn.

"Name?"

Peter's father urged him forward and stood back proud.

Peter looked at the sharp, rough, and handsome man before him. He couldn't be much older than Peter, but he seemed older. More mature, more stately. For a moment Peter saw what his father had brought him here to see. He saw the appeal, the glamour of this guild's power and style. He felt a small pull of attraction at the idea of fraternity, fellowship, and foreign lands. The image of that life, the strong future opening to him in this moment, was attractive, but inside out. Peter had once seen a concave, negative sculpture of a face, lit from below. On first glance, it looked like a face. The shadows matched, and for a moment the eyes were tricked. But when you look at it just a little differently, the image twists and distorts in very wrong ways.

"Name?"

Peter walked away from the desk and to his father.

"I can't do this."

"Get back over there." His grip was like a vice. He pushed Peter back toward the table, where the man was already writing down information for the next boy.

Peter turned, and the whole world seemed inside out.

"You don't know how thin a thread you're on, do you boy? Listen, that's enough. Get over there."

"Did you bring the strap?"

The vice hand pulled him aside and out a side door.

"Enough, Peter, I'm not about to..."

"How could you think that I would just walk in here and do this? How could you even imagine that?"

A calm settled over the two of them. Peter became aware of how the last remnants of morning fog hugged the frost-tinted grass. He noticed the steam of breath coming from his and his father's mouths.

"Because, Peter," his father began quietly, with what seemed finally to be an honest answer, "you know that what I'm telling you is right. Look into the brightness of your heart. You're not just a little boy with a puppy crush. You're a young man. You know what the world is, and you know what you have to do."

Peter said nothing. Birds sang, somewhere.

"Because you know the position that you put me in with your shameless display that night. Because you know that you'll ruin me unless you shape up and do what you're supposed to do."

Peter leaned his back against the brick wall. He felt like heavy sand again, but then the heaviness began to sink, as from an hourglass draining through his feet.

He looked at his father, a wiry, angry little man. He closed his eyes, for just a moment, feeling the sleep pull at him. When he spoke, it was his final plea. "I don't know those things, father. I can't know them."

His father moved in close, put his claw on Peter's shoulder, and said, "Now you listen to me, and you listen hard. You don't know every damn thing. There are things in this world that you have to do because you have to do them. Period. End. No more. You get in there and do what you have to do, or I'll do what I have to do."

Peter looked away.

"No son of mine is going to throw away his life away over some low class skirt. No son of mine is going to talk to me like that and get away with it. You get in there and do what you have to do, or I have no son."

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Peter felt nothing but a gaping sadness, followed by a rush of far-away fury. His heart pounded his resolve. "Get out of my way."

"Did you hear me? Get inside!"

The back of Peter's fist hit hard across his father's jaw. His other fist got him on the eye. His father went down to the gravel.

"Then you have no son, which is about right. You've never been a father to me. You're a bully and a coward. You go to hell!"

Peter lifted his gaze from the horrid image of his father hurt on the ground. He walked away and forced himself to keep his eyes forward.

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Dawn whispered the sky gray above Boret's brick alleys, painting the shadows between distant dim lanterns with hollow colors. Estus ran at a steady, comfortable pace, breathing deep and even, driving his feet in a steady cadence of echoes between mounds of shoveled snow. Few souls were stirring. There was a coffee shop, always open early, with a cashier who sat on a tall chair of dark wood and light brown canvas behind his till, reading. Estus never stopped. He had become so familiar with the man as a landmark, and had passed so many times without a greeting or nod, that it felt wrong to break the veil of their morning routine.

He turned the corner and met the brisk drive of the wind cutting across him. The streets were wider here, with large cobblestones and medians filled with spruce trees and snow. He ran through a deserted intersection to a slanting trail of neat, tiny homes to the Mandela parkway and its wide brick promenades on either side of the river. Fog was waking from its night cover and lifting off of the water where it hung as a canopy cloud over the river walk.

Estus, breathing heavy, but not hard, knelt to fill his canteen with forest fresh water. He rose, swung the canteen to his back and tied the narrow wrap around it to keep it steady for his run back.

This was only his third day of running the dawn, as Kendrick had called it, but already he could feel the energy of his body rising like a chorus to the score of his mind. Here, amid vigilant seagulls and guardian cats, running across the empty bricks, keeping pace with the hearty winter river, it was hard not to feel his mind beckoning the magical state as Kendrick had showed him last night. It closed like a door against the noise of his mind, leaving him in its sacred quiet. He followed the river toward the bridge at the piazza,

but turned into a small alley that took him to the back door of Madam Collins' boarding house.

The sky was growing bright and clear, but the lobby was still swathed in the dim light of low glowing lanterns. He took the crackling steps quickly to his floor and its narrow hall, rattled the loose doorknob with his key and pushed open the door with its familiar squeak. Inside, he stretched forward, resting his hands on his shins, then poured himself a drink of river water.

He sat at the tiny desk and rested, keeping the magical state clear and refusing to allow the random churn of the mind to cloud him. Now he let a smile rise from his lips, and he felt the glow of deep joy and appreciation. He held his body still, taking long, even breaths. He raised his arm and called the heat inside him through his right arm and into his hand where it burned like a spice on his fingers. He touched the candle wick and brought it to flame, and as it danced in the dust beam of the morning, Estus let loose his mind, felt his hunger, yawned, stood, and began undressing for another chilly rag bath in the basin.

The two loud raps on the door came unexpected. Captain Grant Fletcher of the *Autarkic Maiden* opened the desk drawer and lowered into it one of Captain Gareth's whiskey flasks from which he had been drinking. He closed the drawer.

"Enter."

Miggs opened the door to the captain's quarters. "Land spotted, sir. Right on time. We should be to port before noon."

"Thank you. Dismissed."

"Captain. May I speak with you? I would like to know our plans."

"You know what you need to know."

"Grant, there's a lot of talk. They're concerned that there may be trouble for them in Korolem. We're still holding the Legion officers below. What does that mean? Are they prisoners? Are we with the rebellion?"

"I told you before. They stay below until we're docked and the crew is on shore. They're safe and comfortable, and I don't want any trouble. Let it go."

Miggs looked up at Fletcher. His eyes narrowed for just a second and he put on what Fletcher recognized as an awkward attempt to hide his disdain. "Sir, if I may speak freely." He continued without

being invited. "Whatever Captain Gareth did, or why, should not be a reflection on the crew. You were not in command at the time of the incident, and to continue to act as though we are enemies with Legion soldiers is causing grave discontent among the crew."

"They have no cause for discontent. They were following orders, and as long as all of my crew does that, there will be no trouble. Do you understand me?"

"I'm just saying that the circumstances are not clear. There's no way they could consider your field commission valid until we were well into open water. The legalities are vague at best, and at most there would be a disciplinary hearing."

"The legalities are not your concern."

"We need to consider..."

"If you say one more word I'm going to relieve you of your position. Now get out."

The first officer's eyes betrayed his simplistic and eager avarice. After the door closed Fletcher opened the drawer once again. With a heavy hand he pulled out the worn leather-covered flask, slowly unscrewed the cap, and took more of the hot liquor. For days he had mulled his arrival in Korolem, and in all that turbulent time had found no way that he could return other than as the criminal he had become. He waited until the comfort of his woody cocoon gave way to a prickly restlessness driving him to his feet with the thin promise that he could salvage such honor as was left to him. There is always a way, he would say, with that twinkle of knowing under those damned bushy brows.

He pushed himself to motion, hurrying from the question of whether accepting his fate was being very strong or very weak. He rode the inevitable as the *Maiden* rode the waters, drawn toward the only path that was visible within tunnel of tightening time.

He opened the door and stepped into the tireless frigid wind. All week they had been riding the cold current from the north. Last night when they finally met the southern winds the crew enjoyed a balmy and clear evening, but their tack toward land brought the brigantine back into the winter air trapped north of the trade stream.

The Gaelon coast rested purple on the distant horizon under a cloudless sky. Fletcher felt the giddy restlessness of the crew. He heard the lift in their voices as they ran the steering directives from Miggs. He still found it difficult to stand back and let the drills run without him. He stood at the rail on the stern platform and let them see him silent and proud as they drove to land. For the next several

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minutes, with the wind driving at his back, Grant Fletcher fought against being overcome with a ragged, raging impatience.

He allowed himself to be eased by admiring that the captain's actions, up to his final end, had been entirely as he had commanded and wished them to be. There could be no greater end for a man like Captain Lennel Gareth than to return into the arms of their Mother Sea. Even though his own end felt murky and sour, Fletcher rode the pitching deck proudly, carrying the ship in the best way he could think of to honor her lost Captain: with a keel full of profit and hearty sails full of the wind's steady blast.

Land approached and became an outline. The outline became a swath of texture beneath the open sky. As the hull broke the sea into a steady spray of salty mist, the texture deepened and bloomed into color, and finally began to take the shape of home.

His eyes scanned for his first officer, but he was not on deck. Fletcher felt a twist in his belly, but kept his arms crossed and watched. Moments passed. The Korolem coast grew. Carson jumped up from the rear hatch. He ran, stopped, saluted. "Sir, the first officer has a situation below that requires your attention."

"What situation?"

"I'm not sure, sir."

"Send him up."

"He said to tell you it was most urgent."

Captain Fletcher's head snapped to look at the young ensign. Captain Gareth would have boxed his ears for failing to respond to a simple and direct order, and Fletcher had never had that sort of trouble as first officer. The moment passed, and he had to let it go. He did not want to have to start negotiating his orders. "Inspect for docking readiness."

"We're all in shape, sir."

This time he turned and glared at the young man, ready to grab hold and drag him if necessary, but Carson said, "Yes sir. I'll give them another rundown."

Fletcher made a circle around the deck among the crew. There was something in them, a restlessness of some kind. They were too tight, too particularly focused on their tasks whenever he stepped near. He left them and went below.

Miggs was waiting for him when he got to the bottom of the steep stairs.

"What is it?"

"You need to see this."

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"I said what is it?"

"I'm not sure exactly."

"When you know exactly, come up and tell me." He started back up the stairs. Miggs put his hand on the Captain's arm.

"I think it belonged to Captain Gareth. I think it's important."

"Damn it, man. What is it? Papers? A dog? Does it smell?"

"I think it's a weapon of some kind. I think he meant to pass it to the rebels in Gelst, and it looks dangerous. I'm afraid of what it might do when we get near the shore. Please hurry, sir. There's not much time."

The hairs on his back bristled, but he followed Miggs. As soon as he stepped through the bulkhead the Legion soldiers knocked him down, grabbed his arms and legs, and muffled his mouth as they carried him down to the holding cell and threw him in.

Miggs quoted from the third book of the sea. "And behold, when the master was lost the crew looked to the Lord, and a great fire lit the way. Thus said the First Sailor, Benok our beloved."

The Legionnaires stood behind Miggs as he said, "With due respect, sir. Your rudder has led you into the dark. Grant Fletcher, I hold you under arrest for kidnapping, smuggling, and sedition against the Church. When we reach shore you will be turned over to the Teshon authorities."

Fletcher's response held the sodden heaviness of whiskey-fed fury. "You're in mutiny, mister. I'll have your brand for this you son of a bitch."

"I'm sorry, Grant. I didn't want it to come to this."

Fletcher smiled. "Don't spoil this moment with counterfeit compassion, Scott. You played your hand, and you'll lose it over this because you made a very serious mistake."

"And what's that?"

"You should have killed me when you had the chance."

---

In the fourth row, sitting center stage and slumped into her new purple wool jacket, Adrian sat with her eyes closed, listening to the hollow echoes of the troupe's final preparations for tonight's premiere.

"Where's my mustache?" A woman's voice called out from backstage.

Two voices somewhere were practicing a scene: "I think he wrote her a love letter." "Well, she is a keen looker, Deacon, with a

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lovely..." "But! That's my point." "Smile, I was going to say, though I won't contradict you, sir." "What?" "She has a nice smile and such." "It's not her smile, you witless wag, but her eyes." "Dreamy, really. A kind of a sparkle!" "Bah! The letter was for her." "Yes?" "Bah!"

They were drowned out by a trio of low voices all calling out in a unison of wordless warnings. Something made a loud scraping noise. Adrian opened her eyes as the tavern sign slipped off of its mount and fell with a harsh crack onto the hardwood stage.

"Is it busted?"

"It's cracked. Split the corner."

"Props! Damn it, we need a new sign. Oh my!"

"The sign is fine." The last voice, calm and confident, belonged to Becker Dodd, still wearing his work pants and pullover shirt. "When this plays in Boret they'll work all week to get the corner cracked just right. Authentic to the original. It will be an icon of the play. Lucky thing, really. Besides, it's a tavern sign, not your daughter's reputation. It's supposed to be a little knocked up."

"Becker!" A flustered woman rushed to him. He stopped and answered her. "Tony has your mustache. He's just adding a bit more gray." Then he added, before she could ask. "In the basement." She huffed and spun off stage.

Becker looked out and his eyes fell on Adrian. A look of concern played on his face, but he soon replaced it with a large grin, as if coaching Adrian to smile. She didn't. His expression softened, and he hurried down the side stairs and came over to sit next to her.

"It's always crazy like this before a show. Wild, yet formed, like a river full of rain, churning in a magical flux. Do you feel it? Like when you touch the source, but collective, shared. Both intimate and unknown at the same time. A sizzle, the shared knowing, the summoning of a bond between the players and the house. How are you doing, kid?"

She looked up at him, at his bright, strong face, that seemed so far away. "I miss everybody." His manner slowed a bit. He leaned in and put his arm around her shoulder and kissed her forehead. She sighed, and added, "Everybody's busy."

"Where's Hannah?"

"With Peter passing out fliers."

"Why didn't you go with them? That sounds like a lot more fun than watching the crew try to tear down the set."

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She shrugged. She didn't know how to express the feeling of being left out and left behind and in the way when they held hands and whispered giggles to each other.

Becker understood. "Too much mushy stuff. All that kissing."

"Yeah," she answered.

He stood and took her hand, pulling her to her feet and out to the aisle. "I just heard from a little bird that flew by the backstage window that Peter and Hannah are nearly back. I think you need to take them for a drink at the sweet shop." At the door to the lobby he knelt down in front of her and placed two large silver coins in her hand and closed her fingers over them.

"Can I watch, too?"

"Not yet. No magic. Not until tonight. Then you can help us watch all around in case there's any trouble."

"Okay. Do you want me to bring you something back?"

"No, I need to get ready. Curtain is in less than four hours, but eat an extra cookie for me. I'm a little hungry."

She walked through the lobby, which was filling up with bar counters and souvenir stands, and out the big doors. Outside, the day was bright and cold, with a steady wind. She looked around and saw them walking toward the theater, holding mittened hands.

Adrian hurried over to them to show off her money, but before she reached them a group of boys standing near the theater met them first. They were all wearing yellow armbands with two crossed swords.

"What's that, Peter?" One of them asked.

There were five of them, standing in her way. Adrian stopped behind them.

"We missed you at the sign-in this morning."

"Yeah, what happened?"

Peter answered, "Out of my way, Ken."

"What's that?" The boy reached out and grabbed the fliers that Hannah was holding. Adrian moved a little closer, her jaw tense.

"That's what I thought. Subversive propaganda. You're breaking the law, trade trash. Did she hex you, Pete?"

Peter said, "What are you doing here?"

"My first duty. Keeping this area clean of this ragged element."

Peter moved forward and grabbed the boy by his jacket. Two other's grabbed him, and one took hold of Hannah. Her eyes caught Adrian's, and Hannah shook her head no.

"You're under arrest, boy, and so is your godless snipe."

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Adrian's whole body tensed. Her fists clenched, and the coins dug into her soft flesh of her hand. Peter pushed and fought back. The crowd pushed past Adrian. Another boy grabbed Hannah. She shrieked. Adrian's world narrowed into a tunnel view, her mind filled with nothing but wild fury.

They scuffled, someone punched Peter. Hannah called back to Adrian, "Get Becker!" before someone slapped her face. But Adrian barely heard her. Her vision was shifted to the red, and time was slowing down. What she heard was the hum of the bees. They were flying past her, swarming from the warmth of their winter clusters onto the faces and hands of the five boys with their smug armbands.

Peter and Hannah backed out of the writhing skirmish of slapping and shrieking. Hannah rushed to her, but Adrian stood still, pushing her anger into the swarm. A cold blast of Becker's white canceling magic grew around the scene in front of her, and she had trouble keeping her focus on the bees. The swarm flew confused and began to scatter. Her anger pushed back, not only from someone hurting her friends, but carried by all of the left-over anger of missing her father and being lonely and left behind and lost in a strange land where people think they can be horrible and smack people. She felt the power flow through her, forcing the bees to sting ears, lips, hands, faces, commanded by the singular stream of her silent, tense fury that pushed through the white magic cloud, popping it like a thin balloon.

When the mean boys ran away, she let the magic go. The world came back into a simpler focus and she realized what she had done. "I'm sorry," she said.

"It's all right, Adrian. Let's get inside." Hannah led her and Peter to the big blue door.

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"How many?"

"Maybe twenty."

Bodie looked at the nine year old boy with the faded brown beret who had come running to the warehouse to report. He held back his angry response and forced himself to slow down. He put his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "Did you count them, or are you just guessing?"

"Well, I counted seven, but more came, on horses. It's a close guess. I'm pretty sure."

"Did they have any boxes, or crates of any kind?"

"No. But they all had sacks. And they went into the church."

"Okay. That was probably just another police patrol from the farms. Thomas, take your squad to the church and send back if you need any help to hold the point." He turned to the boy, "Good work, kid. Go back with him, tell him everything you saw. Richard!" Another man came over. "Run another sweep around the perimeter. Make sure they're not on the move and that the river road is still clear."

He walked down the middle aisle between the rows of stills that were converting Boret's monthly grain shipment into thousands of gallons of alcohol for the crates of whiskey bombs. They still held the South end of the bay, and the fighting had mostly fallen off in the past two days since they managed to burn down the Legion guild house and the mayor's office.

"Bodie!" Harold called from the front. "They're here. In the bay."

Bodie ran outside and climbed up the tall ladder to the roof. Someone handed him a short spyglass. Five large Legion ships clustered near the middle of the bay. Twelve battle boats swarmed among them taking on supplies. "They're going after the blockade," Bodie said.

The river was frozen solid for nearly a mile where their blockade had been built. Teams had worked all morning in the snow to reinforce the barges with hundreds of rope lines. Every tree within reach helped hold back the impossible weight of the frozen river ice.

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Bodie pulled the glass to his eye again, not to watch, but to allow himself another moment to adjust to the heavy mantle of history resting on their shoulders. This was the time. This season, their winter. Their river. He wanted to feel rage, but what he felt was more like a hollow chamber, a vacuum wanting to be filled with plans, steps, and resolve to keep everyone moving forward against the awful scene that haunted the bay.

He went back down the ladder, quickly but not hurried. A small group of men had come out to see what was going on. They followed Bodie back into the warehouse through the side door. Bodie walked to the middle of the floor and jumped onto a table. Faces turned to him. Conversations stopped.

“Five ships stand in the bay preparing a small fleet of attack boats. They will likely outnumber us twenty to one. Tonight we will know whether the resolve of liberty shall withstand the resolve of tyranny. The hour has come. Go home. Tell your men to pack for five days alone in the snow. Be with your women. Remember to bring plenty of warm socks, boots, a sturdy pair of gloves, and a good knife. And then return before dark with anyone who is ready for Gelst to be free.”

Bodie looked out into the eyes looking up at him. He saw the somber resolve of men dressed in simple clothes and dour determination. Farmers and store owners. Fathers whose children couldn't understand why they were away so many nights. Young men and their uncles. Unshaven and weary. The wind howled past the large wooden warehouse door.

“Whatever happens tonight, whether they manage to break through the ice dams or we hold them back we have already won, because we are acting as free men. The only real weapon they have against us is our own belief. They want us to believe that we are powerless against them. We most definitely are not. They want us to believe that we have to submit to their regulations, their taxes, and to live only as they decide to let us live. I will not. Not anymore.

“I believe that we will hold them tonight. I believe that when they look up and see hundreds of burning whiskey bombs raining from the sky, when they see their ships on fire and they jump into the icy river, our river, they will know what we know. Gelst does not belong to them.”

He drew his knife and held it in his fist, blade forward. “It has come to this. Tonight. Do not come back unless you are willing to do what good men should not be called upon to do, but which free men

must do if they are to remain men. Strike, in the moment of their doubt." He lowered his blade. "I have no doubt. I believe in us. I believe in every one of you. This is our town. This is our land. This is Hell to pay."

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Estus rolled up his tools in their canvas bundle and brushed the saw dust and shavings from his hands and clothes. He had been working all week with Kenneth laying floor slats in the third floor classrooms. He felt Kenneth's familiar pat on his shoulder. "Good work today, Estus. Are you still planning to come over tonight? Margaret managed to get some flour from the ration master. She's going to make dumplings, and I know Karen wants to finish your game of pick and sweep."

"I want to study a little, and spend some time in the Sanctum."

"Good man. Hey, Glen told me he wants me to start testing you. I think he wants us do some layout next week."

Estus lifted his tools and put the strap over his head to carry them. "That would be great. I'll be ready. I'll see you there in about an hour." He went back and forth down four flights of wide stone stairs to the sanctum. It was quiet. He went to the common room and set his tools on the floor next to a thick-upholstered chair, and went to the back hallway into one of the private lavatory rooms.

His back was tired, and his arms ached from reaching and pulling boards, and from swinging the heavy mallet to drive the nail setter all day. His other training was going well, and he was now able to summon and control basic energy. Kendrick had revealed that the next lesson would be auralism, keen hearing.

After washing up, stretching and doing his energy exercise, the stiffness in his muscles lessened. He felt sharper and not so tired. He walked down the empty stone hall toward the chapel between cherry wainscoting and paintings of Benok. He liked to make a show of praying. Usually he would clear his mind and practice a new chant or imaging exercise. This time when he stepped into the chapel he saw Ivy standing alone.

She was wearing a long green gown that brushed the floor. Her bell sleeves were embroidered with a gold filigree in a pattern resembling candle flames. She turned when he entered, revealing an immodest neckline accentuating a low-hanging emerald medallion, but his eyes went to her eyes, which were deep with sadness.

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He crossed the room to her, and her hands lifted into his. She smiled, a weak smile.

"What's troubling you, Ivy?" he asked.

"It's started, and now I must do as I promised. He has chosen destruction, and I am to be the destroyer. Estus, I am so sorry. I shouldn't say this to you, but it weighs on me so. But you have seen it, and maybe you can understand."

"Understand what, Ivy? What have I seen?"

"Antellem." There were tears in her eyes. "I don't want it to be this way. I pushed too hard. I thought I could frighten him, but he's mad. Or I am. I needed to see you. I needed to see you like I saw you in our city. I don't know what I could have done, then, so long ago. I shouldn't have come here, but I'm leaving soon. I wanted to see you, to tell somebody who could understand that it didn't have to be this way, and that I'm so very sorry."

Her eyes were haunted and pleading. He stepped close and let her fall into his arms, her delicate gown against his rough work clothes, her lithe form limp in his embrace.

"Step away from her, Estus."

He turned his head. Glen Dawson was in the doorway.

"You have been told, several times, to keep your place. Take him."

Ivy spun and put herself between Estus and the two Legion guards who charged into the room. "Don't," she told them. They stopped. "Out," she commanded. They hesitated, and started to obey, until Andor Tol-Tolin stepped inside the room.

"The lady is not well. I will tend to her. Take the man as you were told."

Ivy drew a long dagger from her sleeve. The first man went down with a deep cut on his shoulder. The other one stopped. "No," she said to Andor. She stepped toward the lanky elf. Andor was quickly surrounded by four men with long swords unsheathed. "He didn't know that I came to see him. This is between you and me, Andor. Leave the man out of it."

"Ivy, you sentimental hag, do you think I care what you say to him or where? He's a prize for a different game."

She stepped forward with her dagger, "Not him." Her voice wavered a tiny bit, "Not this one!"

Andor answered, "There are thirty more men in the hall, my dear Del, and I am sure you know how much easier this would all be for me if there were an unfortunate accident here. Step aside. I know

that your pretty gown is over seven hundred years old, and I would hate to see it be, well, rumped."

Ivy turned to Estus. "I'm sorry."

They dragged him to the floor.

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Hundreds of wagons, carriages, buggies, and walkers crowded in the road. Men stood on their driving seats to see what was going on. The evening traffic rush was stopped in the wide avenue that ran along the north wall of the Korolem Seminary University.

Kendrick walked to the front of the blockade, and in the darkening dusk stood shoulder to shoulder with other curious and impatient pedestrians watching the procession of carriages move through the grand front gate of the complex. They moved slowly, single file, down the wide road. Kendrick counted eighteen between the gate and the bend in the road that seemed able to provide an endless supply of Legion guild flags.

It was quite the show. The crowd watched, muttering angrily about the delay, but not loud enough to be overheard by the Legion soldiers who held their line with swords drawn and held at their sides. Kendrick walked behind the crowd until he came to the tall brick wall that enclosed the compound. As soon as he found a large wagon that hid him from view he became an invisible wisp and floated up into the sky.

Once he cleared the wall he saw the soldiers assembling in the large field of the divinity quad. He flew over them counted over thirty more transport carriages coming down the main road, and he saw hundreds more people on a dozen more roads all stopped in their evening commute by the military parade.

He rose and looked around the city. Becker's energy was easy to feel, and he followed it, flying through the chilly wind to the Bastion Theater. A crowd of patrons was growing, despite the calls of a local Legion police line ordering them to disperse. There were fifteen police and close to three hundred ticket-holders standing by not quite willing to press forward.

Becker was on the roof of the theater with Nathan Henderson and Dylan Del-Trevia. Becker looked up in greeting. A moment later Kendrick walked from the air onto the roof and became visible. Dylan said to him as he joined the circle, "Thank you for coming, Kendrick. It is a great relief having you with us tonight."

Kendrick nodded, and said, "What do you make of it, Dylan?"

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"It's brilliant, actually. We expected them to fight in Gelst and then use that position to move against Korolem. That would have given us some time to build up our merchant security force and control the pace of bringing Korolem into the conflict. But now they have the momentum and a secure command of our own Legion guild. They don't have to raise even one sword to make everyone think hard about joining any sort of organized defiance."

Nathan asked, "But don't they surrender Gelst? How can Boret make it through the winter if they can't move supplies up the river?"

"That's the gambit," Dylan said. "They need to diffuse this city with a show of force to buy them time to deal with Gelst. But they can't keep this army parked in Korolem all winter or Boret will starve."

Becker added, "Meanwhile they have ships in Gelst attacking the blockade."

Kendrick spoke up. "Those ships aren't there to open the blockade." Everyone looked at him. Dylan nodded. "Their job is to force the rebels to show their hand and use up their strength. They don't need to accomplish anything but keep them fighting in the cold, wear them down, and break their spirit. Then the army can move in and finish the job while Korolem is still feeling the sting of their occupation. By the time they return in the spring there won't be many people left willing to stand up and take the beating that Andor's army is going to give to Gelst."

Dylan added, "Then it's just a matter of attrition to see who can hold out longer. Teshon military with near unlimited funding and the support of the church and guilds, or renegade revolutionaries working as a criminal class. It's brilliant."

"So what do we do, then?" Asked Nathan.

Dylan answered, "It's all about perception. We have the entire merchant fleet, and the life of Korolem depends on it. Half of the trades are ready to stand up and fight, but if the Teshon Legion appears overwhelming and unchallengeable we will be on our own, and there is no way that we can win without the support of our city. However, if we can scratch them early and make them bleed, some of the Korolem guilds, and maybe even a few from our Legion guild, will have enough of a reason to break away and join Gelst as protectors of Gaelon and our freedom. They couldn't last long fighting both in the North and in the South with our merchant fleet controlling the entire coastline. To win, all we have to do is show up

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to the fight. It all depends on whether Korolem can find the need and the will to stand up against the Teshon army.”

They all fell silent. The wind had picked up, and the day was drawing to a close. They could hear the voices of the crowd below. Kendrick walked to the edge of the roof and looked down. The others joined him. The crowd had grown significantly, as had the police line. The local Legion troops were outnumbered at least thirty to one, but still managed to keep their line in place.

Kendrick smiled to Becker and stepped off of the roof. He flew to the rear of the crowd and immediately started bellowing, “Come on! Let’s go see the show! They can’t do this!” He moved to the front of the line and broke through. “You!” He pointed to the nearest Korolem Legionnaire as he kept walking. “Step aside! We’re coming in.” The young man grabbed Kendrick by the shoulders and pushed him back, and in the next second had his sword drawn and pointed at Kendrick, who ignored him and walked around him in a wide circle.

Another guard stepped forward to Kendrick, but he broke into a run and beat them to the large blue awning where he turned and shouted to the spectators, waving them in, “Come on! You don’t want to miss this. They can’t grab us all.” When the guards got close to him Kendrick swung his left fist in a wide circle. They ducked back, grabbed him by the collar, and pulled him against the building. He turned his head and cried out, “What are you waiting for? I got these two!” He saw two more men step forward and then run around the guards. One made it inside and the other was caught. It became a game. Three more ran forward. Guards gave chase and the crowd pressed in closer as they left their posts. It was enough to break it open. Guards found themselves surrounded. Kendrick ignored the taunts and insults of the guards on him who seemed to relish rough handling the one-armed excommunicated troublemaker. Scuffles were breaking out all over, and anyone not fighting was ducking into the Bastion Theater.

As he was being dragged to the prison wagon, he pushed back and yelled out to the crowd one word, over and over, each syllable punctuated as its own battle cry, “Liberty! Liberty! Liberty!” The chant took hold and they added a clap in the pause between words. Lib-Er-Ty-Clap. Lib-Er-Ty-Clap.

Kendrick let himself be pushed into the prison wagon while the chant droned on and on. He sat on the bench and waited, watching the remaining fights. Soon the guards retreated and the plaza in

front of the theater belonged to the crowd. In a few minutes Kendrick was able to step out of the wagon. Friendly hands untied him and patted him on the back.

He followed the crowd into the lobby that was alive with the rumbling echoes of excited conversations, and under the light of five hundred flickering candles, he waited with the others for the majestic theater doors to open.

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Five hundred men sat in the dusk-lit valley south of the horseshoe bend that led to their blockade, far enough away to give the invaders plenty of trouble before they reached their target, but still close enough to the defenses and supplies that he had set up. For six days no shipments had been allowed, and now with their ice dam none were possible. Supplies were building up in the bay, most of them confiscated by the rebels. There were stores of food and weapons hidden in every cellar, attic, and barn along the valley, as well as in dozens of crates hidden along the river road.

They had marched in the late afternoon, quickly, afraid that they were only minutes ahead. They had rushed to take their positions in the last light of the day, and there they waited in four units. The first team would strike then fall back to set up a new position at the rear, rolling back as needed toward their major defenses at the blockade.

Minutes turned to hours as the cold black dirt sucked at their strength as they nestled hidden on the ground, ready, watching. They would wait all night if necessary. Days if it came to that. This was their valley.

Before the final light had drained from the sky they all saw the bright light shifting eerily through the trees. Wizard light. Bright white, sweeping through the forest down river.

"Stay still!" Bodie called out. The men were hidden under leaves and twigs, lying beneath burlap cloaks, but such light, stronger than daylight, could both reveal and blind them.

The boat slid forward against the current. The light ran shadows across Bodie's face. He held still for another moment, then cried out "Fire!"

Amid the echo of his voice ringing in the valley, the forest came alive with activity. Men were up, lighting and hurling whiskey bombs from their launching sticks. Each man carried at least ten. In seconds the lead ship was covered in burning alcohol, and soon had taken fire. The white light dimmed and was replaced with bright

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orange and red flames. Legionnaires leaped into the icy water. Another boat followed and drove to the bank. The first boat had drawn their fire, but was mostly empty.

"That one!" he called out, running among the men, drawing their attention to the second Legion boat full of soldiers with steel drawn. A line of Legion boats followed, and downriver another boat drove to the bank.

His aim was true. Bodie's first whiskey bomb landed and broke in the middle of the bow platform. Men scattered. Twenty more pottery casks broke and spread burning fire through the boat. The Legionnaires returned fire, arrows, but most landed on the ground or sunk into trees.

"Back!" he called. His men followed him up the slope to the river road. He didn't have time to count. "Call out!" he commanded.

A few shouts of "Ho!" returned.

"Fall back! Next position!" Men filled the road, moving quickly to set their next position. Scores of men ran past him into the darkness up the river road. Stragglers struggled up the hill, some hurt. Legion soldiers charged behind them.

"Fire the road!"

Bodie lit another wick and threw the bomb onto the ground in front of him. Then another as a third flew past him into the fiery puddle. Bodie quickly lobbed two more, filling the road with a wide puddle of fire. Trees started to burn. Arrows shot from the darkness on the other side the fire. First one, then dozens. The men scattered.

Bodie led his small crew down the road to a marker, a fallen limb propped onto a spruce tree. He knelt, threw open the dirt-covered lid and started tossing out rough bows and homemade arrows.

Through the dark trees he saw light from another Legion boat moving ahead. The next wave unleashed their attack, and it too was soon engulfed in tall flames.

He got the men near him positioned in the trees off the road. Quickly a dozen Legionnaires broke through the fire. Bodie shot first. The other men fired and scurried away through the woods as they had been trained.

Bodie drew his knife and ran into the road. He thrust and stabbed through the heavy red fabric of one, then found the neck of another. One young man turned and faced Bodie, his eyes panicked. The boy struggled to set his arrow with shaking hands. Bodie knocked his hands away and pushed his knife into the boy's side.

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He shrieked, crumpled, and cried, and Bodie ducked into the woods before they could grab him.

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Becker came down the stairs from the roof into the middle of the excited cast. He pulled them to a circle backstage and spoke to them.

"They're in the house. Gather 'round. Quiet now. Your audience is coming in. In about an hour we are going to be over run with an army of Teshon Legion soldiers. They are coming to shut down the play, to arrest all of us, and probably to arrest the house. But we are sold out, and many people have risked arrest if not their very lives by being here, and so the show will play. Do not stop if you see a commotion. Do not break dialog, even if they charge the stage. Even if they stick me through, got that? Just keep going. Stay in character. Improvise if you have to, but keep the show going."

A voice from the actors called out, "Sir!" Maxwell Keeler, a rotund man with a sharp mustache, stepped forward and orated proudly, "You are addressing professional actors. You have said nothing more than there is a performance tonight."

Becker smiled, "There you go. Curtain in fifteen."

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Estus rode alone in the cold empty cabin of the prisoner coach. There were no windows in the thick wood walls, and the only light was a dim slit where the back doors rattled behind their heavy lock and let in what little light was left in the day. His hands were bound, and a rag had been tied across his mouth between his teeth. He sat near the back doors where there was meager hope of evading the leftover stink of unwashed bodies, urine, vomit, and worse.

He expected a short ride across the piazza to the governor's residence, but the trip had already lasted at least an hour. The wagon bounced viciously over the snow-covered trail. Estus lurched forward and kept his head from cracking against the wall again. He caught a whiff of forest, and the road was rough and ill kept, so they had certainly left the city.

The rattle and its chorus of squeaks droned on and on while his thoughts spun from fury to dread and into a strange bewilderment. It had never really occurred to him that there could be any consequence for being the way he was. Even the spankings he got as a child for playing in the old ruins had always felt more like a failing on his father's part than his own. In seminary, when he saw his questions beginning to anger a teacher or a fellow initiate, it was

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usually out of a sense of futility, or even pity, that he retreated from his point. He had never felt the sense of discomfort or fear that seemed to be expected from him.

Even when he threw the communion chalice at Jorel, it never occurred to him that there could really be any sort of retribution for speaking such an obvious and self-evident truth. A bitterness hung over him for all the prayers he had been called upon to recite in front of Glen, and for how careful he had been, and for all the hours that he had wasted reading about Benok the first carpenter and how he wandered the woods naming the trees and studying their leaves. One thought sustained him, and that was the fact that he finally knew that his private sacrilege in the foothills of Kelebor used to be called the Kaylish Bath, and that he had shared the same space and sat on the same benches as men whose magic was practiced unfettered and unashamed. He knew of the city of Antellem, and knew its glory.

The fact that he was gagged and tied in the empty frigid stink of an old convict coach didn't seem to matter much, and yet the ache in his back and the cramp of his leg were quite real.

Finally the pace began to slow, and he heard new voices. Estus considered, for only a brief moment, trying to make a run for the woods, but when the doors opened three big men were inside and on him before he could even get his feet under him. They pushed him down and tied a black hood over his head. He didn't resist. Instead, he listened carefully as they guided him down the narrow steps to the ground. The hood was thick, but he could tell that there were two torches being carried in front of him. There was a man on each side, holding his arms, guiding and yanking him along through ankle-deep snow.

He stumbled on a stone step. The light changed, and he heard echoes, suggesting he was in a large room. No one said anything. He was led to a chair. Thick, disinterested hands unfastened the wrist strap, pulled the hood off, and removed the gag, leaving Estus in the bliss of being able to flex his shoulders and rub his arms as his escort left the room. He saw only a glimpse of endless forest before the ten-foot tall oak doors crashed closed. The sound of a heavy bolt being pulled across them left a rumble of dying echoes in the massive chamber.

He was sitting on a small wooden chair in the middle of the empty wooden floor. In front of him was a long table on which stood four tall candelabras, each burning a forest of tall black candles.

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There were eight men between the table and a wide fireplace that offered meager warmth. Baron sat at the far end, closest to the outside door. He was looking at Estus, but did not meet his eyes. His expression was dour and solemn. Estus saw Glen Dawson, who was wearing his usual expression of contempt with which Estus had become quite familiar. None of the other faces were known to him.

He looked quickly around the room. To his left were the massive doors through which they had brought him in. There was a small door near the table on the wall opposite the entrance. A row of high arched windows ran along the wall behind the table, each one filled with a wide diamond shaped lattice of iron bars. Behind him was an empty wall and a matching set of windows.

"Estus Arrenkyle." The voice belonged to a young man standing near the center of the table, reading from a paper.

Estus looked at him.

The man looked up, waiting. Estus stared unblinking at the man's right eye.

He tried again. "Are you Estus Arrenkyle?"

Estus almost laughed at the utter absurdity of the perfunctory and pointless question. He leaned forward and tried to stretch his shoulders, which were aching from his arms being pulled back behind him. He rubbed his wrists.

The man repeated. "Sir, are you Estus Arrenkyle?"

Baron was looking away. The entire event felt strangely unreal. The only thing that had even a hint of consequence was the ache in his wrists. He knew where he was and what was happening, but he couldn't quite reconcile it with any sort of recognizable reality.

Again the young man called out. "Sir! You must answer. Is your name Estus Arrenkyle?"

Estus answered, "What do you want, boy?"

Baron's fist slammed on the table. He locked eyes with Estus for just a moment and then looked away. Estus wanted to feel betrayed and angry, but he knew that this led back to Andor.

"So am I the bait, or the barter?"

Baron looked at him, finally. A long moment passed. Baron spoke quietly, yet his voice filled the large room. "It was suggested to me that I send the Teshon Battalion to Gelst to burn down the houses of resistance fighters. I sent them to Korolem instead."

"And I..."

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"You are here to answer for your own actions. Yes. A choice was given to me, and I chose not to be bound at my every step. Your actions are yours to face, not mine to cover up."

In the awkward silence that followed, the young man started over. "Sir, are you Estus Arrenkyle?"

Baron turned away. Estus laughed. "How long can we keep this going?" He looked at Baron and said, "Is he one of yours?" His anger and tension broke into a short burst of laughter, through which he asked, "And what's your name, boy?"

The young man looked at the Governor, who was still turned away, then back to Estus. With a bemused sort of sincerity he answered, "Henry."

Estus laughed even harder and said, "Henry, you're an idiot."

Henry finally won some sort of internal bureaucratic struggle and continued with what he must have felt to be an appropriate compromise. "Sir, who we believe in sincerity to be Estus Arrenkyle, you stand on this day accused of heresy, guild insubordination, cavorting inappropriately with a member of the ancient race, trespass upon a forbidden sacrilege, numerous acts of blasphemy and irreverence, failure to pay guild dues, ravishment of a Holy Sister, vandalism of church property, performing substantial repairs of a major structure without proper license, and the practice of dark magic. If you are found guilty of these charges by this assembled tribunal you shall be expelled from your guild and cast from the church."

He felt the magical state grow in him as he sat quietly listening to the charges. He let the energy of his rising anger channel into the summoning, much like the energy from his running. He felt his breath quicken, even as his mind drew calm. The room sounded muffled. Time seemed to teeter and then inch forward. His vision was filled with the flames of the tall black candles of the nearest candelabra.

When the young man spoke again it sounded distant, tinny, and irrelevant.

"How do you answer these charges?"

Estus pulled himself back to the room, but he could feel magic rolling inside him like billowing steam from a ready kettle.

"Yes, I kissed Mirella Jaynes, but ravishment is a bit of a stretch. It sounds like she could use a good ravishment from, how did you put it, a member of the ancient race. As for my kissing Ivy Del-Gesius, that's none of your god damned business. Let's see, by

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vandalism of church property I can only assume you mean the glass cup in Kelebor. I would be happy to replace the trinket. As for the sacrilege, I don't know if you mean the small ruin outside Kelebor or the ancient city of Antellem. Guild dues are trivial and petty, and what was the other about repairs? Well, again, that's nonsense, so it seems that mostly we are here because I am seeking to reclaim the birthright of every human, the soul that has been strained and wrung from every last one of you, magic, though there is nothing dark about it."

The men murmured. One spat out in an angry grunt, "Heresy!"

Henry continued, "Do you confess to visiting with Kendrick, the evil sorcerer?"

Before he could answer, Estus caught a quick glance between Baron and another man, who consulted with the others, "We must consider the possibility that this man has been hexed by the evil one. We must be cautious." The man turned to Estus and gave him a very pointed glare.

Here Estus laughed, hard. The idea that he was the one lost in a fog of lies was too much to contain. He realized the futility of trying to reach them. They were the epitome of establishment, here only to abolish the threat to their order. There was no reaching them, no defense that he could give. He had been given his cue, his only way out. He could condemn Kendrick, claim bewitchment, beg for their mercy, and submit to any sort of treatment or punishment they chose to administer. This was the best that Baron could do, and it was too much.

Estus looked at his brother, thankful, and at peace with the final parting of ways that must now take place between them. In his way, Baron was also standing up to Andor and to the establishment. Amid war, political pressure, and even his brother's clear and unashamed guilt, Baron still had found a way to save his brother yet again.

Estus looked at him, and felt a rush of pride, thankfulness, and a deep peace. He knew that he could not take Baron's offer, and he hoped that Baron would be able to forgive him. It seemed that Baron understood both Estus's appreciation and his resolve, and for the first time in Baron's weary, angry eyes, Estus felt that he could see a hint of respect. Baron's posture eased, and he smiled a tiny smile that spoke to Estus as clearly as if he had shouted it: Go ahead. You're going to anyway.

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He watched the flames and drew the channel of energy through him. It pulsed, beckoning the flames. He felt it flowing through him like a wave, like from his fingers during his practicing, but more pure, more alive. One paper, then another took to flame on the table. He felt the power surge through him, like a dammed river held in place by the jumble of uncertainty. Then all doubt fell away and the table was covered with burning paper. They stood back, some papers dropped to the floor. Voices called out. The table began to burn. Estus jumped to his feet, grabbed hold of the back of the chair, and spun one full circle and let go. It sailed better than he could have hoped, to the middle of the table where it crashed, dumping the candelabra on its side and sending burning candles falling.

He ran to the back of the room and leaped to the window, grabbing hold of the iron bars and pulling himself up. He stood with his feet on the sill and his head brushing the arch. He saw men patrolling outside, beginning to react to the commotion. He looked over his shoulder. The big doors were opening. The table had been thrown over, and two of the men were running toward him. He turned his attention to the bars. They were fixed solid in the stone.

The magic burned through him, pure and deep, bright and plentiful. A surge of joy filled him from knowing that the strength of the world's greatest mountain was only a tiny sliver of the deep power of the world. He was connected, not with a tiny flutter or a summoning or a channel. Here was the source, in him, magic alive, infinite power drawing through him. It was pure, bright, and wanted to slip away from him. Only the habit of his daily practice let him hold it amid his wonderment of its force and beauty. Time seemed to crawl. He felt the energy moving in front of his hand like a thick cushion of air. The rods trembled and then buckled in the wave of his spell. A stone split, then another crumbled in a slow-motion spray of debris. He pushed forward, feeling his shoulder, his arm, his wrist all tense. When his hand touched the iron, he felt the metal fight and then give way like rods of wood held by cake icing. As the grate flew away the spell broke, and Estus heard his voice finish a bellowing, wordless shout. As hands reached for him he ducked through the arch jumped down to the dark muffled snow and in ten quick steps was into the woods.

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Hannah led Peter by the hand through the wide hallway on the second floor. Their footsteps were lost amid the curtains and the deep patterned carpet, and theirs were the only shadows cast by the candle sconces that were placed high along the curved wall between the archways leading to the balcony boxes.

She was wearing a full-length red gown with a white velvet shoulder wrap. Peter was wearing one of her father's old tuxedos. She felt his eyes on her, felt the tender eagerness in the hand that held hers. Her hair was up, and she felt a cool draft on her bare neck. She turned her brown eyes to him and saw his beautiful smile. When they reached the last doorway he pulled back the indigo velour curtain and she stepped through to the small arrangement of four padded armchairs in their balcony box closest to the stage.

She paused and tugged on his hand. He turned. She blinked, and in a quick second they were locked in a kiss. His hands were on her bare shoulders pushing her against the wall. Her hands were on his back under his jacket. She hungered for the taste of him, needed him close ever since the skirmish out front. His hands moved from her shoulders, to her cheeks, to the soft skin below her neck until his fingers were dancing across the low neckline of her dress. She pulled him closer. His hand brushed across the front of her dress, and the light touch of his palm sent her mind blank and caused her breath to catch in his mouth. His touch became more firm, more determined, and when his lips migrated from her mouth to the side of her neck, Hannah opened here eyes to see a startled Captain Gareth lowering the curtain back into place.

"Are you sure this is the one?" came his voice from the hallway.

"This is it." Adrian pulled the curtain back to go in, saw them, and said, "Come on you two. Everybody's coming in."

Peter stood back. They poised themselves and took their seats in the rear off their little balcony. Captain Gareth had a tuxedo with a satin collar and a little gold chrysanthemums as a boutonniere. Adrian was wearing a yellow colored satin blouse, a black pleated skirt, and a large yellow hibiscus in her hair. As the captain passed

them to help Adrian to her seat, Hannah and Peter shared a guilty glance full of eager smiles and barely contained composure.

The captain turned in his chair and told them, "There were a few guards, but the crowd outside just pushed past them. Not a bad start."

"When? What happened?" Hannah asked.

"Just now. A couple minutes ago. Kendrick went down and stirred them all up. Here they come."

Becker and Nathan were walking up the two aisles to the large doors. When they opened, Hannah heard a cheer rise up from the lobby, and people hurried in and started finding their seats.

Soon the auditorium was filled with the thunderous rumble of excited voices. Hannah leaned against the railing, flush with a clatter of restless emotions, like a symphony warming up. Laughter pealed through the clamor below. Excited voices called out to each other. It was a triumph. Hannah turned to Peter and grabbed his arm. The words she found seemed like the only way to express everything she was feeling. "Opening night."

Adrian spun in her chair, suddenly alert and startled. "More people are coming!"

Hannah wasn't as quick as Adrian, but she closed her eyes and cleared her mind. Like a sudden memory of a lost dream, or the flash of a new idea, she saw men marching in the street from the North end of the city.

Hannah leaned forward and said, "We just have to be watchful. Stay with the Captain. It will be okay."

Adrian didn't seem convinced, but a spotlight on the corner of the stage pulled her attention back to the front. One of the actors stepped in front of the stage curtain with an easel and large placard with the name of the play. "The Alphabet Guild, starring Susan Henderson and Becker Dodd." The applause was raucous and filled with cheers and whistles, which were as much a celebration of their own triumph as it was appreciation for the show. Soon the seats were filled. Stragglers rushed in. All attention was forward.

A stage hand stepped silently into their box, and along with others around the theater took a rope from the wall and began pulling it to raise one of the eight hanging chandeliers to the ceiling. As the light grew dim the rumble of voices eased, Peter put his arm behind Hannah and rubbed his fingers softly up and down the back of her neck. Her breath quickened, and as her eyes began to melt

closed she forced herself through sheer will not to purr, sigh, or tumble over the rail.

The rustle and thrum of the crowd ebbed into a soft murmur. The house grew dark. The hush deepened, but when the curtain rose silence fell complete. Instead of wearing the red dress, as she had done in all the rehearsals, Susan Henderson stood nude in the middle of the stage with her arms and face lifted upward.

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Kendrick watched with the rest of the cast just off stage left. As the curtain rose, bright light raced across the floor to her feet, her bare legs, and then painted her entire body a bright blush of radiant white.

Max Keeler was seated stage right, behind a large canvas, painting Artemus, a senior of the painter's guild.

"Arty, teach me to paint!" She held her pose.

"You must stop talking like that, Sophia," he told her. "You'll get me in trouble. Again! It's a good thing my wife caught you in my bed instead of in my paints. There could have been real trouble." The audience offered a tentative titter.

"I'll bet you let her handle your gear."

"Well, not anymore. She cut me off like a sinners right arm." The audience chuckled, warming up.

"I'll let you paint me."

"I am painting you."

"No," she broke her pose and walked over to him and, pointing to her body, and said, "I'll let you paint me."

He grinned and slowly put his brush forward, then pulled it back with a show of forced determination. He reached out again with a lecherous twinkle, and pulled back again, working the crowd. He circled his heart, warding off his temptation, and when his hand came around he smacked his face with the brush, leaving a big red mark on his cheek and drawing another round of laughter from the audience.

Sophia grabbed the brush, put her foot onto his knee and painted a stripe from her ankle to her calf, and because she had more canvas to work with, she dipped the brush again and continued up her thigh, hip, side, and up the front of her breast. She reached the brush forward again and asked, "What color will I get if I mix this with yellow?"

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"No!" he cried out. "I cannot divulge the sacred wisdom of pigments and patterns." His speech slowed as he ran his hand along her leg. "Shadows and," he added a gulp, "skin tones."

A knock on the stage door rattled the painter, causing him to knock over his canvas.

"Who is it?" Sophia cried out.

Artemus lumbered to the door. Sophia picked up another brush with green paint and asked, "Is he green?" The audience roared.

When he opened the door, Becker Dodd stepped in to unanimous applause and whistles.

"It's Rexx Flynn the innkeeper. Master of the bed maker's guild."

"I'll bet he is!"

"Artemus! You must tell me! Who is this woman? Ravishing!"

"She's not ravishing anyone yet, but give her a moment."

Sophia answered the painter, "Oh Artemus! Let's not be obvious. Flynn, was it?" She stepped toward him.

"And still is." He walked to her and took her hands. "And as long as we're not being obvious, how about you come over to my place and I'll share a couple of my secrets with you."

Artemus complained, "I never shared anything," they both looked at him. "Um, significant."

Sophia nodded and answered, "That's true. Unfortunately."

"So?" Artemus interrupted, "Flynn! What is it?"

Becker was looking at Sophia with appreciation, then ad libbed, "A nipple, I think it's called."

"No! I mean, what do you want?"

"I think I just answered that."

"I mean, why are you here?"

"Oh." He turned from Sophia and said, "There's talk that the guild masters are going to create a new guild."

"A guild? What is it?"

"It's a secret organization that hides knowledge and forces people to wear these ugly sashes, but you know that already."

Sophia started sneaking up behind them.

"No! You lascivious landlord. Tell me about the new guild!"

"The Alphabet Guild. I hear they're going to take over all forms of writing."

Sophia asked, "Writing? What's that? I want to learn!"

The men broke apart, looked embarrassed, and started praying.

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"Well then, I guess neither of you wants to help me wash this paint off very bad. I'll be in my room."

She stomped up the stairs to the platform amid resounding applause.

Susan came down the back stair offstage to her husband. "I can't believe I did that!"

"You are wonderful," Nathan told her as he pulled a robe around her shoulders.

Kendrick stepped back as other cast members came over to congratulate her. The army was nearly to the theater doors. Becker caught his eye but continued his line, "When they're through you probably won't even be allowed to sign your own paintings without a dozen lashes."

Artemus exclaimed, "Preposterous! Utterly absurd!"

Kendrick, well tuned to the vast interplay of energies, could feel the strain of history forcing through the veil of potential, crashing like a molten wave that rose to a high moment, a peak, razor thin, waiting for a feather to fall. With a small spell he could block the doors and keep the entire army and their wizards in the cold outside.

Becker felt it too, but Rexx Flynn kept the scene moving. "Absurd, Absolutely! Preposterous! Perfectly so. Egregious and extraordinary but..." He paused and walked across the stage to Artemus. On his way, he looked again to Kendrick, and Kendrick, sadly, nodded to him and kept the doors to the theater unlocked.

In the lobby, the heavy doors crashed open and angry voices carried into the theater.

"Let us not forget, they have the right to tell us what to think, how to think, and yes, whether to bother to think at all. They have the right because they carry the word of God hammered into the bright steel of their swords."

Artemus bolted to his feet. "But how can they imagine a new guild? Has Benok returned?" Suddenly the aisles were packed with dozens of Legion soldiers.

The crowd rose their voices, boos and howls. Becker stood at the edge of the stage and spoke loud above the commotion. "No! But we have finally found the proto-book, the Book Of Books, the First Book."

"Sally and Dandy?" Artemus guessed, naming the common book to teach boys and girls to read. The crowd laughed.

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"Come down, now!" The voice of the commander called from the aisle to the actors. Rexx Flynn walked away from him to the other side of the stage.

"No! The Book Of Words! Found!"

"A Dictionary?"

"This book is ancient. The beginning. The Word, and now only one guild shall be allowed the privilege of mastering the mystery of the written word."

The commander jumped to the stage. Rexx and Artemus walked away from him, as if pondering the issue. As the commander reached for them, Rexx spun and raised his hand, evading the Legionnaires grasp, making a dramatic gesture, and banging the intruder in the side of the face as he called out, "I have an idea."

The crowd let out a howl of laughter, until the man recovered and took a firm hold of Becker's arm. Becker turned, grabbed the man's wrist, twisted it, pushed, tilted the soldier off balance, and with the grace of his elven-taught martial skills, sent him stumbling into the paints.

Artemus looked down and called out, "A splendid idea, I'm sure." His voice nearly lost in the cheers from the audience. A scuffle broke out in the far aisle bringing several to their feet.

Paint-splattered and angry, the Legion commander called out, "In the name of his holy magistrate Jacob Tol-Westin, this unauthorized performance is canceled." After a brief moment, Artemus repeated, "A splendid idea, I'm sure. But how will all the other guilds..."

The commander drew his sword and held it at the actor's belly.

"How will the other guilds ever learn right from wrong? If we..." His words broke into a piercing cry as the Legion commander forced the sword deep. Becker tackled the Legion commander, held his head and twisted it, breaking the man's neck as they hit the ground.

Kendrick charged from behind the side curtain. With a wave of his hand the guards in the aisle nearest him all tumbled into a jumble within easy reach of the shocked and angry audience, who quickly pounced on them. Kendrick knelt and pulled out the sword. He placed his fingers into the wound. A quick unspoken spell numbed the pain, and as he begin drawing his attention into the wound, stitching together the abused flesh, the actor continued in a soft, stuttering voice, "If we ... are not ... allowed ... to read our own ... sacred words."

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More guards were climbing up on stage, and other actors were beside Maxwell, lifting him and helping Kendrick get him off the stage. They put him on a table. Kendrick pulled his bag from inside his shirt and laid it out over Maxwell's chest. He took out a white cloth and draped it over his hand. He phased his hand and arm just ahead of temporal alignment and reached in to the wound to clean it. Again he dug his finger into the wound and drew a piece of severed bowel closed by pinching the fabric of space between them and quickly cauterized the severed tissue. He held it as he took out a healing salve made from willow bark, cayenne pepper, and rosemary herb paste. He applied the salve inside and on the top of the skin, covered it with another white cloth, and told the person next to him to hold it tight until he could get back.

When he returned he found the stage filled with soldiers, actors, and audience. A Legionnaire grabbed him by the arm. Kendrick turned, slammed his head into the man's nose, twisted, broke free, and pushed his way to the edge of the stage where he called out, "For your children and this sacred land, let us rise and fight his treacherous hand."

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Shallow snow covered the mud and muck of dank wet leaves, hiding sharp thorny twigs in the thick brush and night shadows. Estus moved without aim, fast and low. Something had hurt the side of his hand. It hurt when there was enough attention for him to notice.

He could hear voices already following his trail. He forced himself to freeze, sitting in a ball with his back to a tree. His mind was not clear. He was filled with the panic of the fleeing animal that his body wanted to become. He stopped, listened, unsure what to do or think. Were they near?

He moved, suddenly aware of the sound of his thrashing through frozen leaves and twigs. He found himself sprinting around silhouette trees on sloping ground. His foot squished in wet soil. The next step was in a slick puddle of a small gully. He knew he was leaving tracks and making noise. Darkness was his only ally. Blind indignant fury was his only companion.

Estus stopped, stood, and looked around him. He closed his eyes and heard water. He walked, hearing the clamor of men running somewhere close. He walked quickly, but carefully through the thin layer of snow. He came to a wide, shallow stream and made a clear

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set of footprints into the water. On the other side, he climbed out, walked several dozen paces, stopped, and walked backward to another point on the bank and stepped backward into the water.

He walked against the ice cold current near the far edge. His feet were quickly numb, but what footprints he left in the sandy soft silt would soon wash away. The next trail he left was his to choose, while they had to examine every foot of the bank. This simple advantage urged him forward. The water was trickling softly. He was splashing. Voices called out behind him. He stopped and sat down in the stream. His hand hit the water and stung. A long thorn was stuck in his palm. He pulled it out and rinsed his hand.

Despite his shivering, he began to calm down and think. He was crouching in the dark near the vine-entwined branches of a juniper bush. Rampaging through the underbrush and snow was the worst thing he could do. His fury softened to disgust at the very idea of having to run from these people. He was sick and utterly tired of finding himself bewildered amid the noxious effluvium of their insipid ideas. And now, the thought of them chasing him, of holding him somehow accountable to their indolent idiocy became unthinkable.

It was a call to the challenge. Would reason practiced by club and torch win over the calm radiance of a thinking mind? What did they want? What did they expect? He needed to get out of the river soon. His legs were already numb, and his wet clothes would sap the life from him. They were near. He pulled himself to the bank under the low, scratchy branches of the bush. With shaking hands, he pulled down his wet trousers and began stuffing the ankle and calf with handfuls of leaves and dirt for insulation. He reached under the low limbs and packed himself and as many leaves as he could manage into his pants. He tucked his shirt and stuffed it full in the sleeves.

He listened. It was quiet. Estus crawled forward on his knees, toes, and elbows to the edge of the bush. Torch light and voices were coming from down river where he had left his footprints. He pulled back under the branches, curled himself into a ball, and pulled more leaves over his boots. He gathered loose leaves, dirt, old twigs behind his head, then he closed his eyes and lay still.

For several minutes he heard their urgent voices. They were closer. Estus lay still and let his body rest. The air was cold, and his feet were like ice, but otherwise he was relatively comfortable.

"Find his trail!" The voice was right above him. Estus lifted his eyelids to see a heavy boot just a few inches from his nose. The man was crouched, looking at the ground. Estus closed his eyes and waited. Soon the man moved away, and his companion called out in fear. "Kendrick!" There were hushed whispers. He heard the first man say "It's just an owl, idiot! Keep going."

Soon he was left in silence except for the faint, comforting sound of the trickling water from the stream. He rested, and felt sleep pulling at him. A noise drew his eyes open just as the owl flew to the ground and ducked under the low branches of the bush, coming face to face with Estus. It held something in its mouth, which Estus assumed was a mouse or a small snake. The owl turned its head and Estus saw a green glint. Not a mouse. The magnificent bird leaned forward and dropped Ivy's emerald brooch onto the ground.

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In the upstairs hallway, Gareth spoke to Hannah, "Get them down. Do you have a way out?"

"A back stair, for maintenance," she answered.

"Hurry," he told her. People were running, screaming, crying. Gareth turned from all of that and returned to the balcony just as Kendrick delivered his battle cry. He looked around and saw Becker and Nathan in the crowd on the stage. His body seemed to act of its own accord with impatient calm amid his fury. He drew his knife and cut through the thick chandelier rope. He stood with one foot on the chair, another on the balcony rail, and as he fell forward he felt little hands clutching his jacket.

He fell forward with Adrian's legs locked around him. The chandelier fell, drawing them over the chaos in the aisles. People were climbing over seats, chasing after Legionnaires. The chandelier fell to the length of its long chain and stopped just above the fighting, leaving Gareth swinging back down in a wide arch toward the stage.

They knocked into the melee, and for a moment Gareth was blinded by the spotlight. The next moment he was on the ground, sprawled across red jackets and tuxedos. He rolled quickly to his feet, still clutching his knife. "Adrian!" He called out, barely able to hear his own voice.

It was a fierce scrum. Someone grabbed him and got stuck in the lung for it. He was lost in a sea of unknown faces. He turned.

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Adrian's face was stern. Each thrust of the heel of her hand sent another man flying back. Kendrick was moving toward her.

Gareth looked out to the audience. His chandelier was swinging, casting waves of sliding shadows, revealing that those remaining were fighting fist against sword. Several men, women, and soldiers lay wounded or worse, but the Legionnaires were taking the brunt of it. Many had been killed by their own weapons. The smell of warm blood rose from the fight.

From the day he decided to deliver weapons to rogue river men, this was to be the stake. Lives and destiny. Gareth killed three soldiers who were pushing through the crowd, trying to gain control of the stage.

Two others charged him, swords raised. He threw his knife just above the heart of one, and as the other brought the sword down to him, he spun, matched the down thrust with his hands, and pulled the hilt out of the boy's fist and sent him tumbling. Gareth followed his fall, found his neck, and left him limp.

Someone jumped on him from behind. As Gareth fell forward under the weight, he crossed his right hand with the sword in front of him and leaned away from the blade. He got it pointed behind him just as his hand hit the hard wood of the stage. Whoever was behind him fell onto the sword and dropped heavy onto Gareth's back, while his hand reached around and clutched the captain's thick throat. He struggled against the choke hold until the man went limp.

He pushed up to get his knees under him. Becker rolled the other man off of him and helped him up. The stage was empty, except for a dozen unmoving bodies. He quickly retrieved his knife and followed Becker, Kendrick, and Adrian down the side stairs and up the aisle. His tuxedo was torn and blood stained. He took it off and dropped it. A few other people were running. Bodies were draped over chair backs, crumpled on the carpet, lying between the rows. The chandelier was still swinging.

In the lobby they met Hannah, Peter, and Susan, still wearing only the robe over her painted leg. "Daddy?" Hannah called out, looking for him. Becker ushered her forward. "He's got the wagon. Let's go."

Looters had broken into the ticket booth. Glass was broken. A dozen bodies lay frozen on the balcony stair, broken from the surge of the fleeing crowd.

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There was still fighting in front of the theater. The few Legionnaires left behind would not last long against at the hands pulling and beating them. Two tall draft horses ran at a near gallop from the side of the Bastion Theater, with thunderous hooves and rattle of the large wagon behind them. Nathan pulled them to a stop. Gareth lifted Adrian into the back next to the wounded actor and a small entourage. He jumped up behind Susan. Becker and Kendrick got in last. With a sharp jerk, Nathan drove them away from the plaza.

Adrian crawled to his lap and lay quiet in his arms. Hannah was wrapped under a blanket with Peter. Becker was helping Susan to the front of the Wagon. The other actors were huddled against the bite of the night wind. Gareth found Kendrick's eyes, quiet and calm. Adrian turned, lying back and looking up. "That was scary, Lenny."

"Very. Are you all right, Addy? Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay. Can I close my eyes now?"

"Yes, little one. Close your eyes."

She did. Gareth held her close as the wagon rushed along dark, narrow roads.

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Cold, naked, and covered in scratches Estus sat on a blanket in the brick remains of a large bathhouse left from the ancients. Ivy called this the Bora-Goss region, where the many mountain streams flowed south to form the mighty Mundela. He sat in the corner where part of the vaulted roof still offered some cover. The crumbling arches and vine-covered walls where open to the air, but the fire was burning hot orange through a fresh bundle of limbs Ivy had just added. Smoke drifted up past the roof into the night.

He stared at the fire with unfocused eyes. Ivy unrolled a blanket and draped it over his hunched shoulders. Estus pulled it over his head like a cowl. He was vaguely aware of Ivy moving about, setting a tripod over the fire and emptying a canteen of water into a pot. The fire washed dry on his face and danced a wavering glow whenever he closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said, not really to Ivy, or for any particular reason. The weight of his spent apathy, his utter emptiness of intent needed some words of atonement. It eased the void, but only for a thin second.

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Ivy brought him a cup of hot tea. He blew, sipped, and tasted pine. It brought color to his mood, a dull mud against the pitch.

"When I was young, twenty, maybe twenty-one, twenty-two, I don't know, I heard about a man who fell from the roof onto a rack, and the teeth of the rake, one or two of them, drove into his skull. I saw him once. Someone pointed him out a few years later to me. He had a funny scar over his left eye, kind of a lazy eye, and he was slow, couldn't talk much. But he laughed like some baby giggling, but cracking, bellowing out of his big crooked mouth. Didn't care if he pissed himself or went hungry, but the poor bastard could laugh. Laugh at a leaf stuck on a fence post by the wind. All he wanted to do was play, run, spin himself dizzy until he gagged, piss himself again and then laugh about it."

A moment of silence fell from his tired voice.

"If I had a rake right now."

Ivy caught his eyes through the fire, but she just let him talk.

"There's really no point to any of this, you know. We would all be better off wandering around shit-stained in the dirt with rakes in our heads eating berries and termites. It's all a big fraud, civilization. I mean, really, whose great idea was it to stand up and put on pants in the first place? Cats! They have it figured out. Ever see a cat milk a goat? No! We do that for them and they drink it up. I've had it. Pound me in the head and feed me little bowls of milk."

Ivy was cooking a stew of roots and wild leaves.

"What an enormous waste of meat I am. Better yet, just feed me to the cat. I'd be better off with a hole in the head. I always want to know, why, what, how. It's just a big joke. There's nothing to know except that in a pasture full of people, not one will know how to pick an apple. They'll stand around hungry drooling at the sky, but just let someone try, let one hopeless fool reach up and pick one, then the whole lot of them will tell him how it's supposed to be done. Don't eat it, they'll tell him. Plunge it up your ass, another will say. That's what you do with apples. Bury in in the dirt. That's how you eat. I saw a squirrel do it once. Then one half will pick the tree clean and throw it at the other half, then before you know it, everybody's covered in bruises and apple pieces. What's left are all broken and rotten, and damn them, I just wanted a little bite."

Estus looked up through the fire. Ivy met his eyes.

"This is all there is, isn't it? This is the best we can do. With all these millions of people there's, what, a dozen or so who can actually get anything done? Then a hundred who will lie, cheat,

murder, and scream to steal the fire out of their hands and use it to set fire to the hundred over there who wanted to steal the fire first to burn down some village of scarecrows over the hill. Ivy, is this really the best we can do? I mean, are we pushed and controlled because we're stupid, or are we stupid because we're pushed and controlled? And does it even matter anymore?"

For the first time since leading him in, Ivy spoke. Her voice was soft, gentle, but firm. "It matters."

"Which is it? Is it even possible for people to live without all the lies? The big ones, like Benok, and the thousands of little ones they tell themselves to get by? I mean, do we even deserve magic?"

"Magic can not come to you unless you deserve it. Magic is the state of being able to control yourself, and through that, bring great things into the world. This doesn't happen if you are following someone else. If you have magic, you deserve magic."

"What's the point?"

Ivy stood. She was wearing a heavy jacket. She unbuttoned this and dropped it to the floor. She had a belt full of small tools. She unfastened this and tossed it aside. She pulled off her dark long-sleeved shirt and let her hair down and shook it out. She reached behind her and then took off her tight bodice, leaving her bare above the waist. She walked around the fire and put her boot on the blanket over his leg. She untied her shoelaces, loosened them and pulled off her boot, then the next. Standing in front of Estus, she unfastened her heavy trousers and let them fall to her ankles. He reached forward, and with her hand on his shoulders, he helped her out of the bunched up pants. He took off her socks.

Estus moved his hands up her legs to the short green pants that hugged her hips. He pulled them down and leaned forward to kiss the skin at the front of her hip. His hands held the back of her legs and his mind, weary and worn, was filled with the scent of her skin. Carmen was the only woman he had ever been with, then that thought burned out and drifted away with the smoke. He lay back on the ground, letting her see him as he was.

She stood over him, feet beside his hips. Then she knelt, knees beside his chest. She bent down, and her hair made a fountain around his face. She looked into his eyes and told him, "The point is to live, and to love, and to be together, and to bring great things into the world."

He lifted his hand to her neck and pulled her down. Their kiss was a song of hunger, a driving overture. She tasted like a soft spice,

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sweet, a flavor he had never known. She shifted. Her hand pushed between the skin of their bellies to hold and guide them together. The lingering chill vanished. They lay still, lips together, hearts beating in rhythm with the pulsing he felt within her.

A gentle murmur rose from her throat, and suddenly Estus was aware that this was no mere woman, but an ancient being, wise and eternal, remote and foreign, wanting him and needing him with unabashed indulgence. He pushed her shoulders and she rose enough for his mouth to find the hanging fruit of her breasts, dark green circles, taut and tender. He feasted on her as their pace quickened. Suddenly she rose and reached her hands back to his knees. His hands clutched her heaving hips, and as her pretty ancient eyes saw through his, and her mouth echoed the sounds of his cries, they brought greatness into the world.

Ivy leaned forward again, resting her supple weight on Estus, and again they kissed slowly and utterly while his hands caressed her satin skin and her fingers wove through his thick hair. Her mouth travelled in kisses across his cheek to his ear, where she whispered, "The stew's ready. I'm going to tidy up. I'll be right back."

She kissed him quick and stood up, pulled on her boots, and went around the wall naked into the forest. Estus sat up, stretched, and began laughing like an idiot.

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The shiver wind blew Hannah's hair across her face, icy cold and frantic. She pulled the knitted green blanket tight around her thin red dress and looked down across the bare grape vines that covered the terraced hill to the moon-lit Korolem and the black void of the ocean. The sleeping city stirred with night worries. Torches lit the camps of the seminary in the North. Bright lights flooded the Koro-Del yards. She could just make out the tall masts of their newest ship sitting in her massive dry dock.

There was a sickness in her heart for the fighting and killing. There were dead people crumpled in their theater, on the steps where she played, on the stage, just lying there until someone came to get them. She thought of the young men who joined the guild because they thought it was right and good with their god. They trained and prayed, and shined their shoes. They had been children playing in the sun, little boys running, growing up. Then they were men, training, thinking about their future and their girlfriends back home. Then marching, then fighting, then they're dead and it all stops. No more little boy laughing. No more tomorrow. Just a pool of blood and gaping wounds with rising heat coming out of them as they lay broken on some cold foreign stone.

She was safe here in the rose garden of Becker's vineyard manor, but she could feel the anger, the numb hatred brewing between the Legion and the people, rising from the city carried on cold ocean winds. The parlor window glowed like a pool of bright amber amid the quiet shadows and cricket songs of the vineyard estate. Inside the cast was still taking turns singing and entertaining. Adrian was asleep in a corner camp of quilts while the voices of her mother and father sang one of their favorite duets and Becker joined them on the Piano.

Her eyes followed movement in the shadow where Peter was watching her from the doorway. He came down the steps to her, still wearing his tuxedo jacket and open collar shirt and joined her under the blanket.

"What a place. It's so beautiful here."

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"In the summer it's full of bloom, flowers, honeysuckle, and Becker lets you eat grapes right off the vines as much as you want. It smells so alive, so rich." Her voice trailed off to a whisper. She put her head on Peter's shoulder, still filled with sadness and shock, still tired and restless. It was well after two in the morning, but she couldn't settle.

Peter held her, and for a moment she saw him shining his shoes, reading a letter from her, and being suddenly sliced open, then lying in the dirt. She shuddered, held onto him. He held her trying to comfort her, but she couldn't get those images out of her head.

She faced him, resting her head on his shoulder and nuzzling into the nook of his warm arms. He kissed the top of her head and said, "Let's go for a little walk." He led her along the cobbled trail to the rows of grape vines wrapped around the wires between tall gabled trellises. The sounds of song faded behind them and was replaced by the chanting of night frogs, crickets, and the sigh of the wind through the empty vines.

Their feet crunched across the shadow gray pebbles between the empty vines. Peter held her close, and nestled in the vines beneath the sturdy wind, Hannah felt almost as though she could slip out of the tremor of the world and into a feather soft bliss. They came to the end of the row and again into the blast of the wind. Stairs led down to the next level and another row, but they stopped here and looked down from the Kambor mountains to the city and the sea.

"Are you going to fight?" She asked, trying to make her voice brave.

"I don't know. I don't know what's happening down there. I know I don't want an army in our city. If your father asks me for anything, I'll do it."

"My father won't ask you to fight. It's not our way."

"All I know is I want to be with you. I don't know what's going to happen, down there or here. Hannah, I want you to be with me always. Stay with me. Marry me. Hannah, will you marry me?" He fell to both knees before her, his hands clutching her hands.

She looked down at him, hugged his head, and told him, "Yes. Peter, of course, always with you." She felt the world shift as his words and hers settled into a seamless affirmation. He stood up before her. In that moment, the war didn't matter. The fighting, the killing she had seen melted away at the touch of his hands on her skin and her mouth in his mouth. And then her mind pulled back, afraid of the wall still between them.

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"Peter!" She pleaded, in a soft whisper.

"Hannah, my love."

"There's something I need to say. One thing you must understand before we say our vows."

"Anything. Tell me."

Her mind had played with this moment several times, but always in a vague, distant fog, and never enough to give her any real guidance. She just said it as simply and proudly as she could. "Peter, I'm a witch. I do magic. My family does magic." She watched his face, looking for revulsion, or shock, or recognition. She couldn't tell. She lowered her eyes, suddenly ashamed that she had to bare herself to him like this, and open her family to prejudice and danger, not from some society drone or an ignorant mark but from Peter. She suddenly felt as filthy and unclean as the elves had always preached about her kind. She thought she saw in Peter's eyes the flush of disgust that had never mattered to her, but now made her feel more than naked, and his silence was worse than the type of leering, dismissive gazes from the pious cows in the choirs who believed that her kind were lost, ignorant creatures, unholy, unclean, and evil.

When she looked up to him his eyes were soft, tender. "Hannah," he said, "I'm not like them. I know we're supposed to believe that only the guild wizards can do clean magic. That's church talk. That's my father talking. When I was young I stayed in the country with my cousin and his family. My father's older brother. My aunt's sister could do a little, you know, mending, finding a lost item. I knew my father wouldn't like it, and I knew he wouldn't let me go back, so I never told him. But in the country it just seemed normal. My cousin even taught me a spell."

"What spell?"

"Oh, I can't really remember. You lose it when you grow up. It was a kind of listening. He could hear his mom calling even when we were far away. Wait." He closed his eyes. Hannah felt a tiny stir of his summoning. She smiled, and heard the music that he was hearing, Becker singing back in the house. Peter murmured along with the words, and Hannah joined him. "When the lilies start poppin', and the girls go out shoppin' and the world is bright and blue, there's a song in the air when spring is everywhere, and my heart starts beating just for you..."

Tears of joy shook Hannah's shoulders. Peter held her close and said, "When Adrian called those bees, I figured it was in your family too. Don't worry on that, my love."

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Hannah smiled and said, "My father can too, and my mother is very strong in the craft. Becker's best student. And her sister, Adrian's mother, but they took her."

"Becker?"

"Becker is one of the most powerful wizards of this age. Next to Kendrick."

"Wow."

"Peter. Will you do the vows with me here? Right now?"

"Now? Where will we find an elf to sanction the vows in the middle of the night?"

"Peter, love of my heart, we don't need anyone to sanction our bond. That's between you and me, and nobody else has a say. That's our way. We can have a wedding party whenever we decide, but if you really want to be with me, to be my husband, then all I need is your words, and I'll give you mine."

She held his hand in her hand and raised their hands between them. She reached beside her and pulled off a length of vine and wrapped it around their two clasped hands and said, "Do you want to go first, or me?"

He answered her by saying, "Hannah Patricia Henderson, I love you as the birds love the sky. You are my world, my heart, and I want to be with you from this day forward, through whatever storms this world blows our way. I will take care of you, provide for you, and keep you safe. I will love you and only you until the day my eyes forever close. I take you as my wife."

"Peter James Calloway, I love you, and I bind my soul to you and will be with you through all the seasons of our lives. May our love glow to light the lives of those around us, and be an example of joy amid the bitterness of the world. I will care for you, and be always gentle with you. I will love you and only you every day of my life. I take you as my husband."

They embraced in the moonlight. United. Peter brushed her cheek with his fingers and said, "My wife. My love." She kissed his hand and said, "My husband. My heart." The aura of magic was welling around them, she looked into his eyes and added, "May we find the joys that we can, learn what we must, and forever join the energy of our lives in peace, understanding, and beauty, so by the earth, water, and sky, by fire and by breath, lest any be harmed, so let it be."

Tears were on his face too, as he echoed, "So let it be."

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She nearly knocked him over, jumping into his arms. She was going to be a bride in bloom at their wedding party, his bride. His wife. Every ball with him, every dance, and no more worries from his father or his parade of good girls. She was going to have babies and gardens and grandchildren. She closed her eyes, and with their mouths locked together, she pulled the luscious energy to her, like pillows all around them, and she lifted them, spinning, into the air.

“Open your eyes,” she told him. She took his hand and kept a fountain of energy flowing under both of them. She spread out her arms beside her and tugged on his hand for him to do the same. She flew with him out over the mountain, hand in hand, soaring. She rode the wave of sky energy, letting herself play unfettered, without a care of who might feel the strong waves rushing from the depths of the ground to her audacious call. Peter laughed with joy and surprise.

She flew them back over the garden, over the big picture window still aglow with candlelit performances, and carried them around to the balcony outside the room where her bed and Adrian’s had been made up. Part of her wanted to burst into the party downstairs and tell everyone the news, but a stronger part wanted to keep this special moment a secret between her and her husband.

They settled onto the balcony deck, embracing and kissing under silver moonlit clouds with her long hair dancing around their faces. He pulled away from their kiss, brushed her hair back out of her eyes, and said, “We flew!”

“We did.”

“Wow. Hannah, if my father...” He stopped, suddenly quiet.

Hannah saw the hurt in him, the remnant of his weathered hope and told him, “Your father doesn’t need to know about this. He can’t know, actually. But he should be at our wedding. We’ll find a way, Peter. When the time is right.”

The wind was picking up, howling through the vines on the hills behind the house. She shivered and nuzzled closer to him.

“The blanket!” He turned, as if he might jump over the railing and run around the house to fetch it for her. She held his hand tight and turned him around back to her. She looked up at his beautiful shadow-etched face, and said, “There are plenty of blankets in here.”

“Are you sure we shouldn’t tell someone first?”

“We’re married, Peter, by your vow and by mine. I know that in your world, your father’s world, you’re not really married until an elf tells you that you’re married. What nonsense. There’s not a soul

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on this mountain who would question that I'm your wife and you are my man. It is done. Telling who we wish and when is ours for the telling. If that's what you want, just take my hand."

He pushed her shoulders back against the door, kissed her hard on the mouth and let his hands slide down the back of her silky red dress and pulled her to him. He said, in a raspy, unrestrained voice, soft and close to her ear, "It's not your hand I want to take."

She opened the door and led him into the dark quiet of the bedroom. The music and laughter from downstairs hummed like a warm river below them. The still air and darkness of the room was soothing, and finally she felt as though she might be able to rest. Peter whispered, "Won't they be wondering where we are?"

She told him simply, "They know we're okay."

"But what if someone..." She stopped his question with a kiss.

"Don't worry about that, Peter. No worries. No more worries."

Hannah kicked off her slippers and lifted the red gown over her head, standing in the moonlight wearing only her small silk half slip. She reached behind her and pulled the tie loose and let it slide down her legs. She raised her arms over her head, watching her man watch her body and enjoying it. She felt majestic and complete as her body begin to respond in a pulsing of anticipation.

Peter dropped his tuxedo jacket to the floor. His white shirt caught the dim light from the balcony door, then it too fell to the floor. He stood, painted in the silver glow of the moon and undressed himself. He was beautiful, half moonlit and half dark, poised for their rite. She turned and pulled down the heavy comforter and slid herself into the smooth, warm flannel sheets. He followed her into the shadows and into her bed.

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Bodie and his men huddled on horseshoe hill. They had fallen back time and again, defending and then retreating from wave after wave of Legion assaults. The four teams had melded into one mass of weary warriors. Less than half of the original five hundred were gathered on the high ground above the river bend. The surrounding river, which provided an ideal defense against land attack, allowed the Legion boats to surround their position.

Seven Legion boats remained, holding their positions on the far bank. The others had been burned, sunk, or abandoned. A couple of the boats had scouted ahead to their blockade and returned battered

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and scorched from the barrage of whiskey bombs that kept them away.

Bodie walked among his men, encouraging them to remain watchful. It was difficult not to let the cold seep in, knowing that the Legion soldiers were huddled in the safety of their bold red boats, with fires and food.

They had done well, these farmers and fathers, fighting only with the dim training that had been born into them as men and a few afternoons of practice with homemade weapons. They had emptied nearly half of the Legion boats during the first hours of the battle. Most of that gain was from their very large supply of whiskey bombs, but few of those remained.

Still the blockade held. Ice, heavy and thick.

He watched through the empty black lattice of naked night branches and the bitter wind that slipped unchallenged through them. The seven Legion boats ringed their position around the horseshoe bend, still and unmoving. Bodie's mind screamed to call retreat, to recover, to return to Gelst and protect his thin hold over her, but Gelst did not matter. What mattered was here in the forest, the choke hold on the gullet of Boret.

Spring would come and thaw the ice, but still the people of this valley could master the river. They had the high land, the trees. It would take an army to control the entire valley and keep the goods flowing in the spring, if Boret could last that long.

Bodie looked again at the men huddled among the sopping muddy leaves, tired, freezing, frightened. Their friends had fallen, and there was no way to know how long before they could gather them and cast them with dignity into the light. They sat stiff and sore in the middle of the night, watching and waiting for the next attack that could come any minute or days from now. Retreat called again to him. We have the land. Let them have the river.

A fury passion overtook him. "Up! On your feet, men! Gather your supplies and head to the river road." His voice called out over the hill. "Quickly! Knives ready!"

Soon nearly three hundred were following Bodie, jogging along the narrow dirt river road. One mile, then two. He called the watchers along the river to join them. He stopped and called out, "Here! Gather close!" He climbed up the hill, reaching to the saplings and rocks to push himself up the steep slope. He stood under the moonlight. Hundreds of worn faces, panting, were turned

up to him. Behind them the Legion boats were stirring, moving into the river. There was not much time.

"Listen! Quiet!" His men pushed in. "They're in the river. Go down the hill and find a rope. Cut them all. Cut every tie, every hold. Open the river on them and let them fight the ice. Go!"

He ran with them as they began cutting the hundreds of ropes tied to the barges. The first few ropes fell to the ground. The other ropes grew tighter and flew away from their cuts. Some ropes started snapping on their own. Deafening cracks echoed across the river as the ice shifted and began breaking free.

The Legion boats moved toward the near shore, ready to deliver a new attack, or maybe they knew what was coming. The chained barges broke free, the ice snapped and cracked into huge lumbering pieces that climbed over the barges. Massive sheets of ice spun, crashed into the hill, came apart, and were overcome by heavier, faster slabs behind them.

The ice hit the Legion boats before they could reach the banks, crushed them and ran them under wild, tumbling thunder. In seconds, the tail of the ice dam disappeared around the horseshoe bend, followed by bits of shattered Legion boats and hundreds of red coats that splashed for a moment and then floated still.

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In the old dusty room on the third floor of the Merchant's guild, Grant Fletcher lay awake in the middle of the night. The musty smell of the old quilt mixed with the sallow stink of the pine paneling. The guild quarters were once bustling with traders, students, and sea captains on leave. Now they preferred the commercial boarding houses along Thistle Quay, or the newer and more opulent apartments of the Koro-Del compound.

He was not strictly under arrest, but if he left before his hearing they could mark him as a fugitive from clemency. The guild elders could find him guilty of any crime by tacit apostasy, excommunicate him in absentia, and order his immediate arrest. There was no date scheduled for his hearing. They could keep him waiting for years.

So now, even in the dead of the night, when he felt the oppression of this dingy room closing on him, when his legs needed him to walk in the open air to ease his mind, to reflect, to gather his wits, here he lay unable to escape the swirling monotony of his morbid thoughts.

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Frustrated, he flung the stale quite off of him and stood silent in the middle of the room, fists clenched.

His eyes turned to the dirty pane of the little window. Suddenly desperate for the sweet taste of the night air, he went to the window and found it stuck. Not locked, but sealed shut under layers of old paint. He ran his fingers around the edge. He suppressed a sudden, visceral need to punch the window out. It was concern over being heard that caused him to pause. Only then did he consider the cuts he might suffer from it.

He again tried to push the window up, but it wouldn't budge.

Now he was fully awake, and resentment began to simmer deep into him. Why deny him air? Why pretend that this wasn't as much a prison as a dungeon with iron bars and chains?

He went to the door of his room and opened it. He was met only by the woody scent of the empty hall. He went to the next door and found it locked. He tried all of the doors in the hallway, and all were quiet and locked.

He returned to his room and closed the door. In the dark he opened every cabinet and drawer and found them all empty. There was a single picture hung in the room. Benok riding a raft, carrying a small group of men, the first sailors.

Fletcher took down the picture and pulled at the nail in the wall. It was firm. He picked up his boot and was able to fit the edge of the sole under the head of the nail. The nail budged, and he was able to take it out. He took the nail to the window and scratched it across the bottom of the window, breaking away old dry chips of paint. He ran it along the sides, breaking the window free. He worked carefully and quietly, but giving no regard for the broken state of the window or the molding around it. Within only a few minutes, he was able to move the window within its wooden track, and with a final thrust he pushed up the sash and leaned out into the cold, fresh sea air.

He filled his lungs over and over, feeling a great release and comfort. He looked down thirty feet or so to the cobbled alley. Above him the roof line cut across the sky. He leaned out farther until he had to steady himself by holding on to the stone rain gutter at the base of the roof. He pulled himself out sitting on the sill. With a little fresh air, he thought, we would soon be able to put the worries out of his mind and fall finally to sleep.

But those thoughts barely took hold before he looked around, tested his weight, and let himself slide farther out until he was

holding himself in the window by the back of his knees. He started to pull himself back inside, but instead he grinned like a kid and put his foot on the sill. Then the other. He leaned back, crouching outside the window with his hands holding onto the edge of the roof and the long drop under his back. He stood and pulled himself up to lie face down on the roof with his feet dangling. He rolled to the side, lifted a foot up, and soon found himself standing on the slate tiles looking out at the ocean.

The air was frigid. Fletcher was barefoot and was wearing only a flimsy blue night shirt and pajama pants. Again when he knew that the prudent direction was back to the window. He flaunted that and walked to the peak of the roof. The building was long, and butted against the next. The other building's roof came to his shoulders. He jumped and pulled himself up. From here he could see the bay.

He saw the *Corona* far off in the Koro-Del dry dock. Bleachers had been erected on top of the sawmill. Large flags, their colors washed pale by the dim starlight, fluttered like a line of geese in the sturdy wind. He looked out across to the forest of masts huddled in the crowded Thistle Marina to the deep black of the ocean that swallowed the brilliant canopy of stars. Then his eyes fell on the small Barrington Dock, and there, far away, down the hill and along Bastion Boulevard, just beyond the Barrington gates, sat the *Autarkic Maiden* flying the Legion flag.

He walked along the edge of the roof until he could see the gatehouse and the motion of the guard in the pale light of the lamps.

His feet were numb, and he was starting to shiver. He knew that he should go back to his room and sleep, or at least get dressed and put on his boots. But there was another place that was quite and warm and filled with plenty of clothes and socks and boots.

This thin, ridiculous idea suddenly shattered the remnant of his pleading reason. The presumed authority of arrogant strangers seemed suddenly petty and absurd. Doubt drifted away and he found in its place a calm confidence. He went back to the roof of the guild and went to the edge where the Merchant Guild building met the other. There was a corner, and the decorative brickwork was just enough for his fingers and toes. He reached down with his foot, found a tiny step, and lowered himself from the gutter. Then he stepped quickly and carefully down the brick wall into the dark alley.

He walked in the shadows, wishing he had brought his boots. This alley led to another alley. He walked quickly and silently in the

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shadows behind buildings and across small roads. Cats took notice and gave way to him, but the rest of the neighborhood was asleep and calm.

Soon he was in the familiar narrow yard behind the Barrington administration building, where he had spent so much time managing the papers and licenses for the *Maiden*. He walked across the frost frozen grass to the wooden fence and slipped easily between the sagging end post and the brick building next to it.

He was at the far edge of the dock, hidden by overgrown bushes and grass, and it was quite easy to lower himself silently and slowly into the cold salt water. He swam slowly, keeping his hands and feet below the surface with a slow sidestroke. Soon his body adjusted to the temperature, and he felt comfortable, and free, and reckless, and mad.

He swam behind the *Maiden* and climbed the wooden ladder to the rear deck, where the wind suddenly cut like icy knives on his skin. He stripped off his pajamas and threw them over. He hurried, naked and freezing down to the main deck. The hatch to the lower decks was locked. He felt along the top for the loose batten trim and took out the spare key. He unlocked the door, replaced the key, and hurried down to the hammock bay. The laundry bins were full. He got dressed, pulled on socks and boots, and found a mariner cap.

He grabbed two heavy blankets from the top shelf and stood for a moment, basking warm and comfortable and happy in the belly of his home. He made his way by touch through the narrow corridors to the galley where he threw a week's worth of biscuits into the blanket, filled a water skin, and made his way past the false beam under the counter, past the grain sacks, and into the small aft smuggle hold below the wardroom. He gathered his food and water near him, made a bed of his blankets, and let the gentle rolling of his brigantine rock him to sleep.

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Captain Lennel Gareth of the Koro-Del *Corona* lifted his heavy eyelids and saw a shadow among the shadows. His eyes were swimming in spinning whiskey haze, but he could make out the shape of a man kneeling in front of him. Adrian was sleeping on her pillow beside him in the corner. He was propped up against the velvet side of a large armchair. He shifted his weight from one stiff, numb haunch to the other, lifted the empty whiskey bottle to his lips, and finally focused on Dylan Del-Trevia, who was patting his leg.

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"Come along Captain. It's time to go."

He found his voice, gravely and quiet, and asked, "How many men will you have me kill today?"

"As many as we need, Captain. Susan helped me pack some of your things, and I've sent a chest ahead to the ship. We're all ready to go."

"Have they made any attempt to close the bay?"

"Jacob has the Legion on every vessel he can reach. There was a skirmish on the south end of the Koro-Del dock, but that's been taken care of. Donovan is on his way back with the *Constellation*, but you'll be on your own until he can get here."

"The crew?"

"Prescott has them assembled on board."

Gareth uttered a low growl and said, "I should have been there. That's my crew, damn it."

"You were needed here, Len. Last night. You saved more than you know. It all turned when you came swinging in like that. But there's more to do."

Gareth looked over to Adrian, sleeping sweetly with her hair falling over her eyes. He looked up to Dylan, who answered. "I'll let you say good bye."

Then the shadow was gone with heavy footsteps, leaving the room dark and empty with gentle echoes of hushed voices from the other room. He gave himself a moment, then leaned forward, then sideways cracking his back, and hoisted himself over Adrian. He picked her up in her bundle of blankets, pulled her to him and stood up. She stirred, but quickly nuzzled and cooed herself back to sleep.

He followed the voices into the kitchen's dim lamp light where Susan and some other ladies were sitting around the wide wooden table.

Susan told him, "Take her to our room. Nathan is sleeping, but you can put her in the bed with him."

"I thought she was going to stay with Hannah. Is everything okay?"

"Hannah's with Peter in her room. Best not to disturb them. I've got some coffee brewing. I'll have it ready when you come down."

He lumbered around to the dark stairs and went up one half flight, where he stopped and looked out the window to the valley below. It was nearly dawn, and already the ocean was lit with a spray of golden sparkles as the sun brushed over the Kambor mountains. With Adrian's head nestled in his arms, as he gazed past

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the endless sea, he felt a heaviness in his chest that settled down well past his feet. By the time he was next to Nathan's gentle snoring Adrian was coming awake. When he lowered her to the bed, she looked up and said, "You have to go, don't you?"

He knelt by the bed, took her hand and said, "I do. Dylan's taking me to the ship."

She rubbed her eyes against the slanting lamp light from the hallway that shined in her hair. "I need to come with you."

"No, my dear. You are home now. You're safe."

Her little eyes crept shut, and her brow furrowed in dreamy determination. "We need to make the water. It's going to be fun."

"I'll come back and see you some day. I promise." He saw her suddenly years older, dressed in her ball costume with her hair up and a young man on her arm. He chuckled, thinking what the poor boy would be in for, with this scrappy, sweet, wonderful kid. His chuckle turned into a little lump in his throat. He sat her up and held her to him.

"I'm gonna miss you, kid."

"You don't have to miss me. I want to go on the ship."

He smiled and leaned down to kiss her cheek.

"I would like that, Addy. I really would, but there's going to be more fighting, I'm afraid. You need to stay here, where it's safe."

"Oh, fuck safe, Lenny. I'm going with you!" She sat up, angry.

"Shh. You shouldn't talk like that. You need to have a little girl's life. Butterflies. Dandelions. And no bad language like that."

She looked at him fiercely and said with a fierce, resolute voice. "I stopped being a little girl when my daddy left me and got killed on the river fighting in this war. I'm a grown up whether I like it or not. I've been chased by the cops. I burned down half a city block. I fought by your side just hours ago in the middle of battle with men with real swords trying to kill my friends, and trying to kill you." Her voice shook, and she added, "And I won't let them. I won't! I'm not a little girl anymore. I'm through with that. Everybody always leaves me! They took my mama away when I was a little girl. Then my daddy. Then I had to watch Mister Bodie get strangled and hurt, and I ran away scared, like a stupid little girl, and when they chased you I stayed with you, and made us invisible, and I saved us, and we're a team, and don't you dare leave me behind like I'm some little nothing. Don't you dare leave me, Lennel Gareth. They'll hurt you or throw you back in the ocean. I won't let them. I love you, Lenny, and I got your back, and you are not going to leave me here."

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She rolled off the bed, past him and stomped out the door.

Nathan sat up and said, "You should go, Len. I'll talk to her."

Gareth stood, walked around the bed and said, "No. It's okay."

He went from the dark of the bedroom into the yellow glow of the lamps in the hall. He followed her into Hannah's room. Peter and Hannah were squinting, waking up from their sleepy spooning. Adrian's blouse and skirt were tossed aside with her stockings, and she was pulling on her heavy trousers. She rummaged through a pile of clothes on the floor, found a shirt and put it on.

She walked around the bed, kissed Hannah on the cheek and said, "Go back to sleep, cousin. Bye Peter. I'll see you again soon." Adrian went to the door where Gareth stood blocking the doorway. "My shoes are downstairs," she told him. "I'll see you outside." She squeezed past him and was down the stairs before he could even reach for her. The captain motioned for the young lovers to lie back down and closed the door.

The smell of coffee wafted up the stairs. He followed it down and took a cup from Susan. It was quite unlike the coffee he was used to from his Brig's galley. This was creamy and robust without being overly bitter. "Susan, this is the best cup of coffee I have ever tasted. Thank you."

"What's going on?"

Through the kitchen window Gareth watched Adrian Blackwing carrying her shoes across the moonlit, frost-covered lawn toward Dylan's carriage. Dylan greeted her and opened the door for her.

Gareth took another sip and said, "I guess she's coming with us."

Susan's only reaction was to turn her eyes past Gareth to the doorway. Gareth turned to see Becker and Kendrick standing in the shadows.

Becker told Kendrick, "Go on ahead. We'll be there as soon as we can." He turned back to Susan and said, "I'll get her things."

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Davis jolted awake, but lay still. There were men in their camp, soldiers with their tall black boots and heavy red jackets. One was crouched in front of the embers of last night's fire. Two others were standing nearby, watching. Cody, Gavin, and the girls were asleep.

They had reached the river near dusk. Whiskers turned and headed home, and everyone else gathered around the fire and enjoyed an evening of rest after their long walk. Davis sat up and looked around, feeling the chill air drag at him. The forest was quiet with the calls of distant animals and the wind brushing through the brittle, left-behind leaves. Dawn was just beginning to push dim purple through the lattice of limbs above.

"What's up, brother?" Davis asked, quietly.

The Legion major turned away from putting more wood on the fire and said, "I'm sorry to disturb you."

"Are you?" He looked over to the other two young men who were searching through the boats and their packs. "Think you can pull their noses out of our gear? What's going on?"

The major waved the other soldiers over toward the fire. One stepped near Gavin's head, startled him, and got his foot in a lock for it. Gavin pulled him down, and was sitting on top of him before he was even fully awake. Cody jumped up and threw himself between Gavin and the second soldier, and as they were scuffling Darla called out from under the blanket where she and Katie were sleeping, "Boys! Knock it off!"

Everyone stopped for a moment, then the major said, "Put the boy down."

"Gavin! That's enough."

"There better be a god damn good reason for this. I was asleep. Finally."

"Come on," Davis said, pushing himself to his feet. "Everybody calm the hell down."

Soon everyone was standing in a nervous circle around the newly burning fire. Darla and Katie huddled together under their blanket.

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The major told them, "There's a criminal at large in the woods. He escaped last night from the Bora-Goss Prison Facility. We think he may be traveling with a darkened wizard who goes by the name of Kendrick. Have you seen anyone else in the woods?"

"A what?"

"A rogue wizard. Excommunicated and unbranded."

Davis rubbed his forehead and added, "Nice."

"What is your business here in the forest?"

"It's a long story."

"Then get started!"

Davis glared at him and said, "I'm tired. We're going back to sleep." He turned his back on the soldiers.

"Sir, I'm going to need you to answer a few questions."

Davis turned around and said, "You lost him, you go find him. Not my fuckin' problem."

"Look, we can do this the hard way."

Gavin added, "You wouldn't know hard if it was in your mouth."

"What's your name, boy?"

"My name is Sir, to you, tenderfoot. Davis, want me to kick his ass?"

"Not yet, Gavin."

"I'd probably lose a foot up there anyway."

The major asked Davis, "Can we be through with this? It's an odd time of the year to be out camping, don't you think? You've got boats and supplies. Women. We would appreciate your cooperation." He rested his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Davis gave a heavy sigh and told him, "We were on shore leave in Gelst and got left behind, thanks to kid genius over there. Since then we've been trying to scrounge our way back to some kind of civilization. We got a billet on a little Brig, but genius number two got sloppy in a fight and gave his captain a black eye and we got dumped off in Merebor."

"Hey, that was an accident."

"You're an accident! So, once we get back to Boret I figure we'll hire a barge back down to Gelst and try again to get back to Korolem somehow."

"Why would you want to go to Korolem?"

"I don't know, because that's where I live? That's where our ship berths? The puff pastry sausages at Thistle Quay?"

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"You'd do well to avoid Korolem. There's trouble there, and it might look as though you're trying to get on the wrong side of it."

"What trouble?"

"Heresy, sedition, attacks on Guild houses, trouble from some dark elf named Trevia."

"I don't know anything about that. Right now we're just trying to get back home."

"The barges aren't running to Gelst. The rebels have a blockade, and Boret is under rationing and martial law. There hasn't been any travel through Gelst for about a month now."

"Great. So now that we've been building a good set of blisters and foot sores, if we do finally make it to Boret we'll get there just in time to starve through the winter, unless we get killed by Mongo the crazy mage. I love my fucking life." He reached out and smacked Gavin on the back of the head.

"So how did you end up in the middle of the Boret woods with these women? What's your business here?"

"We came up the Nordel river from Merebor. We were thrown off the night we docked to pick up lumber and canned fish, I think. The girls are on their way to Boret, so we hired Whiskers to carry the boats. Whiskers, what's his name, brown eyes?"

"Nigel Whiskel," Darla answered.

"Yeah. He's got some kind of service running boats between the rivers. He's got a wagon."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. On his way back to his little sad shack by the river I guess. We unloaded yesterday around sundown."

"Did you see anyone along the way?"

"You mean like an invisible evil wizard?"

"Yeah."

"No. We didn't see anything like that."

"Tell me about this little brig you boarded in Gelst."

"Hell, what was the name of that? The Maid? Auto-kraken?."

Cody added, "Arctic? Something?"

The Legionnaire asked, "The *Autarkic Maiden*?"

"That's it."

"Interesting. Sir, do you know a man from Gelst named Bodie Challuk?"

"Yeah. He's from the bargeman family. At that pub."

"What pub?"

Gavin said, "The Broken Wing Pub, I think it was called."

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Davis continued, "Yeah, but we don't know him real well. We usually work with the warehouse teams, and they manage the barge deliveries from there."

"The *Autarkic Maiden* was recently involved in criminal activity and insurrection and has been placed on a Legion watch list. What do you know about that?"

Gavin said, "The fight in the bay? That's not our business."

"But you were aboard?"

"Yes," Gavin answered. "Just following orders."

"You're from a Koro-Del ship that answers to a dark elf, then you just happen to visit the headquarters of the Gelst rebellion. After that you're on the *Autarkic Maiden* as she evades a lawful search and rams a Legion scout boat, and now you're near the Bora-Goss Prison with supplies and equipment that would be of great help to man on the run."

"I guess it looks that way."

"You guess it looks that way? I'm sure that it does. Do you have another explanation?"

"Of course."

"I'd like to hear it."

"It simple. You're a dumbass."

The major stepped back and drew his sword. A second later the other two had their swords ready. "Line up, over there. We're going back and getting to the bottom of this."

Darla said, "Put that thing back in your pants, hot shot. Nobody wants to see that."

Gavin said, "What? You're going to fucking draw on us? You better be god damn sure of yourself, junior."

Darla walked between them and said, "Can you boys all put your dicks back for just a moment? I don't know how we got from 'can I help you' to 'let me stick a sword through you.' How you people run the world is beyond me."

"Ma'am. Please step aside."

"Oh yeah. That's how. Listen, we don't know any evil wizards or escaped criminals. We're just trying to get to Boret. Is that some kind of crime?"

Katie took Darla's arm to pull her back, but the major snapped his attention to the necklace around Katie's neck. He grabbed Katie's shoulder and turned her toward the fire. He reached to her chest and grabbed hold of the pendent.

"What is this?"

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"It's mine. Darla gave it to me."

"Get your hands off her, goon!"

He yanked hard, pulling Katie almost to the ground to break the chain off her neck. He held it up to Darla and said, "Do you know what this is?"

Darla answered, "It belonged to my mother. Give it back to us, or is the Legion now just a band of thieves?"

"This belonged to your mother, and you gave it to her?"

"Yes."

"All right. Take them." The two guards moved in and took hold of the women. "You are under arrest for possession of an emblem heretical and suspicion of practicing witchcraft." He turned to Davis and said, "You can answer for your part in the criminal activities of the Brigantine *Autarkic Maiden*, for association with enemies of the state, abetting the escape of Estus Arrenkyle, and for associating with dark wizardry."

"Like hell we will," was Gavin's answer. He pounced first, grabbing the one on Darla. Davis and Cody both moved in toward the other. Davis clawed him away from Katie, and Cody bit his sword hand.

The scuffle was quick. Punches were thrown, the women punching just as hard as the men. Gavin knocked his man down and turned to the major, but everyone stopped when the third soldier called out and fell to his knees, grabbing his side. Davis and Gavin grabbed the major and held him back. Cody turned the sword on the other.

The night turned cold and quiet. The young soldier gasped and cried. His hands pressing his side were covered in red. The major broke free and helped him lie on the ground. He looked up to Darla and asked, "Can you help him?"

"No. I'm not. I can't. Davis, we're done here."

Cody dropped the sword and disappeared into the dark woods.

"Damn it!" Davis cried. Gavin took off after him. The women went next, then Davis. Halfway up the hill he turned to see the major and the other rushing with the wounded boy away from the camp.

He faced back to the night and charged up the snow slick hill through face scraping branches, tripping vines, and the sharp taste of cold pine air.

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Carpenters, smiths, weavers, and masons sat huddled on the bottom rows of bleachers on top of the sawmill, ready to bid farewell to their beloved *Corona*, built by their hands. Gareth looked up from his post at the bow of his great ship to the mostly empty bleachers. There should have been family, friends, and great ceremony, but all that was canceled because of the fighting.

Prescott approached the rail, and Gareth asked, "Is there word?"

"Yes, thank the light. My brother and his family are safe. They got out of the way before the fighting got to their street."

"It is a foul wind that has blown ashore here in Korolem."

"He told me that by morning some were burning their own barns to deny these Teshon marauders any refuge or supplies. The air was black with it, and still they came, outnumbered and savage. Whole platoons cut off from their regiment roaming wild." Prescott stopped to control his voice. "Women have been hurt."

"And worse," Gareth answered, and left it at that. Beyond the tall stone wall surrounding the Koro-Del shipyard wisps of distant smoke rose to a livid purple haze. He turned back to the sea and asked, "The crew is ready?" even though he knew the answer.

Prescott paused only slightly. "Aye," meaning ready to fight their way out of the bay. Men were positioned on footropes, six each along the eighteen yards, waiting for the order.

With the Teshon Army in Korolem, Gelst lay open for the taking. The weapons in the *Corona's* hold would likely secure Gelst for the rebels. Several Teshon-commandeered ships were already at sea. Some carried food for Boret. Some carried soldiers already a day ahead. At least five circled the coast, perched, waiting for the *Corona*. The captain's eyes were drawn to one particular outline about four leagues off port. The red Legion flag flying above the *Autarkic Maiden* was like a dagger in his side. He felt her shame as his own, swirling bile in his belly.

A deep bell rang, finally, low tones repeating. A cheer, such as could be mustered, rose thinly from the stands. Gareth felt the stomachs of his men tighten, but he stood firm and calm as the flood gates opened, letting torrents of chill seawater into the enormous stone dock.

"Captain?" Gareth turned to see Becker Dodd with Adrian. Becker was wearing a brown leather jacket with a fur collar, sunglasses, and a cutlass on his hip. Adrian wore white denim pants and a brown cotton tunic circled at the waist with a bit of rigging.

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"We're about to head below, Caption," Becker said. Gareth knelt in front of Adrian, lifted the tail of her belt and asked, "Who tied this very nice bowline knot here?"

"Mister Prescott did."

"Well, you look like you're ready to give these riggers a run for their money. When we get on our way I'll let Prescott and some of the guys help you up to the fore yard for a look."

"Okay."

He put his hand on her shoulder and said, "Don't be afraid, Addy. We're going to be just fine."

Her eyes lifted, surprised at the thought. "I'm not afraid."

"Just stay with Becker and do what he says."

"I know."

"Listen, I was wondering if you could help me out with a bit of something before you scuttle below."

"What?"

"Come here." He hefted himself up and led Adrian to the port railing and pointed to the speck of his brig. "Do you see her there?"

"That little ship?"

"She's a brig. Yes, that one. Two masts." He lowered his voice and asked, "What can you see there? Like when you looked before, back at the quay. Do you see a man with a hat like mine?"

She squinted her eyes, but he knew she was using her looking magic.

"A man with skinny cheeks, a little yellow beard just on his chin."

"Shit. Miggs. Okay, it's almost time."

He kissed the side of her head and let Becker take her hand. Becker said quietly, "If there's anything you need just let us know. We can help."

Gareth shook his hand and said, "I know that, Mister Dodd, and I welcome that, as long as she's out of danger."

"Yes, Captain." Becker led Adrian down the stairs to the captain's cabin.

When Gareth looked down over the side he saw the water was now past the halfway line.

Prescott joined him at the rail and looked out to the horizon. "They're positioned well to cut off any northern course. I count five, but there are bound to be more further out."

"We're not going north. Not yet. The small brig, the one out here at the end of their line. We'll make for her port side and head out to

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sea. They're positioned to intercept a direct north run, but we can out run any of them in the open sea."

"No doubt of that. We'll have to tack into the wind. We have a good gale coming along the coast."

"I'd like you on the rudder."

"Aye, sir."

"Then we're going to ram her from the south and board her. Once we have control, we'll use her to intercept the others while we make for sea."

"She has a crew of probably..."

"Two hundred sixteen, take a man or two. I want the men ready to board her two to one. If necessary I'll empty this ship and steer her myself. They were fools to put that brig at the flank."

"It's the maiden sir? Your brig?"

"Was. Full sail, Mister Prescott."

Christopher Prescott called the order to the boatswain, who piped the command. Gareth, his eyes to port, heard the shrill whistle, followed by a chorus of sails dropping. Fore, main, mizzen, and jigger sails fell. Jibs above him to the spankers at the stern opened with a hearty rumble as they stretched full of clean cold air.

Soon the water was to the line. The bell rang, and the huge doors opened, bringing in new tons of cold salt water, and for the first time the *Corona* lifted from her bilge and keel blocks and rested her belly upon the ocean. She pressed against the guide timbers as the wind pulled her steadily forward from her box womb and slowly away from the Korolem coast. At full sail, she charged north at over fifteen knots.

As they rounded Thistle Quay the marina came into view, and Gareth and the crew saw every boat and pier flooded with people of Korolem, waiting to wave and cheer for the *Corona*. The long wharf was a packed solid, and everyone at top voice.

"Very well," Gareth said to his first officer, "Hoist the colors." Prescott bellowed the order, and when Korolem's blue and white stripes rose on the stern's ensign staff, followed by Koro-Del's white anchor on blue hoisted on the main royal mast, it seemed that all of Korolem had come alive in cheers. The voices of the city carried through the brisk wind to the virgin vessel and her crew. Men waved banners from rooftops. Children ran along the marina. Even houses up in the hills were alive with celebration. It was hope that they

cheered for, hope and a building rage against the Legion and its unwanted trespass.

“Take the rudder, man. We’ve work to do.”

---

“Why is my army in Korolem?”

Baron stood before Andor in the wood paneled warden’s office on the third floor of the Bora-Goss Prison. The room stank of cigar smoke that stuck yellow on every surface. A fire was burning in the fireplace, and the air was hot and dry. Baron felt his heavy uniform, designed for cold Teshon winters, grow sticky and oppressive.

For the past week Andor had been feeding him a steady stream of bitter and demeaning tasks, showing him off at Guild events, and preparing filtered reports of the news from Gelst for him to read at public appearances. Baron found himself reporting that Bodie Challuk was raising an army of four thousand dangerous rebels, while he knew that Bodie had the loyalty of less than seven hundred untrained men. Under Andor’s orders, Baron reported that Korolem was barely aware of the situation in Gelst, despite his own intelligence on the insurgent movement and the fact that Koro-Del’s new ship was equipped for heavy battle.

Years of discipline kept his voice calm and he gave his briefing with a cold confidence, even though he expected to be demoted, if not arrested or excommunicated, for his defiance of Andor’s recommendation to send the Teshon Army to Gelst.

“Korolem poses a significant military and social threat, being more remote and much larger than Gelst. I understand that Jacob Tol-Westin has had to take measures to interrupt a growing defiance campaign. There is much sympathy with Gelst in the South, and it is necessary to establish dominance in the region to make sure we don’t have another populist maverick like Bodie Challuk to deal with.”

“And you’re going to just let Gelst fall to the whim of that thug? You’re just going to let him starve Boret?”

“Of course not,” he barked angrily, but caught himself and added, “your eminence. We have secured the necessary shipments from Korolem on Legion controlled ships. I have two regiments in Norgelan to establish a land rout to Boret. Within a matter of days we will have ample supply lines around Gelst.”

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“What if that godless animal and his savage fugitives do to your Norgelan supply lines what they have already done to the Mundela river?”

“We can cede the river to Challuk for the winter, as long as we keep him and his men fighting for it and away from the caravans.” Even as he said it the sick necessity of this action grew like a stink inside him. He knew that he had to use their patriotism and their untrained country pride against them, to let their leader call out the strong, the independent, only to kill them slowly over the long winter.

“And who will be there to keep him fighting, I wonder? Just hours ago, Governor Arrenkyle, Bodie Challuk destroyed his own river blockade, slaughtering every one of the men you sent to watch over him and keep him busy. Will your Norgelan regiments be able to keep his attention on the river while running their caravan?”

“We won’t need to. If the river is open we will just run supplies up the river. Or decoys, more likely. Blockade or not, they still control the valley. But now, of course, they will have to fight even harder. I don’t see any reason to change the general strategy.”

“You don’t? Interesting. Let’s just play games with Gelst while Boret stands on the brink of winter starvation and the Teshon Army wastes time stirring up trouble in Korolem. Did you know that several more of your men were killed last night by a rowdy audience at a play? Commander Hampton is dead. One of the thespians broke his neck. I suppose that’s what you call establishing dominance.”

“I ordered no action be taken until I arrive to oversee operations.”

“So you have discipline problems as well as utter clumsiness.” Andor raised his voice, “And no military presence in Gelst what so ever that’s not floating face down in the river!” He composed himself, and returned to his usual condescending snarl. “Why would I let you go to Korolem? You are quite a disappointment, Baron. I can only imagine what you would do if you did not have my help.”

“Your help?”

“How is Lieutenant Smith?”

“He’s in the infirmary. He’s got a nasty gut wound, but he’ll be okay.”

“And the civilians who jumped him? Where are they?”

“We have every available man on the search.”

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"I'm sure you do. Where is your brother, Baron? You pulled a good trick with that. I didn't think you had it in you. We still don't know how you arranged it."

"We'll find him."

After signing the inevitable order to excommunicate Estus from the Carpenter's guild, Baron had ordered the search to continue with all available men around the clock until he was found. There was little he could do to help his brother now, but the fact that he was still at large this morning gave Baron great relief and a surge of furtive pride.

"Will you? Why should I expect you to be anything remotely resembling competent?"

"These men are not well trained. With all respect, your excellency, there are several areas of discipline and organization which were not well handled under Governor Vendak."

"And you think you can do better?"

"If I am allowed."

Andor took two papers from a drawer and pushed them across the desk to Baron.

"Take these back to Boret. Sign them and give them to Victor."

Baron looked at the papers. Written in Andor's hand was the title, "Special Service Requirement". It was an emergency executive decree calling all men between the ages of fourteen and sixty to report to the Seminary Lodge for Legion support duty, to be trained, deputized, and given tasks related to "civil effectiveness in the face of the evil influence of Gelst Rebels upon our safety and subsistence." The second decree was titled "Rationing and equitable distribution of critical resources."

"Andor, these are not necessary. They will only cause fear and incite unnecessary anxiety among the people."

"Perhaps you would rather the people of Boret place their very survival on your thin schemes, when you can't even control a few rowdy civilians? You are arrogant and petty, Baron. I have been taking care of the people of this land for two thousand years. I don't need you trying to undo that by thinking you know what you're doing."

Before he caught himself, Baron told him, "I'm no fool, Andor."

The elf stood and came around the desk. He poked a long, bony finger on Barons chest and said, "Then stop acting it. Stop pretending that what you think you know has anything to do with what's really going on here. If you want to stop being useful to me,

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go ahead. I know what to do with fools like that. I'm diverting the army to Gelst. You will give the order and you will sign these domestic decrees, or you will wish you had jumped out that window after your damned brother."

---

Estus followed Ivy, treading softly on the snow and sodden spongy leaves of the sloping hills, stepping over branches, ducking under low hanging limbs. The air was brisk and fresh and filled with the thick flavor scent of pine. He was painted with ash and dirt. His face and hands were smeared with black mud, and Ivy had tied twigs on his legs and arms.

She had a way of stepping through the snow leaves without kicking them up or making too much noise. Estus copied her, and found that by looking ahead a bit he could pick his footing to avoid snapping twigs or tripping on vines. He noticed rabbit tracks, deer tracks. Ivy was playing the prey, moving quiet and alert, keeping away from the open.

Their first encounter came soon. She waved him down and he fell to the ground as she had taught him, eyes down, trusting her to watch, letting himself blend in. He listened for voices, but all he heard were his own deep, even breaths. He wanted to lean his head just a bit, to open an eye, but he fought that urge and kept still. Then he did hear them, footsteps running, pounding on the soft ground. He waited until he felt Ivy tap his foot. When he lifted his head all he saw was bare forest.

He watched her move and let himself enjoy the shape of her body bending and moving effortlessly. He wanted to taste her again, to feel the soft dark skin of her muscled legs. The morning drew on. Twice more she had him stop. The second time she jumped up into a tree, leaving him on the ground. This time he tilted his head and opened his eye just a slit and looked through the bare tangled vines of a raspberry bush. Four men in Legion coats walked by not more than sixty feet away.

When they were gone Estus closed his eyes again until Ivy tapped him on the back. He sat in the dirt, feeling the cold, the ache in his ankles. He looked down at the cake of mud on the back of his hands, the dirt under his fingernails. Everything was itchy. His nose was running and his throat was starting to feel raw and pained when he swallowed. Ivy knelt in front of him and said, "Ready?"

He suppressed a cough and said, "Yeah."

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She led him higher, across steep hills to ever higher ridges toward the gray mottled sky. The trees thinned, and when they broke into a clearing they were drenched in a brutal torrent of burning cold wind, filling his ears with its deafening rumble. Estus dropped to his knees, and his eyes raised to the mountains that swallowed the sky. Ivy knelt next to him and rested her hand on his shoulder.

He let his eyes follow the rippling crescendo of hills to the sheer ashen cliffs piercing through the highest clouds, lost in the fog of the winter ceiling. He rested there on his knees, unwavering in the wind, not because he felt suddenly humbled under the mountain's subtle and enormous majesty, which he did, but because he felt the magic stirring in him, drawn out by the presence of almighty stone, earth and power at its most brazen. He felt it as a sizzle, more pure and soft than during his morning rituals, a tingle in a part of his soul that had no name and could have none. He coaxed the energy to him, calming his mind, letting his fears be cast behind him. In a moment he was able to feel the power moving through him from the earth, unfettered and free, tugging him in the direction of tenebrous intentions, as a compass needle harkens the magnetic wind.

He needed to be warm, and the energy of the world came to his need, and he was warm. He turned to Ivy and smiled. She was impatient at first, but he patted the ground and she sat, looking all around them before settling next to him.

The wind pushed around the shimmering ruddy sphere of quiet air that Estus held around them. He slowly reached forward and gathered a small bundle of twigs, broke them into short pieces and piled them in front of him. With a wave of his hand he brought them afire. He sat back and crossed his legs in front of him and let the fire warm his body as his mind knew and explored the magic that flowed eagerly and playfully to his call.

Clouds in his intent and understanding parted, and he knew a calm and quietness of spirit as fresh and vital as air in the lungs of a man drowning in his own irrelevant distractions. He allowed himself to watch, to know, to be drawn into the belly of his path where at his feet lay diamonds of limitless triumph, his to hold but for the simple doing of simple things.

He leaned to Ivy, put his dirty hand on her neck and pulled her lips to his, drank her breath, and feasted on her mouth, sweetened by the rise of magic within them. She took a deep breath and said,

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"Estus, we need to keep moving. This is nice, but we need to go now so we can get to the mountain by sundown."

"We're not going to the mountain."

"Estus, what did you see?"

"We're not done here."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know, but running away isn't right. They work so hard to teach us to be afraid, but not of them, not of some invented god, but of ourselves, of what we can do."

"That's why we can't let them get to you. We should be moving."

He felt the wisdom of that and couldn't see any reasoning against it, but when he thought of moving forward, even one more step, he felt a sickness ready to wash over him, as though the world would crumble behind his feet. He stood. The magic stayed with him, but the bubble of quiet faded away and they stood holding hands in the cold wind. Estus looked around and led Ivy along the top of the ridge.

She heard the angry, desperate voices before he did. Instead of ducking behind the bush, Estus took off his camouflage. He pulled out the twigs and rubbed his face a little cleaner with his shirt.

Three men and two women, feral and scared, ran to the top of the hill and stopped, panting.

"Mongo the mage, I presume?"

Estus answered, "Close enough. Our paths have met here. The stopper is pulled from the decanter of destiny. What am I to learn from you? May we talk?"

"Talk?" The tall one stormed up and loomed over Estus. "Are you the one?" Ivy grabbed him, spun him to the ground and sat on his back.

"Down the hill, please," Estus commanded. "Out of the wind. I'll help you." They were dazed, near panic, but they followed him. They sat in a circle. Ivy gathered a bundle of twigs and set them in the middle. Estus pulled the energy through him, lit the kindling on fire, and made another warm bubble of air around all of them. Ivy opened her pack and took out pieces of hard bread, which she passed around to everyone. Then her canteen made the round, and Estus said, "My name is Estus Arrenkyle. This is Ivy Del-Gesius."

The dark haired one spoke. "I'm Davis, that's Gavin, Cody, Katie, Darla. Are you the one they're looking for?"

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Estus answered, "There are several Legion guards from Bora-Goss searching the forest for me. It seems that I have managed to fall into a political whirlpool set to manipulate my brother, Baron Arrenkyle, who now sits as Governor of Boret. May I ask, why are you running through the forest?"

"Because I'm a dumb ass and got hooked up with a pair of bigger dumb asses, then Darla kissed me and after than I lost track."

Katie shrieked, "You kissed him? When?"

"I was just..."

"Fine." Katie grabbed Cody and kissed him on the mouth.

Gavin looked at Cody, then Davis, and said, "How am I the only? I mean! This is. How did? Whatever." Then he looked at Ivy with a growing smile.

"Hey, no." Estus told him.

Davis told his story again. The broken wing pub, the fake marriage proposal, the canoe trip, Whiskers and walking for two days, to the fight that morning.

Darla said, "It's all a stupid mistake. I didn't know there was anything wrong with my mom's necklace. Nobody meant any harm."

"I don't think I killed him. He attacked Katie. We didn't mean to do anything wrong."

They were silent for a time and then Katie spoke up. "The man said they don't have any food in Boret. We have a smoke house back home, and a whole season full of dried fish and flour. If we help get some of that food to Boret, maybe they will listen and understand that we didn't mean to hurt anyone."

Davis told her, "You can't truck enough food to feed a whole city on that little dirt trail. You'd have a wagon train fifty miles long."

Katie said, "But if they can't get food through Gelst isn't it worth a try? We can use barges part of the way. And we I'm sure Boret has plenty of wagons."

"You need barges," Davis said. "Do you have any idea how much cargo fits on a large Koro-Del trader? You don't need to make wagons. Can you make a river?"

"I can," Estus said. "If we put shovels in the hands of the Teshon army instead of swords. It would take some time, but we could do it." He turned to Ivy and said, "With our friends. Ivy, what if Gelst didn't matter?"

"That's what you saw."

"We have to go back. I need to talk to Baron. Will you help us?"

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"You know I will." She leaned in and kissed him.  
Gavin cried out, "Oh, come on now!"

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Sunlight reflected from somewhere in the *Maiden's* galley through a tiny crack in the wall. The brig sat still, rolling gently on the ocean, letting the spot of light crawl slowly up and down the rough wood of the small smuggling compartment where Grant Fletcher sat, sullen and quiet on his bundle of blankets.

He held in his right hand a long carving knife that he stole from the kitchen in the early morning before the crew stomped on board, before they cast out to sea. He slowly ran the fingers of his left hand along the cold steel of the back of the blade. Two rats scurried near with little ticking feet and high pitched whimpers. He felt one climb over his outstretched leg, but he ignored it. His mind was filled with waiting.

When would be the time? Where and how would he find Scott Miggs alone?

His mind toyed with madness. Through a distant dream veil he remembered the young innocent boy he had once been, and the proud officer the boy had become, only to pollute that innocence. Are you with me then, his captain had asked. That was the moment that he had chosen madness and murder. Gareth had offered to release him with honors, but he had chosen to follow his mentor and friend into the dark world of heresy and revolution, smuggling weapons to farmers and fathers. When the mantle of that sedition fell upon his shoulders he was forced to witness the frayed limits of his abilities and to swallow the fetid flavor of his own smallness. Like all men, he had once believed that buried somewhere within his shell was an ember of greatness that could ignite passion toward the accomplishment of any feat. He had faced his greatest challenge and had crumpled dirty and sour, beaten and empty.

Now that withering ember cast a slanted shadow on the deathbed of his dignity. One final wrong to right. He ran the cold steel across the stubble hairs of his cheek and down to the soft skin of his neck. He wondered, is this knife for him, or for me?

The lingering scent of breakfast cakes and syrup, coffee and fried jerky, lingered just outside the thin false back of the wheat sack cabinet. Fletcher still felt the buzz from the nervous air left by the

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crew as their voices rolled through the galley. The brig felt different to him. The crew was edgy. He could hear the uncertain voice of Scott's toady, Brett Baker, calling out commands as first officer. He felt the disdain and dismay of the crew finding themselves led by these unlikely commanders.

He scraped the knife blade across the back of his wrist, feeling the rough hairs give way to the sharp edge.

The brig was heavy with cargo. She was sitting well down in the sea, sturdy and solid, holding steady. He could hear the wind whistling past the furled sails. He could feel the emptiness below deck. They were drifting in the sea. Not anchored. Not moving.

Boots walked by above his head. Fletcher let himself be seduced by his inevitable animal hunger, moving slowly and quietly to the end of the tiny compartment where ladder rungs led up the narrow shaft to the hidden door between the Captain's bunk and closet. He placed the back of the knife in his teeth and pulled himself up the rungs to the top where he found the latch that would let the panel swing out, but he waited, heart racing, breath held hot in his chest, cold steel death in his mouth. He looked through a peep hole hidden as part of the captain's crest. The small glass lens was the dolphin's eye.

He could see the captain's desk where Miggs had planted himself. Miggs seemed excited, nervous. He heard Baker's voice carry softly from around the corner.

"Can you tell me, finally?"

"We're on a special mission for God himself. Jacob has given us a special duty. Below deck there is a special device, and when we get close to the *Corona* I will release it, and this device will pierce the hull of their great heresy and take it to the bottom of the ocean to rot. No one is to come below deck. No one can see this or know about it. Go up now, and set the sails and rudder. Drive us head on into the *Corona*. Ram her. When we are close, I will take care of the matter."

Fletcher moved his foot to the lower rung. Then the next. Here was his opportunity, so simple. Miggs had set the stage perfectly for his own end. Grant felt his heart begin to race. He felt his blood run hot against his temples, throbbing, pounding in his ears. His hands shook as he lowered himself into the hiding nook. He hurried through the back of the low counter and out into the empty galley.

He heard foot steps coming down the narrow stairs from the quarterdeck. With knife in hand he hurried through the bulkhead and down the aft hatch. As soon as his feet touched the rough planks

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of the hold he heard Miggs call out from above, "Ahoy! Who's there?"

Fletcher stepped back into the cargo bay between large food crates holding flour and corn sacks, barrels of smoked fish and dried meats.

Scott's voice, shrill and angry, called out, "Up! Now, or I'll have you on the post!"

Fletcher waited silent for a moment. The knife felt loose in the wetness of his hand. He gripped it tighter, blade down.

"Now, mister. If I have to bring you up you'll be dragging the keel."

Hearing that bilge maggot try to be captain drew Fletcher into a rage desperate to quench itself on the blood draining from Scott's thin, severed neck. Fletcher cringed in his bones knowing that it was his own failures that allowed this mad toddler to swagger his ersatz command.

He moved away from the hatch ladder to draw Miggs away from where others might hear. Miggs started down the ladder as Fletcher hurried past the crates and through the bulkhead into the bow hold.

Immediately he was struck with an overpowering scent. The entire cargo space was full of barrels of black powder stacked three high and five deep on either side of a narrow path between them. When he got to the end he saw that the area between the barrels and the hull was filled with rough shaped iron balls the size of his fist.

This was no exotic elven device. This was insanity. Fletcher stood in the center of the death of the entire *Maiden's* crew, and the utter destruction of both brig and ship. Amid this, his own madness felt suddenly hollow and unconvincing. Miggs stood in the doorway through the bow hold bulkhead, blocking the way.

Two small portholes on the bow let in just enough light to show the surprise on the new captain's face when he saw Fletcher.

Murdering Miggs now was meaningless, unless it was necessary to keep this powder quiet.

"There's not a shred of sanity left in either of us then, is there Scotty?"

"I've never been more clear, mate."

---

Bodie felt the stink of death cling to him. His arms and back and legs and fingers ached from dragging the dead weight of cold men

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up the soft valley mud all morning. He could see in the eyes of the other men what was gnawing through the base of his own gut, that any one of them might have chosen the clean honor of a quick death in battle to the silent scream of unraveled humanity that choked the frosted air as they hauled endless limp and broken bodies through the fog of blood scent with what was left of their own limp and broken selves. Fatigue beyond soul sunk deep into his hollowed core from which he saw himself moving on puppet strings made of raw nerve.

The few Legion survivors that made it to shore had been finished with the dispassionate necessity of a weary headsman. Red Legion jackets and thin country flannel grew on the wagon pile.

He pushed his mind deep away, feeling almost lost inside the tortured ache of his body, but still he noted a common trait among his dead countrymen. Arrows were the Legion's most devastating advantage. The shafts were hardwood and thin, and the points were made of three knife-sharp fins that met at a thick point. They were professional killing implements, and they made Bodie's sharpened spoon handles seem like the shameful toys that they were. He considered trying to salvage the arrow tips, but he couldn't bring himself to ask his men to dig through the pile of their friends faces. He imagined returning to the large open pyre alone to sift through the ash where he could salvage the scraps.

He dragged his last load to the road and lifted it with the help of the driver. More emerged and were hefted onto the wagon. Soon the thirty men of the final cleaning crew stood panting on the road. Bodie nodded to the driver, who climbed into his seat. Without a word the horses started moving, and the men fell into procession.

For the next twenty minutes the frozen wind, the crumpled ice in his brows and the burning pain of walking on the numb stumps of his feet was a blissful luxury compared to the thick hell of the killing field. The sun was warming the air, and he could almost begin to consider hoping for a quiet place to sleep soon.

The path drove them through the bare forest where the sounds of wagon wheels thumping on the ruts and the breath and footsteps of the men settled over their procession. Bodie became aware of the charging carriage ahead a moment before the driver. The wagon team lurched to the side, just in time to miss the two carriage horses that spooked, reared up, and came to a restless stop.

Bodie limped forward and pulled the horses still, despite the urgings of the desperate driver.

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"Whoa there," Bodie called out to the horses. He grabbed the ropes and yelled, "Ease the reins, god damn it."

"It's fire!"

Bodie fought the horses still. "Get off!" cried the driver, kicking his foot. "Fire!"

Bodie climbed up and pulled the driver down by the hair and threw him into the road. The carriage door opened and a young woman stepped out. The man rose, cradling his hand. He was near panicked. "They're coming. Turn back!" Bodie grabbed him by the shoulders and pushed his back into the rough wood of the body wagon and said, "What fire?"

"Fifty men or more. Torches! They're burning the farmhouses. Killing children, anyone they can find."

"Who?"

The man made an attempt to stumble back to his carriage but got pushed back into place hard. "Who is doing the burning?"

"Soldiers. Teshons."

Bodie let the man crumple to the ground and turned to the carriage team and started unfastening their harness.

"Hey! Get away from there!" Before he could get close Bodie turned and punched him in the throat, sending him coughing to the ground, and by the time he was able to begin his next protest the horses were free.

"Ride back. Warn them. Tell anyone you can to spread the word. Get to the city. We have food and protection there." The woman was out of the carriage by the man's side.

"Jason, he's right. We should go back."

His eyes grew white and wild. "Go back? We can't go back. You didn't see them. They're killing everything." He paused, and seemed suddenly to recognize who he was with. "Because of you. You brought this on us. You and your godless thugs."

He found his footing and took a step toward his carriage, but Bodie drew his knife and told him, "Get on that horse and ride back to the farms. Get there before the soldiers and save whoever you can, or do you want me to just cut out your worthless heart and throw you on top of that pile?"

He turned, looked up at the bodies on the wagon, then his face scrunched up and he started crying. The woman said, "I'll go." She was leading one of the horses away. She jumped from the carriage step to the back of the horse. She turned back, looked at Bodie, then

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to the crying man and told him, "No. I won't marry you." She kicked her heels and the horse took off at a tear back the way they came.

Bodie stepped back, sheathed his knife, and spoke to his driver. "Get back and unload. You may need the wagons to evacuate. Leave the camp and get everyone to the bay. Do what you can."

The driver urged the team on through the frost air. Bodie's men were huddled near in a ring. "Go. Do what you can." When they hesitated, he raised his voice. "Go! I've had enough of this." Bodie turned away to the other carriage horse and started to mount.

"Don't leave me here. It's cold."

"Go with them if you want. Do what they say."

The man whimpered, angry and lost. He turned to watch the men heading off at a trot behind the wagon, looked back at his horse and lunged for it. Bodie pushed him back, knocking him down. Bodie jumped onto the bare back of the horse. He unbuckled his knife belt and threw it on the ground.

"What am I supposed to do with that?"

"Whatever you have to."

He pushed the horse at a gallop to cover the mile back to the river and kept a quick trot for another impatient half hour toward the bay. When he came in sight of the city he picked up the pace, driving the horse through the busy streets of the restless city to his warehouse headquarters.

He jumped down into a throng of supporters wanting to know about the battle. He waved them off and said, "I need a fresh horse! We took care of the Legion at the river, but we lost a lot of men, and now they're burning the farms and we need to make a camp for the survivors. Listen, get the other warehouses ready. Get cots and blankets and food here. Where going to have hundreds of people coming to us by tonight."

Before they could ask him any more questions, a boy led a horse at a run to him. Bodie lifted himself into the saddle and took off without another word. He charged across the wharf past the warehouses, past the school, the library, and into the Legion-controlled area on the north edge of the bay.

He saw the Legion sentry jump to his feet and fumble for his bugle. Bodie urged the horse into a sprint and jumped the barricade, kicking the bugle out of the young man's hands just as he started to blow the alarm. He rode past the Legion camp, and soon had a dozen mounted fighters closing in behind him. He drove his mount to the church, where he startled another fifty soldiers. He pulled

back. The horse reared up. Bodie jumped down and charged the church.

The Legion sentry drew his sword and raised it up just as Bodie got to him. He grabbed the sentry's sword hand and punched at the same time, then he twisted and snapped the guard's arm, took the sword and ducked inside. An arrow sunk into the heavy church door as he closed it behind him. He threw the lock, knowing it would buy him only a few seconds. He ran down the empty aisle, between musty pews, scattering dust in a swirl that followed him through the sunbeams to the altar. He ran behind the curtain and down the narrow stairs through the sanctum door, past the prayer rooms and into the living quarters of the holy sisters, who screamed and scattered.

He grabbed one by her hair and pulled the young girl close to him.

"Where is he?"

She fought him and tried to break free as she called out a wordless scream. Bodie pulled her through the common room to the stairs. "Show me!"

She clawed at his face, distracting him from the thunder of heavy Legion boots running through the sanctum. He dropped the girl and flew up the stairs, circling for five flights to the elf's private chamber.

He found Kessel Tol-Rena sitting in a reclining lounge chair. Kessel Tol-Rena lifted a hand and Bodie felt pain slash through his body. On a quiet day it would have doubled him over in a screaming lurch, but with the army chasing him and the phantom of fallen men behind him, it merely mixed with the numb, the shock, the countless unnamed agonies lost amid the thrash of his fury.

He pushed to the elf and pulled the slight figure from his chair with one hand. He turned with the elf's body between himself and the arrows of the soldiers who rushed into the room.

With the sword on the elf's neck, Bodie quickly backed out to the balcony overlooking the Mundela valley and the bay. The sky was filled with pillars of gray smoke, some even within the city.

"Did you order the burning?"

"What does it matter who ordered it? It is done. I can't help Gelst anymore."

"Not another step or I'll slice his neck through."

Kessel continued, "Whoever gave the order, it was you who caused it. I've been working for years to guide the people of Gelst, to

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give you everything you wanted, but you couldn't wait, could you? You forced his hand, Bodie. You have ruined everything that I have worked for here. You gave him exactly what he wanted. Boret must be fed."

"Feed them then. I don't care. My fight is not with Boret, but with your kind. How old are you, elf? Six hundred? A thousand years old? Are you ready to lose it right here? Call them back. Now!"

Kessel raised a hand and said to the men stepping through the balcony archway, "Hold back. I'm not hurt. Bodie, listen. I remember when you were little, and you stayed after church to talk with me. You used to tell me all about riding on the river with your father and how much you enjoyed it, when he wasn't drinking or hitting you. Bodie, I spoke the prayer at your baptism. I'm not your enemy. I've been trying to help Gelst open up since before you were born. I am not Andor Tol-Tolin. I'm not the one who beat you, or made you feel like you had to steal gold, raise an army, and drag an entire city into war to prove that you're better than your father. Bodie, I want to help you get what you're fighting for, but this is not the way. This is not the time. There's more to this than you know. Let's talk. I can tell you things that will help this all make sense."

The Legionnaires were still moving in slowly. Bodie backed into the corner next to the railing that overlooked the bay. Below, in the church courtyard, the horse was grazing on the winter brown grass that he could find between the snow-covered leaves.

"I don't have anything to say to you except leave us the hell alone. You keep us fighting against each other when it's your kind that we need to fight. You keep us down, lie to us. No more. Get them back!"

"Bodie, I have never lied to you.

Soldiers were pressing forward, arrows loaded and pulled back, searching for a clear shot. Bodie dropped the sword and threw the elf over the balcony rail, holding him by the wrist of one hand.

"Do it and he falls. Take one step or even lean this way, and I let go. Or just kill me and set us all free."

Bodie looked down at the elf. He was pulling away to one side slightly, floating with elven magic above the balcony. Bodie jumped and grabbed hold of the elf under a storm of arrows. They fell, with Bodie on top riding the elf down past the front of the church. Kessel managed to slow their fall, but they still hit hard. Bodie broke his fall on the elf and heard a loud snap as Kessel's arm broke.

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He lifted the elf and ran to the horse, holding the limp elf on his back like a sack, shielding himself from the arrows still falling around him. He threw the elf over the horse's neck, jumped on, and rode through the empty streets of Gelst.

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The seven were cold, dirty, and hungry. Estus looked down through the trees at the Bora-Goss Prison. The governor's carriage was still there.

Estus turned to Ivy, kissed her, and said, "If this doesn't work, can you help them get to Boret?"

"I will."

He turned back to the three men and two women huddled in their thin jackets. He wanted to say something hopeful to them, but there was nothing he could promise. He turned away and started down the hill, forcing himself through the stiff ache of his back and legs. Each step sent a heavy jolt through his weary body.

The guards in front watched him approach. One went inside. Estus kept his steady pace as men ran from the side door. He walked to them and let them surround him, let them throw him to the ground and bind his wrists and legs in ice cold steel. When they pulled him back to his feet he said, "I need to speak with the governor."

"You can speak to the rats in your hole."

Estus expected a response like that. He continued, still in a calm voice. "Let me put it this way. If I don't see my brother in ten minutes, Kendrick will kill us all. I can stop it, but I need to get a message to him."

"Give me the message. I'll tell him."

Estus laughed and said, "Okay. Glom eberoff, torka min bablin moravet. Ubliam kaff inka biver yami." He laughed. "There's more. Should I go on?"

"What is that you're saying? Translate it."

"I can't. But that's okay. Lock me away. I'm probably better off dead anyway. Do what you want with your own lives."

They took him in and through several locked gates, down stairs and into a dark hallway with heavy wooden doors. One door was open, for him. They threw him in. He landed on the dirt. Estus crawled to the far wall and sat with his back to the rough stone wall.

He calmed himself by calling the energy of the earth to him. He felt the warmth grow around him while he pushed a smile on his

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tired face and let himself bask in the certainty of his confidence. This would work, because it had to work. They needed just enough time and just enough political cover to pull it off.

The wait wasn't long. Soon the door opened and men brought in oil lanterns. Baron came in behind them and stood in the doorway.

"This is for his ears only," Estus said.

Baron answered, "They're not going to leave me alone with you. Say what you need to say."

"There are three men and two women outside. Three Legion soldiers woke them early this morning and made rash and invalid accusations. There was a fight, and one soldier was hurt. They are innocent, as any genuine investigation would show, but we lack the luxury of time. They have become key to what I need to say, and I have come to give you my statement in exchange for their immediate safety and freedom."

"And Kendrick?"

"Is on his way."

"I'll let them in. No promises. No deals. You better start talking."

"Alone. Chain me down if you need to. When they're inside and safe, I'll tell you what's going on."

Baron fumed for a prolonged moment, breathing heavily through his nostrils. Finally he said, "Okay. Chain him up." He left. Soldiers brought in irons and wrapped them around Estus, holding his arms tight against his body. They wrapped his legs and secured the chains with locks. Again Estus was left alone in the dark. The energy of the earth came readily to him again, flushing warm through his tired muscles. Estus smiled and let the power calm him.

Soon keys turned in the lock and Baron entered alone. He set his lamp on the floor and crossed his arms.

"Thank you," Estus said. "Are they in? Are they okay?"

Baron didn't answer. He watched Estus for a long moment letting silence settle into the room and grow stale. Finally he spoke in a weary, impatient voice, "What do you have to say?"

"When I came from Kelebor to Boret I went through the Teshon forest. I found the ruins of an ancient city named Antellem. I met Ivy Del-Gesius there, and she told me what happened two thousand years ago and how those events are related to what is happening now. There's a battle going on between the two elven families, Andor's and Ivy's, about the proper way to manage humans and our magic. Andor is using war, manipulation, and lies. Ivy wants a kind of partnership, or mentorship, like before."

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“Estus, you made a very serious threat. Get to the point soon, or I’m going to throw your friends in here with you and let the drunken warden upstairs sort it all out.”

“Baron, those ruins are not taboo because of any great evil, but because they show the greatness of our past. It wasn’t debauchery or sinfulness that caused Benok Tol-Tolin to banish us from our great cities, but the opposite. We were growing up, becoming more wise, and learning more about the world and our abilities. Eventually, our government, our culture, our greatest achievements in art and magic and music became a threat to elven supremacy, and we were taught that to be human itself is some mysterious evil, and that every urge to create or innovate is a mortal sin unless it is done on the leash of the elves.”

“You need to get all of that out of your head, but I don’t think you can anymore, or if you ever could. You’re here, locked up in chains, and you still can’t see straight. You know I can’t let you go this time. This is it, brother. The end of the road. Tell it all to the cold walls here.”

“Several years ago it started happening again. Gelst was becoming too independent. The regulations, the ones you were sent there to enforce, weren’t to protect Boret, but to punish Gelst. It had exactly the impact that Andor wanted. The people didn’t like it. They protested, and he pushed them into a war. I’m sure you know by now that there have been several opportunities to resolve the situation, but resolution only gets in his way. All out war and civil panic is the goal, so that Andor can crush the awakening of Gelst and continue to keep humanity covered in fear. He creates the panic then offers himself and his god as the savior.”

“Are you even hearing me, Estus? You’re life is over and you sit there in the dirt, rambling and babbling. Korolem has war in the streets. Gelst is rotting under the influence of thieves. We need to bring Gelst back to the light. Do you remember the light? Did you ever see it?”

“Gelst is the key to all of this. The story has been that Gelst is the mouth that must feed the stomach of Boret, and because of this Gelst must be utterly controlled. Everyone has forgotten that Gelst never had any trouble feeding Boret for hundreds of years. The threat of Gelst was the creative minds of the people, new industry, new more open society that had to be wrapped under a veil of excessive legislation. Andor can’t admit any of that without revealing his true purpose, and so he starves Boret instead. If we can find a way to feed

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the people of Boret without Gelst, then the premise of Andor's war is undermined. He will have to give up his war or find new ways to portray Gelst as an enemy. Either way, it's the advantage we need."

"What do you know about it? Andor didn't start this. We let him down. We're barely worthy of the Light. Boret is the gem. I won't let it fall. Andor is helping us do the best that we can. I know it's pleasing to have some simplistic explanation for the mess that the world is, but Andor isn't, I mean, he's not causing this. We're all just trying to deal with the crisis."

"Baron, whether you believe me or not about why this is happening, you know that there are tens of thousands of people ready to face a long and hungry winter in Boret, and whatever else is true we need to do what we can to see that they don't starve. The more hungry and desperate they are, the more Andor can mold them like putty into obedient parishioners eager to stamp out any subversive element around them or inside their own minds. But all that aside, helping them is the right thing to do because they are hungry, and they are innocent."

"And how are you helping that? Cavoring with dark elves? Practicing witchcraft? You can sit here and rot! I don't know what to do with you, Estus."

"The people upstairs came from Merebor, the bay of the Nordel river. They walked for two days across a plain between the Nordel and Mundela rivers. If we can connect these rivers with a small canal we can establish a permanent trade rout around Gelst. Gelst can feed us or not. It won't matter that they want to have universities and public libraries. If Andor wants to cripple the independence of Gelst he will have to find another mechanism, which he will no doubt attempt. When he does we will be ready to reveal his intentions to everyone from Boret to Korolem."

"Stop it. You should hear yourself! I should wrap those chains around your throat! If I were the man I'm supposed to be I would have found a way to stop you. I couldn't stop you. You never let me save you, Estus. That's my failure. I'll live with that."

"Kendrick is coming."

"Bring it, then."

"But not to do harm. He's going to help us make this canal with the other humans who, like me, have learned to master the power of magic, which is every human's birthright."

"You're mad."

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"When the world is insane, sanity looks mad. We intend to feed Boret, and to make it possible for Gelst to become home to the best that humans can be. It's time, Baron, to stop living under threat of damnation for being who we are, and to open our minds to the best that we can become."

Baron put his hand to his head. His fingers crawled into his hair and grasped tight. He exhaled heavily, with a growl in his throat.

"Baron, if there is any spark of recognition in anything I have said, then help us move the food and supplies we need to Merebor. There is a ship called the *Corona* carrying food, weapons, and equipment. I understand that you have also confiscated several ships and brigs into Legion service for exactly the same purpose. We can work together. We need to work together."

His voice was spent. "Estus, I can't."

"Take my brand now, if you must, but let those people go. Let them show Kendrick and the others where to dig. Everything is coming to this point. The army is in Korolem. Andor won't be able to move them into place before we have the alternate rout working. Winter is here, and time is running out."

Estus waited a moment, watching his brother. Baron was leaning back against the door, as if hearing his brother's voice was an agony that he was condemned to endure.

Estus said, almost a whisper. "I'm sorry that I couldn't be what you needed me to be. I don't know if you believe any of this or not, but I never went looking for crazy ideas. I never wanted to be different. I just wanted to know what's happening. I just want the truth."

Baron looked up as though he had found a clean air pocket amid the stink. "The truth? The truth, whether you know it or not, is that people need to believe in something or our cities will fall into ruin, run by thugs who will rape and murder and steal. God, or believing in God, is all that stands between us and death. If it's a lie, its a good one, a necessary one."

"Is that what you want?"

"It's what we need."

Baron looked down on his brother. His face, painted by the yellow lamp, showed a knotted brow, a clenched jaw.

"Do you need it, Baron?"

"I need to take care of the Teshon and Gaelon lands."

"Then do that. Do that, and stop this war."

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Baron pounded on the door. "I'll let them go." Keys rattled in the lock and the door opened. Baron picked up the lamp and left. The door closed, leaving darkness to flood over the damp earth stench of the cell. The chains dug into his flesh, blunt and hungry for his warmth.

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Adrian pushed the heavy chair off its rug and across the wooden floor, filling the Captain's office with the raucous grumble of wood on wood. She kicked off her shoes and climbed aboard the plush chair to open the shutters. With her knees pressed against the soft back and her elbows resting on the sill, she leaned out into the cold sea wind and let it play tangle with her hair. The ocean, split apart by the *Corona's* hull, sang out a constant, thunderous cry. Behind them the coastline collapsed into a blurry blue-green line in front of the Kambor mountains, which drifted away like wisps of little clouds. How great the ocean, to turn the mightiest mountain into a frail, disappearing thing. How great to ride master on the sea.

She felt an intimate smile pulling on her cheeks. This was not mere joy, but an awakening, a release from her dreams of red coats with red blood in a swirling, unrelenting torrent where her magic was made of screams and her fingers were made of sharp steel. Now those scary images, the tight knot in her belly, the chill of cold night grass on her feet, and the stubborn clench of her jaw all uncoiled and slithered down into the deep water, leaving her in the softest peace since daddy last kissed her to bed and left the candles glowing. Now she was home, back under the love of a mother she had never known, the ocean, limitless, caressing her skittish soul with a delicious and very private bliss.

Becker stood next to the chair and leaned beside her, his face next to hers in the wind, his hand resting on her shoulder. She looked at him and smiled at his smile, and the way the sun played in the edges of his neat hair. They looked forward as the *Autarkic Maiden* came into view around the bow of the great ship.

Something in her gut tightened. A sudden darkness struck her mood, but before she could grab a hold of the sensation, Becker plucked her from the chair and carried her away from the window. She saw Becker rush to close the shutters, and in the swirling green looking magic, she saw a horrid scene in the belly of the *Maiden*.

Fletcher raised the killing knife he took from the galley.

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Miggs laughed as he struck a match and lowered it onto a short time fuse. It sputtered and took life, throwing light and sparks above the small barrel of powder.

He began a step, knife raised. When Miggs drew his sword, Fletcher stopped and threw the knife. It struck the heavy captain's jacket and clattered across the floor. Grant closed in and fought for the sword, his fingers clawing at the captain's face.

Miggs turned, pulling their fight away from the fuse, lunging backward to try to free his sword arm. They fell to the deck. Fletcher made sure his knee found soft belly flesh when they landed. Something snapped and Miggs cried out. Fletcher rolled off and darted back to the bow hold. He picked up the small barrel before noticing how little fuse was left. He couldn't pull it out.

He ran to the stern, stumbled, nearly fell, then up the hatch ladder, but before he got a foot on the stair to the main deck the fuse fire sucked into the barrel. He threw it into the galley and fell behind the bulkhead as the blast shook the air and sent tables and chairs to splinters.

A sting in his head pulsed through his ringing ears and tunnel vision of disoriented panic. The cut on his scalp poured red over his hands and pooled on the floor in front of him. He twisted and rolled. Daylight blinded him from above. Hands pulled at him. He saw the galley billowing in smoke as the spilled grease led the fire into the store room. Hands helped him to his feet. Familiar faces fluttered around. The fire licked orange through the smoke choke heat that burned his eyes shut. His hands found the stair. His feet pulled him up familiar steps until he was able to stumble away from the plumes of smoke and into the shadow of a massive ship. Fletcher froze in the chaos of bucket drills and the droning alarm bell when he saw the captain of the other ship come to the rail and look down from above.

He wiped the blood and smoke from his eyes as he looked into the haunting face of an impossible vision.

Gareth saw Fletcher stumble and fall, but couldn't spare the moment. The gush of smoke from the *Maiden's* stern erupted into a tumult of raging fire.

"Fools! No time for that. Prescott, Ladders!" He called down to his old crew. "You're scuttled. Abandon your post. Damn it, they're not hearing. Prescott, you have her!" He pushed through the press of flesh along the rail to the rope ladder and flung himself quickly down the rungs to the deck of his *Maiden*.

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He grabbed the first man he saw. "Mitchell, where's your captain?"

The boy stood frozen for a moment and then cried out, "We thought you was dead!"

"Get to the ladder. You're done. All hands! Abandon Ship!" He swam against the current of stunned faces and came to Fletcher, whose head was being bound in a rough shirt bandage by one of his junior officers. "Carson, where's Miggs?"

"He was below, Captain."

"He was with me!" Fletcher shook off his daze and grabbed Gareth by the coat. "She's loaded with black powder. Get them off. Get away!"

"Help him up one of the ladders."

Gareth stood and looked around. The *Maiden* was resting against the *Corona*, scorching the new hull. He looked up to see Prescott ordering the sails furled. The *Maiden's* crew crowded around the three rope ladders, pushing, fighting. Gareth reached into one scum, grabbed a man, punched him in the eye, and called out, "The next goddamned punch better be thrown at me. Line up!"

The heat from the fire warped the air, and soon they had to give up on the aft rope ladder. The *Corona*, nestled into the fire while the last few men hurried up the ropes, was itself starting take fire. Gareth went to the bow hatch and hurried below deck. The smoke was boiling in the dark, but he called out, "Ahoy! All hands on deck."

Miggs stumbled out of the smoke, covered in black ash, and fell. Gareth called out one more time, "Ahoy!" But his voice was lost in the rumble of fire. He pushed Miggs up ahead of him and dragged him to the last ladder. The deck was empty except for the rage of flame. He threw Miggs over his shoulder and started the climb. From above he heard Prescott's voice call out, "Full rudder Starboard."

The *Corona* herself was now aflame on her port side, and as the ships parted ways Gareth felt the heat as the *Maiden* took full flame at his back. Six of the *Corona's* crew rappelled down the tall hull to take Miggs and help their captain up.

He had no sooner got on deck and took notice of the fire bucket drills when he was nearly tackled by a young girl.

His face was a mask of soot and his blue jacket was ripped, but he was fine. Adrian's mind raced back to the fire. Becker's magic

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glared bright to her mind, a sort of shimmer pink chasing the fire. She let go of Lenny and bolted across the deck.

It happened on the run, almost ahead of her, a death clutch urgency that pulled her mind deep into a channel of magic that would have sent her mind twisting had she not steeled it in the furnace of her young odyssey. She endured three more fast steps, horribly slow against the pack of time, but she had to get closer. At the rail the magic burst through her, nearly lost in the maelstrom blast from the very roots of the deep. Adrian settled the power with a wave of her hands, forcing it to take shape, drawing the water up like a mountain crest above them. When the *Maiden* gave her last bitter belch of black power, the blast and killing shrapnel were consumed by the tons of water. The massive wave crashed upon the deck quenching the last hint of fire, and as crew looked among themselves in ragged disbelief of their own survival, Adrian's eyes found the face of the Captain as he watched the last burning mast of the *Autarkic Maiden* disappear below the surface of tranquil blue.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Bodie sat on the rough dirty stairs of the cramped cellar under the Broken Wing Pub, watching the jitter shadow dance of a solitary candle through a tunnel haze from somewhere not quite inside himself. He sucked the dusty earth scent through his nostrils and fed the strangeness with another gulp of whiskey from his heavy green bottle. The harsh burn from each swallow was a welcome anchor that held him for a fleeting moment but then released him deeper into his sinking well of utter fatigue.

The elf sat in the dirt next to a sagging rack of liquor bottles, cradling his broken arm, watching Bodie, who reached again to his knife that he had stabbed into the wooden step beside his boot. His fingers played on the smooth wood of the handle, waiting until he was numb enough to kill the elf and extinguish the entire history of Gelst along with him. If he didn't act soon the liquor would take him. Already his arms were slogging heavy, and his resolve was getting lost amid the swimming shroud of the whiskey. Why could he kill men, other men like himself, but not the elf who played with their death like marks in a game? The taboo ran deep, chafing against his determined will.

"You're not going to kill me, Jebediah. That's not how this is going to end. You need to sleep."

The sound of the elf's voice broke the taboo, and he was left with the ugly chore of doing what must be done. Bodie glared at him. "No more talking." He threw the bottle down with a solid thunk onto the ground and stood himself up. "No more in my head, your lies."

Kessel jumped to his feet as Bodie lurched forward.

He plunged the knife down, but the elf dodged back against the shallow dirt wall and he swung at air. Bodie charged another step forward, knocking on Kessel's broken arm, drawing a shrill cry of pain. Again his arm came down, but into the iron grasp of Kessel's good hand.

In the dim flicker of the agitated candle, Bodie saw the elf's face break from its confident sneer into mask of fear. That vision stirred in Bodie a surge of new anger. This was supposed to be an act of

war, the cutting down of a tyrant, not the murder of a frightened old man. If his thunder of thoughts could have strained themselves into words, they would have screamed, how dare you be afraid? How dare you not accept this after what you've done to us all? Then it seemed right that fear should be his last vision, the same fear that he sold so casually during his sermons, the fears of families shattered, the fear Bodie and countless others felt when they were strapped to a cold stone slab and this very elf let a white iron burn savage into their flesh. Bodie felt the animal in him rise to the kill and thrust the knife down into the elf's shoulder.

Kessel stumbled and fell, broken and bleeding at Bodie's feet, and when he could have dropped and flayed opened the elf's body, Bodie stopped and stepped back. His thoughts focused on a single issue of how to bring an end to the suffering and panic of the people of Gelst, and the sick fear that, no matter how deserving, a murdered elf would do more to hurt them than to help.

He stood, struggling between two worlds. If he was to kill him, it had to be soon. Kessel offered him no cue. He was a lump, a shadow in the dark with his back to the wall and his head up, watching, waiting, breathing heavily.

The distant slam of the front door upstairs broke the moment. Kessel said quietly, "It's going to be okay now, Bodie. Help is coming. For you. Not for me."

Meredith called out, her voice a sweet flower pushing through the muck and fog. Bodie stomped up the stairs into the faint light that seeped through the storeroom window. She stood alone in the twilight glow of the empty pub. He noticed the knife, still wet with blood, in his hand. He set it on the counter. The whiskey swam thick in his head, and he wanted only to fall upon the wooden floor and fall to sleep in his wife's warm arms, but it was wrong. She wasn't supposed to know that he was here.

He steadied himself against the bar and managed to ask, "What is it?"

She ran to him, saw his face and melted against him. "What happened?" He pulled her into his arms and clung deep to her, fighting the rage of fatigue, spilling his own rattled tears into her hair. He couldn't hold her close enough. His cheek brushed hers and he found her mouth, drew her lips between his. His hand held her cheek while her kisses brought him back toward faint recognition of himself.

"What's next? What do you need?" he asked.

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"Are you okay? What happened?"

"They're burning the farms."

"I know. People are starting to arrive. We've been setting up shelters in the warehouses."

"How did you find me here? I was at the river."

"There's a ship in the bay, Bodie. They're on their way here to talk to you. Captain Gareth and some people with him."

"No that's not, you talked to who?"

"I did, just now. They're on the way, but I need to talk to you first."

She led him to a chair, sat him down, and sat across his legs while she pulled his hands to the skin under her shirt. They kissed again, hungry, soothing the strange broken world together. Slowly the rags of his twisted tension began to ease as his hands fed on the touch of her body, her back, the meat of her breasts. He unbuttoned her coat, lifted her shirt to her chin, and drew his lips across her silk skin to her breast and suckled her, drawing redemption and strength from her body to his. She bent down over him, hugging his head. He looked up to the face he loved, framed in a halo curtain of chestnut brown hair shimmering in the last light of the sun.

"Kiss my belly." She stood. Bodie put his stubble cheek on her tummy and caressed her with his rough hands and soft kisses. "That's our baby in there," she told him.

Her words sent a chill through him like cold water in his spine. He had led other men to their deaths and driven other babies fatherless, and he suddenly felt their loss deeper than he had ever known. He put his hands on her and saw visions, swirling amid so many others, of himself holding his own little baby. A stab of selfishness, of wanting his child safe with him and damn the world, thundered against the image of his own death and the sacrifices of so many others. He felt flung from guilt to fury, through helplessness, and finally back to never ending need to just keep going through the mundane trail of necessities, to just do the next thing to be done, if only he could find it.

She pulled her shirt back down and took his hand, lifting him from the chair.

"They're here," she told him.

The door of the pub pushed open. Framed in dim dawn light he saw three shapes. The girl ran and threw her arms around him. "Mister Bodie, you're okay." He knelt down in front of Adrian and

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put his hands on her little shoulders and said, "You too, kid. Hey, I'm so sorry that I didn't get you here. What happened to you?"

"Everything happened! I met Lenny, and found my cousins, and this is Becker Dodd. He's an actor, but really a wine maker, and there was a play, but the army came and we fought them, and I helped, and then I got to go on the ship, and I'm really really glad you're okay." She hugged him again and kissed his cheek.

When he stood he found himself in a bear hug from the captain. Bodie looked at him and said, "Good to see you! I heard you went to Korolem."

"I did. Damn fools at Koro-Del gave me a whole ship to play with. That's Becker Dodd. He's going to go take care of that elf of yours here. We need to talk to him."

Meredith led everyone to a table. Bodie followed and sat while his wife went to the bar and filled glasses with cider from the barrel tap. Adrian said, "You look tired."

"I am tired, kid. Looks like it all turned out for you." He took a sip of his cider. It was smooth and sweet. Adrian drank, and smiled at him over her cup.

Becker came back into the room with Kessel Tol-Rena behind him, repaired, but still in his bloody shirt. Then the front door opened with another bang, and Bodie's mom charged in. "Where is he?"

She ran to Bodie and threw her arms around him and covered his head in kisses. The captain got up from the table and stood behind her. When she turned around, she said, "Humph. I thought you ran off to Korolem."

"Don't Humph me, woman," and he kissed her sound on the mouth.

Bodie rested his head in his wife's arms and fell fast asleep.

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Estus woke and rolled forward to get his feet under him. His hands were still shackled behind him, and he was wearing only the rough linen prison gown that gave little shelter from the packed dirt of his cell. He pulled himself to his knees with his forehead pressed on the ground, and after a long moment enduring muscle cramps in his shoulders, he sat up, pulled one foot out from under him and managed to raise himself standing on stiff legs. He walked on ice feet as far as the chain from his handcuffs to the wall would let him,

back and forth along the half circles that he and countless others had formed.

There was no sunlight, but the prison sounds around him suggested that others were stirring. A cough somewhere. Shuttering gasps of despair. A chorus echo of distant moaning and crying. Another fine morning in the Bora-Goss Prison. Estus shook out his legs and did a couple knee bends to loosen up before settling in to wait for his second day's breakfast of hard bread and a pan of warm water.

He paced some more, forcing himself to smile at the fact that the cramps in his right arm meant that he still had one. So far so good. He had managed to keep his spirits up yesterday, after they came and took the chains off, gave him his gown, and tied him like an animal. He knew that it would grow harder every day to keep from sliding into despair and not think of Carmen and all that was lost, or was still yet to be lost.

He hummed the tune of an old song that the tradesmen's sons used to sing when they thought no grownups could hear them. He filled the tiny dirt cell with the merry tune until he heard the clatter of chains and the sound of heavy boots on the stone stairs. Yay breakfast!

He knelt and waited for his food to be slid inside. The door opened, but instead of a hand and a dirty tray it was his brother Baron and three other guards.

All he said was, "Get him."

The guards came in, unlocked his shackles, and took his chains away. The simple luxury of pulling his arms forward was succulent. He stretched and felt his muscles ease.

"Come on."

Estus stepped into the dark corridor and walked beside his brother toward the bright pool of light at the stairway. The stone was harsh and cold on his bare feet that were dressed only in a thin layer of black dirt. He wanted to ask questions but kept quiet as he was led along the dusty, stench-filled basement hall. They went up the long flight of stairs and past the guard standing bored at the top. Baron led them through a maze of turns and then stopped by a small window and looked through the heavy iron grate. The Legion guards and Estus stood back, waiting patient and still for several long minutes. Estus shifted his weight and tried to ignore the cold draft that blew across his ankles. Estus watched his brother's face lit by the snow shine of the morning. Baron looked tired, but he wore it

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well, with a calm certainty. He never looked back, only out across the bright snow. Finally Baron said, "Okay," and started walking again. The guards pulled Estus along to follow.

A large door was unlocked and opened as they approached. They went through the doorway and up a wooden stair to an atrium between the stable and a row of small offices. Baron led them into the stable where Andor Tol-Tolin and the warden were getting out of a coach.

Andor saw Baron standing with Estus. He stood calm and asked, "Is this wise, Governor?"

"After full consideration, the judges found that he has done nothing wrong. He has been absolved by the consecrated tribunal."

"Really?"

"You'll find it all in order. Each charge was answered and explained, as you will see in the record."

"Interesting. The fire, and his blatant use of dark magic are no minor details. How are you explaining that?"

"The fire was accidental, caused by one of the jurors knocking over a candlestick. The prisoner panicked and fled through a damaged window, and later returned on his own accord to resume the hearing."

Andor laughed, "Interesting, so how did he break through a heavy iron gate set in solid stone?"

"I found a two year old work-order in the warden's desk. The mortar was loose around the window, letting water and ice flow into fissures in the stone which weakened its structure. The iron grate was barely held in place. A heavy wind could have knocked it out. I've had it repaired."

Andor turned to the warden beside him and asked, "Is this so?"

The man barely looked up from his feet and said, "Yes. I failed to fix the window. I wrote the work order. Like he said."

Baron continued, "There were a number of other security, disciplinary, and conduct issues here at the facility, which I have also taken care of."

Andor, still looking at the warden asked, "Will you testify to this under oath to God?"

Still examining his feet, the warden paused, cleared his throat and said, "I would swear it."

Andor cocked an eye to Baron and said, "Glen Dawson told me quite a different story. I think once we review the facts and the witnesses, we will get to the very bottom of this."

"I don't know what you mean, Andor. Glen Dawson was not at the tribunal. His drivers will tell you that his coach threw a wheel, and that they spent the night repairing the damage before giving up and waiting for a ride back to Boret. If Glen Dawson, or anyone else, tells you that he was here, that would be a most unfortunate mistake. Anything Sir Dawson might tell you about the hearing would only be a fiction from his imagination."

"And the charges? All answered and accounted for? This man, your brother, is truly innocent?"

"Absolutely. It is all in the report, signed, notarized, sealed, sanctioned, and registered. You will find no record, no evidence, no testimony, or accounts that differ in any way. So it is written, as it was done."

Baron then took two folded papers from his inside jacket pocket and held them out to Andor. "Thank you for your suggestions, but I won't be needing these. I will be returning to Boret, and I will tend to these matters myself. Estus, come with me." Estus followed his brother back into the prison until Andor called out after them.

"This is not wise, Governor."

Baron spun around and said, "I have a message from an old friend of yours. She said, history begins here. Do you know what that means?" Instead of waiting for an answer, Baron grabbed Estus by the arm and led him inside. A group of Legion soldiers were standing in the doorway as they approached. Baron barked, "Back." They made a hole.

Baron led Estus to a room where his clothes were laid out clean and a bath basin was filled. For the first time since collecting him this morning, Baron looked directly at his brother. His face was calm, friendly, and relaxed. "Ivy is waiting for you a mile up the river road. I had Koby brought here. So clean up. Get dressed."

"So that's it? He's going to let you do this?"

"No. This has nothing to do with him letting me. I'm not sure what he's going to do with this, but I know that I made it pretty hard for him to do anything about it. He made sure the office of Governor has all the power that he wants, then does whatever he needs to control the man in the position."

"I was supposed to be his lever against you."

"Until he saw that it wasn't working. Then he used everything else. He threatened my rank, my reputation. He didn't expect me to notice that he gave me all the power that I needed. When I did, he turned to outright extortion. He thought I would do anything, agree

to anything, to keep you out of trouble and keep all of that away from my public image. He kept me chasing some false promise of what I already had, so I did this to show him that I found my way out of his trap.”

“I think you’re beginning to understand magic. I’m glad to see that, even if it means I had to be your lever too.”

“Well, it worked out for both of us. I wouldn’t have let you stay down there for very long. Maybe until the worst blew over. I knew you would be safe. That’s more than I’ve had for a while. But that was selfish, and you really haven’t done anything wrong except not believe in God, which really only matters to them.”

“To who?”

“To Andor and his elves. You know, Estus, your biggest problem is that you don’t think anyone else understands you, or that you’ve got some great truth that’s too special for just anyone to see.”

“It’s not special. That’s the point. I want everyone to see it. We don’t have to be led around by lies that tell us we can only have happiness, or money, or love if it comes from them and their imaginary god.”

“God is not imaginary, Estus. You’re missing the subtle point. You always did. Believing itself creates God. Believing draws us together in the cold of an unforgiving world. It gives us a reason to try to do good things, to be better than we are, and to not be afraid. It doesn’t matter if it’s real the way rocks and mud and blood are real. It’s real because it changes us, because we’re different without it. That’s as real as most things that matter to us, like honor, or pride, or love. Does honor exist? Is pride or duty real? Does love stop existing just because you can’t punch it in the nose? Belief is what keeps most people from drowning in worry, debt, anger, all the dark things. We need the light.”

“But it’s a lie.”

“Is it? I don’t know what’s really out there. Nobody can. I just know that I feel something when I’m in church, something good. Whatever else, that’s real. That feeling is real, and it makes me a better person. I can believe in that.”

“I have that feeling too, but I have it without the baggage of an idea that was specifically designed to keep my responsibility, my destiny, my magic, locked up away from me in the hands of their god. For me, church is like that cell downstairs. I can be happy anywhere, but there’s a limit when you have to depend on someone to bring you food, or good luck, or money, or whatever it is that

people pray for. Baron, you are a good person because you first decide do good things and then you do them. What you feel in church is real, because god is nothing but a large reflection of you as your best self. They're taking your soul, tying it up with fear, and selling it back to you at whatever price they want. It's time for everyone to wake up from a very long sleep. I'm a heretic, not because I don't understand what you feel in church, but because I refuse to attribute that wonderful spark of magic to anything less than what is most true. It's time to open the veil and get our magic back. We don't need the light. We are the light. You think we need the stories and the elves to know god, but those are just ways to sell us back what we already have. God is not in a book, or in the sky, or a candle, or in the joy of a congregation."

"Where then? Nowhere?"

Estus opened his hand and held a small ball of flame above his fingers. "Let them believe in this."

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The air in the north warehouse was heavy with smoke, voice, and a hot hum of anger and despair stretched across weary worn bravery. Many had abandoned their homes with only what they could carry, speaking in bold voices about returning home while their eyes held fierce and distant, already seeing the ashes.

Captain Lennel Gareth of the Koro-Del *Corona* sat among them at the end of a long wooden table, poking at his plate of griddle cakes. He pulled off another piece to eat, but dropped it on his plate. He had seen the ashes, and though it shouldn't matter any more, the loss ate at him, which annoyed him greatly. He had always been a man proud of his acceptance of the practical and necessary, and to be distracted by mere sentiment over old timbers was an unwelcome irritant. His grieving rode with him as an undertow of bitterness and contempt that wanted to attach like tar to everything around him, such as the baby shrieking like a stuck rooster behind him. Instead of squeezing his cakes into a mush and stuffing it into the little boy's mouth, he stood abruptly and pushed through the sea of people to the griddle where Becker was still pouring and flipping with dogged delight. Adrian stood beside him, wearing an apron down to her feet, mixing another batch in the large bowl while a boy in a brown flannel hat broke another batch of eggs. He leaned down and kissed her flour hair, patted Becker on the arm, and said, "I need some air."

"We're doing it soon," Becker told him.

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“Good. Hey, are you ready Addy? Know what to say?”

“Yeah. I know.” She put a small box of matches in his hand as she handed a plate of cakes to a young man with two boys in a huddle behind him.

Gareth walked along the line of hungry families and out into the cold air. The boardwalk here was filled with men standing in small groups and packs of children running between them. Gareth wove through them, hearing the sound of his name flowing through the crowd ahead. Eyes followed his captain’s jacket, and the way opened before him. The *Corona* was docked near enough that Gareth noticed the sentry on duty take notice of him. He stood at the edge of the open sea, smelling it, hearing it slosh against the wooden pilings below him. He packed and lit his pipe as he watched the people who had come to watch his ship and wait for the omen of its arrival to unfold.

He turned and leaned his elbows on the tall rail while he sucked on his smoke and watched the late morning sun sparkle on the waves.

“They can feel it.”

Kendrick was beside him with his back to the sea, watching the throng of people. “They didn’t come here only because a few Legion soldiers ransacked some farms. They don’t know it, but they feel it. They know it’s happening.”

“You’re generous with your praise.”

“You feel it too, don’t you? There’s something different, not in the slant of the sun, or the shape of the shadow, but they’re seeing the light more than the shade. They’re beginning to feel their pains and anger make a subtle slide toward history.”

“They seem pretty tense and pissed off to me.”

“Listen.”

Gareth turned and looked at the crowds in front of the warehouse, heard the raucous rumble of voices rolling from inside. There was a lilt, a timbre tinged with an anticipation below the tension. His eyes were drawn to quiet faces. He heard the sound of laughter somewhere. The mood was serious, but not desperate. The moment passed, and Gareth drew back into his own head with its churn of impatience and melancholy, but for a moment it all seemed a touch lighter.

“They’re here.”

Gareth followed Kendrick’s glance and saw Kessel Tol-Rena walking between Bodie Challuk and Dylan Del-Trevia. They turned

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and walked up the steep ramp into the side of the *Corona*. Gareth saw Becker leading Adrian by the hand out of the warehouse. They joined Kendrick and the Captain and walked with them to his ship.

He waited for the others to go up before him and then hefted his heavy steps up the ramp. When his foot hit the deck he heard the pipe and felt the ship grow still as two thousand men stopped and waited for his next command. Christopher Prescott was standing behind the others.

“Take them to the wardroom. Have the galley send up tea.” Prescott only needed to glance at a young ensign to send him bolting to the galley below. Gareth said to another boy, “As you were.” He also took off, and seconds later the boatswain piped carry on.

A galley table had been brought into the wardroom. Dylan led the father elf of Gelst to one end and sat across from him at the other end of the table. Kendrick sat to Kessel’s right with Becker beside, next to Dylan. Bodie sat across from Becker. Adrian was between him and the Captain, who sat next to Kessel.

Two tea trays were brought in. Cups and saucers were distributed. Sugar and cream were set. Tea was served, and the stewards quickly left. Adrian was the first to lift her cup to sip. Others drank. Other than the clatter of porcelain, the room remained quiet for several minutes.

Dylan spoke. “First, you will call the Teshon fourteenth mounted battalion back to Norgelan as originally ordered by Governor Arrenkyle, including the three squads that you selected as your personal guard. Then you will address the people of Gelst and announce the end of hostilities with the North. For this cooperation you will take Andor’s place during phase one of the transition. Or you may choose to work against us, and considering where we found you, I would advise you to consider our offer carefully.”

“I have no control over the Teshon army, Dylan. But that is, of course, beside the point. You’re asking me to betray not only my family, but the service we have been committed to for two thousand years. I can’t give this to you. You know that. The war has to run its course”

“Kessel, you are sitting among some of the most powerful magicians in the world. Others are assembled in the Bora-Goss region between the Merebor and Nordel rivers. They are proof of the failure of Benok’s experiment. We are bringing the war to an end by removing Gelst. Trade with Boret has been the defining force for this city. All else had to bow to the great stomach of Boret, as Andor likes

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to call it. That anchor upon this town will be taken away, allowing us to introduce social, religious, and economic measures that will embody the new era. Gelst will be the beacon of this new age, with Korolem close behind and Boret soon after. You can be a part of that."

Kessel looked at Bodie Challuk and said, "I can't believe you are willing to put your people through this. The river is their life, your life. It will be hard times when the ships stop coming, and the docks rot away. It won't be Boret starving, but the people and the children of Gelst once their livelihood is taken away."

Bodie leaned in and answered, "There's not a soul alive in Gelst who doesn't understand that the river is the noose on our neck. Taxes, travel regulations, Teshon security check points, soldiers in our streets, all because you need us to feed Boret. Well, we don't need you. To be free of war, free of the Teshon leash, that's not a hardship to endure, but a freedom to celebrate. I wanted to choke Boret, but the longer the blockade held the deeper the war went, because you didn't need the food. You needed the war. I gave that to you, and the lives of good men, and now I'm taking it back. If we start sending food up the Mundela again we're right back under Boret's boot. We get that now, and that's all the blockade we need."

"Where then," Kessel asked? "What port?"

Gareth told him, "Merebor."

Kessel laughed, "Good luck with that. Even if you can navigate hundreds of ships through the reefs and build a new town, you're only going to move the issue. In twenty years you'll be right where we started, with nothing to show of it. So, go ahead. You don't need me to give orders or speeches. Do what you will."

"One more thing. Miss Adrian would like to ask you a question."

"Oh, what is this?" Kessel asked. Gareth felt the same question simmering in him. This was too much to ask of her. He sat still and fed his patience with a low, heavy sigh and another sip of black, bitter tea.

Becker told her, "Go ahead, Adrian."

"I'm supposed to tell you that I can do magic, and that I'm really pretty good at it, and then tell me if you know what happened to my mother?"

Kessel looked at Becker Dodd, then to Dylan.

"I don't know, sweetheart. Who is your mother?"

"Sera. Her name was Sera Blackwing."

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Dylan prompted him. "Wasn't she one of your Holy Sisters, Kessel?"

"Yes. I believe that she was for a time, but she ran away. She left me, and I don't know what happened to her after that."

"Think again," Dylan said.

Becker added, "She died of the red fever."

Adrian said, "Did you kill my mom?"

"What is this, Dylan? Is there some point to this?"

"The point should be obvious," the dark elf said.

Gareth looked around the table and then to Adrian, who was sitting upright in her chair, attentive, but quiet. All eyes were on Gelst's guardian elf.

"Did I kill your mother? What a horrid thing to say, child. Your mother was very ill. She had a special relationship with God, but there was a sickness in her that kept her from understanding and controlling it. I couldn't make her happy. I tried to help her, and to bring her back, but I could not convince her."

"What kind of sickness?" Adrian asked.

Kendrick told her, "He means her magic."

Dylan asked, "What happened then, when you found her in Korolem?"

Kessel stood up and said, "I think we're quite through here."

Becker lifted his finger and dropped it, and with that the elf was pulled back into his seat hard. He looked to Dylan for help, but all he said was, "Tell Adrian how you helped her mother, how you helped her sickness."

"If you're trying to tell me something Dylan, perhaps you should should just say it."

"Can your work here be accomplished only with lies, war, murder? You talk of light, but can't do your work unless you hide in the dark. It doesn't have to be like that. You can work with us to restore the imbalance that Benok's way has created. You can help bring unity and understanding, so that you can look a little girl in the eye and not have to lie to her. If what you have done is right, then speak it, or atone for it by doing your part to change it."

"Dylan, we do not speak of these things with them. There is the greater good, the greater right, which you know. They need not understand. This girl can't understand the wisdom that had to drive that incident. This is beyond all insanity."

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Bodie was out of his chair, knife in hand. He went behind the captain and said, "What did you do, you son of a bitch! Do I need to cut it out of you?"

Dylan sprang to his feet and said, "Mister Challuk, that is enough!" Kessel raised his hand and Bodie stumbled back. Becker called out, "Bodie. That's not necessary. Sit down!"

Gareth looked up and saw Bodie struggling to hold the knife, holding his exhausted eyes full on the elf as his body was held back by elven magic. Becker was watching, ready. Kendrick was sitting silent, looking at Dylan. When his eyes turned to Kessel, and the Captain saw him wearing a smug calm, his patience gave out. His fist pounded on the table, and he threw his hot tea into the elf's face and commanded, "Answer her, damn you!"

"Yes, I put her down, because she was dangerous and she would not obey me. That is how it's done."

Gareth started to stand, but felt an agony in his gut like a cannon ball through his spine.

Then in the next instant, the pain ended. Becker was standing, holding Dylan back. Kendrick, still sitting, waved away the last remnant of elven magic. Bodie didn't wait.

Gareth turned and pulled Adrian close to him as Bodie finished what he had started earlier that morning. Kessel cried out, a wail of anguish and utter fury. He led Adrian to the far side of the room, past Dylan who stood frozen by human magic. Gareth turned, holding Adrian's head within his arms, covering her eyes, as Bodie drew his knife across the throat of the elf. Adrian fought her way out of his embrace in time to see Kessel Tol-Rena slide to the floor covered in a flood of bright, hot blood.

Dylan ran around the table to the elf and said, "Kendrick! Hurry!" Becker followed around the table to Bodie and led him away from the elves. Kendrick walked slowly to Dylan, but instead of healing the wound, he closed Kessel's eyes and helped Dylan to his feet.

"This is not acceptable. Undo this now!" Dylan was near hysteria. His anger boiled, and he gestured again at Bodie, who felt nothing under Becker's protection.

"Is this how it is to be then? Will you just start killing us, after all that we have done for you? Is this what I have honored and allowed? If you are to be mere animals, then I was an utter fool for even a moment considering that you could understand..."

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Kendrick put his left hand on Dylan's chest and raised his voice, "Shut up, Dylan. Sit down. You're embarrassing yourself. It's done. He's gone."

"You will return him to his family! There will be consequence for this."

The air was tight. The blood was pooling, running across the floor.

Kendrick told the elf, "I will do with him what I damn well please. Listen to me. It can not be acceptable for elves to order the death of thousands of humans and call that the greater good, but mourn the death of single elf. He is dead for the same reason that Andor and he have killed so many humans, because this will help me change the world. This one act will be stronger than any words he might say, here or in Boret, even if our little drama here had convinced him. This is the consequence he chose for taking the path of domination, war, lies, and murder against us. If you think this was mere animal bloodlust, then you have lost sight of your own goals, Trevia. I have no interest in killing you, or any other elf. This was a strategic blow, and it will have exactly the impact I desire. But we have had enough of being treated as mere marionettes to be danced about by one elven philosophy or another. Kessel is dead because his death was needed for our greater good, which was his own standard. He is dead because he chose to be at war with humanity, to be judged by us, and to be sentenced to death for the murder of Sera Blackwing."

Gareth said, "Come along, Bodie. Let's get the barges loaded. It's time for us to be underway. Gentlemen, I'll leave you to clean up." He led Adrian around the table, away from the body with Bodie following. He led them to the main deck, and under the cold sunshine he stopped, took a knee and said, "Are you okay, Addy?"

"I'm okay." Her voice was quiet. "Mister Bodie?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you." She put her arms around him and hid her face against him.

The captain stood and called out, "Hoist the Mizzen crane. Starboard side. Ready on the yards. Cast off in one hour."

Kendrick and Becker came up from below. Gareth asked, "All clear?"

Becker said, "Yes."

"And Dylan?"

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Kendrick answered, "I took them home. Adrian. Are you ready?"

She came over and stood between Becker and Kendrick. They held hands as they shot up into the sky. Bodie and Gareth watched until they were small specks lost in the sky, and then Bodie pounded the Captain on the back and said, "Whiskey?"

"Aye, and double for you, lad."

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Estus stepped out along a fallen trunk to dip his canteen in the ice cold water of the Mundela river. He pulled out the full bottle and drank, chilling his teeth and throat. He gulped it half empty, plunged it down to fill it again, then carefully moved back to the steep slanted bank and rested for a moment, looking up at the rumpled clouds that hung scattered in the whitish blue sky. Lone flakes of snow fluttered around him as he stood still, smelling the muddy forest and the river, hearing the hushed wind. He lashed the canteen to his side and put his gloves back on as he turned and side stepped his heavy boots up the loose leaves back to the river path where Koby was waiting for him. He checked the ties on Koby's horse blanket, lifted his foot into the stirrup, and hefted himself up into the saddle. Estus turned and looked behind him, still expecting Andor or a squad of men in heavy red Legion coats to chase him down again, but there was nobody amid the white flecks of snow that rode the soft, ceaseless breeze. He pulled his collar up, picked up the reins, and leaned forward to let his mount know that it was time to move on.

He thought of Kenneth and wondered if his friend ever found out why he never showed up for supper that night. Was Karen still waiting to finish their game of pick and sweep? Did Madam Collins notice that he had not been home for several days? His mind played through the scenes of his time in Boret, carrying his tools, laying floorboards, going to church, getting to know the other carpenters, filling the bubble of his life with the simple nothings from which happiness can emerge.

The idea of that life still beckoned, as though he could wear those days like a warm blanket and forget the restless heart that drew him out again and again to follow the forlorn chant of impossible dreams. A formation of ducks suddenly appeared above, following the river downstream in a large vee with twenty or more birds on each side.

Their simple beauty brought a smile to his upturned face. Estus watched their graceful march through the bright sky until they disappeared behind the stickly winter branches of the forest. He

started to turn back but there were three other shapes flying back up wind, not in a triangle formation but in a straight line. Two large shapes and a smaller one between them. He watched them until he could see that they weren't birds, but people. Kendrick, another man, and a girl who waved at him as they flew by.

He nudged Koby to a trot for the next several minutes until finally he saw Balta. Ivy was sitting with her back to a tree, waiting for him. She jumped to her feet and ran over when he got near. Estus jumped down and met her halfway in a tight embrace. They kissed and held each other. He found her neck as his fingers slid into her long, silky, black hair. They held their cheeks together. "You're safe," she whispered.

"You're here," he answered softly.

"Where else would I be?" She kissed him again.

"I saw Kendrick."

"They're here, with friends."

"Who?"

"You'll see."

They mounted and walked their horses through the haze of lazy snow while their horses beat their heavy feet in a gentle cadence on the dirt.

Soon the line of trees fell back, giving way to a field of tall yellow grass and sage bushes. The river widened into a large pool and then bent away from them to a distant thunder of rapids surging over a small fall. The cold wind played waves through the grass and hissed through the juniper trees far ahead. Ivy turned into the field, following a trampled path between two rows of markers that formed an aisle about twenty feet wide.

"What is this?"

"This is where your canal will be."

The wind rumbled in his ears and stung his cheeks, but he followed Ivy at a slow pace, drinking in the beauty of the rippling grass against the backdrop of the mountains under the wide open sky.

When they came over the top of a small ridge Estus found his gaze drawn to a hint of movement and voices. He saw the faded brown fabric of a large tent next to a glowing campfire. Estus and Ivy dismounted and led their horses the rest of the way. When they drew near, Kendrick came out of the tent, followed by Gavin. Katie ran past them and threw herself around Estus in big hug. Behind her

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Gavin called out, "Oh come on! Him you hug? I made fire for you, lady!"

Darla smacked him on the back of his head. "Hush, you!" Soon the others were around him.

Davis shook his hand and said, "It's good to see you. We were afraid we might have to go back in and get you. Cody's been wearing a trail from here to the river."

Cody told him, "I'm just glad you're here now."

Kendrick joined their circle. "You must be hungry. Come. We have supper ready."

When Estus ducked into the shade of the tent the scent of stew, humid and hot, peeled away the chill. As his eyes adjusted to the dark, they were led to chairs at the end of a long, well-crafted oak table. Kendrick stood beside them and offered introductions. Stew was brought in bowls of fine china.

"This happy couple is Hannah, and her husband Peter," Kendrick said. They smiled and went back to the pot to fill more bowls. The flying girl brought them round silver spoons and thick cloth napkins. "This is Hannah's cousin, Adrian, one of the most talented natural wizards of all time."

A man and woman sat across from Estus and Ivy. "May I present Nathan and Susan Henderson." They sat and were served by Adrian and the newlyweds.

A hearty man entered and bowed to Estus. Kendrick began, "And may I introduce..."

"Maxwell Keeler, thespian mage, at your most humble service sir." He shook Estus's hand and sat next to Ivy.

"And Becker Dodd, whose wine flows more sweetly than an early spring breeze."

"I'll accept the flattery," Becker said as he set out wine glasses along the table and filled them one by one. "But this wine owes its flavor to the warm summer and late harvest due to the heavy rains we had that year."

Peter passed around baskets of biscuits, and soon all were seated at the table settling into the steaming stew. Estus savored the cabbage, carrots, parsnips, and soft beef. The biscuits were warm. The butter was soft. The wine was chilled and sweet. The steady wind scraped across the walls of the tent but was denied any draft into the warm haven of their supper.

The conversation was light and simple, much laughter at the end with Gavin and Becker. Maxwell and Nathan were talking about

how fun it would be to attempt a revival of an ancient play by Carsus of Antellem. When he heard that word, Estus turned to Ivy, who caught his eye with a smile. She said to Maxwell, "I saw the first run of that play in the Amphitheater of Bora-Sur. While you may need to update some of the idioms, the timeless trial of his heroes will always have universal appeal."

"Madam Del-Gesius," Maxwell said with great reverence, "What a singular honor it would be if we were able to present a modern performance of the eminent bard. Let us carry hope that our efforts on this very day may lead to a season when such a dream can truly come to pass."

"Your dream is mine also, sir. Let us give them wings."

Maxwell stood called out, "A toast!"

All around the table stood and raised their wine glasses. Conversation stopped. Maxwell called out, "To great dreams on a new stage!"

"Hurrah!" They all called out and drank.

When they settled again, Kendrick said to Estus, "Our plans will soon be in motion this evening. If we may presume to borrow the horses, Darla and Katie will ride back to Boret to give details of our mission to your brother. Peter and the sailors will have to take the boats up the canal and meet us in Merebor when they can.

"I don't understand. I thought there were going to be wizards coming to help build the canal."

"They have come. They are here at this table. We shall get started after we have all rested from supper and wine."

"But it's going to be dark in a couple hours."

"Dusk is a special time, a time of transformation, a time when worries fade into hope and the mind is drawn to new possibilities under the gentle, golden glow of tomorrow's promise."

"So is dusk the best time to do magic?"

"The best time for magic, Estus, is anytime you need it. However sometimes, when magic is deep, we give ourselves a moment of ceremony to help set our intent. For this task, dusk will suit us well. Now, if I recall, I was going to give you a lesson in auralism, but how would you like to learn how to fly?"

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Adrian Blackwing sat next to Estus on a little cloud and watched the magic unfold below them. Becker and Hannah's line of fire

stretched far into the distance, burning the sage bushes and trees. Blue smoke drifted from the flames toward the setting sun.

At the river, Uncle Nathan and Aunt Susan began calling the wind. The clouds above the desert plain began to draw together in a wide circle. Adrian's cloud darted away to join the others. The wind rumbled and stung and suddenly spun into a funnel that leapt to the ground right on top of them. It gathered strength and grew dark with dust, chasing the fire. Charred, burning trees snapped as their twisted roots were wrenched out of the dirt and tossed aside, smoldering and black, leaving a scar of clear, upturned ground fifty feet wide.

With the fire still burning far away, and the tornado chasing the flames, Kendrick and Maxwell took to the air. They flew together in a large circle across the Mundela river into the wide path left by the Hendersons' twister. The ground leapt up to them in a blast that shot into the purple sky and rained down in large clumps of mud clay, rocks, root balls, and broken trees.

Adrian led Estus to the ground and stood at the river's edge amid the soft dirt of the shallow trench. She could smell the smoldering, smoking wood, the fresh open ground, the dust still settling from the churning air. The magic here was still raw and strong. She couldn't usually see other people's magic colors, but Estus was almost glowing.

She tucked some stray hair behind her ear and asked, "Um, did Kendrick show you about the water, or just flying?"

"Flying, mostly, but he said I should stay as close to the magic as I can."

"I'm probably going to fly pretty fast."

"I'll keep up."

She would have answered him, but as she sunk deeper into the magic, it was getting harder to talk. She nodded and stepped into the river.

"Oh! It's cold." The river felt like ice knives on her ankles until she felt heat magic from Estus warming the water.

It felt almost as if the magic was calling her, rather than the other way around. She let her mind reach out to join with the pulse of the river and began to feel the water magic open to her in a rush. The channel of power, the power of the river, was like soft clay to her mind.

Adrian felt the water flowing past her legs, felt its never ending urgency to fall to the sea. She took a deep breath and bent down to

put her hand into the cool stream. The current slowed, and the water started pooling around her in a swell. In her mind, she became the sea, the place where the water wanted and needed to be. New swirls and eddies formed as the water continued to gather around her, rising to her chest, spilling over the far bank. The white churning water beneath the falls rose, and the waterfall's noise softened as the river around her rose in a widening lake tickling cold on her chin. Still, Adrian beckoned the river, refusing to release it on its way.

She turned and walked back to the bank as the water overtook her, covering her head. She kept walking while the water continued to crowd urgently around her, swirling, twisting, pulling her hair in its current. She stood, muddy feet in the middle of the trench with her hands up, feeling the weight growing, pressing on her, rushing to her.

The press of the river grew intense, almost angry, but she mastered it and gathered more magic to her. When her lungs began to ache, when she felt the river's ache as her own, she flew up and pulled a mountain fountain of water with her.

Tons of river crested over the bank and fell into the canal. Adrian turned and flew backward, pulling the river with her, cutting deep through the river bank and into the canal bed. She was the river. She was the sea. The mighty Mundela chased after her crashing and charging like a falling flat waterfall. The surge of water followed behind her, a swell ten feet above the canal walls that sucked more tons of water behind, raging and foaming through the canal.

She turned and faced into the wind, flying as fast as she could, feeling the magic flow deeper and more pure through her until she was more magic than girl, more energy than form. Estus was flying fast ahead of her, wrapped in a shimmer of pale pink magic. Her own magic was a bright red furnace fed by the deep current of the mountain that blended with the mighty ocean's endless force. She rode the peak of their power until time stood still and the desert ground flashed by in a blur.

The end came quickly. The water and its load of mud crashed into the Nordel river and up the opposite bank. Adrian arched her back and flew upward, releasing the river as she strained to avoid the top twigs of the pine trees she suddenly found below her. She shot into the air and then turned, nearly spent. Becker and Kendrick were beside her, ready to catch her if she needed. She smiled.

Nearby was a cliff overlooking the Nordel River. She found a ledge and perched on it. Becker settled on her right and Kendrick on

her left. Soon the other wizards joined her. Her aunt and uncle flew toward the cliff with Estus. Hannah flew down behind her and put an arm around Adrian's shoulders.

Together they watched the water from the canal cascade back down the hill while the Mundela continued to surge in through the canal. The entire opposite bank, halfway up the valley wall, had become a stain of orange mud. Below them the rivers churned and spun, frothing as the waters mixed together. Soon the valley began to settle. The whirlpools slowed. The tension eased. The Nordel river accepted the new fork and began feeding the canal.

Adrian stood on her ledge and spread her arms, and with the setting sun painting her in a bright sheen, she leaned forward and fell into the valley.

Her friends and family swooped down with her and together they all flew into the purple and orange canopy of the evening sky.

---

The morning in Merebor was foggy and cold, but the bitter wind was broken by the crowds. Estus leaned against the tall stone wall outside Howard King's store, watching the people of Merebor mob the bay with every boat available. Hundreds of canoes, sail boats, pontoons, and family yachts crowded between dozens of large fishing trollers. Every minute or so, another boat launched into the water or wove through the crowded mouth of the Nordel river, which was nearly a solid expanse of rowboats and small skiffs. The marina sat empty, a naked skeleton of docks and piers whip washed by the upset sea. Whoever wasn't on the water crowded along the wide beach. The small squad of Legion town guards walked among them. Guildsmen of all trades were leading large groups in prayer while a constant parade of bleary eyed, horrified faces chiseled in grim hurried between them. The boardwalk in front of Estus was packed tight with people pushing in and out of the little King grocery. Small children punctuated the crawling undercurrent of fury and fear with their own wails of protest. Couples clung to each other. Men huddled in small, angry groups. Grandparents looked upon it all with gentle, haunted eyes.

Ivy came down the whitewash, weather-worn steps, carrying two pottery mugs of coffee from the store. She wore her hood up with a scarf covering most of her face. He took one of the large mugs from her and sipped the hot, creamy brew. "Cinnamon?" he asked.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

Ivy answered through the scarf, "Sugar and cream and cinnamon. I needed to buy something to get close. It's pretty crowded in there, but he wants to hear about Darla. He'll be out in a minute."

Estus worked hard to settle the sickness of defeat that tumbled and rose from his gut. Now that Ivy was again next to him he gave in to despair and spoke the sour obvious to her, barely above a whisper. "Look at them. This is impossible." The misty shape of the *Corona* was just visible through the dim morning fog, but could not move any closer.

"Listen to them," he said. One crowd, led by a master of the Fishing guild, was chanting, "By the light! Fight for right," over and over. Another group was singing "Oh Holy Light."

Several other loud voices were encouraging the crowds.

A young man's voice rang out from a group of men, "Faith is all the bravery you need, brother."

And older man with a blacksmith guild sash preached to his small audience, telling them, "Though we walk in the darkness of fear, we carry the Light of God within us. The Lord of Light shall forever guide our way. Friends, don't be afraid of these God-haters. Their hands will be stayed by the power of the Lord, the power that He put into you. Praise Benok and his laws that he has taught us righteousness."

Ivy tapped Estus on the shoulder and pointed to a large group hurrying to hear the elf guardian of Merebor. The father elf leaned in to hear a question and then answered loudly, "Swords? Knives? What if they do? Listen, if they put a knife on your heart and call upon you to denounce the truth of the Light, proclaim the truth in your loudest voice! If you can take that knife and cut down evil while it is only a sapling, cut it. Cut it deep! Shed the blood of the blasphemers, and the Lord will be standing bright within you. Brother, God gave you this life, and if you need to give it back to keep evil out of your home, to keep evil hands away from your children and off of your wife, it is your sacred privilege. Rejoice in the fantastic honor that He has chosen you to help Him make the world right again, through your hands. What great works you can do in Him. Do not be afraid. Let them cower from the power of the Lord as we strike them down!"

Cheers broke out around him as Howard King trundled his way down the stairs and over to Estus, wiping his hands on his apron.

Estus stood and shook his hand as Howard asked, "She says you saw my Darla?"

Estus forced a smile and answered, "Yes. She and Katie are both doing well. We met them along the river as they were heading toward Boret and we were heading out. Darla told me that if I should find you here to give you a message."

Her father nodded eagerly. Estus said, "She says she's happy. It's much better for her there, and she hopes that you will be able to see her soon in Boret, and — what was it — no more credit for Mrs. Brathon."

A smile broke through Howard King's worried features. "Yes. She would say that. She worries about me. She thinks I don't know things. You met her where? On the river?"

"Well, you know, things are very bad in Boret. Many people are leaving the city, going to friends or family in the country. We have family down in Kelebor, but we thought I could find better work here in Merebor. We met them in the forest along the river."

"What sort of work can you do?"

Estus set his coffee down on the stone wall long enough to unfasten his jacket and shirt to show the carpenter's brand on his arm.

"Oh, yes, sir! Yes. We can always use good men. We need that. We need men of the Light, especially now, and, God save us all, especially this morning. Bless you, sir. Bless you. If I can be of any help, please call upon me."

"You are most gracious. When did all of this start?"

"Corbin, over there, that's our elf, had to call a special town meeting yesterday and told us that they were coming. Then this morning we held a prayer service at dawn, and he told us what we all must be prepared to do. Most of us have not slept since we heard."

"Who are they?"

"Men of such darkness, such evil as we have not known since Benok walked among us and wove our souls into the Light. Have you heard? Did you hear they killed an elf? The soul of Gelst, a finger of God, slain by the blood-hungry hands of rebellion. They are led by him, you know, the one who calls forth the shadows. Kendrick."

Ivy gave him a small gasp. "Yes, my dear. But it is far worse. There are dark elves behind it all. Evil all the way from Korolem, brewing for many years, haunting Boret, and now on the loose!" Ivy

took hold of Estus's arm. Howard patted her shoulder and said, "Worry not my dear, we shall not let them get to you. We will tear that god-forsaken ship apart with our bare, splintered hands before we let them take our town."

"Take the town?" Estus prompted. "What do you have here that they want? Why here?"

Howard looked at Ivy, then back to Estus. "We're only a small village, but we have women. They have stolen the food out of the bellies of Boret. They intend to starve the holy city and hoard the food here while they kill the men, take the women, and work to spread their evil. By the light! Just yesterday, all we had to worry on was whether to have beans or barley with our smoked fish, and the next day we stand in the face of massacre. Bless the shining light of God that Darla and Katie are safe, but I tell you they'd give those soulless bastards a tough run of it, beg your pardon, madam. The Legion is riding here as fast as they can, and they have ships coming, and true wizards, bless them. We must hold them off for a day, maybe two. If we let them in, Corbin says, they'll have a sanctuary for the winter. They'll rain fire down on the Legion. They'll bring sickness and death to the men, and God only knows what would come next. This is most grave, for we are all that stands now between the light and utter blackness. It must go no further. Not one more step."

Estus told him, "Stand tall, then. Let us all carry the Light of God. Bless you, Mister King. Thank you for your help. Once we get through this, I hope to call you friend."

His words were sincere, but there was no hope. There was no getting any cargo through this, no speech they could offer that would reach deeper than the voice of God. They could only save Gelst by the murder of Merebor, yet to spare innocent life here meant countless more lost to Andor's war.

"Yes, sir. I should get back to my store, but we shall stand together. Bless you. Bless us all." Howard shook his hand again and hurried back to his store.

What had seemed so simple, so grand, so magnificent as he was flying on the wings of magic, was now nothing but a wasted act of impotent hubris against the white hot fury of the lord. Good men and women, brave and full of fear-fed, frenzied hope, stood by the hundreds shouting prayers ready to hold back the greatest evil they could ever know.

He turned to Ivy and found Kendrick standing next to her. "We need to get to the ship," he told them.

---

Captain Gareth stood at the bow of the *Corona* with his first officer, watching the people of Merebor crowd into the bay with every piece of floating stock available, pitching and rolling and bumping together in the morning fog.

He knew that the crew expected to be ordered to fight them, to kill husbands and their children if necessary to complete their mission. His worry wasn't with his crew or their resolve, but with the sick fact that he may have to give that order. The entirety of the rebellion now lay in his hands. Every available barge and every crate and barrel from the Gelst warehouses had been added to the full cargo from Korolem. How could he balance the lives lost here with the suffering in Boret, or the chance to push back the tyranny of Andor's war?

Becker Dodd called out from behind them, "Captain. Everyone's here."

He turned around and said, "Send them up." When he returned to the vision of a village twisted by fear against him, he felt the heaviness sink deeper into his heart. "Mister Prescott, I do wonder if we should simply send the barges up the Mundela river and be done with it. Boret is hungry and Gelst is weary. What good is a free Gelst if it can only be achieved by being the monsters they think us to be? Perhaps we already are."

Becker came to stand on Gareth's left and said, "So do you think we could get past them, if it comes to that?"

Without taking his eyes off of the bay, he answered, "There is nothing they could do to harm this ship. Their biggest boat would splinter against this Koro-Del hull. The difficulty is going to be protecting the barges during unloading if they have it in them to come out to us. For now we'll wait them out. This sort of panic can't be sustained. We'll wait here for the night. We'll rest while they wear themselves out watching and fighting among themselves. When the sun goes down we'll unload the barges on the seaward side and move in around three in the morning after they're tired and spent. We have plenty of weapons, enough to fight off the Legion army if we need. Yes, we can get past them."

The captain turned around and saw the others, the wizards, actors, and children. He also saw the elf woman Becker had told him

about and another man. Gareth went to him and said, "Your name is Arrenkyle?"

"Yes. Estus Arrenkyle."

"Kendrick says you're on our side, and I trust him. He also says the Governor may be coming around. What do you think about that?"

"I think he wants to do what's best for the people of Boret and Gelst, and I think he's learning how difficult that can be. What he wants most is for us to get food to Boret. He let me go because we have a chance to do that."

"So, will he be able to hold off these Legion divisions from Korolem, who are certainly on their way here?"

Kendrick interjected, "No. They're going to be trouble. I doubt they're aware of the subtleties of the limited support we enjoy from the Governor. We need to deliver, and somehow we need to convince these hundreds of good people that we are not here to hurt them."

Nathan Henderson leaned forward and said, "We need to break the lie, show them that we're not here to take their city or their women. All we want to do is float right by them. We just need to get that message out to them."

Maxwell Keeler raised his hand to wave that idea away. "Nathan, again, there can be no convincing them. They are not of a mind to hear that. Even if we could explain it to them all at once, which we can't, their minds have been spoiled against us. Sadly, we must frighten them, scatter them out of the way. Let us do as the captain says and prepare the barges at night fall. We can offer them a severe show of force, reveal the very evil that they fear from us in the most dramatic way. Some will fight, but I don't think they have wizards to match us, if in fact they have any at all. How long, Captain, do you expect it will take to move the barges onto the river past the village once we're underway?"

Bodie answered, "I don't know if we can even get them unloaded in time, even if we start right at night fall. That's only about eight hours, and we can only load from one side of the *Corona*, and in the dark. But even without a town here at all it would take four, maybe five, hours just to get all twelve barges lined up in the river. So Kendrick, what kind of magic show can you put on to scatter them, like Max here says?"

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"We can do whatever we think will have the most impact. Illusions are pretty simple, but knowing what will be most effective is the hard part."

Ivy said, "They're prepared to die for this. It's going to take something pretty strong."

"I know what's strong enough."

Everyone looked at Bodie Challuk. He said, "We just need them out of the water, right? You folks can fly back behind them into their town. We need to set some fires. Keep them busy..."

"No," Becker called out.

"...and out of the water. That's all we need, and I'd rather burn their barns than kill them."

Susan gasped and added, "And what do you think those fires are going to do?"

Kendrick asked, "How about the illusion of fire? We can do that. It would certainly divide them, scatter them."

Everyone drew quiet, considering it.

The captain said, "So here it is. We wait them out, keep them restless. I'll move us around a bit to keep them guessing and edgy, then start unloading at nightfall. When it's time, do up your illusions, and with luck we'll only have to kill half as many."

They were all quiet with only the sound of the cold wind blowing past. After a heavy pause, Becker added, with thin confidence, "We absolutely have to get this shipment to Boret, and it has to be through here. The Legion ships are coming up behind us, and even if we could get back to Gelst without a fight, which is not likely, and somehow keep the resistance alive through the winter, there's no way we could defend against the entire Legion army once Andor moves them back to Gelst. We have to get to the canal or let the resistance die here, tonight."

The silence returned, and with it a pall of resignation. Nathan took Susan's hand. Hannah and Adrian clung to each other.

Maxwell broke the silence with a grave voice, "Then it must be said. We acknowledge that, for the greater good of all, we are declaring that the lives lost here, all told, are of lesser importance than the success of this endeavor. This we declare?"

Bodie was the first to call out, "Yes! This is a war, God damn it. You break things and kill people if that's what it takes. What are we here for if not to get this done?"

Becker countered, "But they're civilians, Bodie. It's different."

## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

"No! The moment they attack us they stop being civilians and start being our enemies. If we're going to do this, then let's do it. Maybe we can scatter and scare them, but whatever, we need to get through. Look, maybe we don't need to scare them out of the way. Why start with an attack? Just tell them to stay back and nobody gets hurt."

Estus said, "But Maxwell is right. They won't just stay back. They can't. Their elf has spoken, and his truth is as certain as their beating hearts. They will attack us."

"With what?"

"With their hands, harpoons, spoons, whatever they can find. It won't be effective. It'll be a massacre, but they'll make us do it. Even if we win and can somehow limit the suffering, we will become every bit as evil as they believe us to be, and that will ruin the rebellion."

Nathan asked, "So Ivy. Is this the best we can do? What do you think we should do?"

"Becker is correct. This is a rare moment in history, but our options at this point are quite limited. The need for human freedom and understanding will certainly continue, much more quickly with a free Gelst than without, but I believe that the unfolding is underway and you will soon reclaim what was lost."

Kendrick asked, "Human soon or elf soon?"

"That depends on what happens here today. Whatever you choose, I will support you."

Again, Maxwell put the question. "Are we agreed then? Unload tonight? Distract them with illusions and fight our way through?"

"No," Estus said.

Bodie barked out, "Why not?"

"Because any sort of attack, illusion or otherwise, will only help peel away their fear and make them stronger. It's one thing to be told that great evil is at your door. It is quite another to smell the stink of hellfire in your own nostrils and know that your hand may be the last to raise against it, that your death may be the one that stops a thousand more. We may be able to scare them off for a while, but once we start this the only way you're going to get to that river is by sailing across a sea of their blood. We don't need to do that, because the good people of Merebor are ready to face the last night of their life, and they most desperately do not want to fight us. What they want is a miracle."

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Ivy walked up the worn, rounded, brick avenue to the cathedral on the hill, past the grocery, the baker, past the tailor and the hair dresser, all proudly showing their guild marks on matching white and blue signs that rocked in the breeze. The low stone wall led to a wide archway into the churchyard with its snow-dusted grass and statues of Benok. She took the stone steps two at a time to the large door and let herself into the woody warmth of the large chapel. It was dark and quiet. The afternoon sun fell in rows of slanted beams across the pews filled with men, women, families, praying in silence.

Ivy walked past them all down the wide middle aisle, her boots echoing loudly through the grand hall. She went up the side stairs, past the long altar table covered with burning candles, and stopped by the lectern. When she pulled back her hood, showing her elven features, she saw a young holy sister peek out from behind the curtain and then emerge to say, with some bit of surprise, "You're an elf."

"Aren't you the smart one," Ivy said sweetly. She patted the girl's cheek as she walked past her and went down the steps to the sanctum. A timid hand took hold of Ivy's shoulder. Her voice found the bravery of her position enough to ask, "Should you? I mean, do you..."

"Yes."

Ivy took off her gloves and said, "I need to see the High Sister, and bring me hot tea." She continued down the narrow corridor with its aged paintings and bronze etched scriptures and the echoes of footsteps behind her trying to keep up.

When she turned into the common room she found an elderly woman waiting for them.

"Elsa, would you please light a fire and put some water in the kettle. Thank you dear. My name is Kera. Please forgive her. It is rare that we have the honor of a visit from a matron elf. How may I serve you?"

"Take my coat." Ivy waited for the woman to come around behind her and lift the coat by its collar and fold it in the elven style. "I need to speak with him."

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"As you wish." Kera bowed, and left the room. There were hushed voices in the hall, and soon another holy sister, wrapped in a heavy coat and a wool scarf over her bright red hair, hurried into the common room, gave Ivy a quick curtsy without daring to look up, and scurried out.

Ivy took the large padded chair in the corner facing the hallway. She waited, calm, hearing whispers and footsteps. Somewhere a kettle screamed and went silent. Porcelain clattered on a tray, then more nervous whispers were followed by Elsa bringing the tea tray to the table next to Ivy's chair. Ivy nodded to dismiss her. The aroma of the tea steaming from the cup filled the common room. It was rooibos, with vanilla and a hint of blackberry. She had time for one soft sip before the door rattled open and Corbin Tol-Merik stomped in breathing hard with his girl in tow.

He took off his coat and piled it on her, unwrapped his scarf and put it around her neck. Then he paused, took a generous breath, and placed his hand on her shoulder to lead her out of the room.

"Welcome, madam Del-Gesius. Our home is yours." He bowed and sauntered to the sofa across from Ivy's chair and sat down, giving her a smile, but saying nothing more. No matter the urgency, for an elf to recognize any sort of schedule would be profoundly rude and weak. She considered for a moment simply sitting with him for the rest of the day, having tea, being invited to supper, and keeping him occupied with the prolonged protocols of elven hospitality, but she didn't want to risk him excusing himself and leaving her in the care of his concubines.

"Call them back."

"I won't do that."

"We do not wish to harm them."

"This is not a mere exercise. They know what is at stake, perhaps edited to suit their understanding, but this is as grave as it has ever been, and you know that. Ivy, you must see the harm that you and Dylan are causing. This is not their time. Could I have accomplished this if your theories were even close to correct?"

"Let's not do this. We're coming through, and you can call them off or watch them die. We figure that you'll have five to six hundred dead, mostly men, but I see you've drawn women and their babies in the river as a human shield. Let's hope that they fight as well as they pray, or at least have the common sense to run away. Am I supposed to let the mere death of an innocent village stand in the way of the greater good? Does Andor? Do you?"

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

He chuckled. "Please."

Ivy stood and called out, "Kera. Bring my coat, dear." As she walked behind his sofa Ivy leaned down. She stroked his neck and said softly to his ear, "Your little redhead is very pretty. You should keep her safe."

She stood, took her coat and gloves, and headed out. Corbin called out to her, "You're as savage as they are. Don't underestimate them, Ivy, or me. It's not going to be as easy as you think."

"What are they going to do, Corbin, when they cry out to your God and he doesn't come?"

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"What kind of crazy, a paddle, stupid boat, walking my feet off, blisters all over the, women, can't believe, it's always women, oh let's go to that pub and meet some ladies, let's kiss and walk forever until our feet fall off, fucking, I hate women, no I don't, I didn't mean to, pretty, neck, their lips, soft, hips, all hell west and crooked and back again, when we get back, I tell you what, nail his damn boots on the..."

Davis interrupted him, "Gavin!"

"What?"

"You're doing it again. Your brains are draining out your mouth."

"I was not saying anything that time. You're hearing things."

Cody jumped in, "The voices in my head don't prattle like that."

"Oh, you too? Mister, let's get stranded and ruin everything. You two are just making it up."

Davis repeated, in a high-pitched voice, "Oh, I love women."

Cody mimicked him, "I hate women."

"No I don't."

"Yes I do."

"I love Katie. I want to have her babies."

"Shut up! Both of you!"

"Just give it a rest. We've all been up all night. We're all tired and cranky, but some of us," Davis pushed his voice to a roar, "manage to keep are mouths shut!! You're embarrassing us in front of company."

Peter added, "I've heard worse."

Gavin pulled in his paddle and said, "That's it. I'm not going to row any more. My arms are tired, I'm hungry, and you guys are pissing me off."

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Cody murmured, "When are you not pissed off, gasbag?"

Gavin stood up and turned around, fumbled with his oar, then he fell in. He splashed and flailed and gasped his way back to the boat and held onto the side, nearly tipping the others in.

"Are you fucking happy now?"

"Give me your hand."

"Are you? Fucking! Happy! Now?"

Peter called out, "Hey it's one of the actors!"

"Where?"

"There! Waving on the shore. We must be getting close to the town."

"Great. Let's all discuss our navigation options while I freeze to death here."

Davis, Cody, and Peter rowed to the bank and helped Gavin out, then pulled the boat onto the bank.

Maxwell fussed over Gavin, "Oh, dear! You'll catch your death in this weather." He quickly pulled some wood together and lit the kindling under the pile with a touch of his finger. As they gathered around the fire, Maxwell made a round gesture with his hands, and the sting of winter air became a warm bubble around them. He looked at Gavin, wrinkled his forehead a bit, then ran his hands down Gavin's arms. Water splashed away from Gavin in a puddle at his feet.

Gavin patted his clothes, all dry. He coughed, buckled to his knees. He dove for Cody's canteen and emptied it. He worked his tongue around his mouth and announced, "I have never been this dry." He squinted and blinked his eyes.

"Listen, friends, there's a bit of a situation. We find ourselves involved with the performance of our very lives. Around that next bend is Merebor, and the river, I dare say the whole bay, is utterly teeming with a mad rabble frothed to a frenzy. We, it seems, have come to pillage their little village and set up a sort of diabolical pogrom to overthrow the good order, which, I suppose, from their point of view, is not too far off of the mark, but be that as it may..."

"I'm thirsty."

"We must all tell the tale of the miracle of the river, and, I do beg of you, please, if you would, let me set the tone of our improvisation. The story is that you escorted our dear friends Darla and Katie to the Mundela river and sent them on their way to Boret, staying behind to consider looking for work at the Bora-Goss penitentiary. When rebuffed..."

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

Cody asked, "re-what?"

"Rejected, lad, turned away, spurned, where's he going?"

Gavin left the fire and ran back to the river.

Maxwell stood up. The fire died and the warm air drifted away, "Very well. Come along then. Let's have at it."

Gavin was on the ground with his face in the river. Davis and Cody put the boat in the water and helped Max settle into the middle seat. Gavin took his position at the front then the rest squeezed in.

"You okay?" Cody asked.

"Yeah. I feel good."

They paddled for another ten minutes or so, and soon came around the bend to a wide part of the river where a few boats were settled. Maxwell told them, "Follow along. I'll be looking for Susan, playing my wife."

As they moved among the other boats, Maxwell urged them forward, growing more agitated. When they were in the thick of the crowded river, he stood and called out in a loud, desperate voice. "Susan! Oh dear! Oh, my dear." He called out to the others, "Have you seen her? My wife?" They called back, with questions. "She's a bit younger. She was wearing her green cape and hood, oh I must find her. The most marvelous thing." He called out again, "Susan!"

A voice called out from somewhere in the crowd, "Maxwell!"

"Ah! Susan! Oh please, make way. My dear!" He raised his voice to call to her, "I have seen the very finger of God upon the ground." Everyone around was opening a pathway, but there were still a dozen boats between them trying to move. Susan Henderson was in a small fishing canoe, waving her hand. "Here! I'm here. What are you saying?" She called out.

"I have seen God's work upon the land." He was addressing the crowd now, "God has opened a river. Two miles inland. Where once lay dusty ground and desert now flows a new vein in God's land! Tell all. Go see. We are living in a time of miracles."

They were getting close.

"Are you hurt? Maxwell! What is this?"

"It is joy, for the Lord of Light has touched the land. These men have seen it, and have ridden upon the new river. For what purpose God has brought this to us I can only guess, but there it lies. Are you well, love?"

They were getting close. Susan answered, "Yes! Oh heavenly light. You're safe! I feared the worst!"

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The two boats were now side by side, and others were helping to steady the small canoe as Susan stepped into the boat on onto the plank seat next to Maxwell. The little boat was crowded. "To the bank boys, we're nearly there."

They made their way to a pier and got out. Maxwell was still excited, he was asking everyone, "Did you hear? We must find him! We must tell Corbin." As he walked through the streets, his excitement and urgency drew a crowd. People asked and were told the miracle. The sailors told their story as they walked.

They came around the corner into view of the bay. "Have strength, brothers in the light." Maxwell proclaimed. "That evil cannot reach us, for God has touched Merebor."

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Bodie Challuk sat in the shade of the main mast sails, apart from the action on one of the many crates stacked along the middle of the deck. His belly churned with angry impatience as he watched one of his barges being lifted off of the stack. Men ran back and forth in front of him, following some sort of organized chaos. Supplies were gathered and stacked. Men were mustered, counted, and checked off. He turned around to look behind him at the fog-covered coast and the bay that was choked with boats and angry bravado. It was all too easy for him to imagine himself with them, holding fast on proud hope and thin resolve.

A cold wind blew his hair across his eyes. He pulled up his coat collar and turned back around to watch the barge descend past the deck and out of sight.

Adrian Blackwing brought over a folded uniform: white pants, one of the loose fitting sailor shirts, and a blue jacket with gold piping and the anchor brand sewn on the right sleeve.

"What's this?"

"Aren't you going to be in the play?"

"I don't know. Looks like it. How about you?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"Do you think this crazy idea is going to work?"

She sat beside him and watched as rope ladders were lowered to the barge. "I hope it does. I wish I could go be in the crowd with Hannah and Peter and Becker. They're going to have more fun."

Estus walked by, wearing his sailor uniform and jacket. He stood at the rail and watched the selected men climb down the ladders

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until the deck was less crowded, then came over and asked Bodie, "Do you know how many are going on the barge?"

"About three hundred I think. Someone said it's about two thirds of the crew."

Adrian added, "They're going to miss it. They have to go float in the ocean for three days and they're going to miss everything. It's kinda sad."

"Yeah, well if this doesn't work they won't be sad. There's, what, maybe five thousand angry villagers and we're sitting here with a hundred and fifty or so?" Bodie put his arm around Adrian and told her, "Listen kid, if this turns sour you need to get off this ship. Fly or magic yourself over to that barge and hold tight. If they start to fight us it's going to get real dirty real fast."

"I'm not afraid of that. This is going to work."

"But promise me, just in case."

She didn't say anything, so Bodie prompted her, "Look, this is no game. If they start fighting..."

"I know what fighting is. I was there on the stage when it all started. I'm not going to promise you that I'll run away." She stood up, faced Bodie and Estus and added, "I'll promise the opposite. If there's trouble, I'm going to find you, and you, and I'll help you get out of it. I can take care of me, thank you very much. I need to go find my hat."

Estus sat next to Bodie and said, "I'm glad she's on our side."

Nathan called from behind them. "Everyone staying on the ship, gather round. Mister Prescott, is there anyone below deck?"

The first officer was already wearing his enlisted uniform. He belted out a command in his hearty voice, "All hands!" The boatswain piped the call, and a dozen other men soon came running.

"Okay. Is this everyone? Very well, then. Stand over here, near the front, and on the side facing the shore. Some of you go up there on the high deck. Remember that you only need to be where they can see you. We'll have swords to pass out. Now, if anyone becomes hurt, move away from the edge and we'll have bandages ready. Please do not get hurt! We'll need to show the fight for about ten full minutes once we start moving. Make as much noise as you can. They won't hear your words, but we need to make enough noise for them to hear. Call out prayers to Benok, curse the rebels, or just scream and yell. Now, I need eight men with strong voices."

Prescott raised his hand, others volunteered. Nathan counted them out and told them, "When you hear me call out, 'We need

help', run to the rail here and throw the ladders down and start calling them to come up to help. As soon as we get some of them climbing up, you'll see the flash. Then, everyone scatter and wait, and let Becker and me do the talking. Any questions?"

A hundred hands went into the air. Bodie shook his head and walked away from the group. Nathan called out to him, "Wait. We need to go through this. Where are you going?"

"To put my damn pants on."

---

Becker stood at the rail of Patrick's fishing boat with Peter and Hannah. Beside him, Nevil held his knife, bare steel pointing down from his impatient fist. He tapped the tip of the knife on the weather-worn wood, making tiny cuts. They were the closest to the *Corona*, the point of Merebor's defense. The other men on the boat were sitting out of the wind, nestled in their heavy coats, leather gloves, and wool knit hats, their watchful eyes glaring out from their grim unshaven faces.

"They know they're beaten," Nevil said to Becker. "Why won't they leave us?"

Becker heard heavy boots walking up behind him. He turned and looked up past the mountain ridge of Patrick's shoulders and said, "They're still quiet, Patrick. We sure gave them something to think about, didn't we?"

"How do you all know my cousin, again?"

Becker stuck to the story he had made up. "We met Darla once, my son here and I, about two years ago, I think it was. We were traveling, and we stopped in her father's shop for some supplies. We talked a bit and he invited us home and Darla made us tuna and dumplings."

"Where you from, then?"

"Korolem, when we're not traveling."

"Not a good time for strangers, seems to me."

Becker felt his heart begin to beat a little heavier, but he went on without missing a beat, "I'll say. Listen, I know we haven't met, but I've been to Merebor lots of times. I'm a master of the Vintner guild in Korolem. I travel a with my son a lot, and now his wife here." Hannah smiled. "We don't have many guildsmen this far north. Sometimes people make wine on their own, and I try to find them and help them before the craft is spoiled by the darkness of individual thought." He watched Patrick, wondering if his sarcasm

had gone too far, but Patrick actually seemed comforted by the sentiment.

“You have the mark?”

Becker smiled and patted Patrick on his meaty arm. He said to Nevil, “This is the smart one here.” He quickly unbuttoned his overcoat and shirt and slid them off his shoulder to show his brand, the vine and grape. When Patrick saw the mark, his demeanor changed instantly. The master of any guild deserved nothing but the best respect that one could give.

Nevil leaned in and asked in a quiet voice. “Do you have any?”

“What?”

“Wine.”

“No. Sorry.”

Motion caught Becker’s eye. The *Corona* was on the move.

He turned around and pointed to the *Corona*. He nudged Hannah’s shoulder. She looked up at him. He pointed and nodded toward the ship.

She turned around and screamed, the most horrid, spine gripping, bone chilling, beautiful stage scream Becker had ever heard. She even followed it with a little half-faint into Peter’s arms.

Becker pointed and called out, “Look! They’re fighting back.” Everyone ran forward. “Patrick, move us in. By the Light! They’re fighting back. God be praised! They’re fighting back.”

Patrick and his crew leapt to action. The anchor was raised. The sail was placed, and they started moving away from the pack to meet the massive Koro-Del trading ship. They watched the skirmish. The entire ship looming above them was alive in battle. Hand to hand. Sword to sword. Other boats were catching up, eager to join the fight.

From above, Becker heard Nathan’s voice, “We need help!” That was the cue. Ladders dropped. Estus came to the rail and called down, “Brothers of Light, help us! Darkness is among us. Help us.” Someone struck him from behind and Estus fell over the rail, twenty feet into the cold ocean.

Becker rushed to the rail of the fishing boat ready to jump in, but Patrick pulled him back and threw down a rope. He hauled Estus close and threw down a rope ladder. Estus dragged himself up the wooden rungs until Nevil and Patrick could reach down and pull him over to rest in a heap on the deck. Becker leaned over him and told him quietly, “You damn fool. You could have killed yourself.”

Estus was shivering. “Just help me up. We have to be quick.”

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Becker helped him to his feet. Nevil threw a blanket over his shoulders, and everyone gathered around.

Estus, in his borrowed sailor uniform, told everyone between gasps, "They meant to burn the houses, kill the men, and take over the town. We couldn't let them. There were those of us who couldn't let them. We started the mutiny, small at first, but when the fight took hold more came to God's side. But we're outnumbered. We need all who favor God's light to help. We tried to put down the ladders, may God help us."

"They're down! The ladders are down." Becker shouted loudly, pointing.

"Go then. There are so many. Outnumbered. We must hold together in the Light, whatever the cost."

Becker yelled out to Patrick. "Get us closer."

When they pulled near, Becker jumped to the wooden rungs of the rope ladder and started climbing up the tall hull of the *Corona*. Already men were climbing up the other three ladders. He hurried, with Nevil right behind. When his head reached over the edge he called down. "Spread the word. Victory is in our hands." He looked around. This was cutting it close. It was clear that the deck was nearly empty. Someone was climbing over the rail at the next ladder, and Nevil was pushing up behind him. He jumped over the rail and onto the deck, ready to call out to Kendrick, when the flash went off.

It was dazzling bright, like a dozen suns. Becker staggered, his vision purple and blurry. When his eyes adjusted the fighting had stopped. Sailors were standing dazed. Angry fishermen and villagers were climbing up, starting to fight the sailors.

"No!" Nathan called out. "We are God's children. Come, friends. Come see."

Nathan staggered from one sailor to another. Hugging them, cheering with them.

Nevil asked, "What's going on? What happened?"

Becker said, "Did you see the light of God?"

Nathan answered, "Yes, the light. My friends, the finger of God has touched this ship. Light, the very Light of Almighty God has taken their evil hands away." He ran to a sailor and yelled to him so all could hear. "Search below. Are there any officers?" The man ran off. "You!" He grabbed Captain Gareth, who was wearing the uniform of an unbranded enlisted deckhand. "Check if the cargo is safe."

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Nathan staggered to the rail next to Becker and called out to the people below. "We are freed from the hand of darkness. The Light of God has cleansed us of those who would hurt you. Come, be with us. You all must see, for a miracle has touched this town!"

Becker went to Nathan and took him by the shoulders. More people were coming up. A crowd was forming on the deck. "What is this?" Becker demanded. "What did you see?"

Nathan spoke to Becker, but projected to the crowd gathering on the deck. "I had a man's throat in my hands. He was the one who bragged of taking ten women for himself. When I heard the mutiny begin, we fought. He punched me, winded me. I fought back, I grabbed his throat, ready to choke the life out of him. Then... Nothing! The light! And my hands were empty. God took them, took the sinners all!"

Gareth and the other sailor came back and reported. "No officers. Only those loyal to God are among us!"

Nathan grabbed Nevil and demanded, "You saw it, didn't you? Hundreds of men fighting, now gone."

"I did. I saw the whole deck up here. Hundreds were fighting."

"They have been taken by the hand of almighty God. Lost. Taken." Nathan turned and ran to another sailor, and yelled, "Get that God-forsaken flag down. Raise the Legion flag so that all may know that we are safe. Praise God, we live!"

Gareth called out, "The cargo is untouched." The deck was now swarming with angry villagers and more were coming. Gareth continued in his loud captain voice, "We have to go back. The people of Boret are starving, and we must return what was taken from them."

"Through Gelst? The rebellion is still alive!" Nathan cried out in despair.

"We must," Gareth insisted. "Whatever the cost. We must turn back, God will light our way, most certainly."

"Yes! We will face what we must. There is no other way."

Becker looked through the crowd. Waiting. He pushed to the rail to see if they had made it. While he was looking, he heard a commotion. Gavin was running through the crowd.

"Wait. You don't have to turn back." It was perhaps the worst sort of melodramatic overacting he had ever seen, but at least he was loud. "The river. God's new river! Did you hear, man? There's, like, you know, the river, man."

Bodie Challuk walked up to them and delivered his line with a voice so stiff and awkward that Becker feared the whole thing might just unravel. "But lo! We are too few. So many have been taken."

Nathan jumped in and worked up the crowd, urging them closer. He jumped up onto stacked crates at the base of the main mast and called out, "Those who have witnessed the miracle of Merebor, will you help? What? Tell me!" The crowd shouted back. "Will you do God's great work and help us take this food to your starving brothers in Boret?" Cheers came from the crowd. "That's right, brothers. Praise the Light of God, for the miracle is now in our hands, and we shall carry forth the Light of God in our works, good brothers! Let the light shine upon us, for we are saved, we are saved, we are saved, we are saved!"

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"You must leave immediately."

"Yes."

"You have a sturdy horse? You'll need to travel through the night."

"I do."

"You carry a sacred trust, my son. I see the Light of God burning upon you, but I fear the darkness. Beware the rebels who are gathering in the North. This will not be easy."

"I can only serve my Lord. He shall have my every breath and hope, every fiber and bone."

"What troubles you, child? Your eyes tell of doubt."

"Father, you know that I will give my life for this sacred crusade, but how can it be that I am the proper vessel for this task? Would not a Legionnaire or a wizard better serve His hand?"

"The Legion has been spoiled by the Governor, who now serves the shadows cast upon the land by his corrupt and contumacious brother. Wizards are unable to practice God's gift without giving alert to the evil one, and so my brother has chosen you, Deacon. This is your chance to redeem the light where you could not before when he was in your care."

"I..."

"No. Have no shame, for the end of this evil influence is nearly at hand. This is the key. Grasp it firm and turn it, for this shall unlock the goodness so needed by us all."

Victor Tol-Tolin leaned forward and placed the paper, folded and sealed with the holy sign, into Glen Dawson's callused hand.

## CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

“Go. Stay on the north bank. We will be praying for you. Dear Father of Light, guide him, keep him safe, and deliver our land into your gentle hands. So let it be.”

“Let it be.”

Glen bowed his head and then walked with gentle pride up the steps of the sanctum, feeling a new energy surge through him from the Holy Light burning like a furnace in his belly. The quiet chapel was bathed in the indigo light of the late afternoon sun shining through the six tall, tinted windows. A cluster of men were talking quietly in the back. A woman was lighting a candle at the sacrament table. He began tracing his steps ahead of him, to his office to get a satchel, home to pack clothes and some flat bread, then to the barn to ready his best draft horse. In his mind he was already pressing through the winter wind, guarding the tiny paper rudder that would steer history beneath his feet.

He approached the tall wooden doors, pulled them open by their cold brass handles and stepped into the small marbled entry way. The torches washed the stone with a shutter of orange beneath the slanted yellow rays of the setting sun. Frigid wind blew through the thickening flurries and whistled under the outer doors, sweeping across his ankles. Glen found his coat among the hooks. He put Andor’s letter into the inner pocket and bundled up in his wool knit hat and gloves.

With the wind blasting on his ears he took the wide stone steps two at a time down into the shadowed piazza where he followed the shoveled walk across to the columns of the portico under the new construction. He paused here at the edge of the falling snow and looked up into the muted haze of the sky.

Snow drifted across his face and settled in his hair and eyebrows. A smile grew from deep in his heart. He unbuttoned one button and reached in to touch the paper in his pocket. Words written by a sacred hand, guided by God Himself, rested close to his heart.

No sooner had he recognized the sin of envy than he gave himself to it, wrapped within a very good reason. What if something happened to the letter? He would have to know the message to deliver it. He was the sacred scout, and he had to deliver the message. Yes, he would keep the paper itself safe, dry, unharmed, but with these traitors, who could know what might happen in the dark of the forest? His hands shook as he buttoned up his coat. His

heart raced at the thrill that he would soon set his eyes upon the words of God.

Glen hurried to the seminary, through the grand wooden doors, across the wooden tiles and up the curved wooden stairs with the wide wooden handrail. His small apartment was at the end of the hall. By the time he put his key into the lock his whole body was shaking with anticipation. He closed and locked the door behind him, mindful that he needed to find his satchel and the last of his smoked meat. That would come next.

Five quick steps brought him to his desk by the window. He pulled out the parchment and set it carefully on the polished surface of the desk. With shuttering hands, he pulled off his gloves, his hat, his coat, and having nothing near to set them on, he dropped them on the floor before sitting himself down.

A moment of doubt taunted him when he saw the wax seal still in tact. Had Victor instructed him not to read it? He lifted the folded paper and pressed it into a tube to see the writing inside. There was Andor's careful handwriting and the words that Victor had confessed he himself did not fully understand, so powerful was the intent of the Lord.

In the middle drawer was a sharp knife. The clatter of the handle filled the room. Time was pressing on him. He needed to be away before sunset. He tenderly cut under the seal and opened the paper. His eyes scanned quickly, then he read more carefully. Then again, his lips whispering the words just to be sure.

His body cast a long shadow across the woven rug behind his desk. He sat still. His face felt flush, and he felt the winter cold seep into his body, but he was unable to move, unable to think. He read the letter a final time. His breathing was steady, but raspy and deep. The gentle hum of color at the window drained from dim to gray to black. His shadow died.

When finally his fingers fumbled for a candle and match, they felt foreign and numb. The rumble of his chair against the floor was like a thunder in his ears. His coat still lay in a heap on the floor, a black shape in the dark room. Glen leaned forward, elbows on the desk, his head resting in his hands, his eyes looking unfocused at the words he could no longer clearly see. Now his shadow was cast haphazard on the ceiling from the lone candle.

He stood. Turned. He picked up his coat and put it on. His hat, still cold, went back onto his head. He put his gloves on, picked up the paper, folded it twice, and put it back into his breast pocket.

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After he buttoned his coat he bent his face down into the heat of the candle and blew it out. His hand touched the black arm band sewn on his right sleeve. His fingers traced the white triangle mark of his guild.

Now he felt every eye upon him. He hurried down the deserted hall, into the bitter cold night and doubled around to the stable, because it seemed that he should be expected there, even though he had said nothing of his mission. He hurried in, away from the angry wind, tracking clumps of snow from his shoes and cuffs to the foyer where the young guard sat.

"Is he in?"

"Yes, Sir, but he's in a meeting. Is it urgent Mister Dawson?"

"More so than words can say. Take me in, now."

He followed the guard into the carpeted office. Glen walked past the two women sitting in chairs in front of the desk and around to Baron. The room seemed distant, too quiet. He bowed his head, ignoring the questions from the Governor.

He unbuttoned his coat. He took only a moment to wave the young guard out. He felt himself grow weak as he pushed through a moment of disorientation, dreamlike. He was supposed to be on a horse, but he watched as his hand pulled out a folded piece of parchment and drop it onto the desk while he stood there, flushed and freezing inside.

## CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

The canal was barely wide enough. The sides of the barge were covered in thick clay from scraping through the narrow channel. Several times the barge would lurch and pitch forward as it ran onto the shallow bottom, blocked the flow, and was again lifted forward in a great spilling splash. Estus stood on top of one of the large crates stacked in the middle. The convoy behind them stretched into the dim folds of the moon cloudy night.

He climbed down again to the lower crate and onto the deck where Ivy sat, and had been sitting quietly and still since the beginning of their journey on the canal. The barge tilted and caught more mud, forcing him into a wide stance with his hand on the rough wood of the crate to steady himself.

"How much more, do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know. But we are moving well and the waters will carry us."

He cocked his head. "I smell the pines," he told her.

"Good. The river is still there, then, waiting for us. Come sit."

Ivy was facing forward. Estus sat and leaned back against the shipping crate. They tipped. Water sprayed up and fell onto the deck and ran over to them, wetting their legs. She put her hand on his arm and said, "Rest."

Estus looked up into the sky where the clouds hung low and luminous beneath the hidden full moon. His mind slowed and rested on the image of the beauty and grace of her dark, olive skin, the casual elegance of her close-fit jacket, the sheen of shadow light that danced in the curtain of her sleek black hair.

"We lied to them, Ivy. We changed them. Merebor will never be the same once the ships start coming. Their houses will be torn down and replaced with docks and markets and too many people."

"Yes, and more."

"How is what we did there any different than what Andor Tol-Tolin has been doing for hundreds of years? Lying, manipulating, steering."

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"It is not different, Estus. It is the way of things. There are leaders. There are followers. The world changes, but what they become is still up to them. Perhaps we made them rich."

"They don't want rich. They want peace. That's why Andor is winning, and why he keeps winning. What if he's right? What if we untie all the knots and everything falls apart? What if we take away the light and we can't find it in ourselves? What if we're left running in the wild?"

"You'll choose the light."

"You think so?"

"It's what you are. It's what everyone can be when you're not crippled by fear. Because you are mind." Her voice grew soft. "Because you are magic, and we will help each other understand where that will take us."

Estus turned to her and found her eyes welled with tears. She looked at him smiling, eyes glistening with a look of tender sadness.

"What is it, Ivy?"

"Perhaps soon we will hear the symphonies again."

He reached to brush her hair with his fingers, but something flashed in the darkness and Ivy lurched away from the sudden dart of light that crashed against the crate behind her. Blue flames splashed across the deck as a shower of whiskey bombs rained from the sky onto the barge.

Ivy leapt onto the crate and helped pull Estus up and over to the other side. The next barge behind them was hit. Estus saw more flying in from behind a clump of bushes. The barge tilted and slid against the dirt again.

Estus saw Bodie Challuk run across the deck and jump onto the packed dirt ground. Estus followed Ivy back onto the crate and saw movement behind the bush. She hit the deck just ahead of him, then they were both sprinting after Bodie with others from the caravan running behind them.

Breath rasped heavy in his lungs. His legs pounded hard on the uneven ground. As he neared the bush he realized that he had no weapon. Ivy had her sword. She stepped, spun around and killed the man behind Bodie as he twisted the neck of his man. Estus came around the bush in time to see three others scattering away.

The wooden box of pottery bombs was lying open on the ground. Bodie knelt in front of it and said, "These aren't ours." He smelled it and scrunched his nose. When he stood, Estus picked up

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the box, took several steps away and threw it, scattering the casks, breaking them and releasing a strong kerosene odor.

A heavy arm clamped around his neck and drew him backward. The arm was like a tree, and the man behind like a mountain of hard flesh, slick with the stink of brine sweat and clay. He struggled with animal panic until the arm released with a harsh grunt. Bodie stepped out of the way and pulled his knife out of the attacker as he fell back onto the dark dirt.

Bodie followed Estus as they fell into step with a pack of others from the caravan. The light was dim. The shadows were a confused mess as the desert floor erupted in motion. Behind every bush was someone with a fire bomb. Ivy ran zig though the low juniper trees, slashing and killing as necessary to lead the small group forward with oil bombs crashing around them.

“Come on, man!” The voice was Kendrick. Estus felt himself lifted into the sky. He joggled a bit as he reached for the magic strands as he had been taught. They suddenly snapped to his call and he charged off into the night following the master wizard.

Kendrick moved slowly over the top of the low trees. He jabbed his arm down and a spark flew from him to the sudden explosion below. Estus followed, then darted sideways when he saw another group. He floated over them, feet tickling the top branches. He saw their stash and called the magic fire to his hands and released it. Lightning shot from his hand with a large crack to the crate of bombs that exploded into an orange and blue cloud that charged up toward him. Estus closed his eyes and thought up.

When he opened his eyes he was well above the scene. They were close to the river. Nathan Henderson flew down toward the water. Estus pressed his arms to his side and fell down to follow him. Becker flew by, then Susan. The wizards suddenly tracked to the bank. Adrian flew down to the water and then up suddenly, bringing the river in a heavy wave deep across the woods of the bank.

There were hundreds of men hidden in the trees, waiting for them. Estus and the others flushed them away from the bank and into the woods.

Maxwell bobbed in the air next to Estus. He motioned for Estus to follow the others back to the caravan, which was moving again through the narrow canal. Bodie already had the first barge into the river, but there was a line of cargo still backed up, still under attack and on fire.

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Kendrick flew past them fast with a pink shimmering bubble around him. As he passed, the fires grew dark and smoldering smoke rose in the pale light. Estus saw an uncountable mob of men milling and stomping, ready to charge. He flew down between them and the caravan, letting his feet brush the dirt. He called fire to his hands and screamed toward them. Some scattered, but others reached for him, grabbed hold, pulled him down. Estus kicked, felt punches landing on his back and head. His instinct was to try to get his feet under him, but he fought that impulse and focused on his connection to the flying strands of magic. He took a breath, forced his mind blank, and shot up into the sky with two men holding on. His shirt ripped. One fell away. He smashed his foot into the side of the other and was then free, but the mob was moving in. Another volley of bombs crashed onto the barges and boats, which took fire once again.

The low rumble of hoofbeats echoed from the river and then grew louder as dozens of red coated Legionnaires drove a raging herd of war horses along the canal between the barges and the ambush. A trumpet sounded, and the horses all turned into the mob, chasing those who fled and trampling or cutting down those who did not.

“Keep moving!” Estus called out. There was a collection of young men standing on the ground by the canal. Estus flew down to them and said, “Get on your boats. Keep going!”

The fighting was moving away from the canal and river back toward the line of woods that edged along the low ground next to the sage plain. When Estus flew back to the river he saw that about half of the barges were already lining up in the river, while the small boats scattered around them and the others turned the choppy corner out of the canal behind them.

Ivy was still on the lead barge, holding her blood-coated sword at her side in a group that included Bodie, Becker Dodd, and three Legion soldiers. When Estus stepped into the group beside Ivy, she put her hand on his shoulder. “This is Estus Arrenkyle.”

“My name is Captain Benson of the Boret Legion Guild. We intercepted a letter, which is apparently one of six other messages, five of which were successfully delivered yesterday, instructing the warden of Bora-Goss to release the inmates for the attack. The message we received directed them to leave no survivors and burn the entire shipment.”

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Estus turned to Bodie and asked, "Where's Kendrick? Is everyone out of the canal?"

"We don't know yet."

Becker answered from behind them. "Yes. We're all in the river."

"We have a message from your brother," the Legionnaire continued. "He said if we find you, tell you to hurry."

"We will. Thank you, Captain."

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Darla spooned behind Katie on the tiny bed in the stuffy attic boarding room of Madam Collins.

An angry shout roused her from her sleep. She blinked open her eyes to the grey on black shadows of the small room, then turned her head up to the window that she had cracked open to let in some air. She listened to the quiet broken only by Katie's gentle sleep breathing. She rested her head again on the stiff pillow and closed her eyes when she heard it again. Two men yelling. It sounded like a fight, but she couldn't make out the words. This time it didn't fade. More voice called out. She turned and rolled off the dense cotton mattress. The bare boards of the wide wooden floor planks were cold on her feet. She stepped across the creaking boards to peer out the window, but all she could see was the empty sidewalk between the boarding house and the river. Echoes of other voices faded into the night, then a woman screamed. She pushed the heavy window open and leaned out.

A man ran by below, stopped and then ran back to help a woman, and then they both ran along the canal out of site. She heard the next volley of voices the same time she noticed lamplight shining under the door. They were louder this time. More people ran by below. Katie snapped up in bed and called out, "Where are you?" Darla shot back to the bed and said, "Get up. We need to find our shoes."

"What is it?"

"I don't know."

Footsteps pounded below them along with muffled voices in the house. Darla opened the door, and the dim lamplight that slanted on the old walls was enough for them to get dressed and ready to run. At the bottom of the narrow attic stair they saw two men. One asked, "Could you see anything?"

Darla told him, "People running. Yelling. What's going on?"

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A door opened and a young man with loose trousers and no shirt looked out with sleepy eyes. Through the window in his room they saw a strange orange glow cast a shadow across the hallway wall. Katie said, "I smell smoke."

They all hurried down the stairs to the front parlor where Madam Collins was looking out the front window. The man asked, "What do you see?" The face she turned to them was stricken and lost, her eyes panicked.

Darla ran to the window and saw the orange glow again, but this time she saw it clearly. There was a man standing on the roof across the street. The orange glow came from fire shooting from his hands. The wood shingles began to burn, and then the man jumped down from the roof, but instead of hitting the ground he flew along the road. Darla pulled Madam Collins back as the stream of fire shot toward the window. It didn't shatter, but the hedge in front of the boarding house porch was burning in spots. Darla led the others onto the porch and down to the snowy street, which was starting to fill with nightmare panic. Darla grabbed Katie's hand and ran to the end of the road in the middle of a small group of people that she was following, or who were following her, she couldn't tell.

As they came to the cross street another flicker of light flashed above. They looked up and saw a dark figure with pillars of flames shooting from his hands setting trees and buildings on fire. There was a glow in the sky and a rumble in the wind. Boret on fire.

Darla turned back. More people were gathering in the street. The rattle of a horse and wagon shook the night along the large street. An old woman started to run out from behind Darla into the street, but Katie held her back as the carriage whipped by, too close. The crowd swept past them to the next street.

A man was yelling out from a balcony, "Run. Hurry out of town. Kendrick and his evil wizards have set loose on the town. Fire! Run!"

They ran with the others along the narrow alleys to the piazza that was starting to fill with hysterical people. Katie tugged Darla's hand, leading her out of the mob to the steps of a doorway. "Darla, this can't be Kendrick. What's happening?"

"I don't know. Look!" Two more dark figures flew above the crowd, circling the piazza, throwing fire through the windows.

People were bunching up and more came pressing in like a wave. They ran as the stampede behind them packed in a mass. Another wagon pushed through, scattering more ahead. Several fell.

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People charged in behind. Fathers ran with children on their hips. Some ran with bare feet. They all raced down the river. The piazza was filled solid with packed panic.

"We need to get out of here! Katie! This way." The streets were clogged. She tried the door behind them, but it was locked. She turned back to reach for Katie but lost her in the mob.

"Katie!" Her cry was lost in the melee hysteria. She stood between the wall and the impossible crowd. Five steps. None of the dark faces were familiar. She kept moving along the wall until she found Katie lying on the ground, holding her hand. Darla bent over her making a shield.

"My fingers." Her face was a mask of brave pain. Darla grabbed her shoulders and helped her up. She cradled her arms around Katie's shoulders and told her, "It's going to be okay, but we need to keep going." A heavy arm stumbled into them, nearly knocking them down. Darla spun and punched him in the eye.

The smell of smoke was heavy. They came around a corner to a wall of fire. Beyond that was the river. Darla looked behind them. The entire city was on a stampede. The alley was clear, but the air was warped and shimmering. "Come on, Katie doll, Run!" Darla led her into the searing alley just below the bright flames. The skin on her cheeks burned. She closed her eyes to slits and led Katie as fast as they could run into the cold air by the river.

They ran and were joined by a family, father, mother, two boys. They ran, panting, their feet slapping out a rhythm on the brick walk until they passed a small pier with a fishing boat. The father stopped and darted onto the pier. Darla stopped. "Here!" he said, waving them in with his family. It was a tight fit. Darla sat in the front with Katie leaning on her. The boys pushed off. She put her arms around Katie and held her as the father rowed like hell.

The city was crowned in fire and stank of char. Screams echoed past the thunder of fire.

"Close your eyes, baby," she whispered to Katie. "We're okay."

---

Baron and three young Legion soldiers pushed their horses through the hot air. Orange flames shimmered in the sky behind the rooftops along the deserted cobble road as they came to a small dorm house with a large porch under the boughs of a small hawthorn tree. The Boret Guild of Magic.

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The house was dark. Baron kicked in the front door and pushed into the musty parlor. It was still. Solemn. The darkness was oppressive, but he called out. "Who's here?"

"There is nothing here for you, Baron." He turned to see a lamp come to light in the hand of Victor Tol-Tolin, casting deep angled shadows across the walls as he walked in behind them from the porch into the formal front room.

"Get them back here! Where is the senior?"

Instead of an answer the elf filled the moment with a hush and an impatient wave of his fingers. "We should go. The people need to see you."

"You have to stop this! What in the name of Light is this about?" Baron's voice dropped to a lost plea. "Why?"

"They were called."

"Uncall them!"

"I can't do that, Governor. They are under the guiding hand of our gentle Lord. There is a great evil among us, Baron, and the fingers of God must now become a fist to drive the innocent away from evil and into the Light of God."

"You're killing them!"

"The righteous shall survive, or will take their reward in the Light with God. Men have become so lost in the darkness, as I'm sure you know so well, my son. They sit idle while evil seeps in like a bleak wind until they become frozen, unable to move, unable to want to move, unable to care that their dear souls are mouldering in the untended pit of intemperance. So they must be led. They must be shown most seriously. They must have a reason to follow the light. You must see this."

His only answer was the incessant, low-pitched bellow of the burning city. Then he asked, "Where is Andor Tol-Tolin?"

"Where is the Light?"

"What does that mean? He will answer for this."

"Andor has left us, Baron. You will not see him again. That is all you need to know."

"Like hell!" Baron grabbed the elf and pinned him against the wall, cracking the old plaster. "He will answer for this. You all will!"

"My brother's fate is no longer your concern."

"And what of your fate, elf?" Baron found his knife clutched in his hand. He brought it to Victor's neck. "Is your fate not my concern? Tell me where to find Andor, or I'll cut your God damned head off."

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"You're wasting your time here, Baron. I'm not trying to be difficult. I have no way to take you to Andor. There is no way that I can make that happen now. It is out of my hands. My son, I am sorry that this has happened like this. You must trust that from this pain will emerge a great good, but only if you come with me and help lead the people to safety. Help them find the Light once again. Baron, I am not Andor. I did not want it to be this way. I did as he asked, and now he has left it to me. I want to help you, but we have to go now. They need you, and I will help you."

"I don't think I want your help." He held the knife on the elf's neck for another long moment. "I want you out of the way, but not like this." He stepped back and put the knife away. "One more thing."

"Whatever I can do, Baron."

"Don't ever preach to me again."

---

Estus stood with Ivy at the front of the barge looking ahead to where the sky whispered red below the grey dawn. It was still dark enough that it seemed almost a trick of the eyes, but minute by minute as they drew closer the wash of color settled deeper throughout the clouds. The river around him was filled with onlookers watching from their own decks. The sky pulsed with a low rumble, more felt than heard. Estus was frozen, numb to the wind, watching the solid silhouette of trees turn into a lattice of red-lit twigs below boiling black smoke.

Kendrick and the other wizards joined them at the front of the lead barge. Hope shattered and blew away between anger and unspeakable grief. Ash fell on them like blistering snow. When the caravan came around the final bend in the river the heat crashed prickly dry over them.

Bodie steered them forward, past the smoking remains of loading cranes and warehouses. Barns and stables lay black and smoldering in enormous piles of glowing embers. No rope, no pulley, no dock remained. The houses by the canal walk where Estus used to run were now nothing but rows of blackened skeletons vomiting a flood of thick smoke above dark silhouettes of the dead. The boarding house had collapsed into itself.

The piazza was a sheet of fire. The seminary dorm lay broken, a burning pile of splintered beams. The new addition with its elaborate carvings and so many of his own chiseled door jambs and

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hours of trimming and nailing wooden floors burned hot blue and roared like an angry furnace.

The piazza was littered with bodies. Toppled wagons lay twisted amid carcass and corpse. Evidence of a hurried escape covered the ground along to the river. Mittens. Torn coats. Dropped sacks. A pile of books burned beside the smoking coat of the old man still holding the remains of a broken guild box. An island of spilled clothes sloped in the water. Dolls, cloths, and dead dogs lay beside young and old, left behind in the burning oven of the city.

"What can we do?" Estus said, not to anyone in particular. "We can't leave it like this. What can we do?"

Kendrick said, "This is mage fire. I can still feel the tremors of magic. They're fighting back. We can help them."

"Who?" Becker asked.

"The free wizards. Small in number, but I've been teaching them. Becker, Nathan, Maxwell, we need to help them."

Estus asked, "Can you put out the fires?"

"Not all of them. This is too much, but maybe we can keep it from spreading, and we need to stop whoever is starting them."

"Go then!" Estus told them.

Susan grabbed Nathan and kissed him soundly, then she kissed Maxwell, Becker, and then Kendrick on the cheek. "Come back to us, she told them."

Estus knelt in front of Adrian and said, "Can you make it rain from the river? Pull it up as high as you can and just throw it into the clouds?"

"I can try."

"Go try. Susan and Hannah can go with you. Whatever happens, stay safe. Stay way high up and don't get hurt, or I'll be very, very sad."

"Okay."

"You can do this."

"I know."

He stood, grabbed Adrian by the waist and threw her into the air. Adrian lifted her arms and flew back over the river caravan toward the fires with Hannah and Susan following right behind her.

"Bodie!" Estus ran to the back. "Steer me close to the bank, and then lead everyone away from the fires."

Ivy came behind him and said, "Estus, we should stay with the barges."

"Do whatever you want. I'm going to find Andor Tol-Tolin."

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“Why? What will that solve?”

“I’m going to kill him.”

He ran behind the crates to the other side of the barge, and when Bodie brought them close he jumped. Ivy landed beside him, and together they ran through the burning hot air of the piazza.

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Kendrick led the other wizards fast and low between the flames where the air was not as hot. He felt the magic, sensing the spells as fire fly flickers in the distance. He flew fast, just above the cobbles, down deserted lanes and through boulevards filled with smoke and charred, fallen trees. Dead houses flashed by them with the echo of the burning city beating a steady staccato rhythm. As they drew near, Kendrick rose into the heat and called cool air around him and the others so they could fly straight through the fires.

They charged into the middle of the battle, and in a quick second he could see that the guild magicians were using mostly their fire spells against the free wizards that he had trained. They were defending well enough, but the guild magicians were keeping them scattered while they continued sending flames down onto the houses.

Kendrick flew directly at one of the guild magicians, against an intense torch of magical fire. He rammed into the wizard and drained his magic just long enough for the man to slip his hold on his flying spell and drop sixty feet into the burning roof that he had just set on fire.

Smoke began swirling around Nathan, faster and faster until he sent his tornado toward two other wizards. He caught them off guard and sent them flying back just as Becker’s illusion took form. The image of a hundred men shooting arrows up at the guild magicians drew their attention just long enough for Maxwell to call lightning from the clouds. A sudden bolt of thunder shook the air, and three more fell.

Kendrick led his three friends and nine free wizards to the next group. Along the way he flew close to the burning homes. He pushed his control as wide as he could, and every few seconds he took a deep breath and emptied his bubble of air to snuff out the hungry fire. Becker and Nathan had picked up on his spell and were dousing fires along with him.

He led them to another group of fire-wielding guild mages. The four wizards took notice, but before they could fly up or away,

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Kendrick turned their own fires on them. They lit like tallow torches and screamed until they hit the brick street below.

The air was still. The fighting here was done. The free wizards all hung together in a large circle in the shifting orange shadow of the fires.

Kendrick looked at his friends and students from Boret, young men and women who had studied in silent secret most of their lives for tonight. "I am so proud. I'm sorry that I wasn't here when it started. You did well, each of you, but now the most important thing is to find any of us left behind. I will take care of the other guild wizards. Our friends from Korolem will help you back to the barges. Stay low. Stay together. Find your families and get to safety. It's time to go. You have all done so well. I'll take it from here."

Maxwell added, "I am so proud to stand with you on this day. The time of opening is drawing near."

Kendrick spun and hurried to the remaining flashes of fire magic on the other side the city.

---

Adrian rose high into the warm air under the overcast sky until she entered the silver moon luster of the icy clouds. Her cloak grew soggy and her eyebrows and hair soon became stiff with frost. It was difficult to keep her orientation in the dense, dim fog. She closed her eyes and pressed upward. When she opened her eyes for a peek, the strange featureless glow seemed endless in all directions.

"Hannah?" she called out.

"We're here," answered a thin distant voice.

"Where are you?" Adrian yelled.

"What?" The voice was farther away. The light was growing brighter, but the cloud fog was so thick that she could barely see her hands. The air was damp and so cold. She wanted to panic, but wouldn't allow it.

Aunt Susan's voice broke through, distant, muffled, "Keep going to the top!"

Adrian closed her eyes and let the magic carry her higher through the freezing fog. When she finally broke through to the clear sky her eyes were drawn to the naked brilliance of crowded constellations swarming endless above. The moon painted shifting shades of ruffled shadows amid the luminous blanket below. To the east the stars were lost in the coming dawn that drew a wide purple line across the sky.

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Hannah and Susan came through, and only then did Adrian realize how far above the clouds she had come. The misty veil seemed almost close enough to touch, but her cousin and aunt were only tiny shadow dots far below her. They all flew together into a close huddle above an endless floor that scraped the edges of the circle sky.

"Aunt Susan," she started. The panic was growling behind a short fence. She felt the weight of the world pressing on her. She felt time sitting still as the life of the world drained fast needing her to stop it now. She felt suddenly small and lost.

Her eyes, darting over the unbroken carpet, began blurring with tears. Everyone was counting on her, but all she had was a thin idea behind hurried hope. She wanted to let the flying spell go, to drop into the hot air and try again. The mere thought of that caused the magic to slip. She fell, then stopped, but the magic didn't feel right. She stretched her arms up to Susan like a toddler stuck on the floor. Susan swooped down and hugged her tight, and then the fear leapt at her and the magic stopped like a door slammed in a sudden wind. Her weight pulled on her. Susan tilted back with Adrian clutching on top and Hannah holding her from above.

"I've got you, Addy. Honey, what is it? What happened?"

"I almost fell down! I don't have my magic. I lost my magic."

"You're okay. We've got you, sweetheart."

She pushed the words out through sobs of frustration now, more than fear. "I don't know where it is!"

"What honey? Where what is?"

"The river! I can't see it. I came all the way up, and I now can't see it. I don't know what to do."

"Okay. Hush now. A few more seconds. Everything's okay. Rest. Just a few seconds. Everything will be okay."

"I don't know if I can. I don't want to have to do this."

"You've done so much. You did great, Addy. You don't have to do this. Just rest. You're okay." Susan brushed her hair. "Shh. You don't have to do anything but let me hold you another minute, then we'll all go back down together."

She rocked, gently. Adrian calmed down. She was so tired. Sleep dragged at her, and she drifted into a shallow slumber listening to her aunt's heartbeat.

"Come on, girls. Let's get back."

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Adrian opened her eyes. The moon was large and bright in the black diamond sky. A smile curled at the edge of her lips, and suddenly her magic snapped back to her.

With her eyes closed it was easier. She saw the river the way one remembers what's hidden in a closed drawer. She picked up her flying magic and began floating. Susan kissed her forehead and told her, "It's always right there, isn't it, just waiting for us."

The magic was deeper now. She couldn't find the words of gratitude that she felt. She nodded and floated away. There was work to do, and it itched like a sunburn.

This time it had to be different. It had to rain up one drop at a time, not like a wave but like a shy spring rain. Just like with rain falling down, she realized that distance didn't matter. She floated head down with her hands reaching down through the swirling fog and turned the water's world upside down. She saw all around her. She saw the stars twinkling far away under her feet. She saw the river pushing up millions of droplets in a shower spray. She saw the burning city. She saw Kendrick's bright tangle of magic. She saw the sun, the earth, the hungry water falling to her, all with her eyes gently shut.

The river rain finally burst through the clouds and aimed for the stars before falling as a coarse mist throughout the clouds.

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Andor Tol-Tolin cried a horrid wail that was lost to the thunder roar of fire all around him. He lifted his face out of the burning ash, and when he tried to roll away the deep dull pain in his side cut through everything with a blinding flash of agony. He reached down with a weak and shaking hand and pulled the knife from his flesh. Now the oven air, the dance of fire shadows, and the choking fog of black smoke above him returned him to his senses.

He lay, weak and unmoving, in the slick pool of his warm blood while his skin itched and crawled from baking in the hot air. He cried out again, truly desperate and afraid, which surprised and angered him for just that second. When he tried to sit up his flesh stung and a wave of nausea overtook him, sending him into a coughing fit that forced more blood through the deep agony cuts. His coughing ended with a gaging retch of blood and bile, but he managed to roll over onto his knees, back in control.

Bright blood smeared across his olive skin. Dizzy spun what was left of the room. He nurtured his passion into a mighty growl and forced himself up onto noodle legs that took him only a couple of stumbling steps, enough to fall through the open doorway and out into the frozen air of the dark alley. His head hit the dirty cobbled street with a sickening thunk, and he could only lay staring unfocused at the pulsing red clouds swirling above.

A mighty gasp took in a fraction of what it should. Andor struggled for air again and forced himself to breathe slower and deeper. Rolling to his side helped a little, but trying to stand up only drained him and he nearly passed out again. His head was bleeding sticky on his cheek and ear, but he could still see and move enough for what he needed to do next.

The magic swirled unfocused and far away. He could feel the fighting, the fire spells, and flying. The magic wavered slowly toward him. There was not much time, so he pushed as hard as he could and he latched onto the magic, only to lose it again like a thought lost in a busy conversation. One more time. Slowly. Where was it? He had to force his mind blank. He had to ignore the pain, and the fact that he might have gone too far, and now his life was

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draining. Then he had it. He reached. Gently, he thought. It clicked, reluctant and feeble, but enough.

His spell was brief, a cry for help, a beacon flash of unfocused magic released a glow of purple swirls sparkling into the burning sky. His eyes closed and dark sleep swept in. The thought that he would die here if this did not work was too impossible to think, and so when the darkness came it fell onto a confident snarl. His eyes closed, and his thoughts drained to black while his skin froze on the cold bricks and burned from the hot air. His mind turned to darkness with the rumble of his fires quaking in his ears.

---

Estus stood on the roof balcony of the Governor's house watching Boret burn. The heat was immense. The disaster was beyond measure. Everywhere he looked was on fire. Smoke rolled in a putrid, searing cloud. What little he could see of the river was empty. He couldn't feel Kendrick anymore. He could barely feel himself or the scalding breath in his nose.

Ivy came to stand with him. "I don't think he's here, Estus. We have to go now."

His feet were stuck in deadening apathy. His eyes moved again over the bodies lying in the piazza below. "Estus," she urged again. Ivy put her hand on his shoulder, cool gentle fingers on his neck. "It is done. You can't let yourself get lost in the sadness. We have to go on and help the rest of them. The fires are coming, and I won't have you hurt too."

He heard her words, but they roused him only a little. He looked over to her and told her, "I can't. I can't just leave. This can't be the end of it."

"It's an ending, Estus. Not the final end. We have to be patient."

"We're past patience. We're past waiting, but for what?"

"There's nothing left here, Estus. I'm so sorry. We have to go."

"Where, Ivy? Where can we go that won't be burned down around us? When are we going to claim our ground? Let it burn. It can't burn down and out. We have to burn brighter than this."

Becker Dodd flew to them out of the red sky and settled next to Estus. "Kendrick found him."

"What?"

"Andor! Kendrick found him in the alley way behind the church. Come on!" Becker led them down the stairs, through the grand foyer, past the offices to the cathedral's side entrance.

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Andor was lying on the pulpit. Estus ran to him with fists clenched, but Kendrick held back his arm and pulled him away from the frail elf. Nathan and Maxwell were bent over Andor helping heal his wounds. Estus broke away and stood over them watching.

Andor raised his head and told them, "It was Victor."

Estus knelt next to Andor's blood-covered head. Andor looked up to him and said, "Victor ordered the fires. He tried to kill me. Please! We have to help the people. We have to hurry to them and do what we can!" He started to get up.

"Where is he?" Estus asked.

"I don't know."

Estus put his hand on Andor's chest, and said, "What do you mean Victor ordered the fires?"

"Not just the fires, Estus. He's the one who gave the order for the prisoners to be let out to attack your caravan. I'm sorry. Yes, I tried to send you to the prison to keep you from causing more trouble, but we have to put that behind us. We need to put a stop to this madness! Please tell me that you got the food and supplies through."

"Why did he do it?"

"I'm not completely sure. I told him to let this unfold."

"What about Merebor? The rumors that we were going to invade the town?"

"I did that, of course. I wanted you to turn back to Gelst and work on my terms. That was a fair move, and yours was a fair counter. This is the political struggle, but none of that matters anymore. Victor grew angry that I couldn't stop you. He said I was sloppy, incompetent. We fought. I told him to let it play out, that we had more than the upper hand after the murder of our dear cousin, but he wouldn't listen. Please! This is desperate. I need to get to my people."

"No you don't," Estus told him. "Keep talking."

A giant crash shook the church. Part of the wall fell as the fire ate through the new construction next door. Smoke poured into the vaulted ceiling of the ancient cathedral. Heat washed over the small group as red burning ash sparkled in the air.

"Estus, Kendrick, you must hear me! Victor intends to lead the people of Boret to invade Gelst and take what's left of their food, their homes. They believe this is all from the Gelst rebellion, and they're ready to end it. Families fighting families, children killing children, and they're hungry enough, desperate enough to do it. Blood after hungry blood! We must get your supplies to them. We

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have to stop this! I must talk to them. They'll listen to me, but unless I can talk to them they'll do anything Victor tells them. You know that. You know that's how we made it, and now he's going to use it for all the wrong reasons. Ivy, please. What life I've got left, let me give it in service to you. Everything is changed now, and there's no way we can do this without you. But now, all that matters is that we get to them, to stop this madness, and to get everyone safe together in Gelst. Please, help me up."

Fire was licking through the crumbled wall. Another beam snapped and shook the building. A shower of burning splinters blew into the cathedral. Pews began to burn.

"Get away from him!"

Victor and Baron stood at the tall doors. Victor sprinted toward the altar. Estus was already running when he felt his entire body transform from flesh into raw blood fury. He reached out his arm and aimed to throw his shoulder into the elf's chest, but instead Victor spun, grabbed, and threw Estus behind him.

Baron helped him up. "Bless the light! You made it through."

"We made it through, but too late. Listen, it's Victor!"

"Take this," he gave his fighting knife to Estus, drew his sword, and charged forward. Estus ran after him, panting. The air seared hot in his throat. Smoke was pouring into the vaulted ceiling like an inverted grey waterfall. Baron's sword flashed red, reflecting the flames. The whole scene shook with each hammer pound of his feet. The knife felt right in his hand, hungry, as he kept his eyes focused on Victor's neck far ahead. Baron was going to get the kill, but he hoped for at least a moment of life left for Victor to feel the sting of the knife, once for every poor soul lying dead in the piazza.

Victor reached Andor a second before Baron, and by the time Estus took two more steps Victor was lying on the ground, his throat cut open. Baron's sword was clean. The blood was on Victor's own knife in Andor's hand.

There was a moment of life left in the elf's eyes as he looked up helpless to Estus. In that moment his anger vanished as though it had never been, but then it began to grow again, not for Victor, but himself.

"No, poor brother," Andor said, standing over the body. "You went too far. You ruined it all. I'm sorry, but they have to come first. It's time for this all to end."

Estus looked around to the others. He wanted to cry out, but his mind was reeling. His voice was choked with the twisting shimmer

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of the world as it broke free and understanding poured in. Ivy reached out to Andor, comforting him. Becker's eyes were heavy with sadness. Estus felt his insides screaming.

A roof beam snapped and fell near the tall doors. A shower of broken roof smashed and broke the last three rows of seats.

"Estus!" Baron called out. "Everyone! Move!"

The wizards flew through the smoke. Ivy grabbed Estus and pulled him forward, but he stopped and pulled free. He stood between the two elves, with Victor lying twisted at their feet. He saw what Andor wanted them all to see, the escape, the salvation of the people of Boret, invasion giving way to cooperation to share the city of Gelst, free of rebellion, free of war and famine in the new shining gem of humanity under the gentle guidance of their savior, Andor Tol-Tolin. Estus found himself nearly desperate to embrace that vision, to be finished with war, to finally be united as a people, healing together from this horrid wound. Another beautiful, nearly perfect lie.

It was clear that Andor knew Estus saw through it all. He told Estus, "Come along, my son. We haven't much time." There was maybe a hint of respect in the tone, but the command was clear.

Estus clutched his hands around Andor's throat and fell to the ground on top of him, thumbs digging deep into Andor's thin neck. Ivy tried to pull him off, but another beam cracked and fell, and she had to jump away.

Pain surged like an explosion through his entire body, but he ignored the spell and kept his hands tight on the elf's throat. He lifted Andor's head and smashed it as hard as he could on the finely polished wood floor. The pain eased for a second, but then washed over him again. This time he reacted. His body jerked, and Andor pulled away from him and kicked him in the face. The roof cracked, buckled, and started to fall. Estus watched Andor running toward the sanctum. With the heat falling fast upon him, he ran.

Andor jumped down the stairs. Estus ran in nightmare slow motion. A pile of burning roof was falling just ahead of him. He jumped, feet first, slid on the altar and down the stairs as it hit, crashing above him.

He stood, just in time to see Andor strike from the dark hallway. He dodged, grabbed Andor's arm, and they fell together into the hallway.

"You're not taking them to Gelst. You're going to die here!" He called the magic to him. It flickered and came on stronger than he

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had ever felt. Andor shrieked as his flesh was burned with magic fire.

Estus hit the ceiling from Andor's magic punch. The elf was on him as he hit the ground, knife ready for a death blow. Estus threw more fire in Andor's face and ran to the end of the hall.

The fire behind Andor bathed him in angry orange. He waved his hand, pinning Estus to the wall.

He focused his magic again. He couldn't move his hands, but the energy around him flew at his command. Magic fire washed across the hallway where it met the inferno of the altar. Andor dodged and lost his grip on the holding spell. Estus fell to the floor.

The stairs were three quick steps away. Estus pushed everything he had into his legs, his balance, back and forth up the steps Andor one turn behind him the whole way. He reached his mind to the flying magic, and leapt up entire flights at a step.

At the top he found the moss covered hall. When he came to the botanical pool room Estus looked around, saw the balcony door and flew at it with Andor's hand holding him by the ankle. They landed rough on the stone balcony overlooking the collapsed roof of the church. Estus pulled himself free and jumped over the short brick wall onto the burning roof. On one side was the narrow gutter and a drop to the brick alley below. On the other were the flames belching up from the ruined chapel.

Estus ran along the hot, sloping tiles to the front edge of the roof between the tall copper spires. Again he grabbed his flying magic and pulled himself up, and again he found Andor on him. They fell over the edge of the roof and onto the narrow platform above the Mural of Benok. They struggled between the hot bricks and the drop to the front stairs, rolling and fighting for the knife.

Estus grabbed Andor's knife arm. Andor's pain spell flashed weakly, but Estus grabbed his flying magic and flew up with both hands holding onto Andor's arm. He spun in the air. Andor's arm broke, and Estus fell on top of him, knife on the elf's throat.

Andor's voice was calm. "Kill me then, if you dare. You'll make me a martyr. I'll become a God, and you'll be the devil."

Estus put pressure on the knife. Andor didn't flinch. He just kept talking, "Or this can end differently. I know what you want. Every blink of your eye, every angry thought you have ever had, every debate and fear and hope has been in my world. You can no more give that up than you can take off your skin. I can show the other

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side. I can teach you how to see. I can give that to you, and more. Money, power. I can make you a God! You know that's true."

An explosive crackle burst the air all around them as more of the roof broke away. The whole face of the church lurched sending a rain of loose bricks and dust on top of them.

Estus barked back, "You're not going to take over Gelst. I know what I saw. You set the fires. You ordered the attack on the caravan. You stabbed yourself. You framed Victor, and then you killed him! They all saw it too."

"They saw what I will tell them they saw. That's how it works."

"Not any more." Estus clenched his arm to slice Andor's neck open, but Andor swung his leg up, twisted, and kicked Estus in the temple. With another quick move he spun and grabbed Estus around the neck between his legs. Andor locked his feet together, foot over ankle, and squeezed. Estus struggled as his vision faded. He forced his eyes up to face the elf and saw an arrow pierce Andor's neck.

Estus struggled free as another arrow hit the elf in the chest. Andor fell down and grabbed hold of the top of the large mosaic. Estus looked down. Baron lowered his bow just as the brick wall shifted again. The moorings gave way. The mural tilted forward. The platform broke free, and Estus fell past Andor.

The stars spun above the fountain of flames all around him. He reached for his flying magic, but Becker Dodd beat him to it and caught him with a jarring grunt. He stood with the others in the oven middle of the grand square looking up at the ancient church. The windows were broken, the roof burned away. Fire rose from the steep naked rafters. A beam cracked and snapped, and the rest of the heavy roof finally fell in, sending a shower spray of embers flying away like frightened flies as burning splinters exploded out through the front doors. Another resounding snap rang out through the roar of the burning city, and the tall twin spires tilted toward each other.

The large mosaic of Benok lurched forward. Tiles fell off. Andor kicked. It slipped again, held still for a moment, and then pulled free in two large pieces that dropped onto the stone steps on top of Boret's father elf, crumbling into gravel and dust beneath the flames. With the image of Benok gone, the front of the church finally revealed the white stones set in the dark brick forming a five pointed star of magic above the wreck and rubble of the fallen church.

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Another loud rumble shot through the air. This was not fire, but thunder. The clouds, heavy with river water and warmed by the fire, let loose in a torrent of cold rain under the light of a new day.

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When Bodie Challuk pulled the long barge to the edge of the river the rain was light, but still steady. The fields along the river were filled with people pressed together against the cold and the drizzle. Hundreds of weary eyes watched as Bodie led Estus, Ivy, Kendrick, and the other wizards up the bank to the rolling, pitching sea of huddled heads and haunted eyes with barely enough room to walk between them. The farmhouse stood tall and tiny in the middle of the shocked and silent masses.

Bodie led them down the narrow aisle that formed as people pressed back out of their way. The thick clumps of families soon became a wall of backs woven into a tight mob, pressing forward to hear the voice of a young Legion commander.

Estus and the others pressed one by one, hip to hip, pulling gently on shoulders, tapping on arms, oozing flesh to flesh between them until they broke into the narrow clearing just in front of the porch.

They were listening to his commanding words of encouragement. "...will be just a little longer. In a couple of hours we'll start moving, but we must all be patient. We'll have tents and some bedding, and I promise you that each day will be better than the last as long as we work together. People have been asking how long it will take to get to Gelst, and I think the answer to that is between three to four days, depending on the weather. We're going to set up two camps, so we can be moving toward one as we're tearing down the other..." He stopped when he saw Baron.

The governor led them around the porch and up the wooden steps. He put his hand on the speaker, who stepped aside.

"The fires are out. About a third of Boret is lost. Most of the city has only minor damage. It's going to be okay."

He turned and stretched out his hand to his brother. Estus walked his heavy shoes across the wide wooden planks of the porch. He took Baron's place at the railing and looked out to the sea of people. More were pressing in from the back.

Estus cleared his throat once and spoke with the bravest voice he could find.

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You are living in a time of great change, a time that everyone for generations will wish they could have witnessed. You are living in a time of great uncertainty, a time that needs each and every one of us to call forth the fragile greatness that we hide within our most secret dreams. We will endure. We will move forward, not as silent observers waiting for the wind to tell us which way to face, but as the brave, the strong who understand what has happened here today and are ready to walk against the wind.

You have been asked to go to Gelst, to take the long road into the safety of another town and rebuild what you have lost. But we cannot go to Gelst, for Gelst, like Boret, has suffered. As we stand here in the mud they stand crowded in warehouses. They too are hungry, afraid, and anxious because the fires that destroyed Boret burned first in their land.

We must go home, but not to the Boret that we left. That Boret is forever gone. We must turn around and go back to the Boret that has been lost in the shadows, but has always been with us in that deep pocket of our mind. This is the moment that history will tremble in awe for what we are about to accomplish today, right here, together. We will do it because we must. We will do it because it is time to move forward, to rebuild our sacred city, and to cast away the ancient shadows.

Some of you will still choose to stay on the road, as I expect some always will. But that road will become harder to travel, harder to find, and those who walk upon those fading paths will find themselves gathering in smaller and louder groups, huddled together on a journey lost to time in the untended wilderness of the old where the signs have faded and where their only guides are ancient whispers on the wind.

The old ways will always whisper to us, but even if you listen to them and follow the wind they can only take you back to an ancient place that has been growing weaker and crumbling for a very long time. They have suffered too many abuses, too many questions unanswered, too many arguments, too many wars. They have left too many people alone, and trapped, and hoping still.

We stand among the burnt remains of what was once so precious to us. Our familiar shelter, our safety, has been shattered into countless pieces, and many pieces lost. Our very core, the most profound in our lives, seems to be drifting further and further from our grasp, and so we reach higher, and we wait longer, and we yell louder, and we hit harder, and we cry, don't let this fall.

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Yet we stand amid the fallen. We have been used and led and controlled. We have gone to war and given our lives, our fortunes, our honor, and our best wisdom in holy service. And still our city is lost, and we are standing in the cold, and all the roads lead only back. Back to the silent, unspeakable questions that we swallow like sour bile until we can no longer taste. Back to war. Back to fear. Back to living the very small lives that they allow us to live. And we cry, don't let me see this. Make me blind and teach me to see only that bright shining lie so that I don't have to know that I am lost.

We cry, show me the way. Show me the light, for I am dark, and I am weak, and I am small, and I am afraid. We cling with desperate and demanding hope to hear the stories, to read the words. We believe, as did our fathers, that the answers are there, somewhere, just beyond our grasp. We fear that we might be left behind while all others charge forward in song, and so we swallow our doubts and we sing louder than the rest. Yet somehow we are still afraid, we are still small and weak, and even in the brilliance of the Holy Light, we know that we will always be dark until we ignite that light from within, for the light shining in your eyes does not show you the way. It only blinds you to follow the hollow voices leading you on.

There is no deeper trust that we have given, but now our city is lost, and the winds are twisting, and more wars are coming, and we find ourselves thrashing about trying to find the light amid the heavy clouds of dark, stinking smoke.

Those who look back upon this time will never know the pain in our hearts for having to watch this darkness come, for having to see our churches fight and fall and hide evil behind empty excuses. What they will know is that today you stood up, faced into the wind and said, I am not small, I am not dark, and finally, after so long, I am going home.

I was born into a stranger's home, and I grew up eating the stranger's food, singing the stranger's songs, until those songs felt like my own. I learned the stranger's stories, and I told them to others until I couldn't even understand the difference between his stories and my own. I lived in his house. I followed his rules. I did as I was told, and I believed as I was told, as a guest in this stranger's house.

Now this house has been torn by the winds of war, by smoke from within, and by promises unfulfilled. Our sacred ground has been scorched, and today we stand upon the hinge of history. We can stay in the old house, prop up the roof and patch the walls. We can

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live among the damage done, ignore that our trust has been burned beyond repair, or we can choose to go home.

You are living in a time of great change. No longer do we need to accept the lies and limits that keep us from discovering the full span of our wings. You are living in a time of the new, of infinite possibilities. We have spent far too much time asking for permission to be allowed to accomplish little things, while all the time our energy, our money, our very minds are given in service to those who will take them, run them dry, and always demand more.

It is time to build new houses, to leave the stranger's home and to build our own where we can finally drink from the excellence that flows deep within us all. Together we will make many new houses. We will learn from each other, and we will sing many new songs.

Our new city will look much like the city of our fathers, but where there were questions we will now have answers. Where there were the few willing to control the many, we will see everyone learning and growing together. Where before there was fear and anger and division, we can now put away those bitter toys and see beyond our differences to cherish the journey that we are all on together.

We don't need the old city anymore, because it's not the shape of the windows or the size of the steeple or the color of the flag that matters. Those are merely the walls in which we sing, but they are not the song.

You are the song. You are the light. You are the magic, whatever language you speak, whatever new stories you tell. What matters, the only thing that matters every moment of every day is whether the light burning within you shines for good or casts shadows.

What can we accomplish if we stop reaching for the security of simple truths and instead we plunge the depths of the possible? What can our children become if we teach them that all they have to do is imagine a thing for it to be. Imagine what our children can achieve once they understand that when they seek conflict they will have conflict, and that when they seek division they will be divided, and that when they cling to only one way, then every other way will be closed to them.

We must teach them that the ways we can live together, to prosper as a people, to reach our greatest heights are not counted among the leaders we thrust awkwardly before us, but are numbered infinite within each of us.

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Love is not diminished by giving it away. Instead it grows and comes back to us, as does anger, and fear, and understanding, and hate, and hope. What we offer to the world returns to us, so let us give well. Let us seek to live in a community of abundance, abundance of skill, of knowledge, of health, of trust, of patience, and of lasting peace.

This is home.

We are living in a time when we must all look beyond simple lies and simple truths. We must look not out or up or behind, but in.

You are the light. You hold the magic, and by your heart will it be delivered. The world is unfinished without your voice, so speak carefully and well. Tomorrow is yet unformed and by your hands will it be made.

This is home. This is where we can stop chasing the shifting shadows in the whispering wind.

We have the power and the calling to become our greatest good, to be worthy of every breath that we take, and to honor the magic that is our mind. We have the power to learn all that we can learn, to do all that can be done.

We can try to go on living in the old house with its ancient mysteries, and its harsh limits, and its cries and lies and sins. But that is not our house. That is no longer who we are. The nest is empty and it is time to fly. It is time for answers and all understanding. It is time to gather the best of everything that we have learned and to rekindle the magic that we are.

It is time to open our deepest hearts, to unfurl the greatest of sails and finally, after so long lost, to come back home.

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The breeze drifting slowly in from the bay of Gelst carried the soft scent of the sea, mixing with the lavender bloom and the heavy cinnamon aroma from the roasted nut vendor pushing his cart along the wide boardwalk. Lennel Gareth sat on the bench in front of the Broken Wing pub, smoking his pipe in the shade of the new bright green awning, letting the morning drain away into another succulent spring afternoon.

Across the bay the *Corona* was settled against the new north quay. After a pleasant evening of sole Parmesan with capers, red wine, and candlelit stories from the south, Captain Prescott was back on his ship finishing three days of unloading another shipment of bricks and lumber from Korolem. Brushing the horizon the *Constellation* charged full sail to Merebor.

A robin fluttered down in front of Gareth, inspected the area with a dozen quick hops and claimed a discarded bit of honey bread. A chorus of gulls cried out by the beach where families lounged under umbrellas and children splashed in the rolling, hissing waves. Lennel closed his eyes and let the breeze wash across his cheeks, letting himself sink deeper into the sweet peace of the bay.

The door opened beside him. Merna led Bodie and Meredith out into the sunshine carrying her new grandson. Little Dennis was sleeping, swaddled up to his ears in a bright yellow blanket. His bottom lip puckered out from between his round apple cheeks.

"You about ready?" Gareth asked.

"Pretty soon. We've got six loaded up. You're welcome to come along. This will be my last run for a while."

"Thanks, but that sounds like work, and I'm still not done being retired." He stood up to bid Bodie farewell for another Boret run.

Merna stood beside them and said, "Before you go, while were all here. Meredith, come over dear." She looked back from one to the other, and finally said in a soft voice, "There's something that I've been meaning to talk about with the two of you, but there was never a good moment. There was always something, many things. But the time for waiting has drained all away. This baby. You can see it right there on his face. I'm probably just being foolish to think you haven't

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both guessed it already, but I never told. No, I never did. I wanted to, but look at him, Bodie, Lennel." She fell quiet, rocking her arms, looking down at the sleeping baby.

"Did you guess? Did either of you ever know?"

Gareth looked up and found Bodie looking back. Bodie asked, "What's that mom? Guess what?"

Her eyes welled with happy tears. A moment of silence drew out, filled with bird song and the soft ocean breeze. Gareth looked back to Bodie as they both began to guess. "Len, this baby in my arms. This is your grandson. He's your father, Bodie. I'm sorry."

Bodie looked at Gareth with a sideways survey. Gareth felt the puddle of awkward begin to pool around them and rise up like cold water until Bodie let out a laugh and said, "Well, there you go. Yeah. Yeah, I can see it." Lennel Gareth looked at Bodie and saw the boy he used to visit. He saw the angry, impatient teenager, the hard-working young man, the leader of men. All the respect and admiration he had for this man swirled into a flash of pride and exploded as a great unspeakable honor before settling finally into the simple comfort of what was.

"Don't you dare be sorry, mama. Don't you dare." He looked at Gareth again, smiled, and said, "I guess we gotta call you grandpa now." He patted Gareth on the arm and stepped out from under the awning and over to the railing at the edge of the boardwalk, looking out over the ocean.

Meredith said, "Come on in, ma. Let's give them a moment."

The door banged closed, and Gareth was suddenly left standing alone. He took a long draw on his pipe, scratched his beard, and followed his son to the boardwalk and leaned on the tall railing beside him.

"If I had known, Bodie."

"No. That doesn't matter. My father was a real... Well, it wasn't easy for her. I don't blame her. Or you. That's between you two."

"Thank you."

A gang of gulls hung on the wind in front of them. They stood quiet together leaning on the rail, watching the birds ride the wind with outstretched wings until the strangeness of the moment slowly drifted out to sea.

Finally Bodie cleared his throat. "You know, there's a lot going on now. Maybe I shouldn't go on this run. I know Dylan's not going to be here for another couple months, but there's a lot that I should start to work on here."

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"Follow what you need to do Bodie. That's all any of us can do."

"I know. We need to get started right. He can help, but I can do plenty on my own here. I always did pretty good for myself."

"You did better than pretty good, for a lot of people."

"Well, I had a lot of help."

"And now they'll help you. However you need. The people love you, Bodie. Everything's set right, now. I'm really glad it turned out this way, but I supposed this news should just be between us. You're going to have a lot of people looking you over. I don't know if they need, I don't know, that kind of distraction. Scandal, I suppose."

"I don't care about that."

Bodie looked at him, his hair blowing across his eyes.

"Then can I? Can I call you son?"

"You better." He nudged Gareth, shook his head and said, "Damn. I mean, damn."

"That about says it." He puffed on his pipe.

"You gonna stay with her?"

"I want to marry her."

"That's not what I asked."

"Yes. I'm here to stay, Bodie. You'll get sick of me, I'll be here so much. I dropped anchor here. For good now."

"I'm glad." He nudged Gareth and added, "Grandpa!"

Gareth nudged him back. "You know, Bodie. It's going to be a hell of a storm. We may wish for the simpler times of war. But you have already learned the hardest lesson, that most of the time all we have to do is get out of our own way and do what we already know needs to be done."

"Well who the hell do you think taught me that? There's always a way, you told me. That's what kept me going. Bah! We're going to do all right now. Drink."

"Drink!"

They shared a look of respect, understanding, pride, and bewilderment, and carried it all forward unspoken back into the pub. The three sailors were at the large table in the middle finishing their stew. Meredith filled their glasses from a pitcher of warm frothy beer with one hand while holding the baby in the other.

Merna's footsteps rattled up the back stairs. She came out carrying a crate of dusty bottles and set it on the bar. She pulled them out one by one, reading the faded labels.

Gavin was saying to the girls at their table, "No, that wasn't my fault. No, shut up, Cody. I'm telling this."

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Davis cut in, "Well tell it all then. You were starting a fight."

"Not starting. Listen to him. Look, you can't let people get away with anything. It's like that on the sea. You have to be ready for anything. So these three guys jumped me."

"One guy looked at him sideways."

"Shut it, Cody. And they're punching me, and I'm holding back, because if I bring out these big rocks," he held up his fists, "somebody's getting hurt bad, and really I'm a nice guy. I didn't want to hurt them, you know, but you can't let that sort of thing go, right?"

"So then the captain walks up."

"I'm telling it, Davis."

"Tell it then. He takes his swing, and right in the face. Knocks the captain on the deck."

"Well, sometimes you got to just blow the man down, you know." He winked at the young woman on his right and said, "You know what I'm saying, right?"

She gasped, swung her arm and slapped him hard across his face.

"Wait! I didn't..."

Bodie broke it up by bringing more glasses around the table and filling them up. "All right, kids. Take a break. We found it. This is a sixty year old brandy. Let's have a drink."

They stood and raised their glasses. Bodie said, "To a new beginning. A new Gelst." Gareth repeated, "To a new beginning. A new child." Merna said, "To peace." Meredith stood next to Bodie and added, "To the new mayor of Gelst, Bodie Challuk."

They all drank.

Lennel stepped to the window and looked out. He said, "Hey fellas, it looks like the *Corona* is about ready to cast off. You better hurry. There she goes. She's pulling away."

The sailors burst across the room and charged out the door in a sprint. They were halfway down the boardwalk before they stopped running and came back panting through the door.

Davis was laughing. Cody was breathing hard. Gavin said, "That was not funny! I hurt my hand. Look I banged it on the door."

Bodie told them, "You're all right. Come back in. Have another drink, boys."

Merna came over to the window and told him, "You're ornery, you know."

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He reached out and put his hand on her shoulder and rubbed his fingers along the bottom of her cheek. He looked out the window to the bright open sea, but his eyes were drawn back to her. The glow from the window caught the blue of her eyes. He remembered seeing her so long ago when the baby in her arms was Bodie.

"I love you, Merna. I always have."

Her eyes twinkled. She told him, "I always knew. I love you too, Len. Now you stay put here, you hear me? You stay with me now."

He turned his back to the window and told her, "With you. Always. Will you marry me, Merna?"

"Aye, Captain."

They kissed in the glow of the window.

---

Darla King walked along the crowded aisle between the vendor tents. She stopped and bought a bouquet of flowers and a small spray of dried lavender and put them into her basket next to today's bread and cheese. The sun was bright above Boret. The air was clean and filled with warmth. Across the clearing she saw Katie looking at a roll of yellow fabric, and her heart filled again with the joy of her. The woman they were staying with was teaching Katie to sew.

She made her way unhurried through the slow moving crowd to Katie, who turned excited to show her the fabric that she had picked out for the dress. "Look! Isn't this perfect?"

Darla watched the glow of the sun play in her blond hair. She was growing it out, and it fell like a fountain of pretty down her shoulders. "You're perfect. Look, I got you flowers."

"Oh!" She took them and smelled them, "Daffodils. I love daffodils."

"I know. Are you ready?"

"Yes. Um. I'll take four yards." She paid the woman and said to Darla, "I'm thinking of taking that job at the offices."

"I thought you wanted to help at the new school. The art classes."

"I do, I guess, but there's so much going on with the construction and all the new projects, and it's kind of exciting. Plus it pays better, and as much as I love Mrs. Green, I want us to have a place of our own."

"Well, don't decide anything today. It's too nice a morning to worry about money."

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Darla took the fabric and folded it into her basket on top of the food. Katie took her flowers and they headed home from the market along the river. The fields full of blackened remains of old buildings were growing fewer. They passed one of the new apartments. Six stories tall with balconies filled with families enjoying the fresh afternoon.

Katie looked up and said, "I want to be a part of this, the rebuilding. Baron said he would help get me the position if I wanted. I think I'll even get to go out where they're building and maybe help on site. That new program, I think it's called friend of the guild, where you get to learn a little bit of the trades."

Darla took her hand. "You should do it. Remember, Baron said he'll help with whatever we need."

"I know. I just don't want to impose."

"It's not imposing. He practically insisted."

"You know what, Darla darling?"

"What's that, love?"

"I'm glad we came to the city. The city needs us."

"The city does. The city is great, but as long as you're with me I don't care where we are." Katie kissed her, and the two walked hand in hand to Mrs. Green's old townhouse.

When they got close their host hurried down the stairs, waving a piece of paper excitedly as she called out, "You got a letter! You got a letter!"

Darla handed her the basket and took the letter. She read a bit and then said, "Ugh! I can't believe it!"

"What?"

"He married Mrs. Brathon. Oh, that woman. She finally wore him down."

"Be nice," Katie told her.

"That old scag."

"Nicer than that."

Darla read on and then cried out, "He's coming to visit! They're coming here! Oh, my little daddy. All grown up and married."

"Oh, your crying." Katie brushed away a tear from Darla's cheek.

"He sounds so happy. He found someone to run the store. Hold on." She read a little further and then said, "Oh my goodness! They'll be here next week! Mrs. Green. I hate to ask."

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"Of course they stay with us. There's plenty of room. No, my sweet, don't cry." Mrs. Green pulled Darla into a hug. Darla held her and said, "I really miss him. I'm so happy for him."

Katie hugged the both of them and said, "Yay! I need to get started on my dress."

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Adrian stepped slowly across the fresh green grass between the large collection of chairs gathered in the field behind Becker Dodd's vineyard mansion. Her dress was a pale lavender full of large white dots. The bow in her hair was white, speckled with colorful dots. Hanging on her left arm was a basket filled with rose petals, grape leaves, small pine cones, and grains of wheat. She lifted another handful and sprinkled them along the path while the orchestra played and the birds serenaded the wedding crowd.

She looked ahead to Becker who stood alone on the platform in the shade under the neatly trimmed curtain of willow tree branches. His black tuxedo was covered in row after row of tiny grey dots. Susan was wearing a smart green gown with dots of gold and white. Nathan's suit was festive with large yellow, purple, and green dots.

When Adrian finished anointing the path, she took a seat in the front row next to Peter's mother and father. His tie was blue with white dots, matching his wife's scarf.

The orchestra finished their piece and began the familiar march of love. Everyone stood and turned around, a sea of circles, dots, and summer hats. Hannah in a white gown wearing a crown of daisies and Peter in white formal robes walked hand in hand down the aisle together. They stepped up onto the platform and faced each other, holding hands.

When everyone was seated, Becker spoke.

"It is my deepest and most humble honor that Hannah Henderson and Peter Calloway asked me to announce their marriage to you this day. It was in the midst of despair and war that they spoke their love into the world and became one. Love is the light, and with love shadows fade, hope is reborn, and wars end. Love is flutter and flush. It's that cozy wrap on a chilly night. Love is eyes that find each other in a hurried crowd. Love is the absence of fear, the dignity of respect, the quiet understanding that even in the darkest days we can change the very fabric of our world by holding still the savage storms that swirl inside us and all around us. Give these distractions to love and they will fade. Give to love your

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impatience, your pride, your jealousy, your regrets, and your most cherished frustrations. Love will return love.”

Adrian could barely wait. She reached her magic in long silver strands to the stream that ran behind the field. The sun was perfect in the sky behind them. She could feel the cool water flowing as eager as she was.

“Look upon this love, ladies and gentlemen, that glows so luminous from Peter and Hannah. We gather not only to celebrate the joy of this young man and this young woman, but to rekindle the torch of our own devotions by bearing witness to love so strong, so pure that it can bind two souls together as one. Peter, would you like to express your love for Hannah to all of us?”

Peter smiled. He leaned in and whispered something to his bride and then spoke in a gentle voice. “My Hannah. You have shown me colors that I did not know could be seen. You have given me wings. You have opened my heart and closed my eyes to the false world that I thought I knew. I want to grow and learn and do great things with you. I want our love to keep shining, brighter every day, through all the seasons of our lives. I will be with you always. I will cherish you and be gentle with you and I will listen and always try to understand. You are my heart. You are my breath and my blood. We are one.”

“Hannah, would you like to tell us of your love for Peter?”

She paused only to wipe away a small tear from the side of her smiling cheek. “My Peter. You amaze me more every day. You changed the world for me and helped me change it even more. You showed me that all we have to do is dare to believe that we can walk upon our dreams. With your hand in mine I can walk anywhere, and I can dream anything. You are my open door. You are my beating heart. I will be with you always. I will take care of you and be patient with you and I will listen and understand. You are my breath and my blood. We are one.”

Adrian lifted her hands and pulled on the river water. It rose in a great mist above the river and caught the light, making a rainbow over the willow tree as the young lovers kissed and the trumpets and kettle drums filled the air with triumph.

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The ancient city of Antellem was filled with a chorus of songbirds. The sun shared the sky with shading clouds. The air was soft and warm and the plum trees were in bloom.

## CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

Estus was lying on a blanket in the shade watching the Circle of Light sparkle through the maple leaves. Ivy sat next to him across from Baron who was stirring the stew pot that hung from its tripod stand over the fire.

Baron said, "We should be able to have maybe five thousand here by winter, and three times more next year." He dipped stew into bowls for the others, then he brought his over to their blanket and sat with them.

Baron blew on the boiled roots, slurping the spiced broth. "We need to talk about the big issue. How can we convince people to come back to the city that was the source of so much evil that it had to be abandoned and cleansed by God's angel Benok?"

Estus laughed into his soup but didn't say anything.

Baron chuckled, "Yes, I see the irony. But I don't know how to get past that. It could be a big problem."

Ivy said, "You're here. How did you get past it?"

Baron paused. They ate in silence for a moment until he answered. "I guess I just learned to think differently about things. Evil can't be in a place. It's in what we do or don't do. This place is just trees and stone. We get to decide what it is."

Estus laughed and said, "Heretic! I knew it!" He finished his soup, handed his bowl to Baron, and rolled up to his feet. He leaned down, kissed Ivy, and said, "I'm going for a walk."

He left their small camp and wove his way between trees and thick grass and wild lavender in the shade of ancient moss-covered buildings. As he walked he listened to the wind, to the songs of birds and the faraway howl of a wolf. He brushed his hands over the purple wildflowers as he imagined the city alive again, alive with magic.

The sun ducked behind a small shade cloud and threw slanted beams of light across the sky. Estus looked up and smiled.

When he was young he wanted to know, to understand, to learn all the great truths hidden to him. As he stood in the tall grass he understood finally that the only great truth is that there is no great truth. There is only doing, and doing is magic. We are creatures of magic as birds are creatures of the wind. It is our source and our destiny. It is the medium of our being. We have to find our path without the comfortable certainty that a guildsman, an elf, or God will clear the way or repair the storms behind us. But God has no hands but ours, and has no voice but the words we speak, and no intent beyond the song of our heart and the power of our hope. God

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flows through us and around us as the great current of our world. Stand and feel the magic in your own fingers. Feel it pulsing in your breath and under your feet. To be alive is to do magic, and the sum of all doing is the measure of God.

Estus moved through the field toward the ancient library that soon would be filled again with knowledge open to everyone. He walked up the old steps to the wide marble porch and imagined students and teachers sitting here, music in the shade, bakers selling muffins. He went through the wide doorway into the dim cavern and followed the echoes of his footsteps to the middle of the grand floor. His hands nearly ached to grab saw and plane to make new shelves, to scrub and polish the stone, to paint the faded colors of the columns.

He went up the stairs to the second floor through wind whistling in the empty window casings. He could see the railing that he would build around the balcony perimeter that overlooked the first floor. He turned from that and continued up the stairs toward the glow of sunlight to the roof.

He walked to the edge and looked down. There was no fear any more. He felt the magic all around to catch him if he needed it. He reached his hand into his pocket. He took out the lock of Carmen's hair, held it against his face, and kissed the green ribbon and the hairs that it held.

With gentle fingers he untied the bow. Estus leaned forward into the waiting arms of magic and rose above the field of wildflowers, high over the trees and above the clouds. He opened his fingers and let the wind carry her away as he rose toward the warmth of the sun.