

“What are you so...” She began, but Marcus forbade her from speaking...by placing his hand over her mouth and pushing her to the ground. She continued to mumble in confusion and distress, but Marcus could not risk her speaking; for if she did, she could reveal both of them. She looked at him with literal fire in her eyes, but changed when Marcus’ eyes appeared to be begging her to remain silent; with his finger in front of his mouth as to shush her. Somehow she must have interrupted his message, because he did manage to placate her.

And as he did, he and she began to hear the conversation below them.

“Within the last few nights, all of you by now have received letters concerning the war effort.” Master Knight said. “Fortune has favored us this last year. We’ve dealt a heavy blow to the monsters and claimed a valuable spoil. Father Constantine.”

Father Constantine walked forward; or so Marcus thought he was based on the footsteps he heard. Emma stopped struggling as she began to listen

“My brothers and sisters.” He said. “The waking tide of the darkness is strong. We have believed long that the tide would vanish through the valiant efforts that you brave souls. And now thanks to all of you, we have discovered the source of the enemies power. The artifact that Azal wielded.”

“An artifact?” One of the soldiers asked.

“Yes my boy.” The priest said. “An ancient Tome that lead the monsters to attack our civilizations. Whoever had the artifact over the last two years was using its power to bring the monsters into allegiance. Come hither and gaze what we have found.”

Two of the clergy went to the back and retrieved a large gold casket that appeared like a coffin. Inside a gold steel casket with a glass covering on the top was a book that almost had this unique abstract design to it. It almost looked like a gray and white nebula of stars and dust was exploding out of what looked like a symbol of a tree with an eye. The tome by looking it possessed what Marcus felt was a chilling and yet soothing aura.

“What is this?” Sir Arin exclaimed as he saw it.

“It looks like a magic tome.” Mediva spoke with interest.

“It almost looks like a Dark Magic Tome.” Arin interjected. “I’ve seen and impounded many cultists with tomes of similar visages. And that looks to be a particularly powerful one...unless my eyes deceives me. I’m no mage so I cannot say for certain.”

“That is incorrect Sir Arin.” Master Knight said. “What we have here from what we have learned from the tomes within the Black Tower is a powerful White Magic Tome...what Azal dubbed the Lughglen.”

The Chronicles of Aladonia Book I

STORY and WRITING by

MMaDness

Illustrations by

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For my Brother Nick...

Who without our long nights conversing about video games

This story would not have been born

What happens when you take JR Tolkien's Lord of the Rings, Paizo's Golarion, C.S Lewis' Narnia, and throw in the entire anime/manga/outaku pop culture of Japan in a blender?

I'd like to think you'd get something like this.

MMaDness

PART I

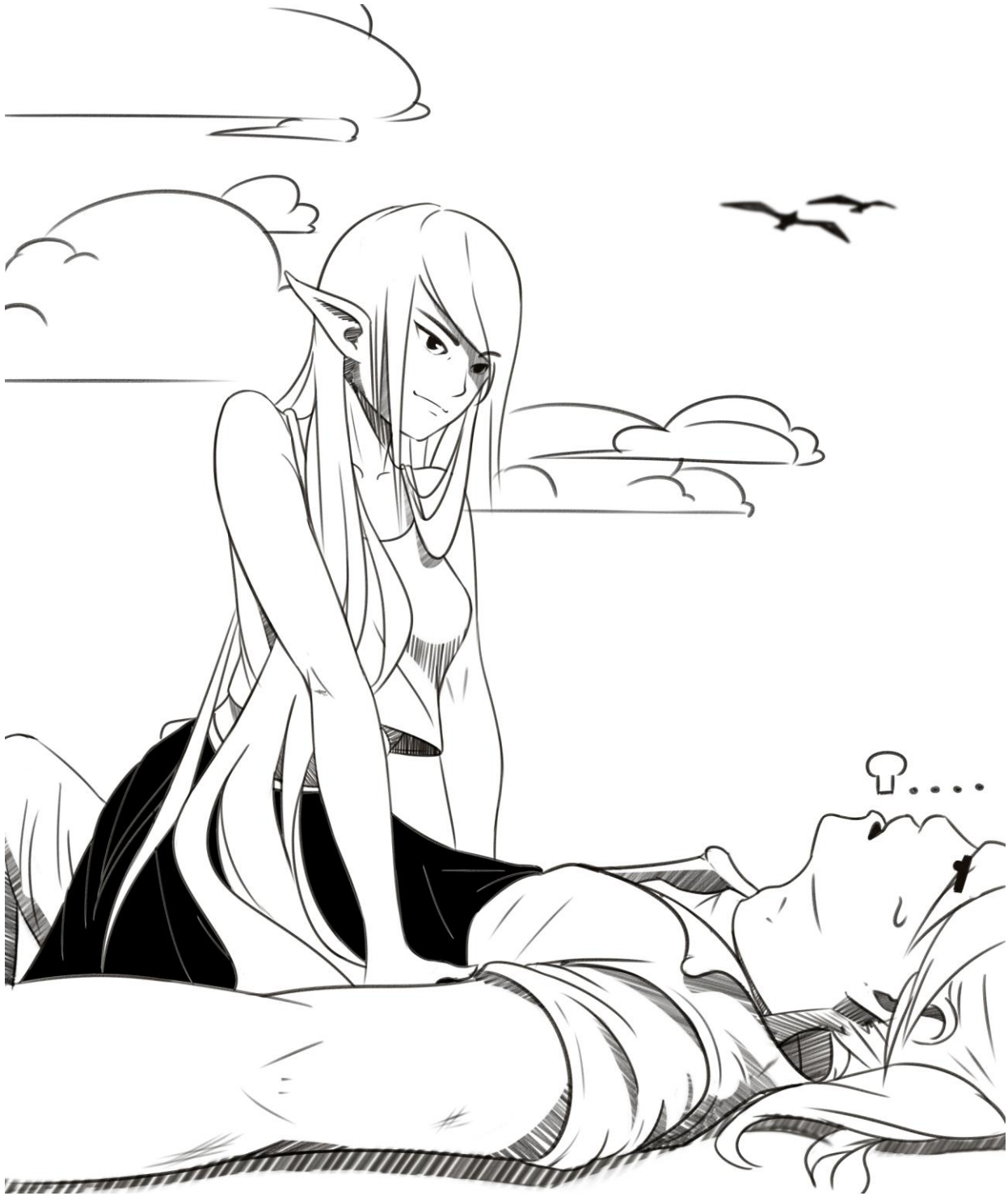
The Legacy Of the Tome

Blessed soldier

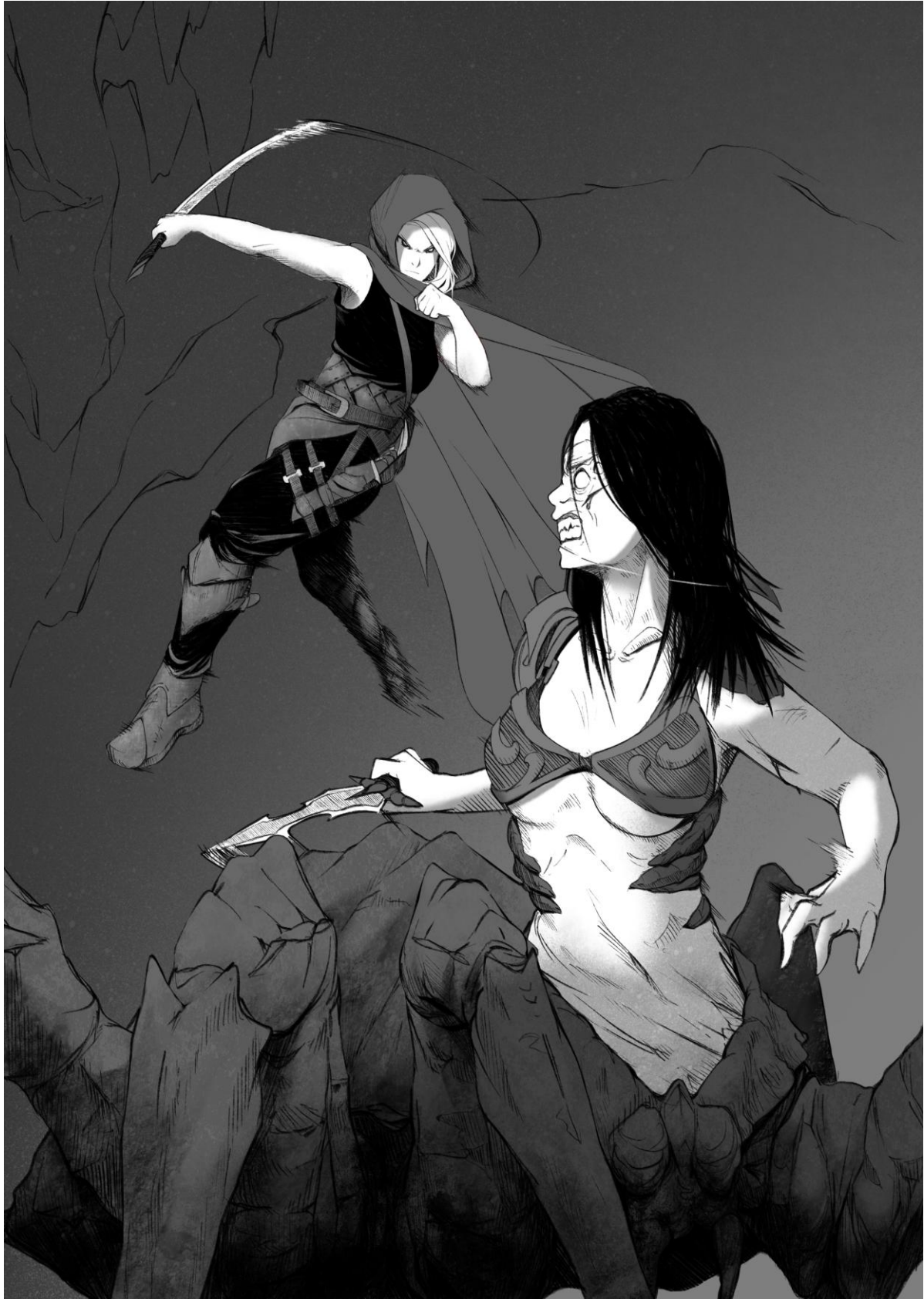
upon your bated breath

Take hold of your destiny and earn thy rest

Tritenian war prayer - Elizabeth Dalton - 1934 of the Written Age











Chapter 1 – In the beginning...

The morning light peered through the window of the room. The wooden wall which carried an eerie dark brown color now began to glow its golden yellow color. A tree outside cast a shadow over the statue of the town guard, while a young man lay in the bedspread of the room as sounds of morning activity began to bustle from it. The humming birds on the trees began their morning songs. The blue eyes of the male opened up as the sounds came to his ears. The shadowy figure of the trees appeared from the windows. One would almost consider the morning an omen of great joy.

Of course, not if your life job considered to be that of a foot soldier.

And that was the life Marcus had chosen as his career. Yes, that was his name. Marcus Achilles Armani. A typical farm boy, a parent's helper, someone to give his family support. He was born during the early onset of winter, and his parent's considered him a fighter. He was sick many times as an infant, and each time he recovered fully very shortly. As a child, he fell in love with the sword, something that his mother rebuked him about for many years. He always loved eyeing soldiers and their blades, hearing many tales from the common folk how the Knights of Tritenia; the elite military force and royalty in the land, fought and protected the lands from the monsters that the lands were infested with; with their armies of soldiers behind them. His father often told him of tales of the knights exploits that he knew of; though he was not a soldier himself. For those days he was young, those tales seemed like dream...and a dream he wanted to be part of.

His father owned a sword, but it was more of an heirloom than something meant for battle. From what Martin Armani...his father remembered from his grandfather, the sword had supposedly seen battle many years ago when his grandfather was still alive. While Marcus knew it was a precious heirloom, many times in the night he snuck out with the sword and practice with it. His parents suspected something when they noticed their son much more exhausted than usual when attempting to do his chores; but he managed to get away with it every time. Since Marcus knew his mother would never approve of him wielding a sword (and in turn his father would abide by the same desire), he made consistent effort to teach himself. The only time they would ever allow him to carry a sword was when he traveled to town. They gave him a simple dirk which his father always carried with him when he made any form of business.

Life was okay, for the most part. Or at least it was four years prior. Then the bad times came in. Several seasons of bad weather destroyed most of his parents crops, severely hurting their income. Though his father claimed that he was no burden, Marcus could not help but think he was incurring more cost to them than they wanted.

But all was not lost for him. One day as he rode into town to purchase seeds, a group of bandits began to harass the local townsfolk. In a stunning display of skill and courage, he disarmed one of the bandits and fought all ten of them, while their friends watched the display from the sidelines. By the time he was done, eight of the ten lie dead, and the rest were soon captured by soldiers. One of the bandits had escaped, swearing revenge on him, but Marcus felt that he would never see his face again.

In the ensuing chaos that came afterwards, one of the Knights had saw his display of skill and immediately inquired about joining the central military. He was sixteen when he had enlisted to the army.

He joined right around when many others were enlisting. Around this time, the city of West Necabla had been attacked by a large gathering of creatures. There were many kinds of creatures that moved in Tritenia; but not all of them were natural fauna or benevolent. Some of them were evil or chaotic in nature. This ranged from the twisted Drow, to the chaotic orcs, to mindless skeletons, and incorporeal phantoms.

The Foot soldiers were the primary military force in Tritenia's Central Army. Marcus was officially part of the central military. Unlike the Knights armies and soldiers, the central military was a military unit owned by the crown for the specific purpose for being available to all members of royalty. They served two purposes: One. To protect the land from invaders and to slaughter the monsters that endangered outlying villages. And two: To secure more land and enforce order. In recent memory, many creatures who worshipped the dark were rallied together by a Demon named Azal; in a battle known as the Blue Flamed War. He had swallowed the lands in years of darkness, before an ancient Hero, Darian managed to slay the evil Demon. Azal's attacks were by far the worst in the lands ever seen. It took many years before the damage caused by attacks was restored.

After Marcus applied, he was assigned a barracks where he endured the most torturous four months of his life. During this four month preliminary training, he gained muscle, speed, and strength that he never held before when he was working on his father's farm. When he was finished, he became a full member of the Tritenian military. However, after this time, the gathering of creatures had been silenced by the general of Tritenia: Master Knight. This confined Marcus to a less glorifying post as a town guard. Still, he had signed up to serve the army; so Marcus had no choice but to remain with them.

Though he was content with what the central military gave him, he wanted much more. He wanted to become a Knight; part of the Tritenian royalty. They were awe inspiring as they passed by, and their skill backed up all of their claims about them. All of the conveyed rumors Marcus saw to be true when he saw them pass by. Though nobility seemed impossible for a commoner like him, Marcus one day hoped he could perform some great task for his country to earn such a rank. Until then though, he decided to pursue the arduous job as a soldier in full force.

His position was assigned in a town named Aldin Village. Aldin was hidden among the trees of a massive forest in the Westernfold. The people who lived here many their living off of making weapons, harvesting and selling lumber. All of the soldiers who were assigned to the village stayed either at the fortress, located somewhere nearby the village. This was his fourth year staying at the town, and living by himself. With the money earned from his service, he purchased his own hovel within the town itself, and decided to remain there.

Much better than staying at the barracks.

It was currently the spring interlude and the month of Faia would be upon the land soon. Marcus was roused when the light peered into his eyes. His blonde hair lit up as the sun beam touched it. His chest and abs still were sore from the exercises that had done later. Marcus's hair was long, stretching one and a half feet towards the ground. He yawned loudly and rubbed his eyes and began his morning ritual: Urinate, bind his moderately long hair into a ponytail, and check the pantry for anything left over. What luck! Some dried meat was still there. He grabbed it, along with some potatoes. After consuming this small meal, Marcus grabbed magon paste and chewed it. Disgusting as usual, but this needed to be done if he wanted to keep his teeth clean. With most of this now complete, Marcus

opened the wardrobe and put on his clothing for the day. His edor was small, but it fit his needs. Several book cases measuring fifteen feet, full of books about Aldania, history, mathematics, and some that had vivid stories for own pleasure. Most soldiers or farmers we're not well read or literate. Marcus however found reading the common language to be a vital tool, especially since many more scrolls and books we're being written to preserve the history of the Kingdom since the beginning of the Written Age. He managed to learn by himself, with the help of a few passersby during his youth. There was a table and a stove...still full of wood last from last night. He didn't get around to eating last night as work kept him up. Other than his bed, there wasn't much else in his home. Marcus sighed and threw off his night garments. He reached in a drawer and pulled out a red undershirt, a brown overlay vest, and tan slacks. He tied his boots and left the small edor.

Aldin was not the largest town in the Kingdom, but sure was not the smallest. Most of the village was small one or two room houses, most occupied by mothers, soldiers, and their sons and daughters. Each one of the homes bare in similarity to his: They we're made of wood and stone; dirt pathways all around the town connecting them. Each section of the town was separated by walls surrounding the whole town. The town was separated into different sections by the wall. Five of the sections we're used for civilians; two of those sections for people of the upper class. Another section had a small keep known as the Archives; used for the members of the political council, and as a library for the governor. The next section was an armory that stored the town's arsenal of weapons.

Marcus was heading towards the town gate, which fortunately for him he lived right next to. He leapt over the gate to his house and landed on the dirt road. He was about to head in the direction of the gate when he heard footsteps behind him. The former farm boy was soon bowled over from the weight and force of a forest girl who collided into him, her green eyes sparkling with joy. Two humming birds still continued to chirp.

"Kishā mar Marcus." Riona said.

Marcus shook to see his friend Riona Florale on top of him. Kisha mar in Elven meant "hello there." Marcus himself was not fluent in the Elves' language, but he knew the basics from knowing Riona, seeing as she could speak both fluently. She was an Elf who lived in the Kel-Ford wood, the Kingdom of the Elves. Because the Kingdom of Tritenia had the best schools in the land, many young noble Elf boys and girls we're sent from their lands. Others simply moved into the kingdom because of better living conditions. Others merely sought to live among their new human allies.

Riona was not one of them; her circumstances for being her were different. She was the daughter of an Elven duke; though her origins were not well known among the area, as per her request; so her very reason for why she lingered in the town was an enigma. Her father was currently staying at the residence of Lord Aron, the ruler of this providence as of last year. The two of them we're friends for roughly four years now. Riona had long green hair that went down to her shoulders (which was quite common for her people and culture), a simple white shirt, long green stockings, and a long green skirt. Yes...she had green hair...green as the grass of the land. People who possess unnatural colors in their hair or on their body are often believed to be able to use magic. She was adorned with jewelry...bracelets on her arms of gold, a tiara of silver on her head, earrings made of emerald, and a necklace of gold with a green jewel in the center.

"Kishā mar Lady Riona..." Marcus said, after recovering.

"Nice to see you this lovely summer morning" Riona said.

“I see.” Marcus said. “Could you get off? Your position is uncomfortable. And my back cannot get any worse than it is now.”

Riona got up and let Marcus get up himself. Marcus was okay with Riona jumping on him. She had a very weird tendency to do this. She didn't seem to mind physical contact, whether she was the one who gave it, or someone else gave it. Perhaps it was some cultural aspect of the Elves that he didn't understand...that or Riona herself was just a very open person. Probably the latter, though it seemed as if it was directed only to him.

“How have you been?” She asked, putting her hands behind her back. “I hear Master Knight has been working you to death lately.”

“He thinks my sword arm could use more honing.” Marcus said as he sat down on a bench. Riona joined with him a second later. “And I have yet to best him or Golton in sparring matches so what he says warrants truth.”

“Well at the rate you are gaining skill perhaps that will change soon.” Riona asked. “Has he returned home?”

“No.” Marcus said, shaking his head. “He's still as reclusive as ever. He has yet to come back from Seaside yet. But I am boring you.” He then smiled at her, in which she responded back. “What is on your agenda today, Riona?”

“Sneaking out from my father to linger amongst the populace to see what I can do to help around here.” Riona said. “You know; as usual.” Riona was living in Aldin while her father remained in the providence. No one really knew who she was, as although an entourage where her father came into the town, she herself was hooded at the time. She often left the manor (against her father's wishes) to help people in the populace. She especially loved to take jobs for people that involved moving around the forests surrounding the hidden village.

“What about you?” She continued.

“I don't know.” Marcus said. “My arms will probably become less than frail knowing Master Knight.”

“He pushes you too hard.” Riona said. “Still, it looked like it worked for the better. You really have become a handsome swordsman.” Marcus did nothing but smirked, as she ran her hands through his hair. “Anyway, I must be getting around town. There are many people who need to be helped, and a father to anger. Vemas Mara Marcus.”

“Excuse me?” Marcus asked.

“Take care.” She translated.

“And you too.” Marcus said.

“I'll meet you at Diagoi's inn for drinks if you're still alive.” She shouted playfully.

“Yeah...uhh...right.” Marcus muttered.

Riona ran off into the town and disappeared from view. Marcus found himself not able to take his eyes off of her, much like he had done many times before. But he knew it would not last as soon reality reminded him that he needed to arrive to the fortress, and he must do it soon.

Marcus sat back up and packed his things. He had to go to the Barracks today. Master Knight had given him a letter to arrive promptly at the base to train recruits; a privilege rarely awarded to foot soldiers. Marcus looked up at the sun and saw it was just about to be over the town, meaning it was about 11 o' clock.

And then reality hit him with how late he was.

Late! Marcus thought; as his thoughts instantly moved from controlled to panic. *I must have overslept. Even with the best horse at the ranch, I might not be able to make it to the barracks. Master Knight's going to kill me!!*

Immediately began to depart for the barracks, faster than he had ever moved before. He went to the town gate. Marcus went to the guard who controlled the gate. He promptly let Marcus out and he began to walk to the stables.

All of the town of Aldin was concealed within the forest. Vegetation in the forest had grown around the town that the sun was mostly blocked out other than several sun beams punching through the leaves. Trees, bushes, and flowers were in all directions, other than a small pathway that led to the field.

As Marcus began to walk, he heard a voice behind him.

"Hesitation can be redeemed." It said. "Inexcusable beyond all other reason."

Marcus turned around to see a single man behind him. He considered to draw his sword, but stopped when he saw a friend he had made at the barracks. Despite a gloomy shadow that lingered over him it was Golton. Golton Ubrair. He was only slightly older than that of Marcus. His hair was long and brown. He wore an unbuttoned brown vest that covered his arms, a black shirt under it, blue slacks, and brown boots. Golton also wore gloves that were dark black and fingerless.

Golton had recently been assigned to a different section of the country for a long time: over five months actually. He went to Seaside, a massive landmass, north of the Aldin region. There was also a massive elite city built right over the Ocean, over the North Sea wall. Seaside City had a magnificent view from a cliff to the ocean; Seaside city was the place where most of the Mages went to learn their magic. In addition, it has had the best schools west of the capitol. Golton had been assigned there with two jobs: render assistance to the current knight who was fighting them off with his followers; and to teach the soldiers there the finer points of sword play. His sword skills were rumored to be so feared that he was recently considered to be knighted by the Queen.

"The Tale of Zalin." Golton said. "Act 1, scene 3, stanza 42."

Marcus turned around and looked at Golton.

"And...that means?" Marcus asked.

"Generally, being late isn't looked highly upon." Golton said. "You're just lucky you know our high and mighty General likes you enough that he won't sack you."

Golton stretched out his hands as the two made a small brotherly embrace. After Marcus released him, he and Golton began to walk through the forest.

"I thought you and your squad were still actively patrolling the North Pass." Marcus said.

"We got recalled back." Golton said.

"How was it?" Marcus asked as he leaped over a puddle.

"I must say that the Ocean town Seaside was quite beautiful when I had my days off." Golton said. "Lovely view I must add. Imagine. A city built over the blooming sea. Quite remarkable work those Dwarfs, Merman and Mages have been able to create. Patrolling was a nuisance though."

"When did you get back?" Marcus asked.

"Two nights ago." Golton said. "It was nice, but I heard some new chicks have just hatched at our base; chicks who have not spread their wings. And they want me to help

them with that.” He shrugged his shoulders. “No better person I surmise; seeing as I am the best one there.”

“Is it not easier to say we have new recruits?” Marcus asked. “Must everything you say have some form of symbolism in it?”

“A literate soldier is more efficient than a Neanderthal.” Golton said. “It is not very looked upon being late. Speaking of which, I got you a gift.”

Golton reached into a bag and threw a book at Marcus. He caught and looked at it. “Another book.” Marcus said. “Thank you my friend.” Golton often brought Marcus different books when he was own deployment, as he was fond of the arts. He had taught himself to play violin, piano, and other instruments that he regarded as enjoyable. He truly however enjoyed plays and stories, and found himself lost in a library for hours if left to his own devices.

“I gave you a majority of my collection.” Golton said. “I figured it would be better than doing nothing when you returned home. And...I don’t have the room anymore to put them. Speaking of home, care to explain why you’re not at the barracks? Even with horseback, you’ll probably be at least ten minutes late. And Master Knight is picky with time frames.”

“I slept past morning.” Marcus asked. “Why are you late?”

“Because you would never get to the barracks if someone didn’t push you or was watching you at all times.” Golton said. “Unlike you, I can afford to be late with the reputation I have.”

“Your humor and hubris is as spiteful as it is cruel.” Marcus said.

“I merely speak truth.” Golton said. “If nothing else, I’ll take the fall with you. Anyway, we must depart to the Fort. If we hurry, we can make it before two.”

The two wandered onward from the forest. They stopped at a checkpoint deeper in to a stable nearby. This stable was the checkpoint between the village and the open field. If an enemy force attacked, these people who stayed at the stables would immediately spring and inform the town; and vice versa. The forest was huge and it would easily confuse monsters on the inside. It also let soldiers reach destinations quickly should they have need. They weren’t for public use, but a soldier could use when needed. The two presented their liveries to show their identification, and they were quickly given a steed.

The Fortress was only about five miles from the base. The structure itself had a massive wall made of a heavy stone surrounding the entire area. There were several towers that stretched three stories high, each with a catapult on it along with several archers to guard it. The fortress was protected from a majority of attacks, and even if it fell, no one would know where Aldin was. There were no open fires allowed at Aldin at any time to avoid the town’s existence from being revealed. Thus, most monsters believed that this was the only thing other than farms.

Golton and Marcus stood at the entrance. It was past 2 o’ clock, though not by much.

“Master Knight will have my head for this.” He muttered.

“Don’t worry.” Golton said. “I’ll take the blame for this. But this will be the last time I do.”

“Funny thing; I believe you said that last time.” Marcus said.

Golton simply chuckled.

“So I did.” He said. “It’s fine. You just owe me a pint of ale when we return.”

“No gold this time?” Marcus asked.

“You’re gold has no logire to me.” Golton said. “I only need byrban.”

Marcus laughed.

“Is that not the same thing?” He said.

“Just get me a pint when we get back to town.” Golton said.

“Well I do owe you one.” Marcus said.

Marcus looked up and saw that a soldier had seen them from the gate. Golton and Marcus their sacks and revealed their liveries to the guards. The guards nodded and gave their approval and opened the gates for them.

Chapter 2 – The Letter

“Oh no; oh no!” Golton screamed as two large oversized hands burrowed him three feet into the cold hard ground.

Master Knight was displeased with both Marcus and Golton. Marcus was knocked down by their General; whereas Golton was buried into the ground from the raw unadulterated strength from the large titan. Afterwards, he popped Golton out of the ground like a carrot and both were forced to run laps before being knocked down a second time. Master Knight looked down upon both of them as they stared up at the massive suit of armor looked down upon them.

“Being the prodigal swordsmen of the entire camp does not excuse tardiness!” Master Knight shouted in such a booming voice that the rocks themselves shook. “If you still attend to achieve that worthless dream of yours, you better start arriving when I ask you to!”

“You must forgive me!” Golton said. “It was my fault that Marcus was...”

“And you need to stop lying up for him!” Master Knight snapped. “Gods forbid; do I need to break both of you!?”

Golton’s tongue immediately ceased.

“Do you not think that I would know of your actions, beyond the fortress’s walls?” Master Knight said. “My eyes and ears extend far beyond these stones blocks. You two are the finest swordsman this side of the country has ever seen; and with no prior training either. You Golton can put any of your brothers to shame, as well as all of the royalty; and Marcus here has the finest sword arm than any soldier I have seen. That is a rare trait to find in this country since the age of Blue Flamed War has now long past. But the tide of what we believe his remnants is rapidly approaching. They still continue to sack and pillage the countryside. And they are more numerous than they ever were in ages past. We can’t have any more slacking off or sleeping in whenever I call you here. Knock it off. Or shall I meld you with the ground using my boot? Please don’t test me; I have killed men for lesser reasons!!”

Master Knight lifted his shoe only slightly and that was enough to get Marcus and Golton to stand right back up in attention. The blood within both of them turned to ice almost instantly.

“Ahh.” Master Knight sighed with joy. “Even my boot is enough to break even the most hardened men. I don’t even need to explain to you what happens when they see me draw my sword, but it involves the changing of undergarments!”

Master Knight let out a heartily laugh as Golton and Marcus sweat became that like bullets. The name Master Knight was originally known as just the general, and could only be held by a family of prestigious honor, honor rivaling that of an Archduke. Many years ago, Clarence Von Dora, the general of ages past, adopted a son after his was killed in battle. This boy proved himself to be of keen mind and superior strength. The son, who was found as an amnesiac, possessed a great suit of armor, and a massive sword, of which was passed down ever since. Because of the son’s prowess in battle, Clarence referred to him as a Master Knight. When Clarence passed, the son renamed the title of General at his request to the King to be formally known as Master Knight. From this point on, the title, armor, and sword was passed down throughout the generations.



Master Knight (the Master Knight of this era, which all seemed to match the Master

Knights as before) was an imposing figure. The man was at times renowned as a monster himself. He was eight feet tall, and he wore enough armor to the point of where not even a speck of skin was visible (as the suit of armor passed down covered one's entire being). He wore the armor, even at times where he was in public, believing that he should be in uniform at all times; in case of the unexpected. In fact, it was a well-known fact that most people who inherited the title of Master Knight was never seen without it on since. The only person reportedly seen him without his armor was the Queen, but no common man could verify such a claim. He went by no other name other than Master Knight as due to his service record in Tritenia, he just seemed to be more used to people referring to him as Master Knight.

Despite being General, Master Knight had very odd tendencies, such as changing his attitude or tone of his voice within a matter of seconds, doing unusual and unexpected things. Several people saw Master Knight (still in his armor mind you) educating young children at Aldin why they should listen to their parents, attempting to cook a roast over a fire, and even going over to smell a flower. Yet no one dared make a remark; or even chat about it town for that matter. His perception on things and people were far above the levels of a human standard, and it would be as if he would know who said what and even at what time. No one wanted to be forced into physical training by Master Knight. Surely with his massive armor, punching anyone would be enough to put them down for good. He was seen at times lifting trees off their roots and hurling them at enemies.

The blade was even scarier than his armor. As mentioned earlier, Master Knight wielded a sword so massive, sheathing it was physically impossible. The sword was longer than that of Master Knight himself, and centuries old. The sword was over ten feet long, three feet wide, and fifteen inches thick. He always had the sword in his hand at all times. Swinging it would send gusts of wind towards people; and with the strength he possessed, the gusts could knock someone off their feet. For most people at the army, picking it up and holding it for ten seconds was more physical training they had done for three days; yet Master Knight always wielded the sword with one hand. It's from that inhuman strength that one would actually believe a rumor within the Stonelands that during one of Almorgo; the Bandit King's raids that Master Knight killed a hundred people in a single stroke.

Normally he never involved himself with people such as Marcus (grunts as he eloquently stated) Marcus knew this, as well as any other candidate. The only reason why they saw him was that the Queen was focusing her recruitment for soldiers here, due to a population boom. Because of that, Master Knight moved down here temporarily to oversee the new candidates. And...it was Master Knight who had Marcus enlist in the first place, which meant Marcus served the foot soldiers under his direct divisions. Master Knight had spent more time honing Marcus's sword arm than most others. No one; not even Marcus knew why. Still, this is what happened; and Marcus could do nothing but listen and perfect his sword arm under Master Knight's guidance. A rare treat like this was something which drove the resentment of others upon him, but none dare challenged him for his forte drove previous challengers to defeat.

The barracks itself was a mass of stone huts. They were small, shorter than the houses of our day and era, each with a wooden floor and very little accommodations. Each of these stone huts were full of blades, spears, axes and bedspreads; some of those bedspreads housing injured soldiers. Other buildings that appeared more elegant and well-built were designated for the officers. Throughout the barracks, boxes of supplies and

small wooden fences that we're used to train people in the art of the sword. Men and women we're already outside in the fenced in areas clashing with wooden swords, as it was not allowed to use steel or blade weapons unless there was a duel had been arranged for that day.

This, of course only applied to Marcus's sect of the army, which he served; which was the central army of the entire kingdom. Golton's and all other sections had different regulations and policies; only being here under a request from Master Knight. And vassals of Tritenia who owned their own private militaries or guards usually ran them how they felt, while the central military had a specific organization that had to be abided by; though any vassals' private military could make a request for soldiers from regions at anytime.

"Your men you are to spare with have already been arranged that I want you to work with." Master Knight said. "You have the one on the farthest right, Golton; under my request. Marcus, your lot is the three directly under it. Guide them with instructions I have given to you. Now make some fine warriors to add to our ranks!"

"Yes sir." Marcus and Golton said.

The two left the building where the General resided and then entered the armory. Marcus grabbed a simple chest plate, and steel greaves to account the situation. Marcus took one of the practice wooden swords and shield from the racks. Golton took one rine sword and one broadsword. A Rine Sword was a well-known sword that hailed from the land of Myridia. Unlike most blades that had the sword facing up on the hilt, this sword was curved, and designed below the hilt. It was intended to be wielded on the off-hand of warrior. It was usually used to surprise and strike down foes in sudden fashions, as the sword was difficult to predict. It was also a perfect defensive blade.

They both put on their: a helmet to cover to the one's face, with padding around the inside to keep their head from suffering against bludgeoning weaponry. A breastplate made of thin steel and then metal greaves for footwear. This was the standard attire of all Tritenian foot soldiers...although some members of either higher rank or possessed more accolades from battle were adorned with more prestigious gear. In addition, Foot soldiers were given a vest of ring mail to protect their legs, and metal shoulder pads. Marcus for his armor had a badge ebbled onto it to represent himself him as a Foot soldier (often referred to a soldier's livery), and a copper star to represent his victory at the village against the bandits when he was first identified as one skilled with a blade.

And so the fenced in area began their exercises. Marcus would place men together two at a time, and have them engage the other. If he saw something amiss, he would then go up to amply rectify what they were doing incorrectly, and then resume the fight. On occasion, he'd brawl with the students himself, as he needed to keep his own exercises up.

Marcus decided to take a reprieve during his shift and went to collect some cool water from a canteen. He opened his canteen, only to find that he had not refilled it from last night. He grunted in frustration. His reprieve was only five minutes; not nearly enough time to get to the nearby stream and collect some water. But as he stood there, he felt a tap on his back and a canteen being handed to him.

The canteen came from an unexpected individual who Marcus had learned to call friend. It was Sir Arin Sorin; the atheling of the knight who ruled over the providence of the Westernfold. He was a thin man with long flowing brown hair with a clean face. He wore a large silvery breastplate, and had a skirt of chainmail around his grey greaves. His pauldrons stood far outwards, and his gauntlets had been torn from years of use. He was

built from his years of training with combat, and capable of using a lance, spear, sword, and axe. Marcus somewhat shivered when he saw him. Months back, he had defeated him and his brother; Mediva Sorin in a duel when Arin disguised himself as a soldier to see how the foot soldiers in the area squared up as compared to him. Mediva Marcus defeated when he looked for challengers to flaunt his skill; and when Golton pushed Marcus forward as if he was accepting the duel...and he was never aware of whom the people were still far later. Mediva was exceptionally sore after being defeated and has held contempt for Marcus since. Arin on the other hand took the defeat rather well; as he claimed it showed him the limits of his abilities. Since then, he always exchanged kind words with Armani.

“Forget to refill?” He asked.

Marcus said nothing, but nodded...particularly glad it was Arin he was talking to and not Mediva. Marcus took the canteen and drained most of it, before returning it to Arin. Arin bottled it up and sat next to him.

“I find it funny that with all of the finesse and forte you possess with blade and shield; your ability to adhere to arrive on time has always been wavering.” Arin said, sitting down next to him, chuckling to himself. “Maybe if you had gotten up, you would have had time to refill your flask.”

“I went to sleep much later than I should have.” Marcus said. “It won’t happen again my lord.”

“See to it that it does not.” Arin said. “Of all the men I have under my command in absence of my father’s age, you and Golton are by far the best that I have. I wish to continue to use you; and I’m sure you want to keep your job. Mediva would like it nothing than to have an excuse to throw you out of the foot soldiers.”

“Is...sir Mediva truly still angry at me?” Marcus asked.

“You made my brother look like a fool in front of the entire army.” Arin said. “I can’t say I am surprised though. Mediva has been lax on his training as of the last few years; where I have never wavered in my exercises and regiments. Even so, to this day I am surprised you managed to win against me.”

“As am I my lord.” Marcus replied loyally.

“You have far more skill than you give yourself credit to.” Arin said, putting his hand on his hands in Marcus’ hands. “So please...don’t do something foolish if you know it could lead to your dismissal.”

“I won’t my lord.” Marcus said.

Arin smiled and shook Marcus’ hand. As he did, Marcus could feel something in his hands as he did. Arin had left him an envelope with Master Knight’s family signet on the front. On the back of the letter was a single sentence:

Only for your gaze. Let no other eyes see this.

Seven hours later, the time was about seven o’ clock and the sun was already fallen over the ocean to the west. Marcus was putting up his armor and grabbed his pack and mounted his horse for the ride home. It was about nine when he returned to town. He still carried the letter Arin had left for him. Most likely it was orders for the week since Sunday had just passed. Marcus took the parchment and intended on reading it when he got home. However, anxiety of his orders got to him and he opened it in while on his horse. It may have had Master Knight’s signet on it, but he was handed it by a royal knight. He lit his lantern and

began to read the contents of the letter; which to his surprise was extremely long and specific:

SOLDIER: Marcus Armani

RANK: Soldier

Tolkeen: Daily training session

Shigurian: Daily training session

Aonumain: Off

Tetsuin: Details follow

From the time I first met you as you slew those bandits on your own, I could tell you were a prodigy.

Now I ask that you put that notion to the test. You have been chosen, along with a select other few to partake in a vital task because of your skills with a blade that I have not seen demonstrated in another for such a long time. I can't say it merits knighthood, but it certainly will do well for your career advancement.

The North Gate has informed us that something of great value will be brought over from Seaside that is of high value to the war effort against the monsters in the Pure-lands. It is to be escorted from the North Gate to Aldin for safekeeping. A second division will be assigned to the mountain pass to scout out a potential shortcut to the Capitol. It is of great importance that the caravan from Seaside reaches our town intact.

A looming cloud blocked out the moon, forcing Marcus to put the paper even closer to his lantern.

The item that will be sent by caravan will be taken to Aldin

You are to report to the pass two weeks from Thursday, along with any others who are given similar letters. Report outside of the forest from the main road on Thursday morn...a convoy should be there. Display your soldier's livery and this letter for verification. Failure to report may result in relief of army duties...

Do not ask questions, and restrict all thoughts to simply doing any and all duties given to you when you arrive.

Good luck,

Master Knight

A chance at Knighthood! This was what he had been waiting for a long time now.

But just as joy came to his mind, so did concern.

For the past two years, there has been nothing going on around Marcus's town. Occasional monster or bandit groups spotted at times, but nothing that raised questions such as these. In addition, vital to the war effort? Had there been something found?

More or less, Master Knight sent this letter himself. The hand writing seemed much more elegant than his superiors that he knew at the local barracks; so the likelihood of it actually being Master Knight seemed possible. Why would the General write to him

himself? Didn't he have others to do that for him? Thinking to himself on this further only seemed to unnerve him more.

Marcus knew he had to see this for himself. For the rest of week, nothing else was marked, so it was assumed that he must need to journey by Thursday. North Pass was a two week journey by horse. When this job was finished weeks from now, he would have a couple days to himself. The new recruits would be fine with their lieutenants for the time being. After all, he was only a trainer; not meant to lead troops.

He decided the situation was better to contemplate at the inn rather on the field. He entered Diagoin's Inn at about nine when he returned. This was a usual spot for him and Golton after their session or patrol when they returned days later. A stone floor, carpeted and polished full of chairs and tables all over. Lamps hung overhead fully lit. Several patrons sat around the bar, drinking merrily and enjoying life, with bards playing in the background. A song seemed to break out as Marcus entered the room; which he recognized as the ballad of Darian.

*Up high on the mountains the mercenaries went
Throughout the fighting, their stamina spent.
Among the swordsmen stood a single one
Who through many losses the war had been won.*

*As he lost his love and all turned grim
A divine wrath awoke within him
His godling blood began to simmer
And hope no longer appeared to be grimmer*

*Up on the Black Tower did he find
The demon himself who was far less kind
The hero then drew his sword
And faced down the demon and his horde*

*The two; human and demon battled for hours
As the land around them began to devour
Until at last, the hero, on top of the tower frigid
Smote the demon, leaving his body rigid*

And the hero himself, pass into legend.

As Marcus was walking towards the bar, a pair of hands covered his eyes. Marcus at first overreacted, but when he heard a girl's laugh, he stopped struggling.

"Riona?" He asked.

"It is me." She said as she retracted her arms.

"You're later than normal." Marcus asked. "I expected I would see you earlier."

"I thought I was going to not arrive myself; but I mustered on to find a way." She said. "Arin and my family wanted me to attend a ravenous dinner, but I honestly cannot stand the food there."

“Why is that?” Marcus said. “I would love to try the food Sir Mediva gets to enjoy.”

“I suppose you would; but I can only stomach it for so long.” Riona said. “I actually enjoy the food and drink down at the bar much more than at his household; I know not whether it is taste or preparation. Would you like to accompany me? I could use a friend, and I’m quite bored.”

The joy that came unto him when he heard Riona say such a thing. Secretly, Marcus was heavily attracted to the Elf girl, but because of her noble status, he was unsure how to tell it to her. Nobility under normal circumstances had to marry into nobility in order to continue the family line. It was a custom in the Elf kingdom, and that was shared in the Human Kingdom.

But if nothing else, there was no law against being the friend; despite his heavy desire to be more than one. She and he got along so well...and even she would do the occasional flirting.

“Well, I would never turn down your company.” Marcus said as he and her sat down at a bar stool. “Hey Diagoi!”

Diagoi walked out from a door behind the bar. He was a fat dwarf who opened the bar at Aldin when he had first arrived in the town. He was also a veteran of a war that occurred in his home in the mountains. He also fought alongside Master Knight in the Age of Azal. During that final battle, where Darian and his powerful magic sealed Azal’s existence away, Diagoi received a vicious gash in his side. If it were not for Tritenian soldiers, Diagoi would have died in that battle. Diagoi’s medals and mementos from the wall hung above the bar for all to look at.

“Whatcha want!?” He shouted in his usual cheery voice.

“One pint over here.” Marcus said as he moved a couple silver coins from his pouch to the table.

“And some red wine.” Riona said. “The best you got on the top shelf...or is that too high for you dotard?”

“As if a fairy like ye would ever know what a good, stiff, drink is.” Diagoi barked back.

“You mean that uncultured swill you call ale?” Riona sneered, clearly on the offensive. “It’s about as refined as your ability to speak and groom.”

“Can’t groom if ye werking hard; unlike some people.” Diagoi barked back. Marcus rolled his eyes as anytime Riona snuck out with him to Diagoi’s inn, she and he always engaged in this bitter exchange of words. He knew she was the elven duke who was staying here’s daughter, but he never cared to hold back his opinion when it came to deriding an elf. This was not something between her and him; but rather a bitter rivalry between their entire races. Elves were created by the Goddess Aini, and dwarves were created by the God Dverger; and the two deities were said to be rivals in life. It appeared to carry over into their creations. It is not to say that the two kinds hate each other (as many dwarf and elven armies have fought side by side in the past) but rather a mutual rivalry based on beliefs, culture, and society. Diagoi eventually had to leave the bitter word play to manage his inn. “Let me check the buttery.” He said, bowing condescending manner to Riona before checking the back.

He eventually returned with a glass cup and a wooden jug. Diagoi was one of the kindest dwarfs in the land. He was a veteran of war when his mountain was invaded by a large band of Dark Elves overseas and the UbraRia invasion. And yet despite the loss of his

leg and his battle scars, he never demanded any respect from the patrons. He filled them both to what the other desired and then handed them over the table. And then the man and Elf began to join in the merry making.

“Did you hear the news?” Marcus asked.

“What news?” Riona asked.

“Golton’s come back from Seaside.” Marcus said.

“Golton?” Riona asked. She muttered something Elven that Marcus couldn’t understand. “Mary’s going to throw a fit when she hears about this...right before the two make rabbits out of themselves.” Mary was a friend of Riona’s that she had met here sometime after she had met Marcus. Since Golton hung around with Marcus, he eventually had made contact with Riona, and her congregation of friends. Eventually, the two chorused with each other and were together sense, though Marcus and Riona were in agreeance the relationship was born out of lust than love.

“The woman is quite infatuated with the man.” Marcus asked.

“She never stops speaking about him.” Riona said. “Drives me insane. I can’t see what she sees in the man.”

“Always nice to have a woman to wait for you when you get back.” Golton said. “Still can’t believe the other deeds I have done to women have not come to light yet.”

Both Riona and Marcus turned to see the brown haired young man next to them.

“Golton?” Riona said. “What are you doing here?”

“This whelp owes me a pint of beer.” Golton said. “For attempting to drive Master Knight’s wrath away from him...mind you, it failed horribly.”

Golton laughed at himself, as he and Riona embraced each other.

“How I missed you my old friend and...by the stars...what happened to your face?” Riona said.

“What did happen to yer face!?” A Dwarf next to Golton. “It looked like someone drov’ it into the stonework.”

“Perhaps what we see is his ego burnt onto him!” A drunkard said from the table. The men around the upstart began to laugh about the situation. Marcus looked at Golton to see that his cheek grew very red and swollen. Golton did nothing but keep his usual smirk and started right at the man.

“Perhaps you good sir, would like to challenge the mobile fortress. You won’t look so pretty afterward either!” Golton shouted. “Or perhaps, you would think yourself mightier than I?”

The laughter quickly died off and the men, dwarves, and elves glanced in the direction towards the man.

“I suggest you back to drink, less you wish to go home with your face cleaved in.” Golton said walking towards the man, expression never changing. “One does not feel pity, for those who provoke the Devil. And I am no saint in combat.”

“Whoa now!” Diago in the Dwarf shouted. “Not in me bar you won’t! Take it outside if ye plan to fight. Otherwise; I’m getting in this when I throw’ yer rears outta here!” Marcus knew that the man was egging on Golton to get into a fight with him. And he also knew Golton would gladly get into that fight, as he was easy to rouse in situations such as that. Many people who met Golton’s wrath in combat went home sore later that day. Still, Golton had no intention to displease Diago in, so he backed down as well.

Golton took absolutely no notice of the rest of the confrontation as Marcus reached into his pouch and took out more bronze coins to pay for Golton's drink. The three kinked their glasses together and began to drink.

"So Riona..." Golton said as he looked in her direction. "How have you been?"

"Very good." Riona said. "I'll be busy over the next two weeks. I have to make the final preparations for Mediva's father party."

"Ahhh, that's right." Marcus asked. "The celebration. I did not realize you were working on it."

"Yes indeed." Riona said. "I love parties, but loathe with their planning. I cannot wait for this to be done. I am sick of seeing papers lately, and a constant stream of manservant's requesting my presence for details on it."

A patron was next to Riona got up and went to another table. Riona couldn't help giggle when she noticed.

"Then you should be delighted that the celebration is almost nigh." Golton asked.

"Can't have are little princess getting worked up about such a small ordeal."

"Oh hush you; before I add another mark to your face." She barked. "I do not mind work as nothing in life; even wealth should be taken for granted. That of course, does not mean I enjoy the work."

"Speak for yourself." Golton said. "I sure as hell would not mind maids attending to my every whim. I could love that life."

"Thank the gods that women's taboos and sins are worse than yours." Riona said. "Anyway, are you two going to come to the festival for Lord Aron? I can tell you it will be quite a sight...our celebration of you human's victory over Azal; and to honor our century old alliance!"

"I think." Marcus said. "Right now, I see no reason not to. I guess it depends on how busy I become."

"I hear the old coot's finally retiring." Golton said.

"About bloody time too." Diagoïn said, interjecting in. "That man's got the endurance of the strongest dwarf to be holding his position for forty years. Seventy-eight years old. He's old enough to be one of the legendary Wandering Mages if I do say so myself."

"Quite right." Golton said. "And I hear his temper is still as fiery as it was when he was twenty. Well, at least when his anger burns. Who is his successor?"

"I do not know...but many of the rumors of the common folk believe Mediva might." Riona said.

"Damnation!" Golton yelled. "Marcus...trouble is soon settling in for you. Did you not defeat the man in a duel some months back?"

"It's not like I knew it was him until months later!" Marcus shouted, burying himself in his drink. He truthfully was proud of his victory, but learning who it was had made terrified for fearful for repercussions of shaming royalty. "Besides, Sir Mediva is a sensible and honorable man. He won't do anything that is...too rash...I hope."

"Oh nothing what a royal reprimand would not be able to fix." A voice came from behind him. "But it wouldn't look good if I let a petty defeat by a duel be the reasoning you were hurled out."

The three turned around to see the door opened, letting the cold air from the night in, and a finely dressed man. The robes and tunic the man had indicated he was a royal. A gold

necklace was around his neck, and his pants were black as night. He had brown boots and wore a purple hat. A surcoat of gold and sapphire blue was worn around him, and a visible sword in his sheath, along with short brown hair. He had a small soul patch under his chin. He stared at the three with a very cold stare, but most of his anger was directed at Marcus. It was Sir Mediva: Lord Aron's son, Arin's brother, and one of the many Knights in the Westernfold. Sir Arin was right next to him. Arin's clothing was similar to his brother's but his appeared more royal with brighter colors to compliment them.

"The usual serfs I see." Mediva said. "Golton...Marcus...and Riona. A strange, but closely tied trio."

"Sir Mediva." Marcus said, immediately getting up and saluting him.

Mediva snorted as he looked at Marcus. Marcus then removed from his stance knowing there would be little he could do to change his opinion of him. "I still can't believe that Master Knight keeps an ingrate like you around. If I was in charge, you would be thrown out of the military."

"Then fortune favors me your father is still in charge." Marcus said.

"But for how long?" Mediva sneered with a grin on his face.

"Considering I am one of the best soldiers in the army, it would foolhardy to dismiss me." Marcus said.

"I trust you didn't come here to let your ego scathe my friend here." Golton said. "Unless you want to go and let this former commoner wipe the floor with you."

"Always resorting to violence aren't you Golton." Mediva said. "You should watch your tongue, Golton. You may be one of the best swordsmen in the land, but you are still my subordinate."

"I serve no divisions other than my own charter under Master Knight." Golton responded, his hand clenching into a fist to drive a point. "You're father may have control over the land, but in no regards does that make me your personal soldier. Only when Master Knight breathes his last will I obey you."

Mediva stopped for a second and thought about Golton's words.

"And on that day, you will serve me and me alone." Mediva jeered back

"Brother." Arin said. "Enough...you have no reason to continue this banter. It is foolish to hold such a grudge; and foolish to dismiss Marcus. Riona...we need to go."

"Arin...why can't we just eat here?" Riona asked. "It's already nicer and it doesn't take..."

"Yes...I know how much you like Diago in's bar." Arin barked, nodding to Diago in who nodded back. "Quite frankly, my father enjoys eating here on many occasions, if I am correct. But...my servants have been slaving to make both of our families a glorious dinner for the private ceremony. It would be rude not to attend, especially with how irate your father is for sneaking off again. Besides they have much to discuss, and by extension us."

"I believe if Riona wants to stay here, she should." Marcus said. "There is no reason not to."

Riona sighed. "Actually Marcus..." She said. "There are some matters that require our attention...and as much as I wish to be dismissive about it, I cannot miss this one...as it seems I have been caught." She turned to his face, and smiled. "Damn party arrangements, I am right?"

"Are you deceiving me?" Marcus asked. "You know full well I can keep a secret..."

"No." Riona said. "I'm sorry...maybe another time, Marcus."

“Oh...” Marcus said. “My apologies...please...do not let me hold you up then...”

“Well...” Riona said. “You came to drag me back...you first.”

Arin tipped his hat to Marcus and Golton, and the two departed the bar. “A duke’s daughter involving herself with commoners...what a wretched notion...” Mediva said quietly; though Marcus still caught the words.

Marcus grew jealous as he watched the two walk away. He did not like the idea of Riona associating with Arin. He idolized her, but he didn’t know how she felt about him. Come to think of it, lately Riona has been with Mediva and Arin a lot more than he or Golton. Could...could there be something going on between the families? While he looked angrily at Riona, Arin and Mediva, Golton nudged him.

“Forget about her for now.” Golton asked. “It’s not like you have the coin to rival whatever Arin or Riona’s father has planned. We have far more important things to attend to. Did you get a letter?”

“From Arin himself.” Marcus said, revealing the parchment to Golton. Marcus reached into his pocket and showed to him the parchment he had received on his way out. Golton’s Mind sight went to work and allowed him to see the images of the parchment and the words written within it. Diago in himself peered over to look. Marcus and Golton did naught to stop him. As a former soldier, Diago in was allowed to look at such high profile letters.

“What a strange turn of events.” Golton said. “I got a letter myself; though the context in it is much different than yours.”

Golton pulled out a letter from his slacks that was folded. Marcus and Golton looked at it carefully.

SOLDIER: Golton Ubrair

RANK: Captain

TITLE: The Crimson Wind

Tolkeen: Daily training session

Shigurian: Daily training session

Aonumain: Daily training session/Report from North Sea Wall

Tetsuin: Begin journey to North Gate

From the time I first met you as you slew those orcs on your own, I could tell you were a prodigy.

Now I ask that you put that notion to the test. You have been chosen, along with a select other few to partake in a vital task because of your skills with a blade that I have not seen demonstrated in another for such a long time. I can’t say it merits knighthood, but it certainly will do well for your career advancement.

The North Gate has informed us that something of great value will be brought over from Seaside that is of high value to the war effort against the monsters in the Pure-lands. It is to be escorted from the North Gate to Aldin for safekeeping. A second division will be assigned to the mountain pass to scout out a potential shortcut to the Capitol. It is of great importance that the caravan from Seaside reaches our town intact.

The item that will be sent by caravan will be taken to Aldin

You are to report to the pass two weeks from Thursday, along with any others who are given similar letters. Report outside of the forest from the main road on Thursday morn...a convoy should be there. Display your soldier's livery and this letter for verification. Failure to report may result in relief of army duties.

Do not ask questions, and restrict all thoughts to simply doing any and all duties given to you when you arrive.

*Bring justice to our kingdom
Master Knight*

“What could this mean?” Marcus asked. “The same letter? War effort against the monsters?”

“I haven't heard of such a thing.” Golton said. “It's not completely unheard of the Mage Knights liberating a powerful artifact of some kind from monsters or other foul beings.”

“I was hearing strange rumors by Seaside.” Diagoïn said quietly as he moved in closer to avoid the populace from getting involved. “A couple men came through here. Mercenaries I think. A large caravan of soldiers we're escorting something from the Ambrim fields.”

“How would you know about this?” Marcus asked.

“Master Knight and I go way back from the UbraRia wars.” Diagoïn said. “He keeps me updated on regular events that go on in the world.”

“The Ambrim fields?” Golton asked. “You mentioned the Ambrim fields?”

“The area around the Black Mountains is a corrupted land of Blight.” Marcus said. “And the Ambrim fields nearby those mountains are still a haven for monsters; don't know why our people still try to make a living out there”

“I don't know meself.” Diagoïn said. “There's something else going on though that's for sure. These are dark times, which they are. With the Pure-lands under siege and many of the farms destroyed, many of the villages are having famines and worldwide food deprivation. I haven't seen the lands in such peril since the UbraRia invasion. Bloody good thing that we put an end to that huh?”

One of Diagoïn's employees threw another log and twigs in the fire. The fire which had begun to die out roared back to life.

“Who knows what it could be?” Diagoïn said. “Discussing, and debating whatever could that...thing' be does naught. The only way ye two will know is when you get there.”

“Yeah” Marcus said. “No use worrying over it yet.”

The three stayed at the bar for an hour longer, talking with Diagoïn, and catching up on their lives, listening to Golton's adventures at Seaside, seeing as this was the first time they had seen each other for a while now. As the two continued to speak, two hands snuck up behind Golton. Marcus looked over his shoulder to see the blonde haired wench who was in love with the man. Golton did nothing but lift his hand and stroke the woman's chest. The girl felt the tingle of his touch, and pleasure seemed to shoot all throughout her eyes.

“Hello beautiful.” Golton said. “I see somebody was awaiting my return.”
“It’s been so long; and you left me here so starved.” Mary said seductively.
“Well then...let’s go home.” He said.

Golton turned to Marcus and walked away.

“This is where I get off to my house.” Golton said.

“I shall see you then tomorrow, correct?” Marcus said.

“Perhaps if you oversleep” Golton said. “We need to get you there somehow. See you in the morning.”

Golton left Marcus then to return to his home and get some sleep.

Marcus returned to his edor and lit a lantern in his house. He went to his pantry and with the food he had, began to make a small bowl of soup. There wasn’t much left in there and he knew he would have to go out soon. Some dried deer meat left over from last night, carrots, peas, and seasonings that his family had sent over to him recently. He set the pot on the stove and then sat down. He opened up the letter again and began to read in long hours of the night, trying to contemplate the meaning of it.

Chapter 3 – A Late Meeting

The last few days before leaving for the North Pass proved to be uneventful. Riona and the letter remained on Marcus's mind for most of the time.

On Tolkeen morning, Marcus purchased a number of things for the trip that he knew the army would not provide; as well as items provided, but not in plentiful supply.

For the rest of the two days after, Marcus continued sparring with other soldiers to impart any skill he could, and read the reports from other units. Nothing from any scouts passing nearby indicated anything was amiss. Nothing surprising; the Westernfold's natural mountain barrier essentially blockaded any attackers from entering the region. The only way into this particular region of Aladonia from the North and east would be to either go around the mountain barrier, or pass through the mountain passes; both of which were fortified by the army.

On Tetsuin morning, Marcus left for the fortress.

Late.

"Damnation!" Marcus shouted after gathering his things! "I'm not having my profession destroyed by my own negligence!"

Marcus kept to himself as he journeyed towards the convoy. Golton was not there, but Golton held a higher position than him; so he could only surmise he was on the way there already or at the convoy now. He ran onto the road, taking little of the sights in. The only sight he could even remotely see was just a lone bird moving into a flock of three others above him.

On his way there in the forest, he noticed that there was someone up ahead. It appeared to be four people: a girl with dark brown hair, whose hair was bound in a hair band. She was wearing a red blouse, gray shorts, and had a cap like bandana on her head. There was a younger man by her side who wore a brown tunic and tan slacks with short blonde hair. The third young man had long black hair, a black tunic with a red scarf around his neck, and black slacks. This man also had a scar on his side. Most of them held weapons on sheathes to their backs, the blonde haired boy carrying a long sword and shield, and the larger one carrying an axe. The girl herself held a large spear on her back. The three people were around a wagon which looked as if it had fallen over, with a horse off to the side as well as another girl. The other girl was a girl with short black hair and yellow eyes who wore an orange scarf around her neck. She wore a dark black tunic, using the skirt of the tunic as an actual skirt. She was also wearing black tights and brown boots. The strangest thing about her appeared to be the catlike ears and tail from her behind. Eventually, Marcus recognized her as a nyanita, a cat like humanoid race that originally was found in Myrida. They appeared like humans, though they would always have a distinct cat like tail, claws, fangs, and ears. From what Marcus knew and understood, most of them had fur. But she for some reason did not.

"That's what I get for trusting you on the reins Emily." The black haired man shouted.

"Maybe if your horse was more than a wild beast, one could actually rear it." The girl sneered back.

“Oh please Emily; surely you are not that daft!?” The short haired black girl snapped, her tail sticking up. “I clearly saw you unable to handle the steed. No wonder you weren’t put into cavalry.”

“You’re one to talk!” The girl named Emily snapped back. “You were assigned to the army leachs since you couldn’t pass physical exams!”

“Don’t you dare bring that up!!” The black haired girl shot back, flicking her fingers to extend her claws.

The man with the blonde hair seemed to shy away from the middle of them as the two bickered. “Can we please just try and fix the wagon?” He asked. “All of our professions lie on this! The fault of being late, and the wagon damaged will be on us.”

“I can’t even believe that I even let you take the reins!” The man shouted back. The blonde hair man seemed to sigh at the bickering and then resumed attempting to fix the cart. “Em...can you hand me the tools?”

“Sure thing Ron.” The girl named Emma said, breaking away from the fight between this Emily and other unnamed man.

Marcus didn’t know what had happened (or whose fault it was in why such a wagon had fallen over), but he did manage to catch the man’s shouting of the North Pass. Could they be soldiers? It was certainly possible; Marcus didn’t own his armor; it had to be returned at the end of the day (and Master Knight always took account of any gear used...he accidentally forget to return a dagger to the armory...he was caught less than five minutes after he left from Master Knight seemly descending from the sky). Marcus knew some of the soldier’s names by heart, but not all of them.

Regardless, they looked like they were in need of help, so Marcus ran towards the area.

“Hey; is everyone alright over there?” Marcus asked, running towards them. The four saw Marcus, the black haired man drawing his sword. Marcus immediately raised his hands, hoping that he would not have to unsheathe his own. “Whoa; parley! I am no bandit!”

“I’ve heard more honest looking men claim as much, and still knife people in the back.” He shouted.

“I’m a private to the Tritenian Central Military; my name is Marcus Armani.” Marcus shouted back. Marcus couldn’t see it, but both the younger looking man and woman shot up when they heard that name. Marcus instinctively reached for his soldier’s livery and displayed it in front of them. The man still kept his sword in hand and pointed at Marcus; but the others quickly shot up and made the man lower his hand.

“Chorin; what the hell!?” Emma said, rushing to the man’s hand and clasping it.

“Chorin; sheathe your dirk.” The younger man said. “He’s no bandit; he’s stationed at Aldin like us.”

“Stationed?” Marcus and the black haired man both asked. The two gave each other a queer look, before Marcus continued. “Stationed? So...that means...”

“That’s correct.” The man said. “Name’s Ron. Private Ronald more specifically. This paranoid one over here is Private Chorin, and that feisty one over there is Emily.”

“Call me feisty one more time; and I’ll have your head Ron!” She shouted back. Marcus could have sworn there was a fire that had lit behind her. She quickly shook it off and then reached her hand out to Marcus. Marcus rubbed the back of his head nervously as he shook her hand. “Emily Grant...Private Emily Grant more accurately. We’re all stationed at Aldin.”

“So I could surmise.” Marcus said. He then pointed to the girl with short black hair. “Uhh...and you are?”

“Umm...Emma Morina.” She said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Charmed.” Marcus said shaking her hand. He quickly released it and went to the wagon.

“Now what’s the problem here?”

“Right...” Ron muttered. “Anyway, the horse ended up convening the wagon into the tree. I managed to take the reins and rear it in to save the wagon, but I lost a wheel in the process. If we go there without the wagon, we will be ruined! They can no doubt mend the wagon, but our reputation will be tarnished none the less.”

“How did that transpire?” Marcus asked confused.

“Well...” Emma said, moving towards him. “Emily lost control of the horse...”

“I did not!” She shouted back. “Don’t you keep talking...”

“Okay fine...so the horse by some spell or modicum of insanity decided to go out of control and we collided into that tree.” Emma sarcastically continued. Emily lowered her face down to the ground, glaring at Emma.

“You make it sound worse.” She moaned.

“I see.” Marcus said, hopping into the cart. “Well then, we haven’t much time. Do you have a hammer, crowbar, and some nails?”

“Yeah.” Emily said. “We’re mostly carrying food, but have a few utility supplies as well.”

“Then fortune favors you today.” Marcus said. “I could do some makeshift repairs to the wagon. It won’t look nice; but it will get you to the convoy at the very least.”

“You would do that!?” Emily exclaimed, running to grab Marcus’s hands. Marcus was a bit surprised at first, but then rubbed his hand through his hair; slightly embarrassed. Then as soon as Emily realized that she was holding Marcus’s hands, she withdrew them without any hesitation and blushed immensely. Emma looked at her, and then giggled slightly.

“Of course.” He responded. “I was a farmer before a soldier. Stuff broke down all the time. Such things like this are well within my forte. Hand me the tools...I’ll get us there...if you’re willing to let me ride on the wagon the rest of the way there.”

“Of course you can.” Chorin said. “We’d be honored with your assistance. I was just about ready to give up.”

Marcus nodded. Emily hopped up into the cart and began to rummage around a bit. After a minute or two, she handed a box to Emma, who slowly handed it to Marcus. After taking a moment to examine the cart, he placed the wheel back onto the middle of the cart and began to mend the cart as quickly as he could. His father had taught him in the past how to handle repairs should he ever befall a bad situation, so this feat was not unknown to him. None of the repairs he did looked pretty, but it would still accomplish the immediate task at hand.

“Tell me...did you all by any chance receive a strange parcel at the barracks?” Marcus asked.

“Yeah.” Emily responded. “Our commanding officer told us we were to head to the granary to procure additional food to feed the soldiers on the way to the North Pass.” She then hit Chorin in the side, causing him to recoil. “Until this thing’s demon decided to go

rampant in the middle of GETTING TO THE CONVOY!!!” Emily had shouted directly into Chorin’s ear, causing him to further recoil.

“If only you could handle a spear better than you can shriek...” Chorin muttered. Emily however heard that...

“Why you little!” She exclaimed, grabbing his cheek. Chorin moaned in discomfort, which quickly turning to grunts of pain. Marcus and Ron stood there stupefied at the display, where as Emma stared at them.

“Don’t mind them.” She said. “They tend to do this more often than what sane humans do. One would say that they have feelings for each other that have gone unrequited.”

“So he would wish.” Ron said. “I had a misapprehension talking to either Chorin and Emily.”

The three who were not fighting shared a small laugh amongst them, and Marcus continued to work. He turned to Ron after securing the wheel.

“What about Emma?” Marcus asked. “Why is she going to the North Pass? Is she a soldier as well?”

Emma looked at Marcus and shot him a queer look; her ears perking up. After a minute, her expression changed from that to saddened and turned her head away from Marcus; as Marcus said something sensitive. Marcus seeing the change in her expression looked confused and worried that he had said something to offend her. Ron also saw this as well and moved to Marcus’s ear.

“Umm...” he mumbled. “Best abstain from mentioning things of that regard to her.” Marcus did not understand what he meant, but he nodded his head to show that he knew not to mention that further. Marcus put in a few more nails into the wheel, and was able to secure it onto the cart. He then pulled himself to his feet.

“Alright...” he said. “I’m all finished here.”

All of the people around Marcus breathed a sigh of relief; except for Emily who bellowed loudly with joy and fell onto the grass. Ron walked up to Marcus and shook his hand.

“You have done us a great service Marcus.” He said. “We are indebted to you for this. When we return from the North Pass, we shall have to take you out for a pint.”

“As long as it’s not blashy, I don’t mind what you take me out for.” Marcus said, pulling himself to his feet and getting up. He brushed off his slacks of dirt and grime and then placed his hands on his hips looking at the cart. “It’ll move; but best be gentle...I’d like for us to get there in one piece.” He moved over to the horse and rubbed its mane gently, whispering into its ear to soothe it. It didn’t appear agitated (and he was certain Emily was not sharp around the edges when it came to horses), but he didn’t want to risk the horse flailing around when he was riding it. “I’ll ride your steed to the convoy. You follow alongside me. Now come along...we’re all behind schedule.”

The four others nodded and started going up alongside Marcus. Marcus gently kicked the horse’s side, and the steed began to move forward. He kept his hands tightly on the reins in order to keep the horse from moving too fast. The repairs he made could easily fall apart if he did this even a modicum different. He and the four others moved alongside each other, and then started headed towards the main road; outside of the forest.

The journey took roughly two hours, which was two hours longer than Marcus had hoped the trudge would take; but he had already slept in later than he intended so he really

could not make it much worse on himself. His only hope was that other soldiers were still trying to organize before the convoy officially departed.

An immense wave of relief flew over him as he came out of forest and upon the large open green plains.

It was here that he was in the vast countryside of this particular portion of Tritenia. From here, he mostly saw vast plains, rivers, and wetlands. Most of the farmland lay towards the East, so it would come no surprise that civilization would disappear as the journey to the North would continue.

The convoy was large, far bigger than Marcus had originally hypothesized. He could not make out an exact count, but he believed there to be roughly over two hundred men; which was roughly two thirds of the division stationed at. He counted at least seventy cavalry, thirty mage knights, and forty archers. The remaining soldiers appeared to be foot soldiers, some of which Marcus could point out, but the rest were enigmas to him.

He pulled out the convoy. A cavalry member rode out to him. By the looks of his accolades on his armor, he was probably a lieutenant.

“Halt!” The man shouted as he came up to him. “Who goes there!?”

“Private Marcus Armani!” Marcus shouted, showing his soldier’s livery to the cavalry. The others around him soon introduced themselves. Emily Grant! Chorin Barin! Ronald Morina! It was then that Emma revealed what her position was in the army.

“Leach Emma Morina.” Emma said quietly, saluting the soldier.

“WHAT!?” He shouted. “Speak up!”

“Leach Emma Morina!!” She shouted up, saluting the soldier with a much more solid stance. The man groaned in front of her, and then rode up to the group of soldiers. He then retrieved something that looked like a clipboard. He looked over a few pieces of parchments, licking his fingers looking up the parchments. He then shot a look after less than a minute at all of them.

“ALL OF YOU ARE LATE!!” He bellowed. Marcus immediately stood up in attendance, along with everyone else. His skin was expunging beads of sweat at an alarming rate; and though he could not tell, he was certain his newfound compatriots were doing so all the same. “You’re all lucky that this operation requires everyone here; especially since...” the man looked over Marcus and saw the cart that was behind them. Marcus swore that this lieutenant may have popped a vein with the wave of anger that came over him. “THAT BLOODY CART WAS SUPPOSED TO BE HERE AN HOUR AGO!!”

“I’m sorry sir.” Ron said. He then looked at Emily, who was still standing in attention. Marcus knew Emily had caused the cart to crash (though not from verbal confirmation; but logical inference), and he wondered if Ron planned to place the blame on her. He however did not. “The horse we were given was spooked by an animal that had rode by before we had noticed it. This man stopped here to repair the cart so we would not come here without it.”

“Did you now?” The man asked Marcus.

“Yes sir.” Marcus said. The man didn’t say anything back to Marcus and the others for a minute. He rode over to the cart and gazed into it for a minute or two. He rode towards the group.

“You’re all on night duty for the next five days; and thank your Gods I do not make it any more severe!” He shouted after investigating the cart. “Now move it!!” He then sped off back into the crowds. Marcus breathed a heavy sigh of relief. The idea of being up all

night, and trying to get sleep during the day on rugged wagons moving over rocks and grass did not bode well for him. He however was more fearful something worse would happen. If Master Knight had heard he had failed to arrive on time twice in one week, he'd be cleaning latrines and privy's for a month.

"Sorry about that." Ron said apologetically.

"What for?" Marcus asked.

"Wrangling you in with us." He replied. The other's faces appeared quite somber as they looked at Marcus. "We got you in more trouble than you probably were warranted."

Marcus looked at Ron and shrugged his shoulders.

"Pay it no mind." Marcus said. "Even if I had hauled from my hovel to the convoy, I would still have been tardy...besides I took the time to repair your cart." He placed his hands on his shoulder, and his other hand on Chorin's. "Like it or not, I am in league with you." Ron looked at Marcus with surprise, as if he anticipated Marcus being angrier. But afterwards he smiled and then placed his hand on his shoulder.

"Then welcome to our assemblage." Ron declared. "What was your name again?"

"Marcus Armani." Marcus replied.

"Nice to meet you Marcus." Ron said, bringing out his hand to shake it.

The convoy left after a half hour when Marcus and his entourage arrived. The soldiers headed directly north of where Aldin was and then began to trudge through the wilderness. Although the road was more optimal, time must have been not a commodity for the army at this time. In total, there two hundred and thirty-three men all together, and they were being led at this time by a Captain Marcus had trouble remembering the name of (mostly because he had a thick dwarven name that had a lot of accent marks and inflection to it); and all of these men from what he could garner had been personally asked by Master Knight to attend.

Speaking of which, where was Master Knight? The force may have been around two hundred men, but one could easily have recognized Master Knight's towering silhouette among the masses, yet there was not one sign of the General anywhere. More or less Golton. Puzzled by this, Marcus inquired during the first day from a nearby soldier his whereabouts. Master Knight had already gone up ahead Shigurian morning and was probably already forty leagues ahead of the group. He left the dwarven captain in charge until they could arrive at North Pass. Once there, he would reassume command. As for Golton, Golton decided to leave early on Aonumain and had already departed after issuing his oral report, but no one was able to confirm why. He did however have Master Knight's blessing from his renown, accolades, and commitment, so the captain permitted his early leave.

For most of the days, Marcus wrestled with sleeplessness. For his failure to arrive promptly, Marcus was forced to take an entire night shift for the next five days, to allow the majority of others shut eye. Marcus normally could handle night shifts; but that was if he was allotted sleep during the day. In order to get sleep, he would lay on the wagons, but the bumping and turbulent nature of moving permitted him less than he needed, and sometimes none at all. The experience was extremely grueling and ate him constantly.

But he was at least not alone in this. Ron, Chorin, and Emily were also there on night watch; along with a few unfortunate other souls; whom Marcus did not associate with. He stayed with his newfound group. As the night dragged on, Marcus and the others conversely freely (and brewed what might have been endless amounts of coffee). The group

had all passed physical training recently; and had only been employed in Aldin for a few months now.

“How long have you been a soldier Marcus?” Emily asked.

“Sixteen is when I was admitted.” Marcus said.

“And it is true?” Chorin asked. “You defended a man’s shop and killed fifteen armed men on your own before you came here.”

“Indeed, though the number I lodged against my blade was really eight.” Marcus said. *I don’t remember embellishing my skills that much.* “It all happened so fast. But I had to do something. In retrospect, it was foolhardy; stupid even. I was beginning to run out of steam. If Master Knight hadn’t been there to apprehend the rest, I’d be dead.”

“How did you manage to survive?” Ron asked. “Fifteen against one, and sending eight of their number into Oblivion is just...”

“Unlikely?” Marcus replied, taking a coffee pot off the fire and pouring the bitter drink to his newfound companions. “I attribute it to luck...the only really practice I’ve had with a sword was swinging it around without my dad knowing. Nothing formal...nothing that I would ever trump a real soldier’s training.”

“How was the physical training?” Emily asked.

“How was it for you?” Marcus asked.

“Felt like I fell off the Black Mountains and landed in a pit of nails” Ron said.

“That is about the same.” Marcus said. “Though I felt my training officer was a bit more sadistic than the rest. Thankfully, I leaned on my bunkmate Antwon to help me get through. It makes things easier when you know you aren’t the only one suffering.”

“Who was yours?” Chorin asked.

Marcus knew his trainer back in the barracks for physical training. He was a tall staunchly-gruff man who had a long brown beard around his face and a shaved head. His name was Captain Jonathan William; who was truly a sadist as a quarter master. Marcus has always looked up to William as his mentor, although William would deny it until the end of the Kingdom. For you see, Marcus did not need a mentor. According to what he overheard from William, he was, and had always been, an extremely proficient fighter. “Captain William of the capitol’s second division.” Marcus replied.

“Never heard of him.” Emily said.

“Be glad that you don’t.” Marcus said, taking a sip of coffee.

The others shared a small laugh, and then Ron and the rest talked to each other about other “fond memories” they had in physical training. Marcus recognized no names from each person they mentioned; but he could generalize how each one was. He had heard plenty of stories similar before.

The coffee pot was soon drained; and Marcus knew that they would inevitably need more to get through the night. Marcus opted to make the next pot and walked away from the three.

As he sat down to make the beans, he heard what sounded like grunting in frustration nearby him. From within the moonlight, Marcus saw the girl from earlier. Emma Morina. The whole time they had traveled, Emma had always been busy or sleeping. Even on nights when they had to maintain the watch, Emma was always doing something. She was a battle leach after all; which translated basically as “battle nurse.” Leaches would go into the battlefield either during the culmination of the battle, or after it and retrieve any soldiers that they could (assuming Tritenian soldiers won the battle). They were armed with

swords; but they were intended only for defense; and never to join the soldiers in battle. Leaches were different than nurses at camps, as they were only intended for simple operations and practices to stabilize soldiers so that they could be sent back to camp alive for medical care who had studied medicine for years.

Emma looked to be practicing with a weapon of some sort. She appeared to have a spear in her hand and was making basic thrusts against an invisible opponent. Not that someone was actually invisible there; she looked to be pretending there was to exercise. Her motions with the spear and thrusts suggested that she had little forte with the weapon. Her movements appeared sloppy and misguided; and she must have suspected it to. Her face looked like she was annoyed, and her tail wagged uncontrollably. On occasion she would get a perfect thrust, but she seemed like she was not someone who either trained with a weapon often, or trained at all.

It had then come to Marcus's attention that he had not really spoke to her much. He also sensed that he may have made a bad impression at the start (based on how she recoiled from his inquiry to her being a soldier). He never figured out what of her aversion to him after he had asked that. After making the coffee and heating the pot, he walked over to her with the mug filled with the bitter coffee.

"Hey." He called out. Emma stopped practicing and then looked over to him.

"Oh..." She said, her irritation gone and her tail somewhat still. "It's you."

"Lovely evening." Marcus said, walking over to her with the hot coffee. Emma looked at the cup, and yawned loudly. She took the cup and took a small sip, which perked her back up after a minute or so.

"Thanks..." She mumbled before yawning again. "That really helped keep me up. Not that it's a good thing with how little I am getting these days."

"You're not the only one suffering." Marcus said, taking a sip himself. "I for one cannot understand anyone who enjoys doing any kind of night job."

"You seem like you're fine...along with Ron and the others over there." Emma muttered.

"We're just masking our frustrations with drink and humor." Marcus said. "But we long for sleep all the same; me especially."

"I can tell." She said. "You have bags under your eyes."

"I'd be surprised if I didn't." Marcus muttered back.

Emma smiled, but turned away from Marcus sitting on the ground. She remained quiet for a minute or so, leaving Marcus in suspense. As such, he went to continue the conversation.

"Did I offend you when I asked if you were a soldier?" He asked.

"Huh..." Emma mumbled, looking at him. "Oh that...no...I mean it brought up some humiliation, but it's none that you could possibly know...so yes I was displeased...but it's over now...sir..." There was a slight pause in her conversation, and then she shook her head. "I'm sorry; I forgot your name."

"Marcus." Marcus said. "Marcus Armani."

"You know...that name sounds familiar." She said. "I've heard soldiers in the infirmary both cheer and balk at the name of Marcus; most of them groaning about injuries inflicted by a specific soldier who was handpicked to join the Tritenian army by Master Knight himself. And my female friends in this village speak of this young handsome soldier who joined the army only but four harvest years ago."

Was this true? Marcus in his heart wished he knew these “friends” of hers. He couldn’t help but blush from her statement.

“...I suppose if the man was handsome, it’d be me.” He said with a tone of confidence.

“So it is you!” Emma exclaimed. “To think that I would meet someone who has such gossip around him; and all the while fixing a mistake wrought on by Emily. If she learned this, she’d shriek.”

“Would she now?” Marcus asked.

“She loves the men that gossip surrounds.” Emma said, now actually sitting down on the ground. “Nice to meet you Marcus Armani. My name’s Emma Morina.”

“Nice to meet you Emma.” Marcus replied in kind. “Especially now that I do not have to worry about upsetting you.”

“Oh don’t fret not on it.” Emma said. “You could never have known. It’s not an interesting tale anyway.”

“Well...if you have time...I’d like to hear.” Marcus said.

“You would?” Emma asked, looking genuinely confused. Her tail twitched somewhat as she looked at him. She must not have believed her tale interesting to someone full of gossip (which Marcus did not even believe existed until today).

“Well...sure...” Emma said. “My family was a militaristic family...all of them in their generations served in the army; and all had accomplishments. And here I am...the typical girl in the family...who couldn’t pass the requirements for a foot soldier even. I was doing alright in the beginning...able to handle the physical abuse and training. That wasn’t the problem. When it came to using weapons, I was a novice. My skills were...feeble to say lightly. Anyone amongst the trainees could defeat me in a sparring match. I bested maybe one individual...and only barely. Even hand to hand I am inept. You could see how my family was about that...disappointed. I have to bear that shame; to be first of my generation unable to accomplish the family goal.”

“Gods...” Marcus said, very empathic towards the girl right now. No wonder she seemed disappointed when Marcus asked her if she was a soldier. The thought of him doing it actually made him feel bad. “I’m sorry if I asked you. No wonder you withdrew from me when I inquired to you about your position.”

“It’s alright.” She said. “You meant no disrespect. You would never have been able to know otherwise. Anyway, my father became a merchant, after his service expired. He was wise, charismatic. Could woe you into buying any of his wares without you knowing how much money you spent. But above all of that, he was a stalwart swordsman. And my mother actually helped build some of our siege equipment. They both served here in the army; and were both veterans. Unfortunately...I never got the knack for fighting. So...naturally I became the disappointment.”

“You do serve the army though?” Marcus asked. “Should they be proud that their daughter is still serving?”

“You would expect, but no.” She replied sadly. “My brother Ron...”

“Ron!?” Marcus exclaimed. He turned to the direction of where the three were; still in front of the fire. “Ron is your brother? Are you not a Nyanita?”

“Yeah.” Emma replied. “Ronald Morina. We share no distinction in our appearance as I am adopted. My family either abandoned me, or has died. I do not know.”

So she was adopted? Marcus knew that he best drop the conversation on that; lest there be some bad memories that he inadvertently bring up. Fortunately, Emma saw to that. “Do you live around here?” She asked him.

“Ye...yes; actually.” Marcus said, shaking his head. “My house is right next to the gate of the town. Not the most magnificent of households, but I can pay for it at least.”

“Much better than the house I own; which does not exist.” Emma said.

“Do you live in Aldin?” Marcus asked.

“No; but I live in the Westernfold if that’s what you’re asking.” Emma said. “Prior to my service here, my home is in Golidoz; one of the merchant’s cities on the outside of the village; a twenty day journey from here by foot. Right now...I’m living in the barracks...as you see earlier.”

“And your father does not serve anymore?” Marcus asked.

“To his dismay, no.” Emma said, as she receded back onto the cot. “My father lost the use of his leg many years ago, so he’s resumed selling wares. My mother left her section in order to take care of him.”

“Oh, I see.” Marcus said. “I am sorry for your dad’s leg.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Emma said. “The man may be a cripple, but you give him a sword and he’ll still topple any of the Knights you see...except of course Master Knight...that guy should be renamed “The Human Boulder.”

“Or the Walking Fortress?” Marcus asked.

Emma snorted as she tried to restrain the laughter bubbling inside of her. It didn’t last long before she started laughing out loud. She eventually regained her composure and lay back down.

“That’s hilarious!” She shouted, her tail curving upwards. “Where did he get that name?”

“My friend Golton invented it.” Marcus said. “Though it is one of many that the man has: the Indestructible man, the Living Armor, The Mobile Fortress, The Reason We Still draw breath...he’s been dubbed with many names more than Master Knight.”

“I bet.” Emma said, snickering a bit. “Mobile Fortress...I have this childish image of a bastion with arms and legs on it; and a colossal bastard sword in hand.” Marcus laughed along with Emma who held her sides from it. He was even more struck with it, as he himself had a similar image of Master Knight in his head as well. Emma yawned a bit, and then picked up her spear. “Well...it was nice to meet you, but I must resume my training. Enlistment is four years nigh, and I must spend every moment practicing. I will not be a disappointment to my family.”

“I wish you the best.” Marcus replied. Emma nodded and downed the rest of the coffee in the mug. Afterwards, she got up, and then resumed her practice. Once again, she was far from any soldier. But she had the willingness to keep trying; and those who dedicate themselves to such goals can reach them.

Made him wonder if his quest for Knighthood truly was in reach.

Still strapped with fatigue from sleeplessness, Marcus staggered back to the others with the coffee pot in hand. It would be a long remaining three days before he could get some substantial sleep.

He thought back about Riona as he did, wondering how the elven girl was handling. He had written a letter about where he was to depart to before he had left; so that she would not believe he was avoiding her. And earlier yesterday on the caravan, a bird had flown by

to deliver him a flower. No doubt it was from Riona; her power granted her control of animals and fauna with enough exertion. Smiling, he held the flower in his hand, and stared at it in front of the moonlit sky.

Chapter 4 – The North Pass

The small force traveled on for over two weeks. On the road, they passed wetlands and fields, until they came to a large hill on a cloudy day two weeks later. Over the hill, they came looking down upon a series of mountains that covered from the ocean to the West and to the Eastern range that separated this section of the land to where the lands north were. These lands were known as the North Sea Wall; and the capitol city of the land was Seaside. Seaside was a massive city made of white marble that was built directly over the ocean on a large platform.

The North Pass primarily served as fort and a toll; inducing taxes individuals who came through. The North pass also served as an outlet for merchants to gather to sell their wares if traveling was a concern, as well as a rest stop for the night. The taxes were somewhat steep due to the large number of military troops that occupied the base. One could travel over the mountain range to make it across and avoid such lastages, but it would be immensely difficult and dangerous. The money made through taxes would be funneled into the vassal who was in charge, and then repurposed for the base (with a portion sent to the capitol). This was the intention, but there have been abuses from it. At the very least, no vassal would attempt to abuse a system if Master Knight was in the providence. The unbreakable man was as stalwart in his conviction against corruption as he was with war.

The base itself within its walls was very similar to Ryan's fortress, although it spun much more room, and there were buildings open to public use (such as a few inns, some space to set up shops and wares, and a few general stores). Since the North Pass was secure, many thought it a good idea to set up their tents around it, and one entrepreneur thought it a grand idea to set up an inn there. The idea made him a relatively wealthy man. Since then, the North Pass invited others to build establishments within its walls to keep commerce going (and the additional taxes from staying in military property).

The road itself appeared to end at a large stone wall about a half mile wide. Several large stone towers were seen with fully armored archers. Soldiers were seen running among the fields for daily exercises. The flag of Tritenian waved in the distance, a tree growing on the flag with a sun rising over it.

Even as they approached the pass, something seemed amiss to Marcus. There were numerous, if not hundreds of tents pitched all across the land around the North pass. Even more so, there appeared to be hundreds of soldiers marching around the North Pass. What would normally have been an outlet for commercial practice and townsfolk moving about seemed to be suddenly a heavily militarized zone.

The lieutenant in charge galloped on his horse over to the pass. A lone soldier gazed at the man off the wall.

"Oy!" He barked. "Whatcha lads doing down there!? Where does this lot come from?"

"Soldier!" The man called back. "We are consignment gathered from Aldin, Telmark, Ogma, and many others under Master Knight's orders to reinforce the North Pass; as well as serve as escort to the assize talking place." He reached to his satchel and pulled out a piece of parchment. "I have documentation on all soldiers in my satchel as proof."

An assize? An assize was a meeting among fellow knights of the land, along with other vassals to the Tritenian kingdom. That in itself put Marcus with a sigh of relief that

the expedition wasn't as serious as he thought. It was common practice that when Tritenian nobility or royalty was to gather for a meeting, that forces would be redirected to wherever the meeting was to take place.

"That so?" The man said, biting into an apple. "Stay put with the lot of ya...I'll be down to run an canvass of the documents. Oy...open the gate you slods!"

Loud clanks we're heard from the inside. The steel gate swung open.

Marcus gasped at the sight. He saw hundreds of soldiers from the Capitol. The soldiers from the Capitol were more decorated than Marcus' division. Their armor covered more of their body than the others, had long flowing capes, and their main weapon was a pike or lance (although they had long swords on their sides). Marcus was surprised though not at differences of armor or region, but the fact of how many soldiers we're there. He even among the army saw men robbed from the church, meaning this was much more than just a typical assize. Whenever the church was involved, trouble followed (sometimes from the church, but other times from forces beyond mortal comprehension).

It also explained why people of less prestige were also taken along with this (as painful as it was to admit, Emma held a very lowly station compared to the men and women who bore arms). With more troops came more probable injuries. The more leaches and doctors in camp, the better.

"By the gods..." Emily murmured quietly to Marcus and Ron; while they marched onward into the pass. "Those are capitol soldiers. All of those directly under Master Knight's holdings."

"I've never seen so many soldiers." Emma said, before moaning. "I shall be working quite a bit."

"This is no ordinary assize then." Chorin replied. "The military presence is too much. There are too many soldiers."

"Yeah." Marcus said. "Suddenly, I'm a little fearful of what is going on."

"If this is no assize, then what is going on?" Chorin asked. "That's what I want to know."

"We will learn at some point." Marcus said. "Best not to prod on these things right now. We need to get used to our new routines. Besides, if it's a meeting among the vassals, dukes, and royalty of Tritenia, it is something us common folk should not be concerned with."

They continued to march inside the North pass, till they came to the registration booth. Here, each soldier would register their name down, as well as any information they could garner about themselves to confirm their identity, and that they were on the list. Most of the first day for those stationed above Marcus and everyone else would be spent pouring through the letters to ensure the validity of who they claimed to be; and that there were no charlatans among the troops. Since the Written Age, documentation had become widespread, so authenticity was important.

Marcus stood in the line among his newfound compatriots for a long time, until they finally made it to the end, where they were given what their jobs would entail, their duties, and shifts. They all stood in line in attendance and as straight as they could (except for Emily, who had a dying need to use the privy as a result of drinking too much from her canteen). Interesting enough, very little about why they had been brought here was shared to them; only that they were guarding the North Pass for an assize that would take place. When prying further, Marcus found that not even the captains knew; and one of them even

mentioned that lord Mediva (who was present at the North pass fortress for this) had no idea what was taking place either. Although he was just a foot soldier, more of why he would be transferred to a city would have been entailed. Their shifts began immediately, and fortune favored them that they were all assigned the same shift; except for Emma who had to report to the surgeon's tent. They were then sent to another line to be given shift leaders.

"It looks like we have been assigned the bastion on the left side." Marcus asked as they moved away from the table. "And it's all of us as well..." Marcus looked up at the bastion tower. Odd as it was, he was actually disappointed. "I feel rather underwhelmed."

"I'll take an easy job over a complex one." Ron asked. "Surely you agree? You have been given simple work before yes?"

"Yeah; on a modicum of transfers before I have been given underwhelming tasks." Marcus replied. "I do prefer more engaging tasks."

"Speak for yourself." Ron said. "I'm fine with this."

"I agree with Ron." Chorin said to his side.

"I'm just getting sick and tired of waiting here!" Emily barked, with her hands crossed along her chest, her legs twisted up uncomfortably. Emma noticed this, and soon began to notice she was swaying uncomfortably back and forth...her hand sometimes going in between her thighs.

"Emily..." Emma said. "Did you forget to use the privy before you got in line?"

"NO!" Emily shouted. Emma then looked at her annoyed. She then made her tail rise up towards Emily and moved it to her side...gently pushing up against her. Emily began to laugh and Emma tickled her, but soon froze up in place as she placed her spear in between her legs up to her groin. "...yes..." she moaned.

"I told you to go before we got in line." Ron said dismayed.

"I know..." She moaned, her hand still clasped between her thighs.

"Emma...Would you be a dear and serve as my watchwoman while I find some secluded place?"

"Absolutely...as long you promise to stop making a habit of this." Emma said, her ears perking up. She then shrugged her shoulders. "Well...I shall be off after I return her. When we have time, we should all go for ale. Farewell!"

Emma quickly clasped Emily's hand, and sped off into somewhere in the North Pass. Being a nyanita, Marcus assumed that she would be able to find some location secluded; and anyone approaching she would be able to spot long before they arrived.

"Your friend Emily sure is a handful." Marcus said, as he walked towards the tower.

"Emily may have her outbursts; but she is not to be underestimated." Ron said. "She is one hell of a spear fighter; and her aim is usually on point every thrust."

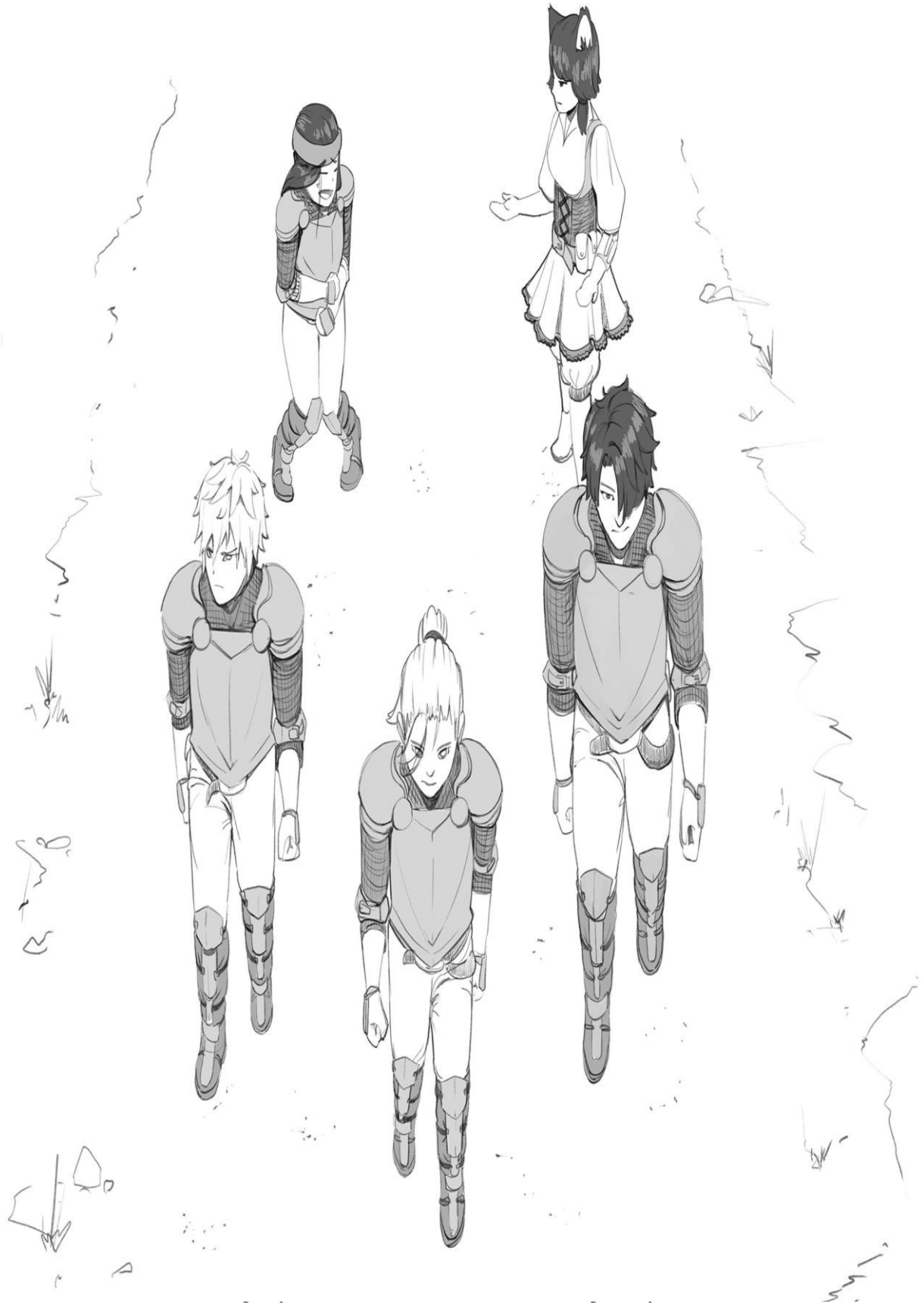
"Just like how she says you are." Chorin sneered.

"Oh shut up." Ron barked.

"I wonder who'll be in charge of us?" Marcus asked. "I remember it was Captain M'norn back at the barracks at Aldin for me; but my message didn't disclose who I would be working..."

"Marcus Armani!!" A man behind Marcus shouted. "So here's where you were!!"

Marcus froze up instantly; and stood in attendance, frozen in place. His blood acted as if it froze up, and he could feel beads of sweat pouring down his brow. He was not even gazing in the direction of where he heard the voice; merely staring off as if he would perish



He recognized that voice; but he could not place his finger on where he heard it before. His answer came to him a second later, as his old training officer looked down at him.

“Ca...ca...Captain William!” Marcus shouted; with obvious fear in his voice.

“Heh heh heh...” William grunted as he looked at him. “It’s been a long time...”

“Umm...uhh...sir...has...has Mas...Master...y...yet?” Marcus attempted to ask.

“Speak...clearly son.” William said.

Marcus gulped and regained his composure.

“Has Master Knight arrived yet...sir?” He asked, calmly.

“That giant construct has yet to return from the South Pass at the North Sea Wall.”

Captain William said. “You and these ones were assigned to my division; which is managing the left wall.”

“You...you are managing the left wall?” Marcus asked.

“Damn right I am.” William said. “About time the capitol recognizes my talent. Anyway; follow me to your post.”

“Ye...yes sir!” Marcus shouted.

William looked down at Marcus and snickered evilly. “To think years ago I was crushing your back...how interesting how life comes back full circle after four seasons.”

“I think I have still have the scars.” Marcus said.

“You damn better!” William said, putting his hand around Marcus. “Those beauty marks are proof that you survived training! Most people can’t say that without shuddering every time they think about their past.”

Marcus nodded. It was true. Marcus knew it was part of William’s job to make his life miserable for that time. But...there we’re times that he thought William took advantage of the situation...at least that’s what everyone thought about their quarter masters.

“This is the man who you endured at physical training!?” Ron asked with a tone of fear.

“Regretfully.” Marcus said, trying to not display his apprehension.

“He doesn’t look so tough.” Chorin said.

William heard it; and Marcus could feel like a fire had been ignited where he was present. William turned around and drove his foot in between Chorin’s legs. Marcus could have sworn a gong rattled in the distance as Chorin stiffened up in agony. He then fell down, his body locked in place. William glared down at him evilly, while Marcus and Ron fought each other for who was to hide behind who.

“Am I tough now young’em?” William barked.

Chorin could only make a high pitched squeal of agony.

William took Marcus and Ron (who dragged Chorin) towards the entrance to the wall that surrounded the tower. Marcus took a gander at the regiments of soldiers around him. Not only we’re there numerous soldiers, but there were other sections of the army there as well. There were Mage Knights (a division of the Tritenian army that focused on magic as their primary battle arms) practicing various simple spells to ready themselves, siege engineers who were busy making repairs on ballista’s, the clergy of Esruweh had sent their faithful as well in full battle attire. No sign of Master Knight though. One would think the General would be overseeing the whole operation.

“Tell me boy...” William said. “Have you ever seen this many gathering of soldiers before?”

“Are we...” Marcus began. “Are we at war?”

“No; but clearly something has transpired.” William said. “Master Knight went on ahead. He should be arriving soon. In the meantime, he’s requested all these soldiers here for an operation. No other details at the moment.”

“So we are stuck here without much to go off of?” Marcus asked.

“Whatever that living armor is having us do is worrisome.” William said somberly. Marcus looked to William with an estrange look; as William never really responded in any fearful tone. But then William changed his expression completely. “But none of these lot are me after all! I should expect them to be whimpering in fear. Should something terrible happen, I welcome it! It will be a pleasure to exterminate any threat to the crown with my arrows!” As they exited out of the stairwell and onto the wall, Arin’s voice was heard.

“William!” He shouted. “I require your services over here.”

“Already?” William said. “I thought you said you can handle this?”

“Not all of my new men believe in unity and order.” Arin barked. “Think you can give me a hand with breaking their skulls in?”

“I live for that!” William shouted.

William picked up a nearby club and ran over (an act which made Marcus and Ron shiver more...Chorin was too busy limping to notice). While William ran towards Arin’s men, Arin himself turned towards Marcus.

“So you arrived.” He said.

Marcus’s stature tightened to show his pride (and hide his fear from William’s wrath). Arin had never seen before to be involved with something such as this.

“The letter you gave.” Marcus said. “Master Knight himself wrote it. I knew something about it was off...but I did not suspect something like this.”

“Neither did I.” He said. “But...nothing is ever so simple these days. Very few men of Tritenia were chosen from each province. Rumor has it you have a desire to become knighted. You certainly found a good way to make a start towards it.”

Marcus nodded. A royal had respect for him. Such an honor!

“Umm...” Arin began. “Since you’re here...there is something I need to inform you of. It’s about Riona.” As soon as he heard Riona’s name, Marcus looked at Arin peculiarly.

“What about Riona?” Marcus asked. “Is she well?”

“No; no no...” Arin said, shaking his hands as if to dampen the situation. “She’s better than ever...it’s just...well. I’ve been keeping it to myself for quite some time now...but...” There was a slight pause in his voice. Then he continued. “The thing is...Riona and I...”

“There you are!” A familiar voice said behind Marcus. Arin turned around to meet the gaze of Golton who was approaching them. “I was pondering where you might have been.”

“Golton.” Marcus said as he shook his hand. And then gaze Golton a look of disgust. “You didn’t wake me up like you promised!”

“Hey; don’t disparage me for your own offenses.” Golton said, holding up his hands. “I am not responsible for you; and you should be aware of that.” Marcus merely rubbed his hand through his hair embarrassed at this, where as Goltn merely laughed. “Sorry I didn’t anyway though...I decided to leave a day earlier to make my way here. Nice to see you arrived.” Marcus continued to listen to Golton, he saw someone thatstuck out. He had strange dark blue hair and wore an unusual looking pair of garments. Light blue pants, a

large red robe with cloth that covered the front of his slacks and the back. He wore silver shoulder pads and a flowing blue cape. He had a light blue staff made of silver with a glittering diamond on the top of it. He also had a red steel sword on his side. The man was looking right at Marcus, looking intently on him, never leaving his gaze.

“Golton.” Marcus asked. “Who is that man?”

Golton looked to where Marcus was pointing.

“I don’t see anyone.” He said.

“You don’t see him.” Marcus said as Golton looked in the direction. “He’s right...there?”

When Marcus’s eyes had finally returned looking in the man’s direction, he had vanished. Completely. There was no trace the man’s existence. At first Marcus had assumed that the man had teleported, but if he did, there would have been some form of energy or effect. And it couldn’t have been an illusion either; as Marcus specifically watched some of the guards bump into him.

“There’s no one there.” Golton said. “Are you sure you got enough sleep?”

“Umm...yeah.” Marcus said.

“I think you need a better diet.” Golton said. “Or maybe...you are thinking about getting some tail...in the literal sense.” The term of what Golton said eluded Marcus for a moment, but then he soon realized he was speaking about Emma. Marcus shot completely red and went to Golton.

“Do not speak of such things!” He shouted, his finger in Golton’s face, looking at Ron with a face that almost appeared as if he was pleading Ron to ignore his friend. Golton merely chuckled and pushed the finger away.

“Perhaps...” Arin said with a slight hint of bewilderment. “Perhaps I should discuss this with you another time...good day Marcus.” It was clear as Arin walked away that Marcus had forgotten he was speaking to the regent’s son about something concerning Riona. He was too fixated on Golton’s accusation.

“How did you even know whom I was associating myself with?” Marcus asked, his face red.

“I happened to be on the walls at the time when I saw the force from Aldin arrive.” Golton said. “I saw you on the cart from my spyglass, sitting next to her; discussing something in great detail. I must say she definitely is a looker; and certainly fetching to look at. I also saw you as well.”

“Ronald Morina.” Ron said sternly. “And the Nyanita whom you speak of is my sister!”

“Oh...is she now?” Golton said, looking at Ron. He then ran his hand through his head looking slightly embarrassed; while shooting a look at Marcus at the same time that suggested he was saying: *I hope you weren’t aware of that; and letting me run my mouth in front of him.* Marcus shot Golton a sly smirk back; annoying the man further. “Sorry...I get so caught up in irritating my friend over here I neglect others around me. Forgive me; I was unaware she was your sister. Though you lack distinguishing features of a Nyanita...” Golton moved to where Ron was and glared down at him. “You lack both the ears and tail, as well as the distinguishing eyes. You have no fur either. So...either you have lied to me, or she is adopted?”

“Adopted.” Ron said sternly. “And it makes no difference to adopted or not. Speak ill of her, and I will challenge you to a duel.”

“I rather short duel than I expect.” Golton said, his hand on his blade for a moment. And then he withdrew it. “But fear not...I shall ensure I make no further lecherous comments towards her in your presence. Know that I am happily swoon to another; and that my comments are only really directed at making him feel uncomfortable.” Marcus shot an annoyed look at Golton, but then sighed.

“Enough!” Marcus shouted.

“It’s a damned shame we shall not have time to associate with one another.” Golton said. “I was ordered upon arrival to focus my efforts on routine patrols. I will be at least two or three leagues out of the North Pass; and much farther for the most part. However, should you have time for any recreation, feel free to meet me at the pub in town. They closed down the Pass to the public, so it shall be mostly us soldiers there.”

“Closed down the path?” Marcus asked. Even Ron looked interested.

“Yes.” Golton said. “Whatever job we have been given that has asked us to be here; it must be of paramount importance if they felt having the Pass full of soldiers and common folk would be too cumbersome. The only people here are merchants who were passing through before the Gates were shut; and are merely awaiting an opportunity to return home. The others are serfs and farmers who utilize the small markets within the walls. People can leave, but they cannot reenter, or go into the pass.”

Marcus nodded, noting the severity of the situation. He was ignorant to what the situation was, but he knew it was no longer an ordinary task at hand. At the moment, he turned to where Lord Arin had been, only to see the upcoming vassal of the Westernfold was no longer there.

“Gods; I forgot about Arin!” He shouted. “He was going to tell me something about Riona...”

“Armani!!” William’s voice bellowed towards him, interrupting. Marcus remembered that he had a task assigned to him and the fear of his commanding officer returned.

“Yes sir!” Marcus shouted, retreating then to the top of the tower.

He was unable to speak to Arin for the rest of the day, and the days that followed.

The top of the bastion had decent accommodations for the task given. There were a few crudely made chairs and large stones to sit on. A brazier with arrows put into it was heated, along with a set of bows. For most of the shifts Marcus would be on, he would be with Ron, Emily, Chorin, and a few others whom he didn’t get the names of. The task was simply to sit and wait; and alert anyone if they see anyone suspicious on the Pass, or if the force guided by Master Knight was returning.

Marcus went to his posts and then remained heavily at watch. The experience of it was bromidic most of the time, as there little to do other than gaze outward and see if something was coming. He had tried to talk to the people to see if he was able to figure out what they we’re escorting. No one however was able to give him a decent explanation of what it is. It seemed that even Captains we’re kept out of the loop for this. Whatever was found, it was more important than even him.

Chapter 5 – The Lughglen

Days passed as Marcus waited for what was to come to arrive. Many times had passed where he had thought he saw something coming in, but nothing had arrived.

Fortunately, it wasn't completely wearisome. Every so often, he would be relieved for another set of soldiers to take his place; and grant him some time off (though considering all he did was sit around, it didn't feel too much different; other than he could actually leave the bastion for longer than five minutes if he needed to use the privy). Fortunately, that problem came up much less for him; and more so for Emily.

With much luck that had transpired, it eventually came to a point where all who Marcus knew finally was given a relief of duties for other soldiers to take their place. Although they were permitted to move around the North Pass more, there was only a minute amount of things that they could do.

So they did the one thing that they really could do; drink at the bar.

There was only one inn in the North Pass: the Black Dog. Marcus didn't know the history of the bar too well; other than it was owned an older grizzled soldier decades back that had a reputation of committing questionable acts on the battlefield in the name of the greater good; and many regarded his acts as morally gray. His son inherited the pub, and his son after.

Having a pub was better than having none.

The inn had an aphetic appeal to it; most of the design had used darker stones, and woods like birch and rosewood to give a dark town like feel. The whole place was dimly light, only a few light sources hung around. The inn served both ale and food, and had lodging for travelers. A young woman managed to the bar, with a few other servant wenches moving about. There was also a stage within the inn used for dancers, and there was a few sultry women already dancing on stage.

The kind of inn would expect inside a base used commonly by soldiers.

Marcus and his group went inside of the inn, and found a table to themselves. With the lighting of the inn, they would at least have their privacy. Chorin was busy cheering on the ladies; demanding that they increase the fervor of their dances.

"You are a pig; and a lecherous man." Emily barked; drinking her ale.

"And if were not for your spear arm, you would be of no value into this army." Chorin barked back.

"Can we not do this here?" Ron and Marcus both asked. The two looked at each other and laughed awkwardly upon realizing they were both in agreement at the same thing.

"Salutations." Golton said approaching the table. Marcus nodded back to him; along with all the others. Ron however merely glared at him; and Golton did sense the hostility. "Ronald."

"Golton." He said back sharply. Golton scratched his head...he did make awkward in their first meeting.

"May I at least sit here to stay with my friend?" He asked. Ron nodded; and turned his head away from him. It was an obvious dismissal. Marcus turned to Golton.

"Next time it would be wise to hold your tongue in other people's presence but my own." He whispered.

"Ingrate." Golton snapped.

“I’m not the one who accused Emma of being my doxy.” Marcus said.

“Drop my sister please Marcus.” Ron said, shooting an annoyed look at him. Marcus looked at him embarrassed and merely nodded.

“Sorry...” Marcus exclaimed. “There are minuscule times I can hold such a slipup over my friend Golton here.”

“Golton?” Emily said, turning away from Chorin. “Did you say your name was Golton? As in...Golton U...”

“Ubair?” Golton said in a sly tone. “Yeah...that would be me.”

Emily’s expression went from confusion to pure shock. Her skin seemed to go white for a moment as she looked at Golton. Golton had a look of pride on his face as Emily came over to him. Golton was indeed a man of great renown in the barracks; and of the town. “So...” She mumbled. “You’re...you’re...you’re the famous Golton!! You’re the man who slew over a hundred orcs by himself! You’re the one who the bards sing so many tales about!”

“And the best looking man in the army.” Golton said, putting his hands behind his head. Marcus rolled his eyes at his friend. He was accustomed to seeing Golton act like a lecherous man, and still be praised by women for it. Emily appeared to extremely ecstatic about this revelation and pulled her chair away from Chorin to where Golton was sitting. “And who might this one be; and how did you escape my sight?”

“Emily...” Emily said, putting on enough of a façade to appear to be meeting him casually; although there was a look of desire in her eyes...and a look of betrayal in Ron’s. “Emily Grant. Nice to finally meet the heroic swordsman of Tritenia. Ron...look at this!”

“Oh I see enough...” Ron moaned with displeasure.

“The pleasure is likewise to meet such a fine lass as you.” Golton said; his eyes burning with desire much like her own.

“What hypocrisy...” Chorin grunted. “I make gestures for the entertainment to intensify their dances, you find it degrading, yet make sultry desires towards this one.” Emily obviously heard Chorin; as she punched him right in the face; with a force that was able to knock the man over despite Emily’s lack of height, yet did not take her gaze away from Golton.

“I heard so many tales of you since I joined the foot soldiers.” Emily said. “How you managed to fight off over a hundred orc by yourself; and emerged unscathed and covered in your enemies blood.”

“A true tale.” He said. Marcus remembered that day; though Golton’s survival was still a mystery. He was clearly surrounded and outmanned. Despite that, Golton emerged the victor with only heaps of enemies around him. To this day, no one knew how it had been done. “But that is one tale I do not wish to go into. I am pleased that the tale has brought me songs of praise, but any slip up in that engagement would have cost me my life.”

“Maybe you should have...” Ron said as he glared at Emily.

“Is there a problem?” Golton asked. “I mean...aside from the...problem I made earlier.”

“One that is not your doing.” Ron sneered.

Marcus and the others ignored them, and continued to sip away on their ale. They were not left alone for too long, as eventually Emma had come to table.

“Hey guys!” She said, walking over to the table; taking a chair from an empty table with her. She looked about the same, but she was wearing a traditional nurse’s dress rather than her casual attire.

“Emma!” Ron said in surprise. “I thought you were still working right now.”

“It seems that the nurse decided to let me go loose for the day.” She said, sitting down in between Ron and Marcus. “Hello again Marcus. How do you fare today?”

“Much better now that I have a break from staring down that mountain path.” Marcus said with joy. “I did not think my duty would be this dull.”

“And I did not think I would be this deep in work.” She replied. “I have not taken this influx of patients in a long time.”

“How are you so busy?” Marcus asked. “The job at the North Gate has gone rather untroubled since we arrived here.”

“People get hurt all the time when they are sparring or practicing.” Emma replied sharply. “Any cuts or wounds that come as a result of doing such need to be examined, lest they be allowed to fester. It is not often the wound that slays the warrior, but the infestation that comes from the body being compromised by illness. It’s been noted in history from apothecaries and healers that even a small cut can fester; and cause illness to the individual. Therefore we need to dress it, clean it with solutions, and have them come back for examination. And that is not included any accidents that might occur; and there has been many in training already.” What Emma spoke of was part of the rigorous regulation of Tritenian foot soldier protocols: any wounds sustained in any form of training had to be examined at the end of the day; or at the earliest convenience of the soldier. He did not know aspects of the body to know the reason why, beyond knowing that it was healthy to keep the body clean when possible. Training regimes were still being held, and there were far more people than normal at a base. “Work loads often tend to increase when there is a bigger quantity of soldiers in one area.”

“Forget I said anything then.” Marcus said, with his face slightly red.

“Figured it out huh?” Emma said. The servant wench came over, and Emma placed an order for some wine. “But it is fine...you understand my job now. I wouldn’t think a foot soldier would understand how busy we nurses and leaches can get.”

“Yes...” Ron said, placing his hand on Emma’s head. Emma’s cat ears moved slightly downwards as her tail straightened itself. “Seems like little Em over here is having her hands full more so than the soldiers.”

“DON’T CALL ME LITTLE EM!!” She shouted, flinging Ron’s hand off of her head, before lowering herself into the table. “And don’t pet me...”

“Still flusters you to this day.” Ron said. The others at the table, couldn’t help but share a laugh around the table; whereas Emma looked extremely humiliated; despite having the upper hand on Marcus earlier.

“Where’s my wine...?” She moaned.

In the midst of the laughter; and the rowdiness of the inn, Emma’s ears perked up and angled themselves over to the entrance of the inn. She immediately turned her head in that direction. Golton must have sensed it to as he also gazed in that direction.

“Something’s happening outside.” She said, leaving her seat to investigate. Golton got up immediately the moment she had said that and fled towards the area. Soon the others followed suit and went outside.

A large commotion was bellowing all through the fortress. Soldiers were moving in attendance on the outside. "MAKE WAY!" A soldier shouted on the wall. "MAKE WAY!! MASTER KNIGHT HAS RETURNED FROM THE SOUTH PASS! HE BRINGS FATHER CONSTANTINE FROM THE CATHEDRAL OF ESRUWEH AMONG HIM!!"

Marcus felt a wave of euphoria well inside of him from hearing that. Father Constantine was here! He was the central figure of the followers of Esruweh; god of creation and the original forger of the material world. Esruweh was the primary ruler of the deities that served the cause of vanquishing evil and the evil gods and demons who ruled within the Dark World. The Dark World was a place where evil and malice thrived; and the extraplanar beings who served those concepts existed.

On one hand, Marcus felt a huge wave of relief. Constantine was a powerful light mage; whose magic was capable of erasing dark magic with his presence alone. On the other hand, if he was here as part of the emulation taking place, then this was no longer an ordinary assignment (if the soldier numbers were not already something to base that off of).

Marcus and the others were soon rounded up to stand in attention as the massive steel gate that lead into the mountains was opened up. Master Knight came barreling in first and the rest of the Knights, Mages, and Clergy ran in. The entire caravan walked through. Marcus went to the ladder by the wall and slid down it as he saw the armored figure get in. Master Knight moved to the side, allowing father Constantine to be shown in full view of the soldiers; and any people that were still in the North Gate. He was a bald man with a short grey beard and mustache around his mouth like in a ring. His face was sullen, sunken in from age, but he still bore some aura of youth around him with his movements. His long white richly ornamented robe and his long golden ring crozier filled the air with a joy not felt among the soldiers for a long time. His other followers considered of other clerics who wore similar; yet far less splendid than his own. After a moment to catch his breath, he raised his staff in the air and began to speak:

"FOLLOWERS OF ESRUWEH! I come to you all bearing tidings of good fortune! I come to you all to declare the enemy; defeated! Many who live here know creatures who revel in the darkness...the orc...the orc goblin...the undead...men of dark desires...and all others that shall be forever unnamed! They have been gathering for some time; bringing wrath upon the peaceful land of Tritenia; searching for the relics of their master from one hundred years since; hoping that through their power, could incite the banners of war once again! But our God is a mighty God! He has shown us where the monster's goal and chalice has been! Through an exegesis through what we have known from the war one hundred years ago, we have determined what the enemy's goal has been! And thanks to your knights; and the many soldiers who serve under the banner of the kingdom, we have found the enemy stronghold and destroyed it!!" A roar of cheers erupted from the crowds; with Marcus joining in. He had heard that beyond the Westernfold there had been eruptions of conflict throughout the kingdom. Golton being sent to the North Sea Wall had seen this violence first hand. Constantine spread his hands and began to lower them downwards; a signal for the crowd to stop cheering. He then resumed speaking. "Alas...there has been many losses in this. Many royal knights and their retainers met their ends in the esclades that took place in accomplishing this feat. Many knights and uncountable soldiers went into accomplishing this goal. Many husbands now return home without wives, wives without husbands, children without parents, and parent's without children. And so with this...let us offer a prayer of thanks to Esruweh...and a prayer to soothe the ones who now must toil in

life without people they have known. A prayer for them to know that hope always endures, and that upon their death beds, Esruwehwill receive them, and they will be reunited as a whole.” Father Constantine lowered his head, and folded his arms together in deep prayer. Many of the soldiers did the same; with some notable exceptions. Marcus noticed that Golton had his arms crossed; and a look of repulsion at Constantine; and Master Knight continued to stand in attendance.

“Imbecile.” Golton muttered; disgust in his voice. “Wars are not won with stealing some object of power; or destroying a stronghold.” Marcus looked in his direction from his prayer. “They are won when all of your enemies lie broken before you.” Marcus hit Golton in the elbow to get him to cease talking; but he still stood there unmoving.

The silent prayer eventually ended; and most soldiers were sent back to their duties. Mediva and Arin went over to Master Knight and the four began a long conversation of something. Marcus was immediately ordered to begin moving supplies to his bastion. He saluted his superior and went over them. As he did however, he overheard Master Knight and Constantine talking; for the supplies he was requested to get were only several feet from them.

“You’re sure father that is safe in this seal?” Master Knight asked.

“We’ve taken every single precaution possible.” Father Constantine replied.
“Whatever this object is.”

“Better in the hands of the military with you by our side, then in your cathedral.” Master Knight began as he turned around towards a decorated soldier next to him. It must have been the Colonel of the region. “Make sure your men are ready to depart within the next three days; and have steady patrols around this providence. When I arrived here a fortnight ago, I heard we lost contact with one of our fortresses many miles to the east of us. It cannot be a coincidence for that tome to arrive here on its path; and that happening.” The colonel nodded and then went onto his horse, calling for the army to prepare leaving in the next three days.

Marcus felt a wave of fear pass through him. A fortress gone silent? Such a thing has not happened in years in the Westernfold. From what he was told, the natural barrier of the mountains and with a long beach to the west prevented most armies from coming through here. This was thought to be the safest providence in the kingdom. For a fortress to go silent usually meant it had to be abandoned; or worse.

Things were changing much more quickly than Marcus could have ever realized.

Because Master Knight was now present, Mediva and Arin were having the soldiers perform more work around the North Pass; and gave full permission to the Colonel in the area to give soldiers extra duties who seemed to have little. Master Knight intended to move both the soldiers from the capitol, the soldiers of the Westernfold, and the clerical order that had come with him move to Golidoz, and then Aldin. From there, they would head east to the Purelands, and then towards the capitol; so the convoys had to be in order.

Normally, Marcus would not have taken too kindly to doing work for the sake of work; but he welcomed it today as his current job with the tower was drawl. Not to mention that he needed more duties in order to curtail his thoughts about the impending mission at hand.

And all the time he was patrolling around the North Pass, he wondered why Master Knight and Constantine were here.

His answer came to him a day later.

It happened when Marcus was patrolling around a section of the North Pass. It was early morning and the wind stood unnaturally still. He was currently patrolling around where the keep was located. At the time, Master Knight, Constantine, and the two royal knights in the Westernfold had departed into the keep; a large stone building reserved for royalty and the soldiers they trusted for serious affairs that needed to be discussed there. Clerical monks and heavier armored soldiers were barring the primary entrance; and no one was allowed inside without approval; or even on the walls of the keep. Even soldiers like Marcus could not pass through; which further added to the assize being something of importance. But Marcus was not curious enough to ponder on such things. He was merely content in performing his duty.

“Damn it...” He heard a voice off to his side. He turned to his side to see Emma in a nearby alleyway in between the fortress and town wall; the nyanita girl around Ron. She was by herself with what looked like a worn out broom, practicing with thrusts. Marcus recognized the movements she was making as those one would use with a spear. They weren’t...good per say. Most of them were rather bad. But she appeared to be sparring with an imaginary opponent, attempting to better herself.

Marcus was rather intrigued and awed. Many of those of whom had selected noncombat roles generally did not try to do any sort of sparring. They were all trained to fight of course; but not as much as someone like himself. The fervor that she had with this badly done sparring suggested she was actually trying to better her spear arm. Sooner or later, he was so intrigued with this that had came upon her and tapped her on the shoulder.

“Greetings Em...” He said; but was quickly startled with Emma and shrieked in terror and swung at his face. Winded by this sudden attack, he fell down to the ground and held his face in pain.

“By the Gods, are you alright!?” Emma said running over to him. “I...I did mean...to...I mean...I thought I was alone...”

“You’re...in an alleyway.” Marcus replied.

“Are you alright?” Emma said, taking him by the hand and pulling him to his feet.

“My pride is wounded, but I will survive.” He said, pulling himself up.

“What...what are you doing over here?”

“I’m...” Emma said in a embarrassed manner. “I’m practicing...”

“Practicing?” Marcus asked. “To...to join the foot soldiers?”

“Yes.” She muttered. “I...I want to try and reenlist. I didn’t want to have the insults I am used to by my peers hurled at me whenever I do train...so I came here instead.” She then turned to Marcus, her tail suddenly perked upward. “Hey; you’re a soldier! Perhaps you could elucidate to me how I did!” She then walked over to him, both of her hands on his. “Did...did I do okay?”

Marcus looked at her jubilant expression. As someone who worked to get where he was, he felt he should tell her the truth. Her aim appeared off, her stance was making her exhume more energy that needed, and she stumbled to regain her posture. There were so many different things he could tell her; and that she most definitely did not do them well. However, he didn’t feel like he could with how happy she appeared. However, in the four seconds she allotted him to think, he came up with a way as to not wound her; and still show her the faults at present.

“Ye-yeah.” He lied. “You’re doing well...especially to keep up with some practice.” Emma looked at him with joy, and Marcus smiled for she had bought his bluff. He then reached for the broom and took it from her; the girl handing it gently to him.

“However...there are areas of improvement that could be done.” He spun the broom in his hand and then brandished it as if it was a spear.

Marcus looked forward, and then imagined someone in front of him that was charging. With this visualization, he waited until the last brutal moment that he would think his attacker would have. Afterwards, he then did a magnificent thrust forward. This thrust was straight and rigid, almost no divergence other than where Marcus intended his stroke to go at. Emma looked at him with stars in her eyes. Marcus looked at her, and then handed back the broom to her. “Now you try.”

“Me!?” She asked.

“Yes.” He said. “Demonstrating it is often not enough. You need to do it yourself if you are to better yourself.”

“Oh...” She said, stuttering for a moment. “Al...alright! Let me try.” He passed her the broom, and she moved into position.

“Firmly put your feet on the ground.” He said. “You’re not trying to do deft movements with them. Imagine your enemy running at you. You could dodge; but if you skewer him right there, there will be no need for it. Spears are made to outrange your opponent.”

“Okay!” She declared.

“When you thrust, all of your strength should go into it.” He said. “Hold nothing back! Let your aim be true and straight. You’re a fanger to all the soldiers behind you and to your side.”

“Striaight...and...true...” She said. Her held the spear in two hands, looking forward deeper into the alleyway. She looked as if she was imagining as if someone was there in front of her now and running. After a few moments after, she attempted another thrust.

This one was straighter than what she had done earlier. It wasn’t an overwhelming improvement as she broke her posture and footing on the ground. But she did have a straight thrust; which was better than she had been doing when he had been watching her. *She is at least listening to me.*

“Not bad.” Marcus said. “Hone your posture more; and you shall do fine.”

“Thanks!” She said exuberantly. “I didn’t know you were trained with spears.”

“Most people tell stories of heroes with swords.” Marcus replied. “And indeed a sword is a noble weapon. But Master Knight still trains us all with spears; and issues those more often than other armaments. And he trains us with those far more than he trains us with swords as a result.”

“I guess that is true.” Emma said. “Still...thank you for assisting me.” She lowered her head in humility towards him. “I am grateful...its nice to hear someone giving me praise and hope rather than insults.”

“Well...you definitely do require improvement in some areas.” Marcus said. “Your posture will need work. A spearman or woman needs to keep their feet on the ground if they are to deliver the proper killing strokes; and to dissuade their attacker from inching closer to them. Train with that, and you shall be fine.”

“I will!” She declared. “You can count on me! And thank you...for the help.”

“You’re welcome.” He said, nodding as the two shared a nice moment between the two. Emma’s tail had curled up in and pointed upwards and her ears lowered. The moment did not last though as they appeared to move back to a neutral position and then Emma looked at Marcus.

“Is somebody supposed to be up there?” She said.

“Up there?” Marcus asked. She gazed upwards on the upper bailey of the keep towards it’s top; to which Marcus’ gaze followed.

“I thought while I saw someone’s shadow being cast from the top.” Emma explained. “From a distance I see no soldiers on the top of it; so I thought it strange when I saw a shadow.”

Marcus looked up and examined the wall. But without being on top of the parapet, he would be unable to determine if someone was up there. Emma appeared serious, but there was no way to verify her claim without means to get up there.

“Are you sure?” He asked. “Perhaps a bird or pigeon might be up there.”

“My eyes do not lie Marcus.” Emma snapped. “They’re better than yours; and I mean no insult from that. It is a simple matter of your flesh and mine being different...although I did find it odd that I could not smell who it was...the shadow was not cast close enough to where I could pick up a scent.”

“Well I do not see...” Marcus initially said, though he never got his full sentence out. He had gazed his attention towards Emma, and out of the corner of his eye some feet away, he saw someone on top of there. “Wait; hey!” He called out. The figure looked down to where Marcus was at, and then it disappeared into the inner of the bailey.

There was someone up there; and only a day after Master Knight returned with the most respected religious leader in all of the land with his entourage.

“I wager no one is supposed to be up there right?” Emma asked.

“No; not at all.” Marcus gasped. “Not from what I was told. The only ones allowed here are soldiers. There’s access ways in the keep to my knowledge for people to get onto the ramparts and battlements, but nothing from here. Damn! If only there was a way up there quickly, I could apprehend them! But the only way to that upper wall is through the inside of this keep. Why the archers haven’t on the walls saw to this intruder!?”

“We need to go up there then!” Emma snapped, quickly then looking around the area as if to find something.

“But how?” Marcus exclaimed, as Emma looked through some barrels of trash and refuse around the area. She began to turn over a few things as Marcus continued to look up to try and see if he could find anything. “There is no place I could rest my foot against, and it would be...” Marcus couldn’t speak further as he felt a gust of wind under him. He looked up to see Emma leaping upwards. She leapt up to a small protrusion on the side of the wall, planted only a single foot onto it, and then again and again; on the most minute of objects on the wall. She was also carrying a rope in hand, though it appeared dirty and grimy. She got to the top and spread dust off of her dress.

“Woo...” She moaned. “Any higher and I would have been able to make it...” She then lowered down the rope she had; the other end descending to where Marcus was at. The rope was covered in grime; and it might been thrown out. “Follow me up here; we shall find this cretin together!”

“What are you doing!?” Marcus barked; before lowering his voice to keep her from attracting other soldiers. He then continued, but much quieter. “Do you have any

conceivable idea what would happen if you are caught? We should go get a superior and inform them of this!”

“You are a soldier yes?” Emma responded. “Could you not say that you had cause to investigate the bailey from seeing someone; and having a witness there to verify the claim? Come now; we shall look for this man together...”

“You don’t even have a weapon!” Marcus bellowed quietly.

“I have my claws.” Emma said, showing her fingers and revealing she her nails had become into razor sharp claws before retracting. “Should any ruffian try anything, I will leave a pretty mark on his face. I may be inept with a weapon, but my natural weapons are not to be underestimated.” Her face was brimming with confidence, but it soon disappeared. “And...if I am to become a soldier as my family wants me to, I must do what I can to assist the army. But...I...I would really like someone to be with me. I cannot say I do not have fear.”

Marcus was unsure of what to do. Emma seemed adamant on pursuing this criminal (whoever it may be) on her own. He knew what she was doing was foolhardy, but she seemed determined to press forward. “This is a mistake...” He muttered to himself. Unable to truly stop her, Marcus conceited and then pressed forward, using the mucky rope to scale upwards. He ignored the grime his hand was getting; having pressed through marginally worse in physical training. He got to the top of the parapets and then investigated.

There was nothing unusual that Marcus noted when he was on top of the building. Whomever may have been there might have already been gone.

“There’s no one in sight.” Marcus muttered. “If someone was here, they must have heard us talking...”

“Yeah...” Emma muttered as well. “Possibly...do you hear that?”

“Hear what?” Marcus asked.

Emma didn’t answer. She moved towards the innards of the fortress; something of which Marcus was not happy with her doing. The building was mostly flat on where they stood; with the exception of a bastion tower in the middle of it. Directly in front of that tower was an outside bailey. In the bailey appeared to be a large stone table with a garden all around it. Many people were sitting around the table, all dressed in fine silks and garments. Some of them bore liveries of noble and royal families. And assize had been talked about by the soldiers, and this must have been it. He instantly recognized four of the people there: Master Knight, Constantine, Arin, and Mediva. And the moment he realized Master Knight was there, he shuddered in fear. He had many times seen Master Knight’s perception happen in real time and in front of him. Emma noticed this change of tone that he had.

“What are you so...” She began, but Marcus forbade her from speaking...by placing his hand over her mouth and pushing her to the ground. She continued to mumble in confusion and distress, but Marcus could not risk her speaking; for if she did, she could reveal both of them. She looked at him with literal fire in her eyes, but changed when Marcus’ eyes appeared to be begging her to remain silent; with his finger in front of his mouth as to shush her. Somehow she must have interrupted his message, because he did manage to placate her.

And as he did, he and she began to hear the conversation below them.

“Within the last few nights, all of you by now have received letters concerning the war effort.” Master Knight said. “Fortune has favored us this last year. We’ve dealt a heavy blow to the monsters and claimed a valuable spoil. Father Constantine.”

Father Constantine walked forward; or so Marcus thought he was based on the footsteps he heard. Emma stopped struggling as she began to listen

“My brothers and sisters.” He said. “The waking tide of the darkness is strong. We have believed long that the tide would vanish through the valiant efforts that you brave souls. And now thanks to all of you, we have discovered the source of the enemies power. The artifact that Azal wielded.”

“An artifact?” One of the knights asked.

“Yes my boy.” The priest said. “An ancient Tome that lead the monsters to attack our civilizations. Whoever had the artifact over the last two years was using its power to bring the monsters into allegiance. Come hither and gaze what we have found.”

Two of the clergy went to the back and retrieved a large gold casket that appeared like a coffin. Inside a gold steel casket with a glass covering on the top was a book that almost had this unique abstract design to it. It almost looked like a gray and white nebula of stars and dust was exploding out of what looked like a symbol of a tree with an eye. The tome by looking it possessed what Marcus felt was a chilling and yet soothing aura.

“What is this?” Sir Arin exclaimed as he saw it.

“It looks like a magic tome.” Mediva spoke with interest.

“It almost looks like a Dark Magic Tome.” Arin interjected. “I’ve seen and impounded many cultists with tomes of similar visages. And that looks to be a particularly powerful one...unless my eyes deceives me. I’m no mage so I cannot say for certain.”

“That is incorrect Sir Arin.” Master Knight said. “What we have here from what we have learned from the tomes within the Black Tower is a powerful White Magic Tome...what Azal dubbed the Lughlen.”

Most of the mages gasped. There we’re legends to say that Azal created an evil tome that carried terrible dark, demonic magic’s; and had knowledge of forbidden rituals. The book was said to have a powerful aura that could draw all of evil to it. And dark magic was expressively forbidden to use in Tritenia. It required years of concentration in order to even properly use; and those who could not use it lost control of their minds.

But grey magic was different than dark Magic. White magic was divine power wielded by deities that were not evil...but neither were they benevolent in nature either. More or less, these deities and their followers usually lived by abstract constructs like Order versus Chaos instead of Good versus Evil, spiritualism, and other things where other Gods and Goddesses did not have much domain towards. And this was the book wielded by Azal.

More importantly, this was a White Magic Tome...not a grey one. That meant it was not written by a mortal. It was written by something more powerful. While humans used tainted dark magic to conduct evil, benevolent light magic for those who followed good, and middling grey magic for whatever concept their deity held fast to, Divine, Demonic, and White Magic belonged to the Gods and their direct servants who resided with them. And those magics were far more powerful than anything mortals could wield.

So what they thought he created was actually something else.

“How did you get your hands on this!?” Arin shouted.

“We had received an tip from a servant of Sir Farith Idarios of the North Sea Wall, and Archmage Zalenisky.” Father Constantine said.

“Someone had gone to the Black Tower, and apparently unearthed this tome.” Master Knight interjected. “With its power, he was gathering monsters for a probable attack in the future. Through Zalenisky’s divinations, and a tip acquired from Farith’s agent, we launched an attack on the ruins of the tower where Azal resided at. Along the way, we were ambushed and assaulted on all directions. We managed to slay the wretch and whatever abominations he gathered, but many of my clergy, and a few knights from other regions and their forces fell in acquiring this tome. Lady Aella led those knights into battle along with Master Knight.”

“Only with your help.” Another man sneered, looking at Aella with ill intent.

“All of us with his help.” A woman with long blonde hair spoke with a commanding voice, turning away from the man to ignore him. “We did manage to claim victory, but at the cost of many of our soldiers. It seems like they were determined to take the Lughglen as well. I fail to see why so many men were sent to find this book.”

“There is a marginal difference between this Tome and those other tomes found by those wretched people Vionkhanions of the Eastern Sands.” Constantine said “If what Azal’s writings in it our true, this tome is powerful beyond measure. Azal was actually a lower ranking demon, but acquiring this pushed him to levels of Archdevils. If something like that could push this demon to that level, what could happen if a mortal wields it?”

“How do you know that?” Arin asked. “I find it strange a priest such as yourself knows demonology?”

“As a servant to the Gods, I must be aware of my enemies.” Constantine retorted. Arin gave a respectful nod, as nothing needed to be said further.

“The last demon attack was instrumented by the demon Azal; triggering the Blue Flamed War.” Master Knight said. “I have never heard of demons actually requiring tomes, wands, or any of the like that any mage normally would use, but apparently this was something that Azal murdered an entire country to acquire. And even today people are still rebuilding from his siege. We can’t risk a repeat of that. If any mage were to acquire it and unlock its secrets for evil...”

“It would be a disaster.” The Aella finished. “Any low tier dark magic ingrate could become a terror if he had access to the magic runes there. I apologize Master Knight...I see this tome has much value.”

Master Knight nodded to her while the rest seemed to agree, but another mage seemed to different ideas.

“Friends.” He said. “One of the most prized artifacts given to us from the enemy. The rumors of this powerful tome we’re able to throw men into fear. Is there not a way use the magic’s within the book against the monsters!? We could a potent mage to channel the powers within it.”

The Mage was about to take a step closer, but in a flash Constantine’s staff was in front of him.

“Emos, son of Dundain...” Constantine said. “This artifact is an abomination. This book has been responsible for destruction beyond measure. To use this book is sacrilege.”

“Even so...” Mediva interrupted. “This artifact is a valuable piece of history. Stories say from prisoners that we’re captured from the Azal says that though the Tome carries powerful magic that is evil, it is also a massive record book, containing histories from

thousands, maybe even tens of thousands of years before the Written age. And besides...it is a white magic tome. How much we could learn with a thorough exegesis of this Tome..."

"This book is responsible for massacres...and I'm sure Azal wasn't the only one to do it for it." Constantine said.

"Or perhaps Constantine..." Mediva sneered. "It is because this Tome is not your God, so much so that you are afraid to use it? To have your God up heaved in front of you!?"

"Blasphemy!" Constantine snapped, waving his staff at Mediva. Mediva squirmed in his chair as he saw the staff glow.

"Enough!" Arin shouted, moving to lower the staff. "Father Constantine...forgive my brother on my behalf. Please do not bring him harm." Arin then turned to Mediva. "And the fact brother that you would even antagonize the Keeper of Faith is an insult to your knighthood, Mediva!"

"But think of the power brother." Mediva sneered in a snide way. "Think of what strength it could bring to our houses. My father...the reigning duke of this land and knight of Tritenia...with this and his infinite wisdom...we could..."

"Enough Mediva!" Arin rebuked. "I will not have you speak of such things further!"

Mediva backed down instantly, but the other mage was not as easy, looking angrily at Golton. It took Master Knight to reach for his sword for him to back off. No one wanted to challenge him. Anyone who did always had lost.

"As you wish brother." Mediva said. "Whatever you think is necessary. I just think we can use this book for more practical means. After all, why destroy something that can be used against the enemy? No one has made a thorough exegesis on the book as it is."

"With that being said, this thing is too dangerous." Gywnevere barked. "The only practical solution is to burn it. I'd rather be benighted in ignorance than gaze at this artifact any longer. If this object is coveted by a low ranked demon and made him into...the demon of legend..." She attempted to open the glass covering, but Constantine smacked her hand off with his staff. The woman held her head as if a child was punished by her father. "What gives!?" She barked. "Is not my notion a sane one!?"

"Don't!" Constantine shouted. "I will not risk a brash knight, duke, duchess, or any man making off with this artifact. The journey to even obtain this dreaded tome took the lives of many men; more than necessary for its recovery. You do not know what kind of power Azal wielded...not even I."

The woman looked at the priest with contempt but then backed off from him. Constantine then opened the golden casket. The moment it opened (even a distance away), Marcus and Emma felt this icy chill permeate from where they were laying down on. It was as if something enshrouded their whole body; and was beginning to squeeze the very life out of them. Emma's tail shot upwards within seconds, and her ears extended outwards to show her visible fear.

However, seconds after it was felt, the feeling dissipated away from Marcus. His blood returned to normal, and the wave of fear passed. What was queerer was the fact Emma still seemed to be stricken with whatever was filling the air; as well as everyone else on the table.

Then Constantine shouted an incantation. A cylinder of bright yellow light was summoned from the sky and collided into where the tome was originally situated at. A shockwave spread from the area, knocking most of the knights off of their feet, and pushing

dust and debris where Marcus and Emma were laying down at. Marcus and Emma both tugged the ground tightly, covering their eyes to avoid anything getting in them. The shockwaves soon subsided and Marcus looked back into the bailey. The table had been destroyed, and most of the gardening had been uprooted by the blast. Marcus and all others gazed in horror at the book. What was surrounding the tome was a white mist; almost as if something had appeared to prevent something from touching it.

“That aura has been protecting the book from everything.” Constantine said, brushing the dust. “Whoever wrote this we believe instilled these wards in order to protect the knowledge he learned from being ever used by him or against him in mortal hands. The knights of Tritenia along with all the vassals of Tritenia were instructed to bring this tome into the mainland for further investigation.”

“Isn’t that the last place we would to take it?” Another man in the background asked.

“Nah; it is the best place.” Master Knight said. “The capitol of Tritenia has by far the best scholars of the land; along with my best soldiers. Not to mention the plethora of research that is there.”

“Almost sounds as if the queen desires the tome for herself.” Mediva scoffed. “Should have figured our efforts were going to her success.” Master Knight turned his head to Mediva; which got the attention of everyone. Faster than a bolt of lightning, Master Knight drew his massive sword Gerlof and pointed at Mediva, inches from his face.

“Speak ill of the queen one more time Mediva...” Master Knight sneered violently. “I almost want you to...”

Mediva did nothing but stare at the pointed edge of the almost pillar sized blade. Marcus himself felt a wave of fear and nausea run through him as he watched it. Master Knight stood there for over a minute before Arin moved in front of his sword, attempting to placate him.

“Master Knight; please...” Arin begged. “Do not hold my brother in contempt...it was...” Arin bit his lip in frustration and shook his head; almost as if he was trying to come up with something...anything to dissuade Master Knight’s anger. “It...it was just this day...we’ve all been under stress now that we...the hot weather we’ve had...we have seen this tome’s power sealed within it. Please...I beg of you...” Arin had his hands folded in front of Master Knight. “Please...abate your anger...do not skewer him for...speaking ill of her majesty.” Master Knight stood there, his sword in hand and unmoving.

Finally, Master Knight sheathed his sword.

“Very well...” Master Knight said. “See to it that your worm brother learns to hold his tongue in the future.”

Master Knight moved away from Mediva and Arin. Arin had glared at his brother in anger for his comment. Marcus couldn’t help but snicker at the sight of Mediva curling up like a puppy, but he was still glad he was not slain. Marcus didn’t like Mediva; but he did not want him to die.

“The caravan will be escorting the tome to Aldin for the time being.” Master Knight said. “We will need to stock up on supplies; it’s going to be our last haven when we begin to head out. I plan to stop at no further towns after this. I don’t want to stop in town, but since I have organized us to proceed on a straight shot forward to the capitol, I have little options. I would much rather proceed directly there.”

“What if the enemy comes to Aldin?” Arin asked, his face full of concern. “The fort that we lost contact with has been destroyed; along with numerous others north of it beyond the mountains; almost in a line coming towards here.”

Marcus felt an instant wave of fear from that statement. He remembered yesterday hearing contact being lost with a fortress. The worst that could have happened was the fortress being destroyed. The worst had happened; and now others were confirmed as well. A direct line here?

Was he about to be part of a large scale war!?

“As it stands Arin, confrontation with the enemy is inevitable.” Master Knight said. “We should paid more attention to our borders when we made the expansion after the Blue Flamed War. There is movement in the Soddan Lands near the Black Tower. Now we pay the price for that...but that doesn’t mean we lost. All that means is to keep your blade handy, your shield in front, and your spears ready.”

Arin nodded towards the massive armored figure. Master Knight turned his attention to the entire force that was brought to the North pass.

“Once we arrive in town, it is imperative that the population does not approach the book.” Master Knight said. “We can’t trust anyone. If Azal wielded this tome, then perhaps there has been wards he has placed on it...or worse. I’m no mage so I can’t discern as to what there could be...but I wish to take no risks at this time. We will send scouts at the time we approach town to...bring the townsfolk to a location for the time being, and then we will continue our march. All you men, all those who have gathered here before us: you are the ones who will bring the destruction of the darkness. The safety of your families, you’re people, and you’re own existences rest on getting the book to the castle safely. I don’t know who wrote this, or its purpose...but if it did all that in the past, I would rather see it destroyed than have a repeat of those events.” Master Knight said. He then placed his hands on his hips, and raised one of his feet on the table. “And had it not been for the damnable protections that the Reality Bender imbued it with, I would have shown this book one of my special techniques with my blade...one of my personal favorites...the SHREDDER!!”

“Yes...who would have guessed it would take a small wisp of mist to dissuade our favorite General.” Aella said, getting up from her chair (or what remained of it from Constantine’s spell). “So what is our strategy for dealing with this?”

There was some minor discussion after this woman brought up what to do. As they did, Marcus noticed Master Knight was staring off into space. He wasn’t looking in Marcus’ direction thankfully, but more or less at the towers of the North Pass’ wall and the parapet that surrounded the keep they were in. In the middle of the discussion, Master Knight stomped his boot on the ground (creating a minor shockwave) and then brought all of the royalty to his attention.

“My dear knights and high ranking members of Tritenian royalty and nobility.” He began. “I’m afraid this assize is adjourned.”

“Adjourned?” Aella said in surprise.

“I’m afraid so.” Master Knight said sternly. “A matter has just come up that requires immediate investigation concerning the secrecy of this meeting. I cannot go into the details yet...but understand it is of grave importance that we end this meeting now; and reconnoiter at a later time. I humbly plead with you that you consider my words and leave to your chambers. Arin...I need to speak to you personally.”

All of the people at the table there appear confused, but Constantine seemed to have an idea of what he implied. The royalty minutes later departed from the area, with Mediva sniveling behind his brother. The look of anger did not leave Arin, while Mediva had a more...disturbing look in his eyes. One that Marcus caught...but he wasn't sure if Arin caught.

They stayed up there for minutes, until Marcus was sure no one was around. Marcus and Emma left the keep, not saying a word after what they heard until they made it far enough away from the fortress.

Chapter 6 – Evil emerges

“So we have a hundred year spellbook wielded by a demon here!?” Emma screeched with Marcus when they had met up later that evening.

Marcus put his hand in front of her as she talked, shushing her as he did. Emma then realized the volume of her voice, went red and shook her head. She did have a right to be worried though...it was not a mundane thing that had passed through the area. This Lughglen was powerful...dangerous. Marcus couldn't even comprehend what the Lughglen could be capable of. It might even have been more powerful than the Fell Tomes; the six demonic tomes in legend which were capable of summoning the most powerful beings in the Dark world onto this realm. Not that he truly knew whether it could or not; or even what it could do...but he wagered if Azal used it, chances are it was far from powerless.

“I mean...isn't that thing dangerous?” Emma whispered.

“I'm more concerned with the fact that we might have an army heading towards us.” Marcus calmly, though internally he was shaking; though he definitely maintained the façade that he was calm. “I have been up to that fortress Master Knight spoke of on minute occasions. It does not have a large garrison, but it is not small. If Master Knight says the fortress was overrun...”

“Oh gods...” Emma said, her knees visibly shaking, his cat ears lowering towards her head. She pulled in my arms closer into her chest, as if to grab her heart. “I...I'm actually terrified. I have never been so scared in my whole life. Ugghh...If only I didn't take up Emily on that offer; I'd never be in that situation with you and have to hear all that!”

“Did you not think something like this could happen?” Marcus asked; reminding the girl she wanted to join the foot soldiers.

“Yes; but I never thought a war would come in our life time!” Emma barked. “It has been a century since any real wars had erupted. I never thought as a child something like this.” Marcus looked at the girl's knees; and they were visibly shaking. “I'm freaking out!”

“Calm down.” Marcus said, placing his hands on her shoulder. “It is alright to be scared. I'm terrified myself...I'm just trying my best not to show it...”

“You...are?” She whispered.

“Of course...” Marcus said. “Everyone is scared at some point...I did not think I would be in something this big myself when I first got a letter to come here...but this beyond my control; and your own. It is something that we just have to accept is what is transpiring now in front of us. And I'm sure we are not the only ones...”

Emma rushed forward in the middle of Marcus' talking and embraced him. She flung at him with such speed and force that he was vastly unprepared for it. He leered down at the girl who was holding him. He couldn't see her face, but a moistness that he could feel on his shirt where her face was buried made him realize she was crying...or at least tearing up. She remained quiet for a moment, before speaking.

“I'm sorry...” She cried. “I'm just...so scared. Can...can you stay here for a moment? I need someone nearby me...I can't ask this of anyone around me...I need someone I know right now to still my thoughts; even if somewhat.”

Marcus did nothing but nod. He in fact brought his arms around the girl as she continued to tear up. She was not crying per say, but definitely seemed in emotional distress that was causing tears to well up. She gripped tighter on Marcus' jerkin, trying to

get control of herself. Marcus did nothing but remain there; until she managed to get control of her emotions. Even when she did, she did not release her grip on him; merely pull her head to look into his gaze.

“I’m sorry...” She said again. “I...I feel better now...I think.”

“Don’t be.” Marcus replied. “What you are feeling is perfectly normal...I don’t think anyone can honestly fault you for this breakdown.”

“I...I just feel a little mean...using you to help vent stress...” Emma said. “I mean...it still feels wrong...”

“It’s not like we kissed or anything...” Marcus said.

“Y...yeah!” Emma shrieked upon hearing the word kiss. “Th...there was nothing that attached us together!” She turned away from Marcus, twiddling her thumbs in front of her. “Still...” She began. She didn’t say anything for a minute, and then eventually turned to Marcus with one of her fingers raised. “One drink!!”

“Huh...” Marcus mumbled.

“You helped me emotionally and tried to keep me from crying.” She said. “You helped right there when I was having a moment of weakness; and especially since we have known each other for a small time. More or less, you also helped me when I was in a desperate dilemma unable to get out of it without aid. When we get back to town, I will treat you to an ale! But that’s it!”

“Umm...sure.” Marcus said; a little confused as to holding the girl especially since they were in an uncomfortable position earlier. “I mean...”

“Now I don’t want you to get any particular thoughts!” She interrupted. Marcus noticed that she was red in the face as she was saying this. “This does not mean anything! I am not asking you out on a date or anything!! It is just me repaying you for your kindness earlier!! Understand!?”

“Yes mam!” Marcus said, with his hands up. *I was not going to say anything of the sort! Where did she get an idea like that!?*

“Hey!” Ron’s voice came towards Marcus and Emma. The two turned to where it came from to see Ron approaching them. “What’s going on over here?”

“N...nothing!” Emma shouted. “Nothing at all! I was...just heading back!” She quickly turned to Marcus and bowed her head towards him. “Until we meet again Marcus.”

“Y...yeah.” Marcus said. “Same.”

Emma turned away from the two and ran off back towards where the leaches were. Marcus stood there and Ron approached him, still visibly bewildered from everything that had happened today.

“So what was that about?” Ron asked with a peculiar look. “Was there something going on between you and my sister?”

“No; though we did have a very awkward run in if that is what you mean.” Marcus answered with a small smile on his face.

“Care to elaborate?” Ron asked again.

“...I’d rather leave it between me and her.” Marcus responded.

“I hope you did nothing to offend her.” Ron said sternly.

“No; no!” Marcus shouted, waving his hands in front of him wildly. “It...it is nothing like that; or that I forced on her!”

“Are you speaking the truth?” Ron asked. “We may not be related by blood, but Emma is still my sister. And if you did anything...”

“Nothing...happened.” Marcus barked with his hands in front of him. “Should you really be curious, I’m sure Emma will entertain you with the run in we had. But please fear not for the integrity of your sister.”

Ron glared at Marcus for a few moments, his stern look never breaking for a few minutes. Eventually his expression faded and he went over to sit by Marcus.

“My apologies.” He said. “Emma is very dear to me...all her life she’s endured a very difficult life with being raised by my father...and the fact she was presumed abandoned by her previous parents did not help.”

“It’s because you have a military family; and she is not that capable of a soldier?” Marcus asked.

“Huh...so she has been speaking to you.” Ron said with a genuine look of surprise. It quickly faded as he returned to talking. “Yeah...every member of my family has served in the army. Although she is not related by blood, she is still held to the same standards as one born into the family. Emma is no combatant. She never has been. She can use her claws proficiently, but Tritenian army wants people trained with weapons; not features of one’s body. My father was never kind to her in the beginning; and he became especially cruel to her when she lost interest in military affairs. She was originally my uncle’s daughter as I believe he had committed an infidelity with a nyanita and she left him the baby. But he died and she had no place to go. He took her in only because he would be considered a villain among his peers if he did not. She’s always been more interested than medicine, cooking, and the arts of an apothecary than smiting one’s husk onto the ground. She only does it to prove to her father she is not a disappointment. But it’s not her calling. Time and time again, I had to placate my father’s anger towards her when she failed to finish any of her daily exercises. My mother is far more caring towards her and actually cherishes her, but she always relents to my father.”

“Why is your family so invested in the army?” Marcus asked.

“They were veterans in the army; as I’m sure you heard.” Ron continued. “From what I understand, my father was heavily invested into it as well to the point of zealotry. A long time ago, we used to have a grand demesne in Goldioz in our family history. But...then my great, great grandfather in the Blue Flamed War betrayed the country to join Azal’s cause. We lost everything at the end of the war, so my family always lived in poverty. My grandfather established a firm reputation as a soldier to try and rebuild, and my father became enamored with the stories of riches we once possessed. The military is a great way to build reputation if you are a commoner, so he gained fervor in it. My father made the rank of Captain when his service expired; and loved the job far more than he should. When he lost the ability to serve, he had hoped I would join the military to continue to try and rebuild our lost honor...I never wanted this. I wanted to work as a smith. But my father threatened to kick Emma out if I did not obey. So I did. I’m sure little Em spoke to you about them in an amicable manner.”

“She did not speak ill of them if that is what you mean.” Marcus said, with a hint of worry.

“She does because she does not have a mean bone in her body to hold any form of resentment.” Ron barked. “Believe me...he is no saint. I have always believed that he took the notion of his children being soldiers too far. What father of his own volition would desire their children to clash against monsters and rival nations for their country?”

“That is a little...” Marcus began; unable to find a proper word for this. “Disturbing.”

“Yeah.” Ron muttered. “Truly it is. To me...those riches are better left forgotten.” He then got up from where he was sitting at. “Well...whatever occurred earlier today, I pray that you did nothing to offend her. You are a guileless man. I do not think I would ever see you doing something that would offend her.”

“Never!” Marcus barked. “You have my word! You certainly care much for her.”

“I do.” He said. “I’d die for her...same with Emily. She looks up to both of us dearly...especially Emily. I’m sure you’ve seen her having her spouts of forwardness at times.”

“I did see that similarity between the two.” Marcus said, laughing a bit. Ron gave Marcus an affirmative nod.

“I’m going to head back.” Ron said. “See you later.” Afterwards, he departed the soldier, returning to the barracks. Marcus used this time afterwards to retire for the night himself.

Again as he watched the moonlight, he continued to think of Riona. It had been weeks since he had seen her. The thoughts of her without himself by her side were starting to become difficult to contend with. She was however the reagent of an elven duke; and himself a soldier. His profession would force him away from her; and she understood this. Still...him not being there was eating at him. He thought of her majestic image right next to him to ease the pain.

Though...he also as a fleeting thought of the nyanita girl Emma as well.

There was only one more day before the army would set back out. Marcus’ patrol went routine with nothing unusual. It was only after his patrol where he heard ebullient laughter nearby. Normally something he would ignore; but he recognized the laughter as Golton’s.

“I do agree with you Karin.” Golton exclaimed. “There are many aspects of the Tale of Zalin that I thought were unneeded! Clearly the writer attempting to force a guffaw from the audience! I love the play nonetheless.”

“I must admit...” A familiar voice that Marcus had not heard in a long time responded; though he could not immediately identify it. “I did not take the famous Golton as a connoisseur of the arts.”

“Is not my blade work a form of art?” Golton asked, pulling out the steel sword he had on his sheath. “Okay...I admit that the art is grotesque in nature; but bladework is still an art.”

“You speak as one from the land of Myrida.” Karin continued.

Marcus turned around to see a blue haired girl approaching him, next to Golton. She wore a grey robe with white linen strips on the sides of it, along with a fancy blouse of red, black, and orange; along with a short skirt of black and red. She had bright blue hair, with enough bangs in front of her that were covering the right side of her face.

“Karin!?” Marcus shouted.

Karin turned in his direction; and immediately had a look of being perplexed to joy. She waved to him and ran over to Marcus. Karin Deevangi was one of oldest friends that he grew up with when he had lived at when he was still living with his family. The reunion was so joyful than Marcus forgot his own strength and lifted his friend into the air. He had not seen her since her was sixteen, and she had a turned in a fine looking lass. She ran over to him and hugged him tightly as she did.

“It’s been years.” She shouted. “I haven’t seen you since I left!!”

“Karin!!” Marcus shouted. “What are you doing here?”

“Gaze at my attire.” Karin said, spinning around and removing something from one of her pockets. When Marcus had seen it, he recognized it as a soldier’s livery. Marcus had now finally realized that Karin was wearing a Mage’s robes. “I am now an acolyte in the Mage Knight order. I just finished my training back at Seaside. I’ve actually been here since Master Knight’s convoy with Constantine arrived.”

“So you can perform magic?” Marcus asked. “Well...I suppose I should not be surprised.” Back in the day, Marcus had noticed that strange things happened around Karin, and she almost appeared to know what was going on. “What kind of magic can you use?”

“Well...at the school I was considered a master enchantress!” She began. “I dabbled in fire and ice magic quite a bit and got very proficient with it...and a bit of enhancing magic as well. Magical barriers, powers of flight, you name it. My teacher says I was a real prodigy...and that if I applied myself to an actual magic school, I could easily be a headmaster. I even learned how to master my...telekinesis. Remember the time I used that?”

Marcus shot a beat red as soon as Karin said that. He peered into her eyes and knew exactly of what event she was referring to. The incident was a moment when a child Karin and Marcus were playing; and Marcus’ trousers had fallen down without explanation. Karin was always prone to pulling humiliating; yet harmless pranks. Golton unfortunately caught his appearance and interjected.

“What?” Karin asked. “Starting to finally realize about those little...pranks I pulled?”

“Uh...ahhh...” Marcus grumbled; desperately not wanting Karin to bring up such a tale in front of Golton.

“What?” Golton asked with peculiar interest as the group began to walk forward. “Is there gossip on my friend here that I should be aware of?”

“Don’t do it!” Marcus snapped, looking at Karin.

“Ohhh...I don’t know...should I truly keep it to myself?” Karin said, running her finger and hands across her face.

“...please?” Marcus begged.

“Hmm...” Karin moaned, still looking at Marcus with peculiar interest. She kept that pose for a few minutes before finally shrugging her shoulders. “Well...I haven’t seen you in many fortnights, so I will let you off easy...” Marcus breathed a sigh of relief as she did that. In addition to the trouser incident, she had done many more; some debatably more humiliating. And Golton was not one to share such secrets with. “My instructor after all did take the time to edify me; might as well let him think his training stuck. Although...” She moved her hand away from her chin and then cupped his chin, slowly moving her finger downward. “With how handsome you are now, I’m far more tempted to revisit some...childish pranks...alone if you catch my innuendo.”

Marcus could do nothing but blush uncontrollably...and sweat. “Nothing much has changed it seems.” He said, finding some kind of comfort in at least Karin remained the same; albeit a bit nicer.

“You know...you mentioned a Marcus Armani as your friend.” Karin said, turning away from Marcus and onto Golton. “I cannot believe that the Marcus you know and the one I knew were one in the same.”

“You were involved in the studies of the arcane.” Golton replied. “Such studies require much attentiveness from all of the mages I have spoken to. You told me you had a knack for it...but I still sense dedication was required. Must have been a slip of the mind.”

“You would truly not understand.” Karin said with a wave of frustration. She then dashed by Marcus and then held onto his hand. “But now I am reunited with my friend of old after many long years. I definitely missed out on something. After all...look at this rugged man here. How I remember the nights of romance I used to share with this one...”

Marcus continued to remain beat red as Karin made very obvious advances towards him. Marcus in his earlier teen years did have an attraction with Karin; and the two shared a unfortunately brief romance; despite the childish pranks she had pulled on him. Karin’s family was moving away as Karin’s father had a relatively wealthy brother who passed away from terror throat; a terrible disease that attacks the throat. He left a rather large sum of money for his brother; and he chose to use it to give Karin an education in the arts of the arcane. Karin and Marcus shared a rather passionate night before she left to mark the end of what was a brief interaction.

But she had returned to him in this moment. But because of how long it had been, and Riona the elf now in his life, Marcus found an attraction for her seemed to be no longer there. He never anticipated seeing her again.

“What an ironic twist of fate...” Golton said. Marcus knew exactly what he meant by that.

“Shut up Golton.” Marcus barked. “How did you two even meet anyway!?”

“I invited the girl to dinner at the local inn.” Golton began.

“We met up as a result of chance.” Karin continued off of Golton. “We went to see the Tale of Zalin live...a trio of bards known as the Silver Lute came through the area and put on the performance. I heard that their lead performer and singer was a half-nymph who had the voice of an angelic being; and such a thing I did not want to miss.” Marcus nodded; Karin had always been interested in the arts. When she wasn’t obsessing over him, she would be doing that or magic. “During the intermission, he chatted me up. I must admit I was very surprised to see the renown swordsman Golton in Seaside; though he’s nothing compared to you my good Armani.”

“And yet you allowed him to buy you dinner?” Marcus asked curiously.

“Truly taking her to my quarters was not my intention for once.” Golton began. “Her talk of you; as I know now the Armani she spoke of and the one I knew was one in the same was clearly showing that it would be inefficacious. Honestly, I was more or less there to discuss with her about the play. We shared some rather interesting opinions over the dialogue and meaning of the play...though somehow the conversation always came to you in some way. Afterwards, we talked more about magic and then left.”

“Truly the world has been turned upside down; the day Golton meets a woman who he actually has no interest in bedding.” Marcus said, with his arms spread out.

“Well...the thought had passed at one point.” Golton muttered, scratching his head. “Well...I will leave you two be to reminisce. My break is almost over.”

Golton respectfully bowed to the two and then departed, leaving the two to themselves.

For the most part, Karin and Marcus simply talked about the times that they remembered in the Purelands. All of the fond memories they had, all of the times in the village, all the times Marcus and Karin’s fathers had went to the tavern to play etchings.

“How was your studies of the arcane?” Marcus asked. “You must have a lot to talk about.”

“It pales in comparison to my years with you...but it was some of the best four years of my life...as well as my hardest.” Karin said. “But I missed all the times that we were together.”

“I remember that one time where you thought you could climb a tree.” Marcus said, laughing. “You never really were much for physical strain.”

“Yeah; and you were never much with interacting with females.” Karin joked, one that hit Marcus harder than his jest towards her. “I remember when how much you stuttered whenever one up and even approached you...except for me of course.”

“I still cannot believe that your father never suspected we were involved that year.” Marcus said, walking with her around the North Pass.

“I still laugh about it to this day.” She said, giggling. “My father must have been quite daft to not realize what a young man and woman in their primes would be doing who met up frequently. I still have not forgiven him from separating us. May he be forever cursed for what he did!” Marcus looked at Karin to notice that her normally sweet and nice expression had changed to a rather violent and angered expression, but she quickly regained her original poise that she held earlier. “But all is forgiven; for have been reunited!”

“Why did you join the mage knights?” Marcus asked. “From what I hear, the mage knights training is gutted to only teach offensive magic for war...nothing like in a true magic academy?”

“I sent many letters to your home during my third year to see how you were doing; as I was having difficulty bearing our separation.” She lamented. “I was heartbroken to hear you went into service for Tritenia. So I made a pact to join the Mage Knights and serve my country...if but to see you again.”

“It seemed to have worked by fate.” Marcus said. “You are here on...” Marcus stopped himself in the second as he began; remembering that Master Knight desired the meeting to remain secrecy. He may have stumbled upon it (along with Emma), but he had no desire to divulge into what he saw with her. “Well...here for something. I suspect you will return to your station at some point.”

He felt a tug on his wrist, and before he realized it, he had pressed up against the wall. Karin’s face was right in front of his; her smile full of lust and desire. “There has not been a moment...” She moaned. “That I did not think about you. Even hell bent into my studies, I thought of you every waking moment. From the time I met you in the village, to this moment with you now. Surely...you haven’t forgotten about me?”

And then she kissed him in a way a woman would her lover.

The kiss threw off Marcus completely. And then...within a second as she did, he felt himself surrendering to the lust she had in her kiss. They stood there for minutes on end, with Marcus after a minute embracing her along with the kiss. She soon moved further inwards into him, and he was able to feel her warm tongue starting to push against his own, wrestling for control. Waves of pleasure were clearly moving through her as she began to moan, moving her leg over Marcus’. She soon began to even guide his hands under her skirts to feel her small clothes, while she began to reach towards his waist. And as they did, Marcus felt right in that moment. Everything that he had dreamed about was beginning to...

Wait...that wasn't right. He remembered that the feelings he had for Karin were gone when she left. Having no guarantee that she would return to his life, Marcus had gone under the belief that the brief relationship had ended; and had not thought about her sense to dull the lamentations about it. Six years had passed; and he had no feelings that he could muster at this time for her...especially with Riona now in the picture.

He did so as well, pulling away from her. Karin looked at him with a look of shock and horror...as if she was stunned.

"Marcus...is there something wrong?" She asked.

"Umm..." Marcus mumbled. He couldn't exactly say or describe euphoria he felt. One moment his mind was simply talking to her as if she was a friend, the next moment he was engulfed in feelings that had long since been quelled by years of not seeing her, the next moment he was back to how he was. It was quite a strange feeling; one he could not describe. As the moments passed, the feeling began to fade as did his feelings for Riona.

"Sorry." He said. "It's been so long...I wasn't sure if I would ever see you again. It feels wrong to do this with things as they are."

"It doesn't feel wrong for me." She said.

"Are you sure you're fine with this?" Marcus asked.

"Marcus...I am no fool." She whispered. Marcus felt a wave of pleasure come across him as she adjusted herself back to how they were a few moments, and dragged his hands across under her skirt. "While I have thought about you for quite some time, I..." she stopped herself for a moment before continuing. "I know there was a possibility that you would...not." Her gaze appeared sullen and sad from saying that. "So..."

The sounds of someone calling Karin's name did she break away, with a look of anger in her face.

"Damnation." She barked. "This stupid task of mine! I almost want to abandon the army!" She then looked at Marcus with again a look of unusual shock...but she wiped it away instantly. "Our time grows short I see...do not worry...can I meet up with you later?"

"S...sure." Marcus said.

"Wonderful!" She moaned with excitement. She kissed him on the cheek, and then ran off, swearing at whomever called her to come by. Before she disappeared into the crowds, she turned to him.

"I'm...I'm sorry if I moved too fast." She said quietly. "It's...it's just been so long since I saw you, my body flushed with emotions. If it was too fast, please let me know."

"It...was definitely something." Marcus said.

"My apologies..." She said. "How...how about we start small then? Would a ale or coffee be a better start? Please let me know...I would rather do something you're comfortable with!"

"That would suffice much better." He said. "If an opportunity comes up, please let me know."

Karin nodded and disappeared into the crowds. Marcus breathed a sigh of relief as she did, and then moved deeper into the alley to keep to his thoughts for a moment. Things had moved far too hastily for him. And it was a good thing she had stopped too. If she had did what she was doing or attempted to resume them, he would have probably taken her back to a room at the inn. Marcus was not a good at deceiving others due to his straight forward and honest nature, so Riona would have found out about such an affair. If Riona

was not in the picture, Marcus would have done it without any form of regrets; and part of him wanted to indulge it despite Riona.

“You have some nerve!” A voice rang out. Marcus recognized the voice as Arin’s; which quickly shook him out of his thoughts. It was coming from the corner of a building he pressed himself up against to think. “To belittle the Queen in front of the most imposing figure we have ever had in the army; as well as the act itself!”

“Quit your prattling brother!” The voice of Mediva shouted back. Upon turning the corner and looking behind the pub, there was Mediva and Arin; both looked like in the heat of debate. Each one had a small entourage of guards with their house emblem on them.

“I think not after I had to intervene to prevent your hide from being culled right there!!” Arin shouted back. “What were you thinking brother!? Do you not realize what kind of power we are dealing with right now!?”

“You mean the most powerful magical weapon in all of Tritenia within our grasp; why yes brother I do!” Mediva angrily shouted back. “This is a grand opportunity...the opportunity you and I have been waiting for! Our father...duke of the Westernfold and knight of Tritenia...could be king with...”

“You would be king!” Arin barked. “Do not think I don’t see through your façade!! I know you have no valiant reasons for wanting to lay claim to that! You would rather use the Lughglen for your own purposes; rather than to protect our nation! We have enemies all around us...if not the monsters that roam all kingdoms; be it above or below...but rival kingdoms! Many of the Vionkahnions worship dark gods!! What do you think they would do should they realize what we have found!? It’d be war! This is madness Mediva!!”

“Many things that we use to this day were born in madness brother...” Mediva sneered. “Think carefully on what you say...”

“Oh I have.” Arin replied crudely. He then drew his sword from his sheathe and pointed it at him. The personal guards all looked with genuine surprise (including Arin’s side), and some even reached for their weapons. Mediva did nothing but stare (though Marcus could have sworn he shook a bit). “If you...” Arin continued. “Even attempt to go near that magical tome...even but a moment...not only will I ensure that you are apprehended, but I shall also inform Master Knight of this errant desire to lay claim to the tome. Father has already not considered worthy to be heir to our household, do you...”

“WHAT!?” Mediva shouted in anger.

“Save me the reviling act Mediva!” Arin sneered. “You know exactly why our father will choose me over you...why he has always chose me over you; and if you do not, then you are even more inept than I gave you credit for! I have done everything and more that father has asked of me; and more! While I was busy perfecting my lance arm and my jousting abilities, you were off squandering father’s money. While I was hastiludes for our household, you were involving yourself with who knows what woman! And when we have been sent into battle, I have always led the charge; while you stayed in the back!”

“There is...tactical reasoning’s behind...” Mediva began, clearly trying to hide fear.

“Away from the battle!” Arin shouted, driving his sword closer. “You are a knave; and a coward! And if you do anything rash, I will see you disinherited! I’ve had enough of protecting you from your own foolish errors! Now shape up! We have a duty to our people; and all people’s of this land to destroy that abomination! I will not permit this tome to exist; especially one responsible for numerous acts of destruction! Do you understand brother? I don’t want to lose you...”

Mediva looked at him, and shot him a face of insincere gratitude. At least that was Marcus perceived it as. Mediva nodded to him.

“Of course brother...” He said. “I’m sorry...you were right...what I am saying is insanity. I should not risk lives with a artifact such as that.” After a moment of hearing this, Arin patted him on the shoulder.

“You’ve made a wish choice brother.” He replied kindly. “See to it that you continue to make such decisions in the future. Now I must leave...there are forty men in my unit that have gone missing since the day the before the meeting. I need to investigate what their fates have been; or if they are merely without leave.”

Arin departed from the area renewed by what he perceived was a successful talk with his brother. Marcus couldn’t help but swell up with joy when he heard Arin deride his brother so fiercely. Mediva could only stand there awkwardly, and looked like he was in a daze of anger and confusion. He in fact enjoyed the sight so much that he had forgotten why he had fled from Karin.

Mediva continued to look in distress for minutes on end. Eventually one of his soldiers came over to him.

“My lord?” A soldier asked.

“Quiet!” Mediva barked. “Do not speak!! We will return to the barracks! My brother’s right...this is foolish to think of.” Marcus continued to stare at Mediva from around the corner. Although he agreed with his brother’s notion, his face suggested that he did not. His face still bore a look of seething hatred and anger. A face that indicated the opposite of what he was saying. “Perhaps...I should consider the wisdom of my brother before I make such rash claims! That tome is...dangerous...yes dangerous...”

His face was full of disbelief and malice...it was clear he was lying. Somewhere...Marcus knew that his would not be the end of this...

Master Knight decided at about five o clock the next day to depart back to Aldin. This was their formation: The Foot soldiers and Mage Knights would stand around the Tome, guarding it with their lives. Cavalry stayed away from the force, seeing as they we’re at their best when they we’re mobile; and would scout up ahead, ensuring their safety and regularly reporting road conditions. They would also enter the village by nightfall, desiring for no one to know what they we’re carrying. Mediva and Arin would displace the common folk into a separate section of the city, until the Tome was transferred to the Archives. Arin would handle most of the talking since he was a very well liked figure in Aldin. When asked, Master Knight said, “The people do not have to know what it is about.” Father Constantine had arranged a room at the inn to attend the retirement for the duke to pass his title to one of his sons (though Marcus knew that if Arin was true, he would be named heir. And Arin was a selfless, honest man, with no failings in his moral character. Such a claim could not be a fallacy). He then had every soldier prepare to leave at night. Once they arrived, since the celebration of the Aron was nearing, the troops would remain there until the festivity was over (mostly since Master Knight was preparing to take another garrison with him...once they departed Aldin, he had no planned stops to the capitol from that point forward).

For some, journey back came quicker than expected. Later in the afternoon, the caravan left North pass. Each one of the soldiers stayed in tight formation. All of the strongest soldiers stayed in the front to guard the Mages. Mages guarded the Clergy. Father

Constantine stayed by Master Knight. Anyone in a five feet radius nearby him we're completely safe; usually.

The journey was going to take at least another two weeks, meaning they would return to Aldin a day or two before the celebration. Marcus and Emma were terrified to return home. True...he had no schedule assigned after their return, meaning he had an undefined number of days off. The rest after this could do him some good. And the village celebration was expected to be grand so he hoped to finish his work on time in order to make to the village.

But he and Emma knew what Constantine was guarding; and had overheard about the fortress that had been sacked by an unknown enemy force; deep in the Westernfold. What Emma didn't know was the forty men Arin had mentioned had indeed disappeared with no trace. Worse of all, the men in question were supposed to be on the towers surrounding the keep during the meeting to watch for intruders. And where could this enemy force be? The fortress in question was many leagues away so the enemy force that sacked out would be spotted miles away.

Distance though wasn't the rampant thoughts though that terrified Marcus. It was how they did it. Without taking the North Pass/West pass, there was no way for such a large force to be within the land. It was doubtful that the West Pass had fallen to opposition; word of such a siege would have resounded throughout the whole land.

But when one carries the enemy's chalice in their hands, one must expect opposition. And regardless of how they got there, they were in the land. And could strike from anywhere.

Chapter 7 – Battle in the Wetlands

Marcus couldn't sleep well this night after about two days of journey. He normally worked well under pressure, but the portent situation that was birthing around him started to creep into his sub consciousness. During the night, he wandered throughout the camp without direction and without knowledge of where to go. The idea of possibly being involved in a large scale battle was not one he was entertaining.

Had he been in battles before? Yes...several. But these were not wars; merely skirmishes and peacekeeping. There was usually only a modicum of attackers; and he always had help in some way. Not that he could not face down difficult odds; Marcus had fought much tenuous odds against when he first fought to defend an old man's shop in the Purelands...and had won the fight as well.

But those were smaller battles with better odds in his favor.

What Master Knight was implying might have been a full scale battle...with rank and file; if even the kingdom was allowed as such.

Those were the kinds of battles were people died in mass.

True; Marcus was no novice in combat. Among his peers, he was only second under Golton. Even people with halberds and spears he could disarm and defeat with ease. He defeated over ten bandits by himself...but there were many stipulations for this. Marcus defeated those bandits by using a combination of swordsmanship and cunning. When he fought them, he would never be still; fleeing to open areas; and only engaging the bandits that had broken too far from the group. When more than two bore against him, he would flee. They may have been physically stronger than him, but the weight of their weapons and armor impacted their mobility...something of which Marcus heavily capitalized on. Against his peers in training, Marcus could fare against far fewer numbers due to the size of the battlements they would train in. Without the ability to utilize his natural mobility, he would have to rely on his strength and allies competency to win for his kingdom. He could manage on his own, but if they started to fail...

Marcus shook his head. Ignoring those thoughts was the first thing he needed to do. If he allowed them to linger in his head, they would only induce further paranoia. A brisk walk might do him good to maybe remove those errant thoughts. Enough maybe to get his mind off what was plaguing it.

There were a few others up at the time (people who were saddled with night shifts; or those who were also in angst over this movement of troops. They may not have understood what was happening, but anyone who had served the military long enough could tell when such operations were not mundane. He heard whispers as he passed by them.

"There are too many knights in one area for nothing to be transpiring."

"They shut down the South Pass to all."

"Have you seen Harriot? She vanished a couple days ago."

"No one shuts down a road used for commerce for a few days without purpose."

"I haven't seen Gerald since Master Knight came from the South Pass."

"Haven't seen a gathering of soldiers like this over a decade."

“I work with the carrier pigeons...I haven't seen any news from the fort nearby Goldioz.”

“I thought I saw the shadow of something inhuman days ago when we first came here.”

He shook his head and ignored the bantering between the army. He didn't to listen to any one of these people. Doing so would only make him waver against his mind further. He moved away from the banter and towards a fire where only one other person was around. To his surprise, he discovered that this person was in fact Emma. She must have heard him approach long before he arrived, as she turned around.

She clearly appeared to be in the same state he was at. Her eyes looked droopy; as if they desired sleep, but could not do so. Just like him.

“I guess you heard me coming...” Marcus said, walking over to her.

Emma smiled and shook her head. “Anyone could have been walking over here.” She said. “It's your scent that gave you away.”

“My scent?” Marcus asked, before remembering she had a strong sense of smell from who her race was. “You can pick out people by scents that fast?”

“You might not be aware of it, but everyone has a distinct smell.” She explained. “You humans don't have that kind of sense of smell, but my people do. It was hard to notice with the constant perspiration of multiple bodies around me, but I caught it as you got closer.”

“That kind of a nose surely has its uses I can surmise.” Marcus said, sitting down next to Emma.

“It does...especially if you're working in services that require paying attention to scents...such as cooking and cleaning.” Emma said, stirring a pot that was on the fire. “I can do a few more things with it too...such as concocting my own shampoos, teas, and perfumes. Emily covets them so much, I am the only one allowed to wash her hair.” Marcus and Emma laughed a bit, though Marcus was also impressed at Emma's repertoire of skills; all of which were heavily reinforced with her race's abilities.

“So...what are you doing up?” Marcus asked. “Surely you have no patients?”

“My mind is running rampant with fear.” Emma moaned, stirring the pot. “I thought I'd brew some chamomile tea to try and relax my nerves. I smuggled some in my pouch. Would you like some?”

“Yes; thank you.” Marcus moaned back. “I fear you and I are unfortunately in the same boat with this.”

“You're scared too?” Emma asked with surprise.

“Yeah.” Marcus said quietly, as Emma began to pour the hot water into a cup for herself and Marcus.

“I never thought someone like you would be scared.” Emma said as she reached into her bag and pulled out a small bag that seemed to contain several small leaves. She then pulled a tea bag from her pouch and tied one up. “You seemed like a brave guy and a stalwart soldier.”

“And I am also human.” Marcus said, taking the cup that she handed him as she placed the tea bag into his cup to simmer and ferment. “It's like you said before...neither you nor I expected to up against something like this. I joined the army with hopes of peacekeeping; and to advance through the ranks to become a knight. I always went to

service every day I was assigned, believing there was a possibility of war. The hated Vionkahnions to our Northwest always are ready to pick fights with us...the Myridians have attacked us in years past. Instead though...the war that is coming to us is in the form of an army that currently lacks in any form that I can fathom that apparently have breached our borders.”

“Did...” Emma began. “Did you overhear anything else? About...what might be coming our way?”

“No.” Marcus said. “...but I did hear something disturbing...”

“What!?” Emma snapped.

“I wish no further distress.” Marcus said. “I’d rather not say...”

“But you must!” Emma barked. “You cannot abandon me to not knowing what you have learned after you have told me that!”

“...Are you sure?” Marcus asked.

Emma merely nodded her head. So Marcus went into his story with his run in with Karin (discreetly leaving out the parts about their past romance; although something about Emma’s ears and eyes suggested that she had an inkling of what was going on). He then went further into explaining how forty soldiers had vanished from their posts with no explanation; specifically ones who were supposed to be managing the towers overlooking the keep. All of this did exactly what Marcus did not want to do; and why he did not want to tell her. But Emma did not hold it against him...she knew precisely how she would feel afterward. She definitely looked at her tea ferment more impatiently as Marcus told the story.

“I see.” She said, her hands shaking. “So...there...there was someone on the inside of the fortress?”

“I didn’t say that!” Marcus snapped; although the evidence seemed to indicate otherwise. He sunk his head towards the ground. “But yes...I guess we could surmise someone was.”

“To think...” Emma said softly. “To think not only is our borders not safe, but not even our own cities. I can’t believe this is happening to me...”

“Me too.” Marcus said.

Emma and Marcus stayed quiet for a few minutes, leading into a silence. Eventually Emma broke the silence by removing the tea bag from her and Marcus’ cup.

“C’mon drink up.” She said. “This will help both of us.”

Marcus smiled as he took a sip of the tea. He felt a rich sense of jasmine and lemon as the infusion went into his throat...not insipid at all. For a moment, he began to relax.

“You are a master of your craft.” Marcus said. Emma’s ears drooped a bit as her tail coiled upwards.

“Thanks.” She said, running her hand through her hair. “I strive for perfection with this.”

They stayed up all night talking, enjoying the others company. While Marcus was feeling more comfortable and relaxed, he could not shake the feeling that he and her were not alone.

“Hopefully, I shall be alive long enough to make further use of it.” Marcus thought he heard Emma whisper.

A few more days passed. As the caravan moved forward towards Aldin, nothing seemed to be too queer. A few deer passed by, the countryside remained as mundane as before. All seemed quiet.

It was not until half a fortnight that it happened.

Late that night, minutes after they were no more than a league from where they intended to stop. Lord Arin had his squad move up ahead to investigate the area further ahead. Clouds began to form overhead. Marcus at the time was with everyone he knew aside from Karin. The sky was originally clear with the moon overhead. The clouds rolled in at an unusual speed and formed over them. Father Constantine looked up with concern. Master Knight looked up, but made no change in his tone.

“Odd.” He said. “Was not the sky clear a few moments ago?”

“Aye sir!” A soldier said. “Saw the bloody moon earlier...didn’t seem like no storms was blowing through.”

“This is an ill omen.” Constantine said. “You best get the men to increase their pace.”

“I concur.” Master Knight said. “Men! March faster! Cavalry...scout out ahead! Men; brace yourselves!”

The men at first were confused with the sudden change of pace, but followed their General’s orders without questioning them. Marcus looked up to see the dark clouds building overhead. Golton looked up in response to seeing into Marcus’s mind. But it was Emma who looked up with actual fear.

“I...smell something....” She said.

Marcus and Golton looked at Emma as she said that, but Golton was the only one who knew what she meant by that. He drew his sword; which prompted Marcus to do the same along with the others.

The clouds continued to stalk the force until it had covered the entire sky. Thunder echoed across the entire sky. The clergy who were potent in the power of light soon began to feel paranoia, fear, anxiety, and distaste all around them. Even if their own territory, it felt like it was on the whole other side of the world. To any potent wielder of light, this was an omen of approaching darkness. Golton seemed to have knowledge because he shifted his direction constantly without stop.

Suddenly, a whistling sound approached the camp. Before Marcus could react to it, he felt the arms of Golton push him into the ground. A piercing sound was heard above Marcus. A man fell over with an arrow in his chest, dead.

“Ambush!” Golton shouted.

Within seconds, arrows fell from all around the men. Screams were heard. Several men fell to the ground. The soldiers that reacted quickly enough put up their shields and survived the first wave. Many more arrows continued to rain down upon them soldiers.

“Circular Defensive formation!” Master Knight shouted. “Follow by me! Come at me minions of darkness! I hope you brought me an actual combatant worthy of my time!!”

Marcus quickly got up and joined the soldiers as they worked quickly to make a wall with their shields. Fifteen soldiers, three mages, and over twenty members of the cavalry escort were killed the initial wave; though Marcus was sure the losses were higher...especially on the non combatant side.

He couldn’t help but be in fear over Emma.

A mage lifted up his hand and casted a spell of light around the area. A small ball shot into the air and illuminated the entire field. Revealing on the hills nearby we're several orcs with bows drawn. Orcs we're a very common monster in the lands. They generally had greenish skin, long ears, and wore mostly armor than clothing. Of course, this varied from time to time and not each case was the same. They we're also one of the sentient of monsters.

There we're also a wave of Hydros appearing. Hydros are monsters that on the surface appeared like an adorable creature with large adorable eyes made entirely out of water. However, the true form of a hydro was a carnivorous heart shaped organ that floated inside the large telekinetically manipulated water. Originally, they we're a creation by a powerful wizard who lived in the Old Kingdom, but one of them got out. The creatures had the ability to reproduce without a mate, thus creating an infestation. They mostly attacked by expanding their bodies on top of men and then drowning them. Once that happened, they would feast upon the remains. They we're very common in the wetlands, but very easily dealt with. They can't expand their bodies more than eight to ten feet, and their reaction time to attacks was below average. The only problem was the water that telekinetically surrounded it acted like a tough armor so attacks had to be precise.

However, the men we're unable to leave their position as the rain of arrows continued to fall from the sky. Marcus had fought in conflicts, but never where he was pinned down. He kept his shield up.

"Truly this was not what I thought would happen on a trip to North Pass!" Emily shouted next to him as she did not have a shield.

"Where's Em!?" Ron shouted.

"I don't know!" Marcus shouted back. "Hopefully behind our shields!"

"How are we going to escape this position!?" Emily shouted, clearly in terror and distress.

"Hopefully when Master Knight starts shouting at the monsters to come before us and the fear begins to break their ranks!" Chorin groaned as arrows continued to put pressure on his shield.

Arrows continued to fall from the sky and crash onto the surrounded soldiers. Some of them pierced through the gaps by pure fortune from the monsters part. Once in awhile a man would fall. This did not bode well...if they fought back, many of them would be killed. But if they remained here, they would surely be whittled down over time. And there was no telling what might else would be out there...waiting to strike.

"MEN OF TRITENIA!" An orc's voice rang out. "Surrender to the might of the followers of the Fallen one! Surrender the Lughglen!! Do so and we shall maybe let you live!"

A few more screams rang out as several more men and women fell around Marcus. He wanted to go out there and cull the beasts right there as they did, but he kept his senses in check. He knew to leave the formation now would only mean death.

A horse neighed and men's shouts rang out in the distance. Several of the monsters screamed in terror as galloping hooves beat the ground towards them. A horn bellowed out throughout the land.

Lord Arin had returned!

The men shouted as they led their charge in; and although Marcus could not see it, he knew damage had been done. The lances of the cavalry began to pierce the ranks of the

orcs, all of them beginning to fall left and right. Some of the men were shot off their horse, and some hydros grabbed the individuals off of their mounts. The orcs saw their kind falling and dropped their bows to help them. But Master Knight saw them leave their positions.

“Break apart!” He shouted.

At once, the men grabbed their blades and shields and charged at the monsters. Marcus and his comrades charged into the fray themselves. The Hydros expanded their bodies, falling on several of the soldiers. But their comrades quickly charged towards the Hydros and slashed their cores. The orcs, realizing that their position in holding the soldiers in place had failed, grabbed their own swords and charged towards the shining Knights. The soldiers, because of the loss of their comrades, swung their blades with terrible ferocity. Many of the orcs fell as they tried to defeat the army. The mages unleashed their powerful magic’s upon the soldiers. But the sheer number of orcs prevented them from piercing the ranks.

“Lord Arin; what kept you!?” Master Knight shouted.

“Forgive me, I was ignorant to their movements till a half hour ago!” Arin shouted. “I cantered back as quickly as my horse could take me! Where is my brother!?”

“His scouting unit has not reported back!” Master Knight barked. “No matter...it is time to skewer these lot that have come to bear upon us!”

Many of the orcs broke off from the main hills and worked around to where towards where the Tome was. The mages saw their approach and flung new spells, creating walls, altering the terrain, and many other impediments to slow down the advance. They we’re lit on fire, and fried from electricity, causing confusion and ruckus among the invaders.

Then Master Knight charged into the fray. His massive sword carved straight into a line of orcs and Hydros. Most swords could not penetrate the flowing barrier of water within the Hydro, but Master Knight’s massive sword carved straight into all of them. More than twenty bodies piled on the ground with a single stroke of Master Knight’s sword. And Master Knight continued crush monsters with his sword’s massive size. However, Master Knight was only one man.

And one man could not protect an entire army.

The orcs and Hydro’s continued put more pressure on the soldiers. The hills we’re now covered with orc blood and dead cores of Hydro’s, and the bodies of men who should have lived a happy life with their family. The rain storm pounded on the soldiers, causing many of the warriors on both sides to trip and fall. And the hordes continued to bear down upon the soldiers, no matter how many was slain. Marcus and Golton went back to back as many foes surrounded them. Emily speared an orc left and right. Ron and Chorin fought together, Chorin using a mighty tower shield, where Ron would deliver a blow and then retreat to safety. Father Constantine used his staff to repel oncoming foes. Even for a man in his fifties, Constantine was still able to fight as he could in his younger days. And his clerical staff was able to burn monsters as he swatted them away.

But the horde continued to come.

“Protect the Tome!” Master Knight shouted. “Do not let them take it back!”

“Master Knight; another wave coming from the east!” A mage shouted.

“Why do you tarry then!?” Master Knight shouted. “Engage!! Do not let them take another archery position!”

As Marcus and the others fought, he realized now was the time to begin searching.

“Ron!” He shouted. “Let us seek out Emma now while we can!”

“Right!” He shouted back. “Emily...Chorin...have my back!”

Marcus and his allies sprinted and fought with extreme haste; though he was more concerned with the safety of Emma. Golton had seemingly vanished in the fray, but Golton always preferred direct confrontation with the enemy; so Marcus knew where he could find him if needed. He did not panic for his friend’s safety...Golton had fought far worse odds and emerged victorious. His sword slew many of the monsters as they charged directly towards him. Marcus fought with extreme valor and haste towards Emma, so much so that he did not take notice that he left fifteen bodies in his wake. He passed by Karin who used her magic to freeze monsters solid in front of him. She would then throw bluish spheres of magic from her staff, causing a nearby creature to collapse.

He stood there memorized by this. Karin had definitely gotten better with magic. It was actually very intriguing to watch.

“Marcus!” She shouted. “We’re cut off!”

“Karin; rally by me!” Marcus shouted.

In the midst of the fight, Marcus managed to hear Emma’s screams bellow out. As soon as he heard it, he fled towards that area of where she appeared to be at; so much so that Karin did not notice his vanishing until he had moved into the masses. And by the time he noticed it, he had already moved too far from her. The difference between Emma and Karin was that Marcus was certain Karin could handle herself from what he just witnessed...Emma was inept at combat purloining all reports about her. After moving through a few soldiers, and striking down a few orcs, he came upon Emma. She was around several dead soldiers and a few orc bodies; and one was moving right towards her. An injured William appeared to be by her, defending her. The orc he faced swung his falchion at her, leaving a grotesque gash on his chest.

“GODS SAVE ME!” Emma screamed as the three burly monsters approached her.

But Marcus would not permit them easy prey. He leapt over Emma and struck the first one down with a swift slash. He then grabbed a nearby spear, dropped his shield and hurled it into another face. He struck down four others as they bore upon him, surrounding him to fell him.

But Ron and the others arrived. Ron went to Marcus to relieve him of the one whom he was facing down. Chorin lifted up his shield and withstood the assault as it came upon him. Emily gored them each one by one with swift strikes of her spear. Her thrusts were on point each time, Marcus wondered if she was human.

“You were right about Emily...” Marcus said. “She is no slouch to combat.”

“Did Ron say that about me!?” She shouted, looking at Ron with disgust. “You bastard...thank the gods you actually have good looks...”

“Save it; concentrate on saving my sister!” He shouted back.

“Don’t worry...” Emily said, goring another down. “I got you Emma! You’re the only one who knows how I like my hair!”

“You save me; I’ll give you a full make over!” Emma said, full of joy and terror.

“I’ll hold you to that!!” Emily shouted back, piercing the hide of another monstrosity. They continued to fight until the enemy had moved to other positions, cutting their losses on this flank that the youths held. At times, Marcus looked and attempted to call out to Karin, but his voice was drowned out by the combat. The reprieve would only be

temporary with Marcus and his group; and he knew he must move back to the flanks, lest he be overrun.

Even more pressing, William had taken a nasty gash to his chest. The orc struck with such force that cut through his armor.

“Grab William and get him to Constantine and his clergy!!” Marcus shouted. “We must get him some healing magic now!”

The others nodded in affirmation and began to drag William away from the area; with Chorin carrying him. They began to push towards the area where Constantine was.

Constantine and his clergy were still fighting. Master Knight seemed to be off fighting with Arin to skewer the ones pressing the south side of the flank. As Marcus continued to fight and slay creatures, he looked upon a hill to see a man; or at least it looked like a man on top of a hill. A bolt of electricity came from the sky and landed into his hands. A second later, the bolt was deflected towards the casket. The resulting explosion that came with it sent Marcus and his companions, Constantine, and the rest his comrades flying. The casket fell on the ground, the glass shattering on impact. The fear in his eyes was astounding.

It was unknown where Constantine had been knocked to by the sudden blast of magic. No doubt should he had seen the mage, he would have taken counter measures to deflect the blast. But there was no time to lament, nor was there time to verify he still drew breath. Time for action was now. Orcs were rapidly approaching where the Tome was.

If Marcus could escape with it...

He had immediate objections to this plan; but he chose to ignore it as footsteps were too rapidly approaching his position. He scooped up the tome into his hands, wrapping it in the linen that it had come with, and took Emma's hand.

“We'll flee into the wilds!” Marcus shouted.

“Flee!?” Ron barked.

“By the time Master Knight returns to this position, we'll be slain.” Marcus snapped back. “We'll have a better chance should we choose to escape now; we can try to reconnoiter with Master Knight later!” The group had objections (especially not knowing what Marcus meant), but with an entourage of evil approaching, there was no time for grievances.

So they fled onward. But Marcus had remembered the man who casted the spell. As he ran from where he was towards the hill, he saw the man appearing in between his escape with several orcs by his side. He pointed at his direction and sent the seven orcs after Marcus. Marcus though remained vigilant. CLINK! CLASH! RIP! Marcus slew the orcs as they charged towards him, with Ron and the others following up as he did. When the man realized Marcus had slain his guardians, his hands embers of a bluish energy. Marcus kept his sword in place and waited for the man to fight. It was clear he was a mage, and mages were not to be trifled with. He knew the basics when it came to battle during training; but that was it: If it was a missile spell, avoid it. Leave the area of a spell that covers a range before it is cast; and do not relent in combat. Any spells beyond this he prayed to the Gods to help. The others gathered around him as he held his blade out. “Stand down.” He said. “Or else I will run my blade through your back.”

The cloaked man turned to Marcus, although his face was covered by blackness. The man laughed coldly towards the young lad. Marcus just looked at him, unmoved by the obvious insult.

“You think this victory of yours means something?” He cackled. “There is no hope for you denizens of light. Soon, the realm shall be covered with a second black cloud. And the world shall go under siege a second time. Only through the magic of Azal will you be saved.”

“I don’t care what you preach on about mage.” Marcus said. “I am a soldier of Tritenia! If you won’t stand down, then I’ll cut you here and now.”

Marcus darted forward towards the man. The man reacted by sending a powerful sphere of dark energy at Marcus from his staff. The others fled out of the way to avoid the attack, Ron pulling Emma to the ground. The sickly looking ball of blue fire was a direct course to the soldier. Marcus simply pivoted his feet to the side and let the blue fire pass him by before continuing his advance. Two more shots fell towards Marcus. The boy rolled under the first one, but left his head wide open for the next. Instead, he threw his shield into the fire; as he heard most projectile spells we’re expended when they contact a surface. And luckily, this one was one of those spells. Unluckily, the spell created an explosion. The blue fire burst everywhere, sending both Marcus, his companions, and the assailant flying. Smoke enshrouded the general area of where they we’re fighting.

It took Marcus a moment to get his wits back together; whereas the others seemed to be more shocked from the spell. His sword however was nowhere near him. The man himself had already recovered as was already preparing another spell. Marcus could see a ring form right below him. Without thinking, he leapt from where he was. A column of blue fire erupted from the ground. The man lifted up his wand and a bolt of lightning went into his palm. He rolled out of the way and dodged the lightning bolt. Marcus had rolled too close to the man and the man had already another spell prepared in advance. His staff was glowing with a dark blue light, as the others formed by him.

“Even if we fail; and your country has possession of the Tome...” He said in anger. “...you won’t live to see it!”

But before he could unleash his spell, he jerked up suddenly. The man fell over dead. Marcus looked over the man’s body to see Golton standing a few feet from him. One of his scimitars had been stained with a red liquid on the blade; and Marcus realized that he had been killed. Golton quickly regained composure and ran to Marcus.

“I can’t believe you took on a mage by yourself.” Golton said. “You all are much braver than others.”

Golton reached his hand towards Marcus and pulled him to his feet, as his companions gathered around him. Marcus shook his hand and gave him a quick hug before looking at the dead man before him, and retrieving his sword. Out of the darkness around them, several orcs approached Marcus and Golton.

“Damnation!” He grunted. “More of them.”

“We can’t fight odds like these Golton.” Marcus shouted.

“You can’t...I can.” Golton said, looking at him. “I will remain here and hold my ground. You flee into the wilderness! I will seek you out when I finish these cretins off!”

“But...” Marcus begged.

“Go!” Golton shouted. “Do as I say! I have vanquished numbers far worse than this! For me to be defeated here would sully my image forever! Now flee! Fly into the darkness! I’ll come for you! I promise!”

Before Marcus could address anything further, Golton had sprinted forward; and had seemly vanished in an instant. Seconds later, he heard several clashes of steel and



inhuman screams of pain around him. He couldn't see the full details, but he could have sworn he saw multitudes of strange glints appearing every second, and then a body falling from that.

But even when the orcs Golton appeared to be slaying, many were still passing by him and heading towards Marcus. Without waiting for a reply from his friend, Marcus and the rest of his companions fled into the darkness.

Chapter 8 – Into the Wild

The length of time that passed from when Marcus and the others fled and until they stopped was unknown. They simply did not stop fleeing for what seemed like hours. By the time they had stopped it appeared to be that evening; though the cloud cover still remained over them. It looked as if it could rain at any moment. They had stopped in what looked like a small glade in a nearby forest. As soon as they believed they were safe, most of them began to sit down. They were all fatigued from running all night. Even Marcus collapsed onto the ground. Most of them ignored the fact mud and grime was beginning to fill their clothing...at this point they all wanted to rest.

After a moment's respite, Marcus began to assess the situation that they were in. He had with him William, Emma, Ron, Chorin, Emily, and himself. Karin was nowhere in sight. Marcus was certain he did not lose her while they were running; he remembered seeing her when they fled away from the oncoming force. But when they stopped, she was gone. Marcus did not want to think of her slain; hoping her magic would have allowed her to escape.

William was currently unconscious and wounded, so one of their number was already down. To what direction they had fled in was unascertained at the time; although Marcus was able to surmise at the least they had fled either to the east or south. He did not know exactly which direction was it, and nor did he know where he was at. At the time they fled, all they had was their backpacks on them, which held some basic gear, but nothing for surviving out in the wild for an elongated period of time. They did have their weapons, and Emma had her medical supplies. They all had their knives; which was important as one should never be in the wilderness of Tritenia...and in some shady hamlets without one on them. Counting out between all of them, they had enough food to last three days. Water seemed to not be an issue due to a small stream that rain through the glade.

But that was it. At least for the moment, they did not seem to be chased down.

"Are...are safe?" Ron whimpered, breaking the silence of groaning.

"I...I think so." Marcus said.

"What were orcs doing this far in our lands!?" Chorin barked in anger.

"Neighboring providences like Ogland yes; but here!?"

"Then our borders are not as secure as we thought." Marcus said.

"But...how!?" Emily shouted in anger. "How did they get here!? This is supposed to be the one of the safest lands in the region."

"They must have found a way through." Marcus said. He knew Master Knight had talked about the fort falling east of the North Pass; but that still begged the question of how they managed to do it...and in such numbers?

"What do we do then!?" Emma screamed with her tail wagging feverishly. "What now!? We are away from the army; and lost in the wilderness! And there's no telling how many more orcs are out there!"

"It could be days before we our found..." Emily moaned. "We shalln't last nearly that long."

"Yes and I'm sure lamenting about it is just as effective." Chorin snapped. "We'll be fine!"

“Oh and you’re adept at survival now!?” Emily snapped back. “I remember in physical training how many times we had to circle back in that forest escapade!”

“You didn’t help either Emily!” Ron shouted back, now engaging in the argument that was brewing. “If anything; you’re the one who got us lost to begin with.”

Sooner or later, everyone other than Emma was bickering about their situation; and the hopelessness that appeared to be in. Emma was too much in a panic to even try and comment on their situation. Everyone seemed to be concerned on placing faults on one another rather than try to dispute methods to handle their situation. As minutes dragged on, the situation saw no signs of deescalating.

Marcus knew he had to do something to stop it.

“We’re not lost!” Marcus shouted loud enough for all to hear; though truthfully he had no idea where he was at. During the night, he made many twists and turns in the wilderness to evade oncoming torrents of footsteps ahead of the group. With how many turns he made, all he knew now is he was somewhere either south or east of the army. “We are merely misplaced! We cannot give into fear despite our situation; it is in auspicious to do so. We need to think clearly and cooperate with one another, or we shall surely be lost!” All attention was placed on Marcus as he stood there. He realized a second later that they were looking at him; looking for guidance. And considering what he had just proclaimed, it would inadmissible to back out now. He took a breath to give himself a moment, and then continued: “We may be in the middle of the wilderness, but that does not mean we are in trouble...yet. It can easily turn as such should we give ourselves into fear. The attack came during the night, and we fled till dawn. We have been running roughly six to ten hours...I lost track during our continual changes in direction to avoid the rampant orcs. But...we did so on foot. If Lord Arin’s cavalry survived; and I’m sure it has, then we shall be found perhaps after a day or two. But we shall not expect it as such; and shall make camp here. It is imperative we find the army, or someone that can give us aid. Until then, we need to act expertly. Any impotence on our part now can easily have us killed if we allow it to linger. Do you understand!?”

The others glared at Marcus for a minute, but they eventually nodded. Marcus breathed a sigh of relief and then sat down.

“Okay...” Marcus moaned. “Where to begin?”

“Food...” Chorin moaned.

“I took a look at the food while you were all arguing...we have enough food for three days.” Marcus began. “We some rationing, we can make it last six...but probably no more. We’ll need to forage and hunt in order to make sure we can stay alive for that long. Does anyone have a bow?”

“I do.” Chorin said, pulling a short bow out from his backpack. “It’s not anything eloquent like a long bow, but it should be able to hunt us smaller game; though I am limited on arrows. What about preparing it?”

“My father has shown me how to prepare wild game.” Marcus responded. “I can handle that...Emma...how is William?”

“He’s very ill.” Emma said, checking William’s forehead. “The wound went untreated due to us fleeing, and I believe it has been allowed to fester too long. He’ll need treatment right away.”

“Can you handle that?” Marcus asked. Emma merely nodded. There was no need to ask further.

“Okay...Chorin...you will look for wild game to hunt to bring us food.” Marcus began. “Emma will continue to apply her healing talent on William to get him on his feet. I’ll handle preparing the food in the evening assuming Chorin can find anything. Ron you’ll run with me on patrols during the day...hopefully we’ll find the convoy in doing so; or any remnants of it. Emily will handle foraging in the wilderness.”

“Why do I have to run around looking for nuts!?” Emily shouted.

“Because unless all of us work together, we’ll starve.” Marcus said, shooting her a dead look. “I may not be a lieutenant or Captain, but I’m four years your senior in this army...so I’m ordering you to do it.” It was a clear dismissal of her attitude, and Emily backed down. Marcus nodded in her direction and then pulled himself up. “Anyone else have grievances with this?” No one opposed him. “All right...we’ll rest tonight and then begin our search tomorrow?”

“Shouldn’t we start looking now?” Ron asked.

“It’s already evening.” Marcus responded, opening his backpack to pull out a bedroll. “By the time we cover any ground, darkness will already blanket the land. It’s better if we go out at first light tomorrow. Besides...” He yawned quite loudly, which caused others to do so in unison. “I think its best that we all attempt to get sleep...we’ll be less irritable and more aware as we go searching.” Everyone seemed to agree with this decision.

Sleep did not come as well as Marcus had yearned for. The weather had turned from overcast to heavy rain, and there was very little cover from it. Even as it abated, they had very little comfort from being soaked to the brim. Most of the survivors shivered and turned about; and some (namely Emily and Ron) turned to sleeping together in order try and get some level of comfort. Emma was up a good portion of the night dressing William’s wounds and doing her best to clean them; but without supplies, she surmised it would be a futile effort for the most part. In the end, Marcus woke up feeling worse than yesterday.

But he had no time to lie in his bedroll. Work had to be done.

He pulled himself out of bed and went out with Ron to begin exploring the surrounding fauna around them. As the hours passed from their escapade, it became even more and more apparent that Marcus had little to no idea where he was. He never explored this area of the Westernfold before; and even if he did, it may have been only once. Not enough to recollect anything about it. He also found no signs of any Tritenian soldiers that were in the area. He returned back to the glade unsuccessful.

Emily and Chorin were attempting to find food. While Emily was able to locate some herbs and nuts, they could not find anything wholesome. Chorin had unfortunately, missed his shot with a squirrel that he had spotted on his exploring around the glade. It left them that night forcing them to eat a half’s day rations.

Emma could confirm no progress on William’s recovery. Though her talent and skill left William better than he was earlier yesterday, he was still barely conscious, only on occasion murmuring incoherently. At times, Marcus thought he heard William murmur the name of a woman, but he could not tell due to his hoarse voice. Either way, he would serve them no good now.

The next day proved to be no better. The humidity began to rise, causing them to sweat profusely throughout the night. Again, the group had very little sleep and was forced

to continue their duties in hoping to find any form of respite. The only silver lining was that William's condition had improved, so that someone of less expertise could monitor him.

Emily and Chorin were given the duties to scout out where the army was for the day, and Marcus decided to handle hunting with Emma. While he had not practiced with a bow as much as his sword, he did learn how to use one to some degree in physical training. And Emma possessed far superior hearing and scent as compared to him, so her skill would be no doubt needed for hunting. In truth, Marcus wanted her out hunting the first day...but her skill was needed to stabilize William's condition. She yawned loudly as the two made were making their way through the forest.

"Have you ever gone hunting before?" Marcus asked Emma.

"No." She said. "My father had asked me to come along many times...but I was always more interested in finding herbs and exotic plants more so than finding animals."

"I've always heard that nyanitas are very capable hunters." Marcus said.

"And I probably would have been if my parents had not up and abandoned me while I was young." Emma snapped.

"Oh...right." Marcus said, turning away in humiliation. "Sorry."

"It's alright; not much can change the past." She said. "Besides...I have the blood of a hunter deep inside of me. This is something that my heritage has always been naturally good at!" She crossed her arms and perked up her head. "I will be fine."

"I certainly hope so." Marcus said.

"What...do you doubt me?" Emma asked crossly.

Marcus didn't get a chance to answer. Her ears perked up, and she suddenly stopped. They kept adjusting and changing directions, as if she was trying to hone in something. Afterwards, she pulled Marcus to the ground.

"Stay still." She whispered. "Something approaches..." Marcus obeyed her, and remained as still as he could.

Minutes passed with no result, but eventually something came by; a small deer. A wave of excitement passed through Marcus...finally they would have had something wholesome to eat.

"I don't think it sees us..." Emma whispered.

"I'm taking the shot." Marcus whispered back.

Slowly, Marcus pulled up the short bow and began to take aim. He pulled back the string awkwardly as he had not had used a bow since physical training. He while shaking pointed the arrow forward at the deer, just in time for it to notice his presence. He let the arrow fly.

Only for it to miss the deer. The skittish animal fled in terror at the sight of the arrow inside the trunk of a tree.

"Damnation." Marcus grunted in frustration. "And just when I thought our fortune would reverse itself."

"Your aim was off only a few inches." Emma said. "If you had reflexes like mine, then surely you would have landed us a meal."

"Perhaps you would like to try to secure us sustenance." Marcus said coyly. Emma smiled at him and took the bow.

"Perhaps I would." She said in a snarky but friendly tone. She and Marcus walked around the area a bit more. Eventually after sometime, they came to what looked like a smaller doe in the area. Emma licked her lips and eagerly pulled back the string.

SWOOSH! The arrow flew forward.

Barely even moving to where the target was. Emma gazed at her arrow hitting and breaking off when it hit a rock, and the doe fled as quickly as it did the other one.

“That...was even farther away than the one I shot.” Marcus said baffled.

Emma could only communicate in whines from her appalling shot.

The group returned back with not even a squirrel among their person. Fortunately, Emily and Chorin fared much better. They had located a cave somewhere farther north of the glade they resided at. It was a trek, but it surely provided more cover and hospitality than the previous settlement they were at. Groggy and weary, then gathered what was needed and moved to the location of the cave. The outside was far more revealing than the glade they resided at, but it would make much better comforts than outside.

That night, Marcus had a disturbing dream. He dreamed that he was in completely black area. In all honesty, he could not tell if he was asleep; or if he was awake. He saw his other companions around, but none took any notice to him; regardless of how much he spoke or attempted to garner their attention. In fact, no matter how much he tried to reach them, he could not.

And then...he saw it. Fire. An all consuming fire moving towards him. Marcus could feel the flames and heat careening towards him, and at this moment, he was unsure if he was dreaming. Unable to differentiate the two, he began to flee...only to notice that his friends were remaining still; even walking towards the oncoming flame. Marcus fled towards them, attempting to dissuade them from moving towards the red flames, but none addressed him. They simply turned to him sadly and moaned:

“So...you are the progenitor? Let’s test your vworthiness.”

The flames then instantly consumed everyone. Marcus watched in horror as he gazed upon the flesh of his friends instantly being devoured by the hungry flames, reducing them to ash in seconds. Seconds later, his body was consumed in roughly the same manner.

And then he awoke. He awoke in a cold sweat, yet could still feel the heat from the flames. He pulled himself and immediately went to check on everyone, to find they were alright. The only thing out of place was where the Lughglen was at.

It had moved no more than ten paces from Marcus’ bag.

He didn’t sleep much the rest of that night.

Despite hearing the ominous voice of the Lughglen, Marcus and the others slept much better than the previous nights. Not that the rest they got was sufficient, but was much better to perform survival tasks on than what they originally were relying on. Still...food was becoming more pressing. Their arrows were diminishing from failed hunts and even misplacement on Emily’s part. In terms of rations, Marcus counted a day and a half worth of them remaining; and it was slowly getting worse. He was now beginning to feel the pangs of hunger come over him; though he did his best to diminish those thoughts.

But at least some fortune came over them. After having been barely conscious for days now, William had finally woken up. He aroused slowly as Emma was investigating his wounds, and then looked up at her.

“Where...am I?” He asked lethargically.

“You’re in a cave in the middle of the countryside.” Emma said. “Marcus...come over here.”

Marcus walked over to William, rubbing his eyes to wipe out any fatigue that he still had. William looked weak, but recovering.

“Where’s...the army?” He asked.

Marcus looked to William, and could only give him a gloomy expression.

“We...have been separated from them.” He said lamentably.

“Separated!?” William groaned angrily. “Why!?”

“We were becoming befallen by orcs.” Marcus explained. “It was either flee into the wilderness or die...we choose to flee.”

“That’s...” William groaned. He coughed up a bit and something incomprehensible. Marcus saw his eyes slowly closing, before he managed to utter “...coward’s...talk...” William fell unconscious.

Emma quickly placed her finger on his side, and still she felt a pulse.

“There is no need to worry.” She said. “He’s merely asleep. Probably is getting much more rest than any of us.”

“Thank the gods...” Marcus said, moving away from William. “I find it funny that I am expressing trepidation over a man whose goal in life was to make me and my respective trainees lives miserable for a few months.”

“If William was awake, we’d have one more person aiding us with our survival.” Ron said.

A loud groan came from within the cave. The groan came from Emily, who was holding her stomach. All eyes fixated upon her, as her face slowly turned red.

“Umm...what’s our food like?” She asked.

“You...don’t want to know.” Chorin said.

“We have to get something soon.” Marcus said. “Even something a minute as a squirrel or even a collection of plants would suffice...edible plants mind you. Grass will not sustain us.”

“Unfortunate considering there is so much around.” Emily moaned. “Damn the horses...I sometimes neglect to think how well off some animals are as compared to us sapiens.”

“Other than being prey to larger predators and on the run pretty much most of the time; yes they certainly are more fortunate than us.” Emma retorted.

“Well we will gain no food from sitting here.” Marcus said. “Emma...you will go with Emily to hunt...Chorin and me will take to examining the wilderness for any sign of the army. Ron...you hold down the cave.”

Everyone nodded, agreeing to Marcus’ notion and again they moved. This time, Marcus and Chorin did discover something out of place. As they trudged through the fauna and wilderness of the land around them, he had discovered sets of unusual tracks moving in the dirt around the area that they residing at. The tracks appeared to be owned by a creature that had a set of eight legs that seemed to scuttle around. Marcus believed that it could be a set of horses moving through the area...a suggestion that imbued him with much hope that the army was in the area. Because of how wet and muddy the area appeared to be, neither one was certain of whose tale held more merit. Marcus kept note of the tracks and continued forward in futile effort the rest of the day with no sign of the army being close.

Food wise, they fared a bit better. Emily and Emma had found several nuts, berries, and even some roots of which could be consumed. It wouldn't hold them together, but it would allow them to reduce how much of their rations they would need to eat. Despite this, food was still a problem that they fared...they were done to a single day's ration by the end of the day.

The problems continued for days. By the end of the second day after the discovery the tracks, they had eaten their last crumbs of food. William's condition was deteriorating, and Emma was certain lack of nutrition was to blame now. Time was beginning to turn against them, and Marcus knew he was running low on time. Their luck continued to thin even farther as a few more days passed and nothing seemed to change their predicament

Everyone else was drenched with fatigue. Despite soldiering as they could to perform their tasks, most of them were unable to venture far from the cave. Emma seemed to have the most trouble as she could barely operate; even on maintaining William's condition. The only one who was seemingly able to shake off the condition was Marcus; who was able to move at about the same distance outside of the cave, albeit at a much weaker pace.

And as he moved, he couldn't help but believe he heard a twisted voice following him wherever he walked.

"I'm...so...hungry..." Emma moaned.

"I...could devour anything at this point." Ron moaned.

"Baked...potatoes..." Chorin groaned. "Cooked pork...vegetables..."

Those were some of the groaning Marcus managed to make out in his fatigued state as he mostly laid his back towards the cavern wall. He really was at a loss to do anything. He didn't know where he was, and he wasn't finding food. The situation appeared to be all but hopeless in this case.

In the midst of his thoughts, he sprung up immediately, as he heard a fell voice ring throughout his mind.

Let's see how you handle when your friends turn against you.

"What is that?" Emily asked, looking in Marcus' direction.

"What?" Marcus asked weakly.

"What do you have in your hand?" She asked, drawing the attention of everyone else.

"I...I don't..." Marcus said initially. However, he turned to his arm and noticed that something indeed was in his hand. It was the white cloth that held the Lughglen...although something did not appear right with it.

He could have sworn that he smelled a well cooked roast coming from it.

"Is that food?" Emily asked, slowly riling to anger. "How long have you had that!?"

"Emily, it is not food." Marcus asked, though he himself took a glance again just to be sure. The book was still wrapped in its white linen and still retained its shape, though the smell persisted.

"Don't you lie to me!" Emily shouted, walking over to him. "That clearly looks like a chicken bone!! How long have you been holding out on us!?!?"

"Marcus how could you!?" Emma shouted at him.

"Emma, I swear to you I'm not!" He snapped.

“Then what is that in your palm!?” She screamed.

“I thought you were our friend!” Ron shouted. “Give what you have...we are starving over here!”

Marcus was being backed further into the cave as the group approached him, moving at him in almost in a zombified state. Emily was already reaching for her spear, and Chorin his sword. Marcus looked at the group in extreme panic, unable to interpret the madness that the group was going through.

What is going on? He thought to himself as everyone moved towards him. *There are moving towards me like madmen! What can be doing...* He didn't need to look much further than the tome in his hand. He quickly traced his mind back to several nights when he beheld a terrifying dream in front of him. The tome already showed it could move by its own accord to some degree...could it also induce madness?

And if it could, how would he show them the truth?

“Marcus!” Emma shouted, drawing her claws from her fingers. “Don't make me do this! I don't want to! But I'm starving!”

“Emma; please...” Marcus begged. “I know what you see in my hand may appear as something, but it is not there. It is an illusion!”

“Don't you lie to me!!” She shouted. “Not after all the time we spent with each other! My eyes are superior to yours, so do not tell me that! Now give us some!!”

Marcus looked into Emma's eyes (along with everyone else's) to see that a wisp of this green energy seemed to consume them for a split moment. The energy was visible...not a wisp of Marcus' hungry driven mind and definitely no hallucination. The tome was doing something to them! Was it plucking at the weakness of their minds from hunger?

He couldn't think on it anymore...Ron leapt onto him. Unable to defend himself from the sudden attack, he fell to the ground with him, and the others soon befell him as well. They were shouting incoherently, demanding he surrender food of which he did not have...under threat of death.

“Give it to us!”

“We're starving!”

“If you do not, we'll skewer you!”

“Marcus!!”

As he was being held down, he knew he had no choice. Though he was certain whatever madness cast over them by the tome may not break, he hoped that it might break someone from the spell. He had no intention of striking down his friends here.

“I carry with me the tome of a demon that the orcs were after when we were attacked!” Marcus shouted. “The Lughglen!”

It did nothing...initially. Ron, Emily, and Chorin seemed to be twisted under the spell of it. Emma however was a much different case. She hesitated for a moment and let go of Marcus. “The...Lugh...glen...” She muttered several times. Eventually, she shook her head and her face no longer seemed to be under madness. As soon as she noticed the others, she shrieked and ran to them.

“What do you guys think you're doing!?” She shouted. “Get away from him!! Ron; snap out of it!”

Emma tried to pull off her adopted brother, but he easily over powered her and threw her off. She tried again, and this time he got up and delivered a firm thrust of his fist into her. Stunned by the sudden attack from her brother, she fell to floor squirming.

“Stay out of this!” Ron shouted in a voice that sounded far from his own.

At that moment, Marcus was overcome with a rage. He threw off Chorin and Emily and drew his sword. Using the blunt side of it, he delivered a blow of similar intensity to Ron, knocking him out cold. He followed up with a blow against Chorin, which resulted in the same fate.

Emily however was not as easily duped. She ran forward with an energy she did not possess in the earlier days and grabbed hold of Marcus, pulling him forward into the darkness of the cave. Marcus struggled to regain his footing, and eventually managed to place his hand on her face; trying to slow her down.

“Give it to me!” Emily shouted in a voice of similar discord as Ron.

“I do not know what entity you are, but I demand you to release my friends!” He shouted in a resounding voice.

At that moment, Marcus witnessed a bright light illuminate from where he was at. The source of the light he could not identify, but it seemed to be from all around them. Marcus didn't remember much of what happened. He just remembered Emily collapsing to the floor right after that. Marcus himself was thrust into a wall from an unseen force and hit his head hard against a wall. Afterwards, overwhelmed by fatigue and hunger, he blacked out and knew no more in the waking world.

“Wvell...that wvas boring. It took that long for you to do that. Still...the wwork of my Tome has done what fate has entailed. You'll be much more interesting I think in the future. Sleep for now. I wwill be wvatching you boy.”

Chapter 9 – Into the Spider’s den

Although Marcus was unconscious, he could make out minute sensations of things as time seemed to elude him. At one point, he felt very still...losing all connection to the world. It was not until what he felt was a few minutes that he felt the sensation of something touching his shoulder. It felt prickly...and hairy. The next few minutes were feelings of being moved and dragged. It was this time that Marcus could vaguely make out images, although he remembered none that he be held with the state of how his mind was. The images he saw was almost like a large arm were holding his shoulder. He felt what he believed to be rocks on the ground below him, rolling up against his body. For a few minutes, the world again remained still. The veil of shadow and silence remained over him. Towards the end of his unconsciousness, he felt something soft and sticky.

Of all the sensations and things he felt, the most vivid thing he remembered “seeing” was a humming bird. A very beautiful humming bird that seemed to flutter in where he his “eyes” were. The bird floated to him, tweeted a few times, and then flew away into the darkness. Afterwards, he “saw” nothing else in his vision.

Only the sensation of something sticky on him.

Eventually...he woke up. He wanted to look around and see where he was at, but that was the first problem. Marcus couldn’t see anything. He first suspected that Emily had pushed him too far into the cave; but he remembered still being able to see the entrance...at least he thought he did. Now a veil of shadow covered his entire face.

His first instinct was to pull himself to his feet; but he found himself unable to do so. In fact his whole body felt...stiff...and viscous. Something was preventing him from moving, and it felt moist and warm. It began to make him feel uncomfortable, as if there was something abhorrent about; though he could not make out what it was that bothered him about it.

Seconds later however, he felt his stomach churn. He felt a wave of nausea and fatigue overtake him as he laid there. As quickly as he had awoke, his body was almost begging him to return asleep. Feeling a sense of danger, he fought it off. It continued to plague him, but he gave it no quarter. It eventually dissipated, but not before leaving Marcus feeling sicker than before. Fatigue drenched throughout his whole body, but he knew he had to escape...wherever he was.

His first task was to be able to move. Since he could not pull himself to his feet, he sought other means to start moving. He eventually found that his left arm appeared to be somewhat loose from whatever surrounded him, and fought with vigorous might to pull it out. It was a desperate fight, and he was still weak from hunger; but he managed to pull his hand out from whatever he was in. With his now released hand, he began to feel around the floor that he was placed on...only to find there was none. This confused him...as well as terrified him where he could be. Realizing that he had more pressing concerns at the moment, he continued to try and pull himself out. When he realized that it would be impossible to do so with just his hands, he thought of getting his knife. Fortunately for him, he was able to reach his satchel with little difficulty, and was able to retrieve it. From then on, he began to cut the threads that surrounded him away little by little...

Threads! It came to Marcus in a moment after he had thought on it slightly. As well as the terror this sudden knowledge brought to him. He cut off a strand around his body and

began to run it through his fingers. It was a silk thread...but very sticky. Marcus speculated such a thread if not cut by a blade would easily remain on whatever surface it was placed on.

“Almost like...a spider...” He murmured.

The reality did not take long for him to muster. He more frantically began to begin slicing the strands over and over, cutting whatever he could to try and escape. A spider's den he had fallen into; and he could only presume the others may be in the same predicament. Tritenia had the common every day spiders, but they also had ones twisted by dark magic to be many more times their size. While some of these spiders still acted and remained the same, others grew wills beyond that of animals...and unfortunately many are vile and evil. These spiders could think and act like any human on the world, and some even spoke the tongues of man. Some spiders were mixed with humans as a result of even darker magic than earlier, and even gained the upper torso of a human, or sometimes even the full body of a human with eight spider legs on their backs. These creatures were called the aranriders...and Marcus preyed he had not ended up in a den of those...for they were usually far more cunning and wicked than ordinary intelligent spiders.

The process took several minutes, but he eventually managed to free himself...and learned the hard way of where he was at. Much like real spiders, the large ones hung their prey high up in the air...a fact Marcus completely overlooked. He ended up falling several feet and hitting himself on the ground...hard. His stomach couldn't take the combination of pain and discomfort, and he puked his guts out. This only made Marcus feel even worse than before...as now he was hungry, dehydrated, and sick. He was certain as he pulled himself to his feet that the room would be spinning if he did.

But his senses reorganized themselves quickly.

He felt that he was no longer alone.

Behind Marcus was a large spider, skittering towards him. Marcus could not see it, but it certainly was big enough to be heard approaching him. It was only till it got close enough that Marcus could see its robust insect eyes.

“Sssssssso...” It squeaked. “You essssscaped. I'll see that you don't make it no further!”

The spider made in an inhuman scream and leapt at him. By simply judging where the eyes were, Marcus was able to dodge its attack. He had to be careful...not only could he not see his attacker to well, neither could see his surroundings. His illness (which he surmised was probably poison that the spiders injected into him) was another factor as well. The spider launched a few more attacks, sometimes using its legs to push into Marcus. Most of the time they hit on their mark, and it was only valiant strokes of luck Marcus conjured up at the last minute to escape being bitten again. Other times, it used its mouth for a swift bite, but Marcus had an easier time evading it since it's eyes reared back every single time it moved for such a thing. The problem was attrition...Marcus knew the swipes he got in with his knife left negligible wounds...whereas the poison was still in his body. He needed a moment to regain any morsel of strength he would have left.

The fight pressed on for several minutes, and Marcus could feel his strength leaving him quickly. He needed to dispatch his foe; and with haste. In desperation, he launched an attack against the spider, charging head first into it like a mad man. He trusted forward and stabbed through the wretch's eyes, causing it to howl in pain. He then struck again in the left eye, blinding the thing. For the moment, Marcus had thought victory was in his grasp.

Thought it was at least.

Evil spiders such as these do rely on their keen eyes to see, but some can also hunt by sound and scent; and this one was no exception. He lurched forward against the blind swordsman, and pressed its fangs into Marcus' left arm. Reacting to the sudden attack, Marcus brought his knife to where he perceived the head was.

He could not have been more on point with his attack. He had actually brought so much force that the small knife pierced through the thick skull of the creature, but Marcus could not see this feat he had accomplished. All he knew is heard the spider give off an unearthly scream before collapsing to the ground. The spider moved no more after that.

Unfortunately, in its death throes had already been accomplished more than it did in life. Another dose of poison was coursing through Marcus' arm, making him sicker and more feverish than before. He managed to move at least a few paces before collapsing onto the ground, his body twitching and convulsing. His body was begging him to stop and lay down. For a moment or two, Marcus stopped resisting and then did just that.

As pain flowed from his arm to throughout his body, he felt strangely relaxed at laying still on the ground. The thought of surrendering himself to all that was transpiring...he would have no worries...no thoughts...no fears...peace.

No friends!!

His thoughts in the midst of his clarity came of his friends who had been with from the beginning. He could only think of the perils they were enduring at the moment. Would they be twofold as him...were they already consumed by the spiders!? No! He couldn't allow that; and he couldn't allow himself to fall before he learned of their fates!

"I..." Marcus groaned. "Have not...come this far...to fall here..."

His first pulled himself up and ripped off his shirt and vest. He then proceeded to suck the blood out of his arm, hoping to drain the poison out. He did this for at least a minute. Now he was dealing with blood loss on top of his symptoms...and even with inept knowledge, he was certain this would either not work or last. But he had little recourse to attempt something more than what he could think of at the moment; for he lacked the supplies, knowledge, and the talent to do or attempt anything else. A small reprieve in the pain came and found it easier to move; though not by much.

Marcus groggily moved forward toward wherever he thought there was an exit. Anything than where he was at. More often than not, he would clash into a wall, and then seek out either another cavity within the cavern wall, turn around. He bumped around in the darkness sick and feeble. He stumbled and fell over a lot, and only raw determination brought him back up. On even infrequent occasions, he would have to stop to puke due to his body pushing itself while poisoned. Sooner or later though, Marcus was able to adapt to how he felt and was able to move himself without falling or stumbling. The pain still persisted.

FFFFFFFFFFFFFFWWWWWWWWWWW. A strange sound of beating of wings came in front of him. He reacted sluggishly and swung around. The flapping backed off, but for the moment. Unlike with the spiders whose eyes Marcus could see, this time he could not see the eyes of whatever had just flew by him. The sound was still there...just slightly in front of him. Sensing danger, Marcus kept himself ready to fight at any moment.

The sound remained there in front of him. When it didn't go to Marcus, Marcus moved towards it. This time the sound moved further away from him. When he moved back, the sound either remained at the same distance in front of him, or where it was at

before it moved. Only if Marcus approached it did it seem to go deeper into the darkness where he had not been. A curiosity then struck Marcus, and he decided to go forward. The wings moved deeper into the tunnel, with Marcus sluggishly trailing behind it.

His foot touched something as he moved...it almost made him fall over onto the cold stone ground if he had not caught the side of the wall. He fumbled around the object...it felt leathery...a backpack! Could this have been one of their packs? No matter. He put his hand inside of the pack and searched around. There seemed to be numerous fabrics and cloth in there...which Marcus eventually discovered might have been clothes. Not what he was looking for. Eventually he discovered an unlit torch on the sides of the backpack. Using the rocks as flint, and the steel of the knife, he was able to light the torch...finally giving him some illumination around him. The surroundings stayed much of the same...something Marcus had expected at this point. The pack he believed might have belonged to Emily as it contained numerous garments that seemed to fit a woman of Emily's stature; and because Emma often joked at Emily of concerning herself with unneeded gear for travel. He also found her spear next to the backpack, of which he retrieved and put into his hand. He was trained in its use, so it was not like this was unfamiliar to him.

Whatever was flapping its wings was also unveiled by the light of the torch as well. A simple humming bird was floating in front of Marcus...something Marcus found bewildering. How could such a creature survive down here? And what was it down here to begin with? Was it not blind like he?

The bird flew deeper into the cave, only to quickly return to where the glow was. It continued to do this until Marcus moved forward with it...as if some sense in his head told him this was the correct course. Soon, it flew down into a tunnel before returning to the light, despite their being another tunnel across from it. It was here that he began to suspect it was leading him. As time went on following this bird, the poison must have abated as Marcus was able to continue forward.

"A bird of that size could not survive down here...even for a small time." Marcus muttered to himself. "What are you doing here little bird?"

The bird did nothing but flutter around him. It did spin around his head the moment he acknowledged it, but remained static in its actions beyond it. So he continued following it, the torch in his hands. Still the bird led him onward with no discernable end in sight.

Eventually he came to a large dome cavity within the darkness of the cave. Stalagmites and stalactites adjoined the entirety of the area they were at. A small sound of dripping water was heard in the distance, hitting on the cold hard stone. Moss was throughout the cavern wall, and appeared sporadically as Marcus shined the torch around.

The humming bird did not stick around. It immediately sprang forward and flew into the shadows in front of where Marcus was at.

"Hey wait!" he shouted, but it was in vain. The creature vanished into the darkness.

Marcus decided to pursue it, but he was stopped when something plopped in front of him. Marcus shone his torch light in the direction of where it came from and saw it was a web...or a piece of one. It must have fallen from the ceiling.

"Lossssed....you fool..." a fell voice appeared above Marcus. "Now he knowsssss we are here."

"Where do you sssssssuppose Adrie is at?" Another voice hissed.

"Ssssssuppose this one killed him."

"Look at his hand...it reeks of his blood...this one murdered him; that he did."

“Murdered Andrie!!?? A lot of fight in thisssss one!”

“Retribution must be taken from this one! Kill him! Murder him! Drain him dry until he issss but a hussssk!”

“Where are you!?” Marcus shouted. “Conceal yourselves no longer from me! Return my friends to me!!”

He must have gotten their attention as he heard movements from above him. He held the torch as high as he could, but could see no visage or silhouettes of any kind around him. He knew they were close, but how close was the problem.

“This one can’t sssse us!” The voices hissed again.

“Should we go to him?”

“Yee! Let us rip him asunder!”

“He wishesssss to fight! So be it!”

Marcus heard the skittering moving towards him in a few moments. He stood still, trying to pinpoint where the sounds were coming from exactly, only to find that it appeared like multiple movements were heading towards him. Instincts kicked in, and he stood still, waiting for the first one to approach him.

And then the first spider emerged. It leapt at him from and attempted to sink its fangs into him. Marcus at the last moment caught its eyes approaching him and he moved to the side. As the creature recoiled and recovered from its attack, Marcus trusted his spear forward, straight through the skull of the creature. It flailed around some before falling to the ground. The spiders stopped their advance for the moment, seeing how easily Marcus had felled one of their own; and then renewed their attack furiously; for now Marcus had slain two of their kind.

Marcus saw the lights of their eyes moving towards him. He backed off and waited for his opportunity to stab one. If one spider moved too far from the group, Marcus picked him off with a single stroke. If he failed to bring him down then, he would retreat and riposte later when the opportunity became more present. If more than two came upon him, he would continue to back off. For the moment, it seemed to work as he ended up bringing a half dozen of them dead.

But soon others began to befall him from other sides, and his plan quickly began to fall apart. He thought about moving into the cavern cavity that he had been inside of earlier and defend himself there. The spiders were large and strong, but they could only proceed into the cavity one at a time. There was no way he could slay all of them, but he felt if he killed enough, they would be forced to retreat. They seemed to hesitate to some degree whenever he skewered one of their kind...and could he not blame him? For a single human to outwit so many of these creatures in combat and even slay some of their own would be a demoralizing sight at best.

As one knocked into Marcus and nearly bit him, Marcus knew though that time was running short. He could not survive if they all entrenched around him and surrounded him in the cave...fighting them in the cavity was the only way to hold them back.

“Come after me you cowards!” Marcus shouted, fleeing towards the cavity.

He never had a chance. *TWANG!* A sound of an arrow leaving the string of a bow resounded. The arrow forced itself into Marcus’s shoulder and he immediately fell down onto the ground. He scrambled to his feet as best as he could, but the spiders were upon him in moments. Soon he was surrounded by several of them.

This was it...there was no feasible way out now.

And yet the spiders did not wish to kill him...yet. They began to spin their vile webs all over him, until he was completely covered in it. Afterwards, they began to drag him off somewhere in the darkness. Once again, Marcus could not see anything. They soon began to hoist himself on a wall. Once he was firmly there, the spiders then moved away. Marcus could only shiver in fear of what was going on...the spiders could easily have killed him...he could easily have been eviscerated right there.

But he was still alive.

Why?

A single torchlight then appeared on the top of the dome like cavern that he was in. Soon another was lit...and another...until a good portion of the cave was there. To his horror, Marcus saw Ema, Ron, Emily, Chorin, and William all tied up. They barely seemed to move, with only small twitches and convulsions. The sight was very horrifying for someone who fought so valiantly to try and preserve his friends.

The more horrific sight was the sight of the spiders which had now begun to infest the cavern walls. There was a good thirty of them, though Marcus was not keeping a hard count in his head. It was not just spiders either...as Marcus surmised or prayed that it would not be. There was an aranrider female on the top of the cavern wall, using a single thread from her body to descend to where Marcus was. She had this long black hair, war paint across her eyes to make it look like she had more eyes than she held; as not all aranriders have the multiple eyes of their arachnid cousins...though their fewer eyes were much better. Her arms were smooth, yet muscular...and her lips black as death. In her hands was a black bow, and she held a quiver made of a strange leather that Marcus thought better not to think on what it might be. She glared at Marcus with clear foul intent and licked her lips evilly.

"I knew that I was missing one from our catches." She sneered. "No doubt a malcontent among my den took some of the meat without permission. I don't know whether I should thank you for ending his miserable existence..." She then drew a knife from her pouch and placed it upon his throat. "Or slit your god damn throat here for killing my other children!"

"If you had not shot me..." Marcus sneered back. "I would have fought till I murdered your entire den."

"Bold words for someone now caught within my web." She jeered.

"Bolder for someone who sent her children to do her own dirty work." Marcus countered. The aranrider stood there for a moment, before nodding to Marcus.

"You speak with bravery for someone who is soon to die." She whispered. "I rather like that...humans like you...defiant to the end." She grinned at him, and licked her lips again. "You always end up making the more tasty meals." She then pulled her body up so that her legs were attached to the silk that she had exhumed from her body and then began to crawl up to the ceiling. "And now what to do about you? Should I kill you slowly...maybe rip the flesh off of your body and consume it in front of you? Should I drink your blood until you suffocate as you lay? So many options...so little time..."

"So little time?" Marcus asked.

"Unfortunately..." She jeered back. "Normally...I'd let you fester a day or two and then feast upon your entrails. But as to my fortune and misfortune, you came into my den carrying something littered with darkness. A foul taint upon the light of this wretched kingdom of Tritenia...a darkness not felt in the lands from a century prior." Marcus had a

wave of fear shoot through him. He knew what the aranrider was referring to...and she must have known he knew. "So you know of what I am speaking of...the Tome wielded by the demon of hundred years hence...the Lughglen!"

"How did you know!?" Marcus shouted.

"We were contracted by an agent of the dark army growing in the land." She sneered, laughing evilly at the revelation. "They promised us a glorious feast of the humans of these lands...all of which had driven us away from our homes. In return, we had to find the ones who swiped the tome in the middle of the battle some moons ago. The one who contacted believed that a pair of soldiers who may have been separated from the army might be carrying it...and we simply had to find it. Never did we believe you would end up foolishly right outside our front door!" Now Marcus knew had wrong of a choice it had been to use the cave as an entrance...or at least have explored it further. The cave was in fact the den of the aranrider and her kin...and they had encamped right in front of it! The aranrider saw Marcus learn this revelation and then uttered a foul cachinnation in front of him. "I've already sent a messenger to inform the spy of our success. The only command...was that you were to be left alive."

"Me!?" Marcus shouted. "Why me!?"

"Doesn't matter to me." She said. "These lot will suffice for a meal." Marcus then saw the spiders gathering to where William and the others were laying at.

"You can't!" Marcus shouted, trying to pull himself free of the webs. "Let them go!!"

"Our kind can only survive on meat." She said. "Are you telling me...that we are not permitted to eat?"

"You can't eat them...their people!" Marcus shouted back, in complete desperation. The aranrider saw this and swung over to him on her web. She then took his arm and bite into him. Since her face was like that of a mortal woman, her fangs did not go as deep. But the poison still had the same effect, and Marcus still found himself unable to move. As soon as he went limp, she moved to his ear...and began to whisper. And still the spiders gathered.

"People you say..." She moaned. "Do you not think the ox, the pig, the sheep, and other animals mourn the loss of their kin when they fall by your axes...and your arrows? Is not what I am doing...the same as your entire race? Your race thrives off the domination of others...intelligent or not. Do you think if the animals could all speak and understand like you all...they would weep at the loss of their mothers...their fathers...and all kin gone to feed your stomachs? But because they are dumbfounded and foolish, you believe your actions are justified. My kin survives by the same actions; in fact even more so as we can only consume meat. Your flesh is our means of survival, as well as the flesh any animals...and we feel you are even more dumbfounded and foolish than other animals. If my actions are seen as evil...then your race is just as vile...just like when your kingdom forced us into the very edges of the world and forced us to scavenge to survive..."

"Please..." Marcus moaned. "Spare them..."

"...I think not." She replied. "You care for them do you not?" Marcus merely nodded. "I cared for many of my kind as well...and you will now see what it is like to watch your friends die!" She then leapt onto her web and began to crawl up it. Once she had reached the ceiling, she began to utter this horrid clicking sound, which was her speaking the tongue of spiders. *"Eat them all, and do so quickly...we must present the*

Tome to that UbraRia's agent before he arrives with his servant...and I want this cave presentable!" The spiders fell upon the others like a black tide. One of the spiders bit into a cocoon, as well as others. A muffled scream came from the cocoon, which Marcus believed was Chorin's. The scream was numbing as Marcus watched others began to bite into the cocoons'. Because of the poison, he was unable to turn his head away...all he could do was watch.

THAWCK! A shot rang out and an arrow pierced through the skull of a spider. The spider fell from the ceiling onto the ground. The horrid clicking sound, and the gasps of spiders shout out through the entire area. A second shot came out and another spider fell down. The aranrider looked confused and desperately twitched about to find the source.

"WHAT IS THIS!?" She shouted. WHERE ARE YOU!? SHOW YOURSELF!!"

And the culprit did reveal herself. A bright light...brighter than any torchlight appeared from the cavity of which Marcus had come from. Marcus immediately recognized the visage who appeared from the mouth.

It was Riona Florale herself. She looked a tad different from the Riona he knew...her casual dress and shirt had been replaced with a sleeveless black shirt, a thick brown belt with a silver buckle. Her skirt had been replaced with tight black leather jeans, and brown boots even more worn than his own. She had black sleeveless gloves, and her jewelry and make up was not present aside from her earrings. She held a cloak with a hood bound around her neck, but the hood was down to allow her long hair to flow. She looked more like a ranger than she did a duke's daughter with this attire on. She had multiple knives strapped to her sides, a pair of elvish curved short blades, an elvish Kintar (a single edged sword with no crossguard; often called the Elven Katana), and an eloquent bow made of a white waxed wood. The nimbus of light that illuminated seemed to come from all around her with no source.

"AN ELF!?" The aranrider shouted. "KILL HER!" The aranrider armed her bow and shot at Riona. Riona moved to the side to swiftly dodge the arrow that flew at her. She then notched an arrow of her own and fired back. Unlike the aranrider, Riona's arrow hit. It pierced her hand, causing her to drop the bow she carried.

The other spiders soon descended upon her, yet Riona showed no fear. She quickly strung more arrows into her bow and fired more and more; sometimes two or even three at a time. Many of the spiders were killed before they could even get close to her, and even more injured. Despite Riona's efforts though, she could not stop the tide with her bow alone, and the spiders still approached her.

"RIONA!" Marcus shouted with the last bout of energy he had before he went limp again. "RUN!"

Riona looked up to see Marcus enshrouded in webs. She looked with horror at his appearance.

"MARCUS!" She shouted. She then glared back at the tide, with an anger and hatred Marcus had not seen in eyes since the time he knew her; so much so that she looked as if she bite into her gums if she pressed her teeth harder. She dropped the bow and held her hand off to the side.

There...Marcus watched as Riona's hand was lit ablaze, as this spherical ball of fire coalesced into her hand. Fire appeared around her as well, as if her entire being was lit ablaze...yet she herself appeared to be not harmed from it. It was if the fire surrounding her was just as much her as was her own body. Marcus recognized that Riona was conjuring

some form of fire magic; but was not using wands or a staff to do so. If what Karin had told him about magic was true, then Riona was a blood mage of some form. As the side approached, Riona swung her hands forward and several bolts of flame and fire flung from her into the spiders. The bolts immediately burst and exploded into the spiders, igniting them instantly. Even the sparks that emerged from the explosions caused an entire spider to immolate instantly. The spiders screamed in agony and ran about in multiple directions, in utter agony and terror. Within seconds, the tide of twenty or so spiders was reduced to merely only three or four...with the aranrider as well.

The aranrider looked as if she was in horror and agony from the sudden attack by Riona. Even Marcus was somewhat horrified from Riona's assault. He knew Riona had power...but he had never seen it used on the offense...only in subtle tricks and cantrips. This was a tantalizing yet horrifying visual of how her forest power was used. Riona kept her hands lit ablaze and began to approach the spiders. Any spiders that she passed that writhed in pain alive she slew there with her elvish blades...in a cold display of brutality.

"W...ho...who are you?" The aranrider spoke chillingly.

"I am the daughter of the elvish royal family line of the kings of the Kel-Ford woods...Riona Florale I the heir apparent...daughter to Lordin Florale III, and Lady Gwenlin Florale II." Riona spoke in a resounding regal voice that commanded authority as she walked towards the aranrider. Marcus had never heard her speak like this...he could not tell if she was capable of speaking like this...or if the aranrider had merely invoked a wrath deep within his friend upon her. "I have come to this den to seek out a friend who you hold in captivity, along with companions he had met during his time in the army in the last three weeks. I come here with demands that you will meet, or I will burn the rest of this den with holy fire....collapse it into the earth, and wash it away with water."

The aranrider bit her lip as she looked at her bow. She did not have the time to descend from her web and reach it before Riona could burn her where she stood...or shoot reach it herself and cut off her means of fighting her. There was no telling the other terrible things Riona could do...so she simply moved to the wall and rested herself in a sign of peace.

"Hold lady Riona." She shouted. "I will call for parley if you cease your attack. I will hear your demands."

"Good." Riona barked. "You choose wise. Pray you continue to do so as negotiations begin. I hear that you little time before some...agent arrives...so I shall make this brief." The aranrider seemed even more anxious now. Riona's elf ears had heard of this agent of the dark army's arrival...which meant Riona already knew there was little time to remain here. "My negotiations are simple...you are to return that man...his companions...and all of the gear you have pilfered from them and all other victims to me at once aside from any food that you have stored up...for I would consider it dishonor if I even touched your tainted crug. In return, I will let you live, and what few spawn you have left."

"You would leave us with nothing but food!?" She shouted.

"You have little use for those treasures vermin." Riona shouted back. "You need only food...do you not? You said it yourself. My terms stand at that...you have but thirty seconds...and not a second more...make your choice or die where you stand." Riona's arm was consumed with more fire and flames...and the aranrider knew she was serious.

More or less, she also knew there was little in the way she could do to stop Riona. Riona was some form of mage...and her power was deep and strong. The aranrider lost twenty of her kind in seconds to Riona's power...and she would probably lose more. There was no feasible way out. In a way, she was like Marcus...poisoned and paralyzed on the wall.

...Marcus! Of course...surely the elf would not wish to harm her friend. The aranrider moved her eyes to a trio of spiders who were just within a second or two of Marcus, and made a small slithering noise from her mouth. The aranrider descended towards Riona...still showing a sign of peace. Riona simply looked up for a moment, and then resumed her gaze at the aranrider.

"Very well..." The aranrider said in a cunning confident tone. "I will send what surviving children I have to scour the caves for the gear of these humans and return them to you...then I release the boy and..."

"I demanded the man first; along with his companions." Riona snapped. "You are to release them first..."

"But child..." She moaned.

"I may only be a hundred a twelve...a young child by my people's standards ...but I am not to be addressed as a child by you." She snapped back in an even more authoritative voice. "You will do what I say...or you will die."

As Riona was cursing and making demands with the spiders, two of them were slowly trying to approach Marcus in an effort to hold him hostage to be used against her. A move the aranrider wanted to make, but could not do so without Riona noticing and incurring her wrath. Marcus was beginning to recover from the poison and was noticing the spiders moving towards him. He looked at them with fear as one got it's fangs within striking distance of Marcus.

But despite how slow they had moved, Riona had seen this...for Riona knew how to speak the foul tongue of the spiders, and they had moved too close to the edge of flames, allowing Riona's elven eyes to see them. Where she learned it she did not know...but it was particularly useful in this situation, making known the plan of the aranrider. She invoked two more bolts of flame that hit the spiders, knocking them off of the wall and falling to their doom by the aranrider. Enraged, the aranrider leapt off the cave wall and used her knife to swing at Riona. Riona back-flipped over the sudden counter attack, and backed away to avoid the strong legs of the aranrider. She used her knife wildly, but with finesse to be able to challenge Riona. The other spiders moved in to skewer her, charging furiously with their maws stretched. Riona merely extended her arms forward and impaled both her elvish blades into their skulls, before ducking under the aranrider's stroke. She then drew the elvish katana she had; and engaged in a contest of steel rather than magic. Elvish katanas were similar to the Myridian blades of the same name, but no cross guard and generally longer in length and width. At times she tried to invoke magic, but was unable to move her arms properly, so she merely focused on winning the duel. Their blades clashed, creating sparks and resounding loudly throughout the caves. She blocked and parried each strike against the aranrider...so much so that it drove the creature mad. The attacks were even more erratic when Riona began to push against her, wounding her with multiple slashes and cuts.

At last, Riona struck the aranrider across her chest with a deep wound that spurted much blood, and knocked her to the ground. The creature stood there, writhing in

pain...unable to move...for the weakness of the aranriders was that their human bodies controlled even their spider bodies. If the body was brought low, the whole creature died with it. Riona held her two blades to the creature's neck, as she laid there...moaning in pain...

"My...friends..." She moaned. "You...butchered my...allies..."

"So have you to others..." Riona said coldly. She then moved away from the aranrider and then moved towards the wall that Marcus was on. Riona leapt up to the wall, and began scaling it with an absurd speed. The remaining spiders in the cave had fled out of fear of this elven sorceress, for her power was too great to handle. She moved to where Marcus was and began to cut his binds.

"Marcus...are you alright!?" She begged, cutting his binds frantically. "Oh gods I'm so sorry I'm late...I tried to track you...I really did...I had to backtrack to avoid that orchish army. I really did try to meet with you..."

"Riona..." Marcus groaned. "I'm...poisoned..."

"Right..." She said. "Hold on...I will get you healed...I promise!" She cut down the webbing that held Marcus and held him in her arms as she did. Riona held onto him for minutes...embracing him tightly, running her hands through his bangs. After a few moments and wiping away an errant tear, she pulled him to the ground. She soon through perseverance and through magic released the others from the cocoons.

"...why..." moaned the aranrider. "Wh...y do...they get to live...and w...e....die?" Riona looked to see the dying lamentations of the aranrider as she moaned in pain. Marcus was able to hear them as well...and although he was steadily losing consciousness. And as he did, a pity began to wallow inside him. "...*just like when your kingdom pushed us into the very edges of the world and forced us to scavenge to survive.*" Marcus had heard of Tritenia pushing back mindless creatures into fell and deep parts of the world to protect its people and other lands. But this aranrider was different. Not only that it seem she was sobbing at her impending death, but she seemed to truly lament her position...being forced to scavenge to survive. Her position truly appeared to be pitiful...and one that wallowed Marcus with an overwhelming desire to spare her

"Wretched creature..." Riona sneered, dropping Marcus gently onto the ground and drawing her elvish blade. "Can you not bleed faster...or shall I deliver you unto death myself!?"

"Riona...spare...her..." Marcus moaned.

"What!?" Riona barked, looking at Marcus.

"Please..." Marcus moaned. "I...beg you...spare...her..."

And then Marcus fell asleep and knew no more.

Chapter 10 – Awakening at the abandoned Edor

Marcus dreamed. The dream of which he had was unlike any dreams that he had felt. He did not understand why...only that he knew something was different. It almost felt like he was in the middle of another bewitching dream caused by Lughglen.

But that there was something different...almost celestial about it.

He was in the middle of a town...that seemed to be lit ablaze...surrounded by the bodies of many enemies. He did not know who they were...only that they had tried to take his life; or at least what he perceived. He felt more were coming, but that he had time. His sword was in hand, his shield as well...his clothing had been seared and torn, and his face bloodied.

A silhouette approached him...one that was very familiar. He could identify who it was, only that its body suggested a woman. A wave of fear and betrayal surrounded him as he did.

And then he awoke.

The sun blinded him completely as he saw it, staggering his eyes as they tried to point out what they were looking at. He appeared to be facing a clear sky with only a wisp or two of a cloud in sight. When he moved his head to the right side, he saw that he was looking out towards a glade of trees far off in the horizon with a cherry blossom or two in the distance. A lake lay in front his vision with wetlands further up, with grass and wild flowers all around. Birds chirped all around him as he felt the wilderness all around him. Far into the back were large green rolling hills. The sight was far more tranquil than what he had felt over the course of the last three weeks.

When he turned his head upwards, he found himself looking into Ema's face. The sight of her sudden appearance made him nearly shriek, but he found himself resetting himself when he felt a ache in his arm and side.

"Ugghhh..." He moaned.

"Settle down." Emma said comfortingly. "You are not in the best of health right now. You're looking at some small fractures and several gaping wounds. Not to mention the numerous spider poison that was in you at one point. Thanks to Riona, I was able to concoct an panacea for it and purge your system of it. You should..."

"Gods..." Marcus interrupted, looking at Emma. Emma stopped as Marcus reached out his hand to caress her face. "Your...your alive...oh gods your alive..."

Emma stood there...stupefied that Marcus showed such care and affection for her despite the short time they knew each other. She considered Marcus a friend, but for him to be this worried over her sake...especially since she had fewer injuries as compared to him. Marcus stood there, keeping his hand on her...and even fighting back a tear or two. "I tried..." He moaned. "I tried so hard...I thought when I failed...I...I..." He continued to lay there, moaning about his failure. Emma stood there for a few more moments, before smiling affectionately, and placing her hand on his own.

"Yes..." Emma whispered, nearly about to cry herself. "I'm here...with you..."

He laid there as long as he could before falling asleep again.

It took Marcus several more hours before he was finally on his feet. He faintly remembered talking to Emma, but will admit he could not remember specifics of what he did. When asked if he did anything to offend her, Emma shook her head and said “You both made me and yourself feel better before you slept.” From there, he knew he did not have little to worry about with her and was able to move around on his own accord in peace.

This is what had happened from what he managed to gather from Emma. After dealing with the aranrider, Riona pulled the others out of the cavern and used her power to heal their life-threatening wounds. Gathering from that, it seemed Riona was skilled with both magics of Fire and Healing. Afterwards (true to her word against the aranrider) she looted the spider’s den belongings (which according to Ron was quite the haul) until the coffers there were empty. She was unable to carry it all back, so she merely carried as much as she could, burying the rest until she had relocated the party to somewhat safer haven.

That haven was an abandoned inn on a small road reaching towards the town of Golidoz in the West...a trading hub known throughout the Westernfold. The inn was abandoned and in disrepair with hundreds of footprints around it; more than likely as a result of the rampaging orcs that had come from there. It had all the amenities; a common room, a bar, several hallways, and bedrooms for all. Supplies wise though, it had been looted so there were little left to take; other than what the raiders could not haul. It must have been a high class inn for Marcus saw luxuries such as a balcony that overlooked the glade, a garden, and even an outhouse. When questioned about Golidoz, it appeared that the party of monsters went out of their way to evade the town’s patrols. *“It might have been a flank of the besieging creatures that might not have had the numbers to besiege the city...that or their intent was the Tome itself.”* Riona had seen caravans on her travel that were bringing cargo from Golidoz to other towns, which meant the trade town still stood. She had established a contact even that would bring them transport to the town some days from now once everyone was well enough for travel.

Once Emma had been brought onto her feet, Riona returned to the cave and collected the remaining treasure along with the gear of the others. She continued to steal it all until the aranrider had been left with nothing but rotting corpses of her children and allies, and anything Riona thought would insult her in leaving behind. The whole process had taken her at least eight days, during which most of the others had slept through. While eight days seemed like a minuscule amount of time, and her effort infeasible to have done in it, Marcus had physically seen her power; and wondered if her being able to accelerate that process was another flicker of her power. Whether this was true or not was never answered...and Marcus was too grateful to pry.

Food was not a concern for Riona had brought plenty of preserved grains, fruits, cakes, bread, vegetables, and even fish. Anything she did not have she could forage and hunt; and she was no slouch when it came to performing either of these tasks. Emma had seen during when Marcus was feverishly asleep Riona shoot a deer from the inn they were at, and even Emma’s eyes could not pick out where the deer had been...only that Riona went out and returned with it sometime later. And when food or anything related to aspect of supplies from nature truly seemed to become an issue, Riona always just...”happened” to find whatever she needed at the time.

As to what the elf had been doing...she had mostly been doing civic duties around the inn; and to the others while awaiting their recovery to send word to the caravan. Riona mostly worked in the kitchen, cooking and preparing stews and pleasant smelling foods, as

well as finding and pilfering herbs from the wilds to help Emma prepare medicines that the party would need to deal with their run ins with the spiders. On whenever she found a break, she would practice with her weapons, and even beautifully play a small harp that she had brought with. Though not all went as she had expected, much to Marcus' enjoyment. Riona had attempted to clean the inn to, only to make it marginally worse in appearance than before, frustrating her to no end. While Riona had the power to make mending's on wooden and metallic items, she didn't know the intricacies of how certain tools were made; and often made them unusable by accident.

As for the others, Ron, Emily, William, and Chorin were all awake and moving about. While they were poisoned at one point, the doses they had were small as well as their injuries...and not amplified by fighting off the spiders like Marcus. He was honestly the worst off of the group when it came to comparing injuries. At this point, Ron and the others were relieved that no further harm would come to them.

Riona was a welcome sight to the group.

Marcus walked around the inn. His first priority was to talk to Riona herself. Not only because he had truly a great affection for her, but to know her reasons. She had claimed that she had been tracking them...her reasons she did not disclose...she seemed to ecstatic on getting him out and alive. He searched around the inn till he came to a open room that might have been once a balcony, where she was trying to use what was set up as a make shift close line to hang up. She must have seen him coming because she immediately reached for looked like a towel and wrapped it around her body; to which Marcus realized that she was just in her small clothes...and possibly not even. Riona looked at him, flustered and embarrassed, frantically removing other garments from the clothes line...which appeared to be woman's undergarments.

"Ma...Marcus!" She gasped.

"Ri...Riona!" He snapped, turning around red and flustered. "My...my apologies! I did not think you were indecent!"

"I...I did not expect you to be up and about!" Riona said, her back turned to him to keep him from seeing any of the small clothes she had taken. "You...must excuse me! I cannot have you see me like this! We are not wed!" She then frantically fled off to the side and into another room where she had disappeared into. Marcus could feel his blood boiling from the sight of Riona without her clothes on. While he knew such thoughts were offensive, Riona was beautiful girl; and he could not help but think of her in such a way. At times, he wondered if she thought of him in such a fashion. The body language she would use on him sure would suggest that she had an attraction to him; especially on certain occasions.

Eventually Riona emerged from the room she had fled to, wearing now a simple white robe around her body. She walked over so silently that Marcus could not hear her, mostly because he was still wrestling with his integrity and the image of Riona nearly without a thread on her body. Noticing that he was in this state, Riona made her move and brought Marcus closer to her.

"Gotcha!" She said, nearly causing Marcus to leap out of his boots. As soon as he recoiling had finished, he turned to her, and she jumped into his arms. "It's wonderful to see you my friend! I have missed you a great deal!"

"An...and I too!" He said, still in surprise, embracing her back. "I hope you will forgive me for my intrusion."

“...Perhaps I will... or perhaps I will not.” She said, breaking away from him and moving to his side. “If I might impose, are you still keeping my indecent visage in your mind?”

“Umm...” Marcus moaned with discomfort. Riona did not let finish and placed her finger on his mouth.

“I suppose that is all I needed...you naughty boy.” She snapped, still keeping her usual smile on her face. “Then again...maybe I wanted you to see me like that, and reacted that way to tease you...or perhaps I am planning to slit your throat for seeing me like that.”

“I suppose I should hope for the former.” He said with a sly tone in his voice. Riona reacted in the same way by shooting him a sly smile. “It almost sounds like under different circumstances you would enjoy and want me to see you like that.”

“Maybe I do...” She said, putting her arms around Marcus neck. For a moment, she held him tightly, putting his head within inches of her face. And as she stood there, locking eyes with him as the wind pushed his bangs across his face, and her hair flowing behind her. And then she leaned as if to give him a kiss...to which Marcus leaned in as well.

Only to find her finger in between her and his lips.

“But...” She said. “I am no bed swerver...and wish to preserve myself as all women should until I find a husband...and we are hardly in a place even remotely romantic; would you agree?”

Marcus bit his lips in frustration. For once he was this close to the girl he was enamored with...and even still she continued to tease him. He could tell she had feelings for him...but Riona was always a difficult one to gauge.

“Until marriage you say...” He moaned in frustration.

“Well...if the timing was right, and he had more silver in your tongue, I might be inclined to let one who wants me have me beforehand.” Riona sneered in almost a sultry manner. “And while you have an inkling of silver in it, I’d dare say the timing does not seem right with being lost in the wilderness, hunted by a mysterious enemy within your own country’s army.”

“You speak much truth...” Marcus said. “I must say...you were the last person I would expect to see out here...forgive me for saying so boldly.”

“And forgiven you are; as circumstances would normally prevent me from being so far out in the wilderness with no escort for miles.” She said back. “I’m sure once my father discovered my absence, he would have been quite irate. More than likely he has dispatched my head maid Alexia to find me...and once she does (as she always does), I will be returned to him...and who knows how the other royals of your lands are taking to the duchess heir to be missing.”

“Discovered your absence...” Marcus repeated from Riona’s words.

And then he realized something. Riona did not do this with her father’s permission; hell probably without Lord Aron’s permission as well. She was the only daughter to that of the elven duke who was here...and quite overprotective from what Riona had implied on many occasions. She had not come here because she was sent...she had come here of her own volition.

And that might have sent the royal family in all sort of hell to look for her.

“You...you left without permission!?” Marcus shouted in notable concern.

“Of course...do you not know me?” She asked playfully. “If I would try to escape a social convention between your families just to go to an inn and drink cheap red wine with a

dear friend, do you really put it past me to go on a journey to find him; especially being given an opportunity to stick it to my father's stern attitude of his?"

"I...I suppose not!" Marcus shouted. "But...this truly seemed like an unwise move on your part?"

"Is it though?" Riona asked. "I had a sense when you left that you would be in danger. I heard things from the lands around us...foul terrible things were running on the plains in your direction. I heard it in the water...the air...the animals...and the sun. So...was it truly amiss for me; knowing the Tritenian army who have had no knowledge of premonitions of the elven duchess heir of the Kel-Ford woods, knowing they would not believe her...take matters into her own hands to save her dear friend...who means too much to her?"

Marcus stood there. She knew exactly what might have been transpiring around the borders of the Westernfold; or had morsel of knowledge of what was going on. Master Knight would have not been around, the only ones around town would be the few Captains in charge. Lord Aron was not fit to command or ride anymore since his retirement, with that now being handled by his son. Even if they had believed her, it would have been doubtful they could have done something. She knew the risks...both politically and physically. And yet, because of her nature, she choose what she knew best.

What gave her freedom; if but a moment.

"No...not it is not." Marcus said somberly.

Riona merely smiled as she usually did. However, she did not carry her face like that for long. She eventually frowned and looked at him with a serious look in her eye.

"Marcus..." She asked. "Why are you carrying this?"

Riona went off to the side of the room, and pulled something in a white linen cloth. She then unveiled it, causing a wave of fear to enshroud Marcus' mind...along with her own. However, just like before, Marcus only felt it for a moment, where as it took Riona several moments to compose herself; throwing the cloth back over the Tome.

"I shalln't ever get used to that." She muttered. "The Lughglen...how did you get this?"

"Long story." Marcus said.

"Probably a very enlightening tale." Riona said. She then turned to where Marcus had come from, and began to look at the door with strange intent. After a moment, she called out in that direction. "You can come out now...I can hear your breathing."

"Agh..." A voice squeaked from behind the wall. For a moment, nothing happened. After a few more seconds though, Emma's shy head peered from behind the wall. She was dressed in more casual attire; albeit filthy from mud and grime. Beyond that though, she looked better than she had in days; probably had been sleeping for quite a bit where she earlier had little. "Ummm...sorry..."

"For what...eavesdropping?" Riona asked, extending out a friendly hand. "Nothing to be ashamed of. Come now...come here." Emma looked at Riona with an intimidated look for a moment, but then slowly made her approach to Riona. Once she got in proximity of her, she sat down right next to her. "See...you have nothing to fear."

"I...I know..." Emma muttered. "It...it's just..."

"Just what?" Riona asked.

"You...you just seem so...commanding." Emma said softly.

“Commanding!?” Riona exclaimed, laughing heartily. “That is the first time anyone has ever called me that!”

“Truly?” Emma asked.

“Indeed.” Riona said, sliding over to Emma. “I may be a noble elf girl, but I have act very forlorn compared to my peers...so much so that no one takes me seriously.”

“Truly?” Marcus and Emma asked; nearly in the same instance.

“Truly.” Riona said, with some of the usual fervor she had in her voice declining. She then shook her head. “I don’t act like a proper elven lady by any measure. I think I shamed my father on more than one occasion in my lifetime; mostly of my own accord.” She then sighed audibly. “I don’t honestly mean to...there’s just many things about a noble household I honestly don’t seem to enjoy. It is nice being wealthy...but also lonely.” Marcus looked at Riona with surprise. She was never really one to open up to him like this to him. Riona must have sensed that and then turned to him with a small smile. “Never thought someone like me would have her own troubles did ya”

“Not really.” Marcus said.

Riona smiled to him brightly, but then focused her attention back on the Lughlen. “So...how did you come to acquire this?” She asked.

“I’d like to know that too.” Emma asked. “Is this why you beseeched us to flee into the wilderness?”

“Umm...” Marcus said, not wanting to admit it. But Emma approached him and shook her head.

“You need not feel shy in answering.” She said, smiling as she did.

Marcus, breathed a small sigh of relief and then said. “Yes...that was the primary reason.”

“I see.” Emma said, pushing Marcus’ arms down to his sides. “So they were after the tome...we couldn’t let whoever was leading them have it.”

“No you could not have.” Riona said, turning to look back at the Tome.

“The tome had been captured by a squadron of soldiers handpicked by Master Knight with the followers of several religions who serve under Esruweh’s banner.” Marcus said. “That is what I gathered at the assize that took place in the North Pass. We were to transport this to Aldin; and then to the Capitol city to store it away...until a method to destroy it remained. Our patrol was attacked, and the Tome separated from Constantine. I took it and fled the army to prevent the invaders from laying claim to it.”

“I see...” Riona muttered. “If everything I have read about it true, then that indeed was the best course of action.”

“Do you know what it can do?” Marcus asked. “We overheard a conversation between Master Knight, Father Constantine, and few Tritenian royals, but we do not know what it can do.”

“Oh...I am not so ignorant to this book.” Riona said softly.

“You know what it is!?” Marcus asked in surprise.

“Of course...my father is a known scholar of magical artifacts...both in myth and legend.” Riona said. “I regret to say my knowledge of it is limited; there are few recorded passages of its existence. But his library is extensive and deep...and I have snuck in there multiple times to find such interesting reads. He possesses most of the writings of Archmage Zalenski.”

“Archmage Zalenski?” Marcus asked. He recognized the name from the words of many Mage Knights he served with. Archmage Zalenski was a famed sorcerer in the Rezoilian area. He was a very knowledgeable man, whose magical career focused on magical artifacts and their histories. He wasn’t the most powerful mage; as much as he was more than likely the smartest. He was also a master duelist who was the only one who could hold to Master Knight in a duel for longer than a minute. “He knows about the Lughglen?”

“He wrote a few chapters on it in his compilation of known magical artifacts.” Riona said. “The Lughglen is a powerful white magical tome that easily exceeds a Tier Nine artifact. It is a legendary tome that contains the writings of the Reality Bender, a mage of such cosmic proportions that exceed some low ranking deities. He who possesses the Lughglen possesses the knowledge and power of the one who wrote it. “

Marcus and Emma looked at Riona in surprise.

“How do you know all of that, but those people in the meeting did not?” Emma asked.

“Probably because you humans are so fragile and live so little, you are bound to not have learned as much as my people who can live for many centuries more.” Riona said playfully. “I mean no offense, our fleshs are merely different is all.”

“Tier Nine?” Emma asked.

“Tier Nine...” Riona replied. “It is a reference to the Asnom scale of magical leagues...the scale you humans wrote to determine the power and capability of any magical object or spell. The convenience of the scale and the writings of the laws behind it made it so most wizards and spell users (even among our people) use it. There are tiers set at one through to ten...one being as simple as a magical sword that creates harder impacts, harder to break, and lighter to carry. Ten being as powerful as to move the sun and stars themselves.”

“Whoa...” Emma groaned with surprise. “Such magic can do that!?”

“Supposedly.” Riona said. “I’ve never seen such power before.”

“Really!?” Emma asked curiously. “But...you’re like so old...”

Marcus felt a chill go down his spine when she said that, though he did not know why. Emma seemed to sense it to as she immediately tensed up. Their answers came moments later when he saw Riona’s eyebrows become cross (despite her pleasant smile being there), and what he perceived to be a vein near the top of her eye. In a moment’s flash, Riona grabbed Emma’s tail and began to pull hard on it, and placed her foot on Emma’s back...knocking her down to the ground. And still she smiled.

“I’m going to forgive you for calling me old but this one time.” She said, pulling on Emma’s tail. “Though I am indeed a hundred years your senior and your statement makes sense, I am still angered whenever a mortal, or even one of my own makes such a statement.”

“AAAHHHHHH!!!” Emma screamed. “QUIT PULLING MY TAIL!!!” The sight was taxing from what he saw that he fell to the floor in fear.

“*By the gods, she’s a monster!*” Marcus screamed in his head.

“My pride as a woman and the fact I am still youthful by my people’s age commands that!” Riona shouted. “So please refrain from calling me as such in the future!”

“OKAY I WILL!!!” Emma screamed. “UNCLE....UNCLE!!!”

“Good girl...” Riona said, releasing her. Emma scrambled to Marcus’ side, embracing him with her arms across him. Both of them were shaking nervously as Riona looked at them, her vein still there...and still smiling.

“You...your friend is terrifying!” Emma said stuttering.

“I’ve seen more sides of her than I thought I would today...” Marcus muttered back.

Several footsteps were heard walking over to where the group was. Riona and Marcus turned to see Ron and the others walking towards them. Even Captain William was there among them. As soon as they saw Marcus, with his strength regained, they all ran over to him (except for William...he just watched from the door while the younger lads and lass ran passed him).

“Ron!” Marcus shouted. “Emily...Chorin!”

“Marcus...you walk among the living once again!” Ron shouted, running over to him and sliding to his side.

“Welcome back my friend.” Chorin said as he sat down next to him.

“I saw your spearwork against the spiders, even when drugged with their venom!” Emily shouted as she went over him, embracing him from behind. “I’ve not seen a swordsman able to use a spear as well as me!”

“My friends...” Marcus said, choking back his emotions as they all gathered around him. “It’s so good to see all of you! I had feared the worse when I had been beaten back.”

“So did we.” Emily moaned, continuing to hug Marcus tighter. “When we came to, Emma was working so feverishly to keep you alive. You looked terrifying...you truly did. You almost looked...”

“Dead?” Marcus asked.

“We...well I wouldn’t put it like that!” Emily said, backing away and shaking her hands to dismiss the notion further. “Just maybe in a coma or something similar...It’s...it’s not like I was worried about you or anything!! I knew you would bounce back after that brave display of yours!”

“Strange...” Emma said, with a cocky look in her face. “At times I thought you were at his bedside more than me and Riona...asking the same question of “will he make it!”” Emily looked at Emma with a wave of betrayal and disgust.

“YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH YOU SNITCHING BRAT!” She screamed. The others looked at Emily who was clearly trying to hide her concern from Marcus. Even Marcus joined in the laughter as well.

“Emily...I did not think you were capable of showing such concern...” He said. Emily turned to him with a look of anger in her face that matched Riona’s.

“Want to take another three day nap!?” She shouted evilly.

Marcus gazed at Emily with a look of concern. She very well looked like she would inflict similar lacerations and blows that the spiders did in a few moments.

“You do that Emily...” Riona interrupted. “And you might find you will sleep much longer than that when you deal with me.” Emily looked at Riona who still stood there smiling. She then shot Emily this evil look...one that made Emily tremble and back away from her, and the rest of the group. She then looked to Ron. “Ron...did you fill that basin as I had asked?”

“You mean that pool in the bathhouse?” He asked. “I did...but most of the firewood here is soggy and worthless...”

“They’ll be no need.” Riona said, pulling herself up. “I will handle the fire.”

“Basin?” Marcus asked.

“Well...” Riona replied, looking at Marcus. “We are filthy from our time moving in the wilds, as well as our clothes. This inn has a bathhouse and I do believe we should make use of it. After all...a solid bath would do us all good. Wash our bodies and our troubles away! Follow me all...I will handle the rest. And afterwards, I will prepare us quite a meal...I have a stew that I have been meaning to make; and I finally found enough ingredients to do so. Come on...chop chop!”

Riona then moved her arms to cohere the people who were in the room out of it. Marcus himself got up and pulled Emma to her feet. She brushed off her skirt and then began to follow. “A bath sounds so amazing...” Emily moaned in delight as she walked onward.

As Marcus did, he felt someone grab his arm, preventing his movement. He looked to his side to see William holding his arm tightly. As with his instincts gained from his physical training, Marcus saluted him and merely stood there until he said anything otherwise. William held him there until the others had gone and vanished further inward.

It was only after all had gone away that William began to speak.

“I heard what you did, and how you handled yourself in the wilderness.” He said.

“Yes sir.” Marcus replied.

“I always knew you had a good sword arm...” he continued. “But I always thought of you fleak when it came to burdening the lives of men on your back.” He glared at him with a look that almost pierced Marcus’ soul.

And then...he smiled.

“Way to prove me wrong lad!” William shouted loudly, placing his hand on his shoulder and laughing. “Never before have I heard a tale of such bravery. No private of mine would pull off the stunts you did.”

“Ahh...ah thank you sir.” He responded, still saluting. “Bu...but the true heroine of this is Lady Riona. She was the one who freed us from the spider’s grasp.”

“Aye...that she did.” William said, nodding in approval. “Bit of a daggel tail that one is, but she makes up being a bellibone. But you...you still have to be thanked. If you hadn’t made that call in the battle to flee, all of us would have been run down. I certainly wouldn’t have made that call. I prefer to fight my battles with utter zealotry...I don’t believe in defeat. A cowardly call you made...but the right one. Much better that could be said for me.”

“Thank you sir.” Marcus said back.

“...I look forward to seeing your calls from this point forward.” William said, walking away from Marcus. “Who would have guessed you actually amounted to anything...”

“Thanks a lot sir...” Marcus groaned, walking alongside him.

The group gathered in the bathhouse. The bathhouse itself was merely a small room in the inn with a large bowl like basin in the center that could fit up to four people. Around the room were smaller stools, glass mirrors on the side, and shelves that may have once held shampoos and soaps. Most of these said items lay broken and battered; but a few still seemed to stand. Marcus saw Ron putting in a pail of water into the basin, before putting the pail off to the side.

“Well...that should do it.” He said. “So Riona...how do you plan to provide us a hot bath?”

“As simple as dealing with the spiders.” She responded. She waved her left hand in front of her. All around the group, they felt the heat rise and become tense. Soon what looked like strings of flame appeared from distortions in space and fled into Riona’s hand. Many of the companions shrieked in terror; as none had witnessed Riona’s power as Marcus had. The fire gathered and formed a small sphere, of which continued to grow as more flames gathered. Soon the distortions disappeared, and the fire stopped gathering, leaving Riona with a burning sphere in her hand. She pressed the palms of her hand together, which caused the fire to roll into a small ball; as if it was clay. She then pressed further into it, until it was merely a pebble. A red glowing pebble. Riona showed the glowing pebble to everyone; allowing Emma and Emily to go closer (but no others).

She then walked over to the water, and dropped the pebble in. The water where it landed erupted into a column of steam, which then spread in the entire basin. Riona turned to the others.

“I believe our bath is ready.” Riona said.

“...magic is so cool.” Ron muttered.

“Well what are we waiting for!?” Chorin shouted. He didn’t get far into the room. Riona grabbed the door and shut it in front of him causing him to run straight into it face first; and barring himself, Ron, Marcus, and William out. The only ones in the room were the girls, with Riona’s head peaking out of the door, who seemed to have dropped the robe she had been covered with from earlier.

“Sorry boys...” Riona teased. “It was by a woman’s hands that this gift was given...so it shall be women who get the first feel of it. You will be good boys and await your turn; and if you value your honor...among other things about yourselves, you will do wise to wait till we are clothed and have exited this room. I have but exceptional hearing, as well as our dear Emma does. Anyone who even tries to take peak at us in our most vulnerable and exposed states; know that I will know your identities...and you will not walk away from such an offense standing straight. I have shown you but a glimpse of my power...and I will be glad to show you more in a much...more...physical way.”

The guys looked at Riona and nodded to affirm they understood her threat quite clearly. William was the only one who did not nod, for William was not afraid of Riona; or if he was, he did not show it. Truth be told, he was more afraid of what his wife would do to him if she discovered such an infidelity; not necessarily at what would happen to him immediately if he did.

“You tell’em Lady Riona!” Emily shouted. Her slacks could be seen thrown across the opening of the door as Riona continued to stare at the men, turning away to address Emily.

“You need not call me Lady here; as I have told you before.” She replied. “I am not your lady of this realm.”

“I mean you’re still royalty of another land though right?” Emma asked from within the room.

“Yes; but I have no desire to be addressed formally among friends.” Riona said. “I despise my friends calling me Lady.”

“Friends don’t pull other friend’s tails.” Emma retorted.

“Or call their friends old!” Riona snapped back, closing the door and shutting the door.

The men were now on the other side, to do whatever duties they could in the inn until it was their turn.

Chapter 11 –Day of relaxation

The men waited for patiently for their turn to go into the bath that Riona laid out for them. While William decided to scavenge the inn for whatever mead and supplies for their future journey he could find, Marcus and the others decided to patrol the inn around the area.

“Those girls know we bathed with them before in the barracks right?” Chorin asked with a look of disappointment.

“No one has a choice in that regard.” Marcus retorted. “We’re not in the barracks right now; and certainly not Riona.”

“Ignore him; I’m sure Chorin is merely stating his lecherous desires out loud with no shame.” Ron muttered, with Chorin eventually turning his head down low. “That she elf is something else...Riona was her name?”

“Yeah.” Marcus replied. “Lady Riona Florale the I.”

“She speaks to you as if you and she have had a kinship.” Ron inquired. “Do you two know each other?”

Know her? He practically loved her. From the four years he spent in Aldin, she was the very reason he would often try to awaken at a proper time, to hear her voice, to laugh at her string of disobediences that she would do, to drink with her, and at times even place his hands on her skin. He had not felt this way about a woman in quite a long time (since Karin to be exact)...and he often cursed himself that he had chosen a woman who was so far above him title wise. However, he relished in the fact she herself showed many times and places where she also seemed to have feelings for the young soldier.

“Uhh...Marcus...” Ron interrupted his thoughts. Marcus stood there realizing he had been day dreaming, and then shook his head.

“Sorry... yeah I know her very well.” Marcus replied. “She’s probably the best friend I have back in the town of Aldin.”

“How on earth did you manage to meet a girl so far out of your league like that!?” Chorin asked. “I’d kill for a she elf of that beauty to talk to me.”

Marcus snickered. Clearly Chorin was not adept when it came to talking to any form of woman. He then turned away from them and reminisced on the past.

“It was last year when an entourage of elves came to the town of Aldin...taller in stature than me and other soldiers.” Marcus began. “There were not many of them...a richly ornamented elf who I later found to be one of the duke to the Kel Ford woods realm. He had several guards; all adorned with their gold like armor, long bows, and elvish weapons. There were some civil servants, a few maids and manservants. There was one elf though, more petite than the rest...standing out from the others. She was hooded and cloaked at the time at the time, so her appearance I could not see, but she seemed to look in my direction. Her face, far more beautiful than any face I had seen among the entourage. She waved to me in a friendly manner, and I waved back. That’s all I saw of her for days.”

“And then what?” Ron asked.

“...It was some weeks later that I had apprehended someone who was pilfering from a nearby market.” Marcus continued. “I saw the man and pursued him across town; until in an alley in between some hovels and the building where Riona had been staying at. The man in question was a youth...a boy who had stolen some wheat to feed his family, as his father could not work from an injury at the time, and he and his mother had been

starving. At first I did not believe him, but the boy's mother had found us and verified his story. I then was wallowed up with a pity and sadness for them...and at the risk of my job, I let the boy go; and even loaned him some of my pay to get food. I asked them to pay me back...but I did not believe that would have come to pass. Anyway, moments afterward, I heard a clamor above me and found this elven girl falling and asking me to catch her. Her skirts were being pushed up against the wind, and she was holding them back; and her hair had been blown out of place. When I asked where she came from, she implored me to come with her into town, claiming bad men were after her."

"That sounds rather farfetched." Chorin snorted.

"My tale or her's?" Marcus asked.

"Both." He said.

Marcus shrugged his shoulder. Chorin had a point in his claim. Truth be told though, Marcus' tale was not fallacious.

"Well...even if my tale was false, would you like to hear the end of it?" He asked.

"It is certainly more entertaining than walking around this inn hoping for something to happen." Chorin said.

"Please don't say that..." Ron interrupted. "I've had enough of an experience in the spider's den. Continue Marcus."

Marcus nodded and then continued. "It did not take me long to surmise she truly had no one after her...and she caught that I suspected that and apologized. She then introduced herself as Lady Riona Florale I. I was astonished and frightened, and bowed to her, but she refused to have me do that. Although I am a royal to the elves, I am not one to you. You may look upon me as a friend. When I asked why, she had told me that in the Kel-Ford woods, few elves would treat the younger man with the mercy and compassion as I did. And because of that, I had earned her interest as she said. I suppose you could say me and her went on a date per say...it certainly seemed like one as such. We did everything one would expect...went to a park, went to Diagoi's inn for some food, even went outside of the walls to see the forest. We even exchanged some very flirtatious comments between the two of us. Eventually her father's guards caught us...and nearly had me impounded for what they perceived was kidnapping her. But Riona informed the guards that she departed of her own will...and I had nothing to do with it. Ever since then, Riona would constantly leave the governor's area just to see human culture in front of her, visit me, and to cause her father much aches and pains."

"Didn't get a chance to bed her I see." Chorin joked, which nearly made Marcus lose his balance and fall onto the floor. Ron was able to hold him down and keep on his feet.

"Don't mind Chorin; for a woman would not look at him even if he called their attention." Ron said "Her father must be a patient man to deal with her."

"I think he has little choice." Marcus corrected. "From what I understand, she is the only daughter that he has. Her mother died after a disease made her bedridden for days. And she told her father is too prideful to take another wife or adopt...leaving Riona as his only heir."

"Does she hate her father?" Chorin asked.

"Loves him to death she said." Marcus replied. "She just likes to stick it to his stern attitude of his...as she told me."

There wasn't much more of the tale about his and Riona's first meeting and meetings onward to tell afterwards, so Marcus and the others continued their patrol. Eventually, they passed by the bathroom where Riona's head emerged from the door.

"Hello boys..." She said. "We are nearly done and out of the basin. We have no towels so are just waiting for bodies to dry from the heat."

"Is it still hot?" Marcus asked.

"Oh that spell I weaved into the water will last for hours; or until I bid otherwise." Riona said, winking. "It'll be just as warm even with us having spent a half hour in it...though the quicker you get in the better."

"How much longer?" Ron asked.

"Not much more." Riona began.

She was interrupted by a small scream from Emily and Emma. Riona turned to the two to discern what they were yelling at, where as Marcus and the others went to the door.

"Wha...what's going on!?" Marcus shouted.

"THERE IT IS!!" Emily shouted, ignoring Marcus. "KILL IT!!" Again, she screamed loudly, reaching Marcus and the other's ears.

Without thinking, Marcus, Ron, and Chorin dove into the room. They looked around the room and noticed a family of rats was moving from one end of the room to the other. Emma and Emily after the guys busted in took their notice away from the rats and the fact they were sitting on the stools without even a thread on their bodies, and immediately used their hands to cover themselves (Emma with her tail in addition to this; whereas Riona fled behind the door, poking her head out to see what they were screaming about). Once they realized what they were screaming about was nothing but a trivial matter, a chill went through each of their spines (even with the humidity in their bodies) as they turned to see the girls.

"M...MARCUS!" Emma shouted. "RON!"

"E...Emma!" Marcus shouted.

"Sister; you are indecent!" Ron shouted.

"She's not actually your sister ya know!" Chorin shouted.

"We know; get out already you lecherous knaves!" Emma shouted, extending her claws on her hands, her tail covering her chest, and her other hand picking up a wooden bowl which she hurled right Ron. The object beamed Ron right in the fact which caused him to recoil out of the room and fall over, his nose bleeding. The punishment did not end there as Emily picked up a nearby broom and aimed it at Chorin.

"You...are going to pay for ever looking upon my naked body!" She screamed. She then used the broom as if it was a spear, hitting Chorin right in the groin. He recoiled back the same as Ron, though he ended up laying against the wall on the other side and collapsing. Neither of the girls stopped there when it came to avenging their honor, but Marcus stood there...frozen like a statue with his hands on his eyes. As he did, Riona snuck towards, moving to his ear. When she got there, she began to whisper.

"I forgive you of this offense, for I know you and how you act...but I don't think they will so easily. Best flee now while the other two suffer their wrath before they turn to you...and pray they...and I...forget."

Marcus stood there, shaking for a moment more before taking a gulp of air. As Emily and Emma continued to thrash the helpless others, Marcus took this moment to exit the bath, retiring to common room.

It took awhile for the men to explain their actions, and nothing further came unto them from the girls, other than distasteful stares and obvious contempt. Both Emily and Emma had much less spite towards Marcus; for even Emma noticed he put his hands over his eyes whereas the others did not. When William was informed of the situation, he merely laughed heartily and told the younger men they were fools for acting so rashly; and lucky that the girls did not castrate them there. The men shared their bath (with William leaving earlier), and then went to the commons for dinner after hanging up their laundry.

Riona was already away in the kitchen with a hearty stew being prepared. Emma and Marcus were in the kitchen, learning from Riona her secrets for cuisine. She was preparing a hearty stew consisting of deer meat and numerous vegetables and staples. She also was preparing Emma had caught earlier as well. William was bringing out whatever mugs he could begin serving ale. The rest were merely waiting for the meal to be brought out.

“Riona that smells divine.” Emma said, using her powerful nose. “I can feel my muscles relaxing from just its scent alone.”

“If we were only in town, I could prepare something even more divine than this.” Riona said, chopping up herbs and celery and then placing it into the stew. “I’d have more access to spices and other meats around the land. As to learning this on the road, you eventually do get sick of trail rations and other travel foods...learning to cook with ingredients in the wilds comes naturally...after some experimentation of course. Not all my meals came out like this in the beginning I will tell you truthfully. Some were just absolutely dreadful. Emma...hand me those peppers and my mead.”

“Sure thing!” Emma said, picking the two up. Riona took the peppers and cut the tops off, removing all of the seeds before proceeding to cut the others up. She then took a hearty swig of her wine before adding them in. “Never took you for someone who likes mead...considering your station.”

“I love anything with honey in it.” Riona responded, wiping her mouth. “Most of what my people use is honey in many of our foods...and where I should normally have gotten sick of it, I ended up coveting it above all sweeteners.”

“How did you manage to procure all of this food is more or less my question.” Marcus asked. “It seems like an awful lot of supplies for but a single night.”

“Do not doubt my abilities Marcus.” Riona said, raising her chin in the air. “We shalln’t have to worry about food any longer with me around. Besides...in the next day or two, the caravan I have established contact with will arrive and we shall have passage to Golidoz.”

“Why Golidoz?” Marcus asked.

“Closest civilized town from here.” William said, walking into the room with a mug of ale in his hand. “Although my lady, we have an athas to return to Aldin...what with this Lughglen.”

Marcus looked and William with astonishment, for Marcus did not inform William of the object that they were carrying. He was certain that was a mystery to him. However, William shook his head in his direction.

“Don’t act so surprised whelp; Riona informed me after I left the bathroom about what was going on.” He said. “She figured that a commanding officer should be made aware of why you made the choice to flee; and what our mission was. And you’re lucky Master Knight didn’t take your heads when you learned about the assize’s true purpose.”

Marcus looked to Riona, who merely shrugged. He didn’t exactly want to inform William about the tome, but acknowledged Riona’s reasons as to why she informed him.

“The halfling who I met would only take us to Golidoz.” Riona said. “I tried to bargain for Aldin, but that was outside of their purview. It is alright...Golidoz will be a much safer city to reside in and plan our next move. You can reconnect with your army and try to send a messenger to Aldin or the North Pass. Perhaps even survivors from the escort are there; or maybe Master Knight has relocated there himself. I know the paths south of us will be treacherous...as orcs and goblins now run rampant. Without proper support, even I could get culled trying to take you back.”

“Guess we have little recourse to attempt something more.” William said, taking a swig of his ale.

“We are but seven, and only six of us are trained for combat...sorry Emma.” Riona said, looking apologetically at her.

“Thanks a lot Riona.” Emma said sarcastically. She shot her a look of disgust...to which Riona merely looked as if she had committed a war crime. She then recomposed herself and then continued.

“The fell armies who have breached the defenses here run rampant across the plains.” Riona continued. “If it were just myself, I could get back safely...but guiding the movements of six others...it would be folly of me to try and get you safely. I excel at teaching on many things, but the arts of remaining hidden are not one of them. Among my people, I am still but a lass. A wise, beautiful, and intelligent lass even for my people...but a lass none the less.”

“Then we go to Golidoz.” Marcus said. “The walls of the city are strong, and the barracks is rather large. We should be safe there...except from that damn Tome.”

“It’s just a book lad.” William blurted.

“No it’s not.” Marcus said, as he turned to him. “That book can do things...I even heard it speak to me.” Riona stopped stirring the stew when she heard Marcus say that. “It made Emma and the others believe I had food I was withholding from them; when I was just as starving as them...and they nearly killed me for it.”

“Oh...” Emma said, her ears perking up. “You know...I somewhat remember that...when I heard Marcus say he had the Tome in his hand, I remember then waking up from what I thought was a dream.”

“Enchantment magic.” Riona said with her fingers on her chin. “Magic spells used to bewitch and control the mind. It can change how a person is thinking or acting without them realizing it...only strong hearted individuals or abjuration magic would be enough to prevent it.” She turned to the direction of where she had stored the Tome. “So the Reality Bender must have placed wards onto the tome to protect it; or control any wielders who might lay their hands on it...maybe even the tome itself has a mind of its own. I see why Father Constantine placed that enchanted cloth on it.”

“It definitely does...” Marcus responded defiantly. “I heard it speak.”

“Speak?” Emma asked.

Marcus merely nodded. Needless to say, the revelation that the tome might have a consciousness was not a pleasant one, even for Riona who was normally very calm to some degree showed some sign of worry and concern. Emma almost looked as frightened as she had been when she had first learned what the tome was. William however looked no more worried than before, finishing his ale and moving to the barrel to get another.

“Doesn’t matter what it is or what it can do.” William said. “We have a job and we need to see it done. Let it throw all the tricks at us all it wants...between her magic, my indomitable will...and the fact the tome hasn’t bewitched your mind yet, we should fare well I suspect.”

“Here’s hoping.” Marcus said, toasting to William before downing his own ale. “Though what makes you think you won’t be bewitched?”

“Well if it can’t do it to you, then I should suffice that I am safe from its feeble power.” He then exited the room and went into the commons area with his third mug of ale. Marcus and Emma shook their heads.

“He’s a charmer.” Emma said sarcastically.

“Most trainers are.” Marcus said, taking a drink.

“Resisting an enchantment spell takes quite of mental focus to handle.” Riona muttered, resuming her stew. “I applaud anyone who can resist such spells...especially the more powerful ones which can alter your memories or perception.” She then took a small whisk bowl and took a small sip of the soup. She then breathed in excitedly and took off her apron. “It is done...go get some bowls! Let’s eat and divvy out the belongings of the spiders.”

“All right!!” Emma shouted. “I am starving!”

Emma ran off to begin gathering all the utensils they would need to serve food. As she did, Marcus stopped as he had remembered the aranrider which Riona nearly skewered in front of him. He remembered before falling into darkness asking her to spare her from death. “*Please...*” Marcus moaned. “*I...beg you...spare...her...*” He remembered the words he had spoken to Riona as clearly as night and day. As Riona gathered the pot to move to the bar, he turned to her.

“Riona.” He asked.

“Yes Marcus.” She said, turning to him.

“What happened to the aranrider?” He asked.

Riona turned to him with genuine interest as she turned to him.

“The aranrider...from the den?” She asked.

“What happened?” He asked.

Riona looked at him confusion, and gave him a blank look...one that looked as if she was guilty of doing something. Marcus looked at her with a more interrogative look in his eyes.

“Did you kill her?” Marcus asked.

“...Marcus...” Riona began, putting the pot back on the kitchen counter. “You know that aranriders are born in evil...they are but wicked creatures who delight in the torment of others. That aranrider had killed many people. Many.”

“I know; and I know what I was asking was probably a result of poison, or a corruption of the mind.” Marcus said. “Maybe even a weariness...but even so. It is what I wanted. Her words...I couldn’t help but feel that maybe my race was responsible for her actions.”

“What is born in evil will commit evil.” Riona retorted. “You humans pushed them to the fringes to defend yourselves from them...not the other way around; do not confuse her words for tragedy.”

“I can’t accept that.” Marcus said, shaking his head. “My father has always told me that as long as we can think and act, no one is truly incorruptible. We are only to be judged after our souls are sent to Everlasting Spire.”

“And what about others you have struck down?” She asked. “What about those you sent to Everlasting Spire?”

“I never said I was perfect in my belief.” Marcus said. “Sometimes, I have no time to incapacitate and ask for surrender. The battle in the wetlands from days ago I was surrounded on all sides by foes...I had to strike them down; or I would lose my life. Sometimes, regardless of what I feel...I have to survive. But if I could...I would try to bring them in alive. Maybe...maybe through some act of kindness or mercy...they might rethink their ways.”

“You humans can be so idealistic at times.” Riona said, reaching back for the pot and carrying it to the commons.

“It is still my ideals...” Marcus asked, more assertively. “And you did not answer my question!”

Riona stopped moving, and gave a guilty sigh. She had her back turned to Marcus for what seemed like a minute, before turning to him smiling.

“Yes...I gave her a blessing of healing water and stitched her wounds.” She said. “I even moved her unconscious body away from the den...so that whoever came there would not skewer her as she slept.”

“You truly did!?” Marcus asked with surprise. After seeing how she culled the others, he was surprised at her healing the creature. “It is what I asked; but you actually doing it...”

“You asked me to.” She said. “I was repulsed by the act...” She shot Marcus a stern look, but quickly returned back to her smile. “But...I would be more repulsed at myself if I did not grant the request of the man who I truly care deeply for...no matter how mental it was. It is after all that idealistic sense you have of which I find your most admirable quality. I do hope this decision does not have consequences for you.” She then turned around and went into the commons, greeted by the sounds of cheering and utensils hitting the bar.

“Yeah...me too...” Marcus said, going into the commons as well.

After Riona brought the food out, Emma began to portion it out for everyone. Each one of them had a bowl; and some were lucky enough to get seconds, and everyone at least got a part of the fish that was cooked. They all sat at the bar, with William acting as the bartender. Everyone got ale (except for Emma as she preferred wine, and Riona was truly enjoying mead more than she thought) and water...whichever they preferred at the time. Most of the time was then spent in a rather merry state; as now the group no longer had to fear death coming to them.

While they ate, they moved away from the bar for a time to begin divvying out the spider’s loot. The treasure that the aranrider held was far more than anyone originally intended. It was unfortunate to surmise that the majority of this treasure and items may have belonged to victims at a point of time, but there was nothing that could be done about that. The treasure consisted of large assortments of gold and silver coins in pots, a few



weapons that they could add to their arsenal such as daggers and spears. Each of the coins were divided out evenly, with the exception of Riona who took no interest as she belonged to a rich family already (although she did take a dagger as it is always wise to have some form of knife on you...and she admitted that she would not turn down everything). There was some minor treasure such as some earrings, rings, and jewelry, each divided out evenly. It held the guys no value; but it certainly could be sold to a jeweler for some gold. They found several bottles full of liquid, and even a bottle or two of wine. One of the bottles went to William, while the other was uncorked at the table. After examining the smaller bottles, Riona had discovered they were magic potions, all of which of healing.

“Consuming these potions in times of great injury would be enough to bring a man who was inches from death back to their feet.” The potions went to Emma as she was the dedicated battle leach. There was some clothing and food, but none of which they could use as the food seemed indigestible for their stomachs. “Maybe if we were orcs we could...” Emily joked at the table. Emma opted then to take the clothes to make into bandages for future use; and no one complained with the notion. There were some traveling supplies such as flasks, bags, compasses, arrows for bows (which William, Chorin, and Riona divided amongst themselves, as William was a stalwart archer from rumors in the barracks, Marcus had physically seen Riona’s skill, and Chorin did have an extra bow on hand), flint, and many other things that each laid claim to. The bow of the aranrider went to Riona; as she did defeat the creature so the claim did go to her, and a fine bow it was. She did however give the knife to Emily who had a fixation on the appearance of it. Ron and Chorin took what appeared to be ornate blades with jeweled scabbards, and Emily a spear of great quality.

Of all the treasure that was found, the most eloquent of the one was a beautiful silver necklace with a black onyx attached to it. Marcus originally was dived it out, but Emma looked at it with peculiar interest. Marcus saw her gaze fixated on it, and then smiled at her.

“Let me see how this looks on you.” He said.

Emma looked at him with surprise, her gaze now fixated on him. Marcus then reached behind her neck and attached the necklace around her. He then placed his hands on hips as he looked at her.

“You know...” He said. “That looks much better on you than me anyway. It matches your hair and your dress perfectly”

Emma was stunned at such a gift, that she immediately blushed and turned away from Marcus, unable to look at him in the face. She feared she would melt emotionally in front of him if he did; as the necklace was strikingly beautiful; and the claim was dived to him.

“Th...thank you!” She said. “This is a beautiful gift! I will treasure it always!” Emma looked at the treasure she had and continued to stare intently at the black onyx in the center of the jewel. As Marcus turned from her, he looked at Riona who appeared quite pouty and jealous. She glared at Marcus with a look that made him feel as if she was piercing into his soul. Since Marcus had given the necklace in a friendly gesture, he did not know what he had done till minutes later. The knowledge of that was more frightening than the theories he conjured on what Riona would do to him seconds later.

Thankfully...glares and having more rounds of mead than she would have normally was all she did.

The rest of the night was then spent counting up the loot that each ended up with; and tallying up the supplies. Towards the end of the night, Riona seemed to be losing energy and yawned on a consistent basis. Riona had decided to turn in early, for she had spent much of her mana as she said throughout the last few days; and needed longer periods of rest to relax herself and regain her spent powers. She planned to sleep as much as she could tomorrow in order to regain her strength; which struck Marcus as odd. Elves only need half the sleep Men needed, which is why most elven cities are still bustling even at night. The trade off of this trait was that sleep deprivation effected elves more severely than humans so getting a night's rest is much more emphasized for them. So either she had stayed up for some days, or her exhausting her ley lines had drained her to that degree.

"I have never spent so much in the last week in my whole life." She said, walking towards one of the inn rooms. "I scantily believe I will stay awake for very long once I crash into bed."

"You do look tired." Marcus said.

"Spending magic is just like exercising your body...the more you push yourself in using it, the more tired you get." Riona said, yawning. "We all have a body and soul...and things that affect our souls (such as using magic) affect our bodies. And let us not forget I have done very consistent travel to rescue you all...I am afraid this will be the first full night of rest I have had in awhile. Someone else can handle breakfast tomorrow...I fear I shall sleep the whole morning in."

"I can handle that." Marcus said. "As long as there is food for me to work with."

Riona yawned loudly, smacking her lips. She rubbed her eyes and then said. "There...there is some bacon, bread, and vegetables in the cupboards along with some eggs...I have placed spells on them to maintain their freshness so fear not in using them. I look forward to your cooking tomorrow...goo...good night." She then stumbled into her room and closed the door. The others then continued down the hallways, each to their rooms where their gear was placed at.

"By the Gods..." Ron said. "We each got more than enough coin to make up to a year's pay in one day; possibly more."

"Closer to six months for me, but I'm charge of you runts." William barked.

"Still...not a bad haul...might be able to get my wife that necklace she's wanted."

"I can finally afford repairs to my house." Marcus said. "There's a small leak I have been meaning to fix in the roof; but have not the wood to do so."

"We might be able to afford a house in Aldin Ron." Emily said ecstatically. "And if tallied up our incomes, we could even make the taxes."

"It is what we have been saving up for." Ron said. "Something that Emily and I have agreed on for awhile. Hell of a lot easier to pay for a home if it's the three of us."

"You, Emily and Chorin?" Marcus asked.

"Me, my brother, and Emily." Emma said by Marcus. "Chorin over here is a cheapskate."

"She's not wrong." He said. "The barracks has all the enmities, and I can deal with the lack of privacy. I'll store my findings in the banks of Goldioz for the time being...and keep a bit for myself."

"I see." Marcus said. "At least you have your priorities straight."

Emily then broke away from the four, and then started moving towards one of the rooms. "All right Ron...I'll see you in the room later tonight."

"Uh...uh yeah!" He said, looking extremely embarrassed, with what left Marcus curious. Ron noticed he was getting awkward stares from Marcus to which he merely gathered his breath and said. "I...must be off." With that Ron himself quickly moved away from the others moving to where Emily was in one of the vacant rooms. As Ron did, Emma then yawned and moved towards a door herself. "I shall take this room for the night. Good night Marcus."

"Good night Emma." Marcus said.

He and William then walked off a bit before William tapped on his shoulder. He then turned to William who was still there. William shot him a stern look after she went in.

"Get some sleep lad." He said. "This night has been truly needed; but we can't get comfortable. We are soldiers; and it's high time we start getting back to our jobs. We have a task that needs to be seen done. In the morning after breakfast, you and I will start getting this place in order so we can leave as soon as the caravan arrives. We can't remain forever; we have to get that tome back to Father Constantine, Lord Arin, and Master Knight."

"Is there something in Goldioz that can help?" Marcus asked.

"I don't know, but it's far better than hiding in a broken down inn." William said. "Get some rest and be ready for tomorrow...that's an order!"

"Yes sir." Marcus said, saluting William.

"Bright...and...early..." William barked. He then walked off to his room. Marcus followed suit to his own room. After performing his night rituals prior, he then went into bed and fell asleep.

Chapter 12 – Pursuers

Marcus was awakened by William, who brought him to his feet. The idea of being forcibly woken up when he was not among the army did not sit lightly with him, but William would not have it all the same. Begrudgingly, he pulled himself out of the cot in the inn he was sleeping at. He did his morning rituals and then moved into the commons area where he began to cook breakfast as he stated.

Chorin was already awake, and patrolling the surrounding area of the inn. Monotonous work, but William wanted to be sure that the inn would not go besieged by foes. If whomever Jezebel referred to in the cave knew where they were with the spider's den, it might not have been a stretch to assume they might know where they resided at now. Ron and Emily were awoken, and even though they were without garments and sharing a bed, they were still soldiers to William and had to keep at work. Emma was awake and busy tearing the clothes she took from the spider's loots into strips of cloth and linen, and then sanitizing them to the best of her ability. William took this time while breakfast was being made to inspect the inn for structural damage; and how well it could be used should they need to hold down within it. He already could tell that it would serve as a poor battlement with no area that could serve as a fosse; and missing portion of the walls, but it would be better than nothing. True to her word, Riona slept most of the day and did not awaken; even for breakfast. Admittedly, she had all the rest she needed before the morning rose, but she still felt tired from exhausting use of magic, so she would do light reading and then went back to sleep. She only emerged later in the afternoon fully awake.

Most of the day was spent by William made them run through some exercises to keep them in shape. In a way, Marcus felt like he was basic the initial training for the army with how intense it was, but William kept it short. He then made everyone have their packs and supplies all set up and organized; ready to go should they have to flee the inn for whatever reason. Of course, he did not ask Riona to participate, but Riona ended up doing it anyway as she felt disgusted with herself for how long she slept.

The day went by with no sign of the caravan in sight.

The next day went by similarly; although this time Marcus was awake before anyone else was up. William's intensive training regiment caused Marcus to pass out earlier than he thought. The sky was a bit darker than before, with a line of thunderstorms to the east of them...the sun obscured by them as well. The ground still appeared moist from the morning dew.

While he wandered around the inn, he looked outside to see Emma practicing with a broom as if it was spear. It was similar to what she had done when he first met her. Once again, she showed she had vast ineptitude with the weapon. Intrigued by her dedication to her athas, Marcus decided to go out to meet her.

Emma saw him coming long before he got close to her, as she stopped to look at him. Smiling as she saw him, she waved in his direction.

"Still practicing to join the army?" Marcus asked.

"I won't stop until I become a private." She said defiantly. "The others say I have no talent for it and no place, but I will not be a disappointment my father. So...I continue to train."

"You've been very diligent about it." Marcus asked.

“I have to be.” Emma said. “If I am not training, I cannot improve my skills. My father always wanted me to serve in the army.”

“Ron told me about your father.” Marcus said, sitting on a rock next to her. As soon as he said that, she stopped practicing; her ears lowering towards the ground.

“Oh...did he now?” She said more forlorn than earlier. She remained still for a minute or so and then sat down next to Marcus herself. “He...told you about him....different than I?”

Marcus nodded to her. She lowered her head in a somber state and brought her legs together, her hands crossing through ankles.

“I don’t get it...” She said in a sad state. “I’ve done everything he’s ever asked of me...I did training regiments from him, I learned regulations. The only thing I could not master was the art of using weapons. I could have been a better healer and gardener...I lost so much of my time that I could have spent continuing my pursuits that interest me. And yet...he’s still cross with me.

“This is very sudden to be concerned about it.” Marcus asked.

“Oh I always have been concerned for it...” She said. “But...I usually keep it to myself. But...we are heading towards Goldioz...the city where I grew up. Where my mom and dad are. And...I know deep in my heart...that I will have to go and face my father when I go there. I will feel compelled to do so. Why...why is he so insistent that I become a private in the army?”

“But...you serve the army...” Marcus stated.

“I do.” She said, looking somewhat happy. “I...I serve as a battle leach. I contribute to the army. There is much use when it comes to someone who serves to make sure soldiers survive and return to fight once again! Surely there is use in that...right!?” There were many hesitations in her voice Marcus noted as she spoke; and her smile did not seem sincere. As if she was trying to hide something. Emma knew that Marcus did not believe her. Once again, her ears fell low and she continued. “No...he did not acknowledge me. The day I told him the army assigned me to the battle leaches, he never replied.”

“Never replied?” Marcus asked.

“No...” Emma said sorrowfully. “I...I wondered if the letter never reached him. Maybe the messenger had dropped it, or something more mundane and plausible.”

She remained quiet for a small time as she sat there next to him. Marcus continued to stay with her as she did, remaining quiet. For a moment, Marcus thought he heard a rain drop fall to the ground.

“But...” Marcus began.

“Ron got a letter.” She began. “I knew Ron got a letter about his admission into the barracks. He didn’t tell me about it, but I caught it with my eyes...and I recognized father’s scent on it. I managed to get a glimpse of it while he slept that night.” She bit her lip, as if she was trying to force something in her mouth down. And then she exclaimed, “He told Ron...that I was the biggest disappointment to this family!”

“He actually said that!?” Marcus exclaimed.

Emma nodded. In that moment, Marcus noticed that Emma was beginning to weep. A tear rolled down her eyes as she sat there by him. Emotions were beginning to well within her as she dug up what she considered painful memories.

“I don’t get it!!” She bellowed. “I try so hard every damn day to win his affection! I train every day so that I can pass the enlistment process...so I can get through the basic

training! I hone my own people's senses so that I can better myself! I serve the army even...but it's not enough! IT NEVER SEEMS TO BE ENOUGH! I JUST WANT HIM TO SAY HE'S PROUD OF ME! TO SAY HE ACTUALLY CARES FOR ME! I...I don't even know if he has ever said he loves me..."

Emma looked at Marcus with a completely distraught face, her eyes leaking tears at an alarming rate. Without waiting for Marcus to do anything, she reeled her face back and fell into his chest, continuing to weep softly. Marcus looked stunned for a moment, and then embraced her as she began to bawl...and he stayed there until she did not need him no more.

"I...I..." She cried. "I...just want to study medicine! But...he ra...raised me when I had nowhere to go!...What do I do Marcus!? What do I do!?...Gods...I wish I could learn how to use weapons to their fullest."

The clouds to where he was then broke apart where the two were at. A sunbeam broke through landed where the two are. Marcus didn't know how to answer her. She was in clear emotional pain, and she only seemed to be getting worse. She continued to sob in his arms, as he looked to the sky to watch the sun break through the thunderstorm line for a moment. As she cried, Marcus began to have a hatred of her father well up inside of him. He thought of him as nothing but this twisted, angry man who only took this girl in because of social status and to quell rumor mongering. And Emma was still suffering from some form of attachment to this clearly unkind man. At last, he turned to Emma with a stern look as her necklace began to glow brightly (almost brighter than it should be from sunlight), he said to her. "I think you should live your own life, and to hell with him."

"Huh?" Emma asked.

"Ron's told me about your father; and find him nothing but a killcow from the description." Marcus barked. "He leaves me agauw with every story that had been told to me about him. I say you live your own life...finish your term with the military...move in with Ron and Emily. Live your own life...and be bound to him no longer."

Emma stood there, stunned with his declaration. Ron had told her many times along with Emily to improve herself and then reenlist to the military if she wanted to earn her father's respect. Now for the first time, she was hearing someone else tell her to throw all of that away.

"You...you would have me cast all that I lived by...away?" She asked.

"He doesn't deserve a beautiful girl like you as his daughter; if all he cares about is trying to rebuild his family's reputation!" Marcus shouted. Now Emma was blushing, her face entirely red. Actually...she was not alone. When Marcus realized what he had said, he himself was also blushing. He barely had ever thought about what he said, until after he said the words in his head again.

"You...think I'm beautiful?" She asked, moving closer to him.

"Yo...you...you are certainly fetching to look at." Marcus said. "I certainly believe you are."

"Marcus..." She said ecstatically. "That's..." She hiccupped a bit as she tried to keep her emotions in. "That...that is the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me." She smiled in Marcus' direction, as he smiled at her. She then collapsed into his arms and embraced. "Thank you...so much for that. I truly needed to hear someone say that." She even began to lean in closer to his head

Whatever she was planning though, she did not get to do. Her ears began to perk upward, and then twitch about. She looked over Marcus' shoulder and stood on her feet. Marcus noticed this and turned around.

What he saw in the grassy field in the distance was this dust cloud on the ground, slowly gaining height in the horizon. His human eyes could not let him make out what the cloud was; or if it was natural. Emma however seemed to be a bit more worried; but even her nyanita eyes could not make out the oncoming maelstrom. Her eyes were extremely perceptive to closer things, not farther things like the eyes of the elves.

"What is it?" Marcus asked.

"I don't know..." Emma said. "But...I feel a lot of movement in my legs..."

"We best go inform Riona!" Marcus stated. Emma nodded to him, and the two fled back inside the inn.

They found Riona awake in her room, and she appeared very cross when the two barged into her room. When they described however the cloud, she snapped herself awake. In only a white night blouse and extremely small shorts (of which any shorter could be misconstrued as undergarments), she ran to the window outside and looked.

"Riona...what do your elf eyes see?" Emma asked.

Riona looked for a moment, and then shuttered. She looked as if color had been drained from her face. She then turned to Marcus.

"Marcus; wake everyone...now!" She shouted, running towards her room. "That is a caravan of goblin warg riders heading straight towards us...and many other creatures as well!"

"They found us!?" Emma screamed.

"We all knew it was possible." Riona said sternly, running into her room and closing the door. "GO GET EVERYONE; WE HAVE LITTLE TIME TO SPARE!"

So Marcus and Emma fled to each room, waking everyone up...all earlier than they had wanted...but the threats of wargs and orcs woke them onto their feet despite that. William himself woke up and seemed to be full of glee upon hearing about the imminent attack, for William loved combat more so than his own survival at times. Each one hurriedly gathered their gear and their packs.

Then they all gathered and began to plan with the short time that they had. Riona's eyes had seen about twelve warg riders, four man eaters, and many goblins. Wargs were sentient evil wolf like beings that came from lands far towards the Black Tower. They could mimic the sounds and tongues of man, and were nearly twice the size of an average wolf. Man eaters were a plant like creature that (as the name suggested) devoured the flesh of men and drank their blood. They appeared to be like large tulips, a large bulky body in between the petals and roots, and the flower concealing fangs. Their roots (which were few in number, but were large. Their positioning on its body almost made it look like an octopi were it not for the flower) were tentacles, and they could raise them out of the ground...and use them like legs. They were mostly mindless, but could easily be controlled with enchantment magic...and some could even be given minds of their own. Goblins were tiny chaotic creatures who loved to sow mischief and misfortune wherever they fled to. They were generally evil beings...and those who weren't were still mischievous by nature. Many commoners referred to them as little orcs at times; and the comparison was very

close to how they acted. Riona was certain they were after the group as they showed no signs of slowing themselves towards the inn.

While it was possible to evade the Man eaters and goblins, warg riders were not as likely. Wargs could go head to head in contests of speed with horses, and even Riona could not outrun a horse. Maybe with a spell or two, but she never went into if she could conjure such power. Even then, the spell might only serve her...not the others. Eventually, they came to a conclusion that they had no choice but to hold their ground in the inn; at least until the warg riders were dead.

“Finally!” William shouted. “I can finally give these monsters revenge from my defeat in the Wetlands! I can’t wait to make them all pin cushions. Time to put your race’s archery skills to the test...my lady.”

“This is no time for competition!” She shouted, running to the outside of the inn. As William and Chorin ran towards her to get into position, she poked her head out from the door with a snide look in her face. “But...if you wish to make it one, then be prepared to lose.”

The inn had at least three entrances to it (one being a large hole in the side; and then the front and back door). Three people had to watch the entrances; as it would be all over if any creature got inside. Riona used her grappling hook in her traveling bag to attach to the roof, and then pulled herself along with William and Chorin to the top of the inn. From there, the three would cover the area top side and stop any intruders; or hopefully force them to retreat. Emma took no part in the planning...they instead placed in the furthest part of the inn with hopes that she would remain hidden from the goblins if everything fell apart. Emily took the large gaping hole on the side of the inn, with Marcus and Ron holding the back and front door. Everyone on the bottom was hopelessly wishing that the creatures would be slain long before they arrived at the inn, but that seemed like a fool’s hope with the horde approaching them. The goal at least was to hold out until the caravan arrived; or until at least the wargs and man eaters were slain...the goblins on foot were much farther off.

One of the wargs and their riders sped onward until it was within shouting of the inn. “HUMANS!” It screamed. “GIVE US BACK WHAT BELONGS TO THE DARK MASTER!”

Riona would hear none of it. She notched an arrow and fired; killing the rider as the arrow went through its eyes. As the warg flailed around when its rider was slain, William fired an arrow into its belly. It did not slay it, but the arrow Riona shot seconds later did as it pierced its skull.

“That makes one!” Riona shouted.

“That shoulda been mine you damned she elf!” William shouted, preparing to fire on the next closest target.

With their messenger and mount dead, the warg riders knew that parley would not be called for. With that, they let their bloodlust loose and charged forward, bows and swords shaking in their hands. William, Riona, and Chorin let loose a volley of arrows into the oncoming horde. Some arrows hit their marks, but many of them were wasted as wargs are swift creatures. Even Riona cursed as her arrows which previously had no trouble hitting the spiders were not hitting the creatures nearly as often.

The wargs and riders circled around the inn a couple times. They retaliated by letting loose arrows of their own against the archers from above, keeping them from firing, but the

group had some minor cover on the inn's roof so they were not too worried. Arrows continued to rain from all sides. The wargs lost half their numbers before they finally noticed that there was a section of the wall missing.

With that, they made a charge towards it. Emily was the one stationed by the hole, and she saw the creatures coming. Noticing that they could only fit one at a time; and that the enemy was converging on her location, she braced with his spear and called out to the rest of the group.

“THEY'RE ALL COMING TO ME!” She shouted. “GET IN HERE!”

The first warg charged her, but Emily wisely set her brace down. Although the strength of the creature knocked her down and into the kitchen, it foolishly charged straight into her spear, goring the creature right there. The rider was also flung off toward where Emily was. As Emily tried to pull herself up, she saw the goblin pull himself up and draw his sword to gut her. Were it not for Ron's quick movements and swing right there, she would be gutted. The goblin turned to Ron as the soldier loped off its head.

Neither did the creatures outside fare any better. Riona's group sent a shower of arrows at the recoiling wargs and riders as they tried to find a way in with a warg body in the way. Two more of their number fell, but they managed to get inside.

“Damn!” William shouted. “We have to get in there!”

“The man eaters are approaching!” Chorin shouted.

“Already!?” Riona screamed. Indeed, the man eaters had gained considerable ground and were nearing the inn. Faced with little time, and knowing such creatures are not easily faced on the ground, Riona told the others to continue firing. She then put down her bow and began to enshroud her hands in fire like before.

As for the wargs and riders, they scampered inside. Emily had made a hole into the kitchen where only a man sized creature could get through. Because of this, the wargs began to rip parts off of the wall to break through, as the goblins were ignorant to other ways into the kitchen. Knowing they had a funnel, Emily used her spear and took down the next warg. The rider fell off and was trampled by his comrades trying to get in. As another warg came in, Emily again took the creature down, and even got a stroke into the rider.

But the beasts broke through. One of the goblins charged in with a spear and pierced Emily's side. Emily screamed in agony as she fell down. But Marcus would not let them go for a kill. He moved to the warg by her and loped the beast's head off. When the rider pulled himself up, he was cut down by Marcus. Realizing there was more combatants, the final warg and rider moved away from Emily and leapt onto Ron. He was pulled to the ground and the creature attempted to go for his neck, but Marcus stabbed forward and stabbed through the creature's throat. When the goblin fell onto the ground, Ron leapt to it and stabbed through its neck. Immediately, he charged to Emily who was clutching her side from a near fatal wound. Blood was beginning to drip from her mouth.

“Ahh...ah...” She whimpered as she continued to bleed badly. She coughed and hacked with blood coming out and onto Ron's face

“She's really hurt!” Ron shouted, a look of desperation on his face. “Marcus! She's hurt bad!!”

“Get to your sister and get her one of those potions!” Marcus shouted. “I'll handle the rest of the inn!”

“By yourself!?” Ron shouted.

“Yes; now go!” Marcus shouted. “Go before we lose her!”

Marcus took one of the goblin spears and sprang forward, while Ron retreated inward. As he did, Marcus felt a tug on his leg and he was brought to the floor. The goblin Emily had stabbed had only received a minor flesh wound. He sprang on top of Marcus and attempted to stab him. Marcus grabbed his hand and prevented him from stabbing downward; which only made the goblin even more desperate to kill. In an act of defiance and insanity, the fell creature sunk its teeth into Marcus shoulder (although it was aiming for his neck). The creature’s fangs pierced his shoulder and Marcus bellowed in agony as he felt blood trickle from it. He could not pull the creature, or else it would bring its sword into his flesh, and neither could he bring his sword into it due to his positioning.

But he did have a new dagger of which he could use with a single hand. Dropping his soldier’s broad sword, he drew the dagger from his sheathe and drove it into the throat of the goblin. It quivered violently for a moment before falling still. After retrieving his gear, he threw the body off and went outside.

Although when he saw the man eaters, he wisely departed back into the inn.

The man eaters were now at the grounds of the inn. Riona unleashed her spell of fire which hit the Man eater. However, this was not nearly as effective against the spiders. Man eaters were plant like creatures, and water pumped through their body. While it certainly left a nasty burn, it did not envelop in flames like the last time.

“Damnation!” Riona shouted. “I shall have to try new magic! Perhaps this spell will suffice!”

The fire in Riona’s hand disappeared, and instead was replaced with what looked to be a green silvery energy around her hand. Riona was beginning to use magic of winds and kinetics; though she was utilizing a variant of it that known mage swordsmen would use to as they described it “increase the length, width, and/or even height of their slash, as well as its lethality.” Such magic would allow a swordsman to swing their sword from where they were and hit a target from many meters away. More powerful versions could slice through metal...and even large towers.

Riona then drew her elvish katana and ran the magic through her sword. As soon as she did, she placed the weapon at the side of her hip, and her other hand hanging over it as if she had a sheathe for it. As the first man eater approached, she drew the blade out from the imaginary sheathe and swung forward. What came out was a brilliant crescent shaped burst of energy that then flew forward. It cut the man eater straight through, cutting the creature in two. A fountain of blood exploded from it, and the beast gave off a horrid scream before falling.

The other two however took the time in which its comrade fell to begin climbing into the inn. Using its senses, it located where the three were and swung its tentacles on top of roof, seeing out prey. Its tentacles wrapped around Chorin and it began to pull him downward. Chorin managed to catch onto the side of the roof; and not a second later. Had he missed, he would have been lost to everyone.

“HELP ME!” He screamed.

William wasted no time. He drew his sword and cut into the tentacle. Riona fended off the others sprawling all over the roof, and William then gave another cut into it, finally severing it off. The man eater retracted from its attack, but the other did not relent.

At this moment, Riona realized to remain on the roof was suicide, as they were too open to fend off attacks from here. She then used magic of kinetics to create a large impact into the roof below them. The roof collapsed under them, and they fell into the inn once again.

Marcus nearly took the full brunt of the caved in roof, but had rolled out of the way at the last moment. The three bewildered and confused as they got up, coughing dust, and bloody spit. Marcus immediately went to Riona and helped her to her feet.

“Are you hurt!?” Marcus shouted.

“Calm down Marcus...just a smudge shaken.” She said, getting to her feet.

“Your leg is bleeding.” Marcus said, looking down to see droplets of blood under it.

“I surmise it is...I felt something pierce my leg as we fell.” She said. “Better that than eaten by Man eaters.”

“Could you warn us next time you want to do something mental like that!?” Chorin shouted.

“And waste time as two large man eaters are about to consume us!?” Riona barked. “You are certainly daft boy if you think I will waste words with that thing in front of us!”

“There’s still of them out there!” William shouted.

“And goblins not too far behind...” Riona added, moving to a chair aided by Marcus. “I can tend to my wound; but those things will try to get in here shortly. They need to be dealt with.”

“How do we kill them?” Marcus asked.

“Not an easy feat.” Riona said. “It would be much easier if we try to lure the tentacles in here and cut them off one by one. Get by the windows and get its attention! Do as much damage as possible; and I will rejoin as soon as I can!”

They all nodded and took Riona’s plan into action. Each one of them went to the windows or openings, and then tried to draw as much attention as they could to the Man Eaters. It worked very well for the first few moments as the creature tried to attack them each time with them scoring some minor damage. However, each attack did more and more damage onto the inn, and soon the wall they had was gone.

Disaster struck when Marcus was wrapped by the Man Eater by the leg. He was easily pulled away from the inn by the group and towards the gaping maw of the Man Eater. It raised Marcus into the air and prepared to drop him into it’s mouth.

He had little time to act; but fortunately he still could use his sword. He swung several times on the creature’s tentacle like root and cut it off, falling to the ground. And as he did, he got a glimpse of the creature’s neck. He couldn’t tell how as he fell; it seemed like he was falling in slow motion. Either way, he saw an opening on the creature that he could not afford to lose. He in the short time he fell gripped his sword again and cut straight through the creature’s neck; lopping off the large head. Though Man Eaters were generally over ten feet in width and nine feet in height; they had very short necks to where their flower like head was; making them easy targets for none but the swiftest sword and axemen.

Marcus fell to the floor; stupefied from his preposterous feat, but had little time to think on it as the other approached. William and Chorin sent a barrage of arrows into it, causing it to react in pain. Still it lunged for Marcus who dodged the first few tentacles; and hacked them off in single strokes. Within seconds of the Man Eater’s attacks, he had cut off half the tentacles.

William and Chorin were stunned. To them they merely saw glimpses of glints of steel and Marcus seemly unmoving, but they attributed it to trick of the mind. Everything seemed normal on Marcus' end, albeit clearly in shock of how accurate and quick he struck. Attributing it to adrenaline, he pushed himself forward and led an attack against the creature; assisted by William and Chorin's bow. As the Man Eater recoiled, Marcus grabbed the goblin spear and hurled it forward, impaling it further. Blood spurted about from the multiple wounds it suffered, flailing all across the inn grounds. In a final attack, Marcus charged forward and stabbed his blade in, turning in its thick carapace all around. Man Eaters were tough; but were without bones, so there was little resistance. At last, Marcus stabbed forward and pierced its stomach, causing it to die as its stomach acids poured out into its body.

There was little time to celebrate. Goblins were started to run down the fields towards the inn. There was at least forty of them, and only seven of Marcus' group, creating nearly an eight to one odd. Seeing that their allies had fallen, the goblins clearly did not take chances with this, the whole group remaining together and not splitting off. Marcus fled back into the inn to inform his allies.

"They're down, but the goblins are coming." Marcus shouted.

"I see 'em!" William shouted. "We can't fight that many off lad in the fields; as much as I would want to."

"So what; do we hold here and die!?" Chorin shouted.

Chorin had a point. If they had slaughtered the man eaters and wargs earlier, they might have been able to flee right then and there...but now the goblins were upon them. They would be able to see where they were from where they were at. No matter which direction they ran in (unless directly in line with the inn from their vision), they would be able to see it.

But the goblins had a fair view of the area. They would have to face them here.

"Guys!" Emma shouted as she ran into the area. "There's a series of wagons coming up the hill!"

The group upon hearing this sudden change of news fled towards the entrance of the inn; the exact opposite side of where they were at. News of the caravan was spread to the others and they soon converged at the entrance. A caravan of wagons was indeed speeding towards the inn.

"By the gods...it is them!" Riona shouted. "It is the group I established contact with!"

"The goblins aren't too far off!" Chorin shouted. "Captain; if there was a time to..."

"Dammit boy; I understand!" He shouted. "Everyone; get your packs! We flee now!"

Everyone nodded and snatched up all of their gear, fleeing out the inn and onto the dirt road in front him. The goblins were getting closer and closer; actually within enough range to start raining arrows at them. Riona and William of course retaliated with her own, each picking off a few of the group. Soon however the shower that was being sent at them made it too dangerous to attempt picking them off any further.

The caravan consisted of about four covered wagons, each being drawn by two horses. Each was covered with a white wool top. While three looked and appeared to be about the same, the center one appeared more eloquent with more glossy wood, bluish wool, and looked like it could fit about fifteen people in it; whereas the others only about ten. There were people on the wagons manning the horses.

The caravan obviously had seen the goblins, as three of the wagons turned away. Only the more eloquent one proceeded forward; actually at an even faster pace than earlier. Even as the goblins were approaching, the caravan rode up next to them. The wagon was manned by a brown haired Halfling with a fine coat and gray pants. Next to him was a large gruff orc wearing a brown jerkin and a loincloth. He had a straw hat over his head and a piece of wheat in his tusks. On his back with a large greataxe and several knives on his leg. The caravan stopped in front of the group as the Halfling pulled back the reins.

“WHOA!” He shouted. “Lady Riona I presume!?”

“Aye!” She shouted. “Pearin Torkin! You could not have cut your caravan any closer! Where were you yesterday!?”

“A merchant’s life requires business first!” Pearin shouted. “I see you made some friends of some nearby goblins!”

“To our dismay!” Riona shouted. “We can discuss price later; we must go!”

“Fair enough!” He shouted. “Mog; cover our rears!”

“Yeah...yeah...” The orc groaned, reaching into the back of the wagon and pulling out a rather menacing looking crossbow. “Get in wagon...stay out ofway.” The others nodded and filed into the wagon, goblin arrows steadily getting closer and closer to them. As soon as the last one was in, Pearin cracked the reins and guided the horses to turn around. Once he did, he put the horses in full speed.

He was nearly too late. A few seconds more and the goblins would have entered into the caravan.

With the wagon and the horses in full speed, the goblins began to slowly lose ground. They of course fired arrows back at the wagon, some of which landed inside of it. The wagon had several barrels in it, and each one of the party took the tops of them and used them as makeshift shields. Mog however took little notice of the threat, and fired his crossbow over and over. Marcus heard goblin screams on every shot, and Mog continued to do so until about two minutes later. He then set down the crossbow next to him and walked to the front of the wagon.

“Well my associate...” Pearin said. “Our status?”

“No wargs...can’t catch.” He grumbled as he sat back down, putting his wheat back in his mouth. “We lose incountryside in rock fields. I take watch tonight.”

“Oh I’d make you do it either way after today...” Pearin sneered. “Can’t have the buggers gut us in our sleep tonight.”

“Whatever pay wages.” Mog groaned.

Pearin turned to the group who was recoiling from the arrows. He then smiled.

“Don’t worry friends!” he shouted. “You’re safe now!”

Once again...the group had escaped the minions of the enemy.

Chapter 13 – Merchant Town Golidoz

The goblins pursued them for the remainder of the entire day; but ended up losing them in the wilderness. Well...at least that was the theory Emma had suggested...and prayed was right. It may have been that, or the goblins simply decided that they had to cut their losses. And they indeed had losses; far more than they must have expected; whereas Marcus' group was still alive and well. Even Emily who had sustained a fatal wound had survived the ordeal thanks to the potions found in the spider's den; albeit extremely sore around her chest and side for the remainder of the day.

The wagon came to a place called the rock fields; which was a series of large jagged hills that had large rock formations in them. The other wagons had been told by Pearin to return to Golidoz until they arrived. There were many crevices, spires, and even caves in the location that made it easy for one to hide. And although goblins were naturally good at navigating caves, one would still need to know those caves existed to make use of such a skill. Pearin decided it would be best to remain in one of the nearby caves, and sent his orc companion to explore it. Mog explored the cave and found no back to it, meaning unless there was a secret door, it would be a decent haven. They pulled the wagon as deep as they could; for goblins could see in the dark...but only to a certain degree.

Of the two who had come to their aid, there was not much to talk. Pearin was merely a Halfling from the Olrion grassland, from a location known as Suzani. He invested into a small transportation and trading company his cousin had created,; called the Parkin Trading Company...which became his after his cousin passed away unfortunately from terror throat. The company would buy wares and commodities from North Pass that were not readily available in the Westernfold, and then sell them in Goldioz. He also ran transport for any merchant or trader who needed to haul large amounts of supplies and was without means to do so.

There was even less to speak of Mog; his orc bodyguard. Mog came from an orc tribe far into the Northwest, and left because of the brutal nature of his people. He had enough insight and wisdom to know he was not as strong as his peers; making his chances of survival low. He decided to leave and make off on his own before such an ill fate befell him, and somehow found his way on the caravan when he arrived in Tritenia. He then became hired on as a permanent body guard; and that was that.

Mog remained up for most of the night until Riona had at least slept enough to remain awake, watching for any signs of pursuit. The others did not trust him fully as he was an orc, so at least one another would remain on watch. As night progressed, he concluded that the goblins were no longer an immediate concern; for if they were going to risk anything, they would have done so that night. "Either goblins lose way...goblins sniveling and flee...or goblin master displeased and recall. Likely cull failures. Orc and goblin raid often...know how plan." Mog said in his broken Tritenian tongue when asked by Marcus when it came to Marcus' watch.

"Are you certain we evaded them?" Marcus ask. "Which do you think?"

"Goblin lose way me thinks..." Mog said, biting into a piece of foul smelling meat. "Wagon swift...goblins not as. In unfamiliar territory...maybe get lost. Orcs better trackers...have better scent. Goblins good as fodder."

"Well...I do thank you for helping us." He said, taking a swig from his canteen.

“No thank Mog.” He grunted. “Mog thought you doomed in field. Pearin see opportunity...raise price, owe favor. Mog would not come to aid if in boots of Halfling.”

“Oh...” Marcus said awkwardly.

“Mog leave tribe to live.” He grunted, swallowing his meat. “Mog make business risk...not life risk.”

“I...see.” Marcus moaned.

In the morning, they packed out of the cave, and the caravan sped off. From there, no further attacks happened, and the group began to slow ride to Goldioz.

It was on the tenth day of their travel in total where they finally arrived at Golidoz. During the day before they entered the town, the party had returned to the main road. Most of the buildings in the town were made of stone, unlike Aldin, which was made of wood. The town was surrounded by a large stone fence that surrounded the entire town, with the words of the town’s name engraved on a brown sign hanging above the gate. The landscape around the town was an open green field...compared to Aldin which was in the middle of the forest, behind walls that looked like brush. And unlike Aldin, there seemed to be carts, wagons, and carriages moving in and out of the kingdom every so often. The town also was on two levels. There was a large cliff, one the east side of town that was formed from a hill in the east.

The town itself was guzzling with commerce and sales. There we’re market vendors set up all throughout the streets; the first street into the town was a bigger bazaar than Aldin ever had. Many people we’re going up to the vendors, examining the many items that we’re on the table, shelling out many gold coins for the crafts of the people. Soldiers patrolled the town’s streets, questioning people of suspicious nature. Several carts and oxen came back from local quarries, carrying limestone and marble. This town was much busier than Aldin; especially since it where the estate and primary manor of Lord Aron and his sons Mediva and Arin lived at (when the two brothers were not on campaigns). The middle of the town had a large fountain, made of marble and to form the ring, ground water from within the hill poured out into the ring. Many townsfolk went to this fountain carrying buckets, for which they would use to water flowers, or for their own consumption.

“It’s been a long time since I have been here...” Marcus said. “Too bad I have little memory of anything interesting...”

“Never been here that much?” Pearin said as the cart entered town.

“No sir.” Marcus said. “I have been here on but a few rare occasions...and I am never in town long.”

“You certainly have missed out then.” Emily said, resting her head on her hands. “You know...I really do miss being here. I thought when I went to physical training I wouldn’t miss this place.”

“Home sickness tends to happen when we nearly have lost our lives twice.” Ron said.

“There is much truth in that.” Emily moaned.

“I’ve been to the North Pass; but was never assigned here for more than a day.” Marcus said.

“Well...how about a tour?” Emily asked. “How about we show you around town!?”

“I would like that!” Marcus said with excitement. “I truly don’t know much about this place...though I think would prefer a drink and food first.”

“That can be arranged...we know the best inn for it.” Ron said ecstatically. “The Sara Donnell Inn.”

“I cannot wait.” He said with some excitement in his voice. He took a moment to absorb the sights a big longer. “This truly is a marvelous city...surely anyone who started a business would want to be here if they lived in this region.”

“I’d actually rather like to have my company extend out to the city of Ogma in the Purelands; but the current tolls for the West Pass are not within my company’s ability to afford.” Pearin muttered.

“...Too far.” Mog added grumpily.

“And yes...it is quite a trek.” Pearin responded grumpily. “I’d have to expand to Aldin first to establish a trade route. Once I do that, I can work towards expanding in Ogma. Till then, I focus on the northern quadrant of the Westernfold.”

They continued onward for a few minutes more; during the time Pearin reconnoitered with the rest of his caravan. Pearin stopped the wagon at his company’s loading docks, to when the party one by one exited the wagon. Pearin and Riona then discussed price, to which the Halfling exponentially increased the price to the original deal Riona and him agreed on (at least three times the original amount). Begrudgingly, the group ponied up the gold and settled the price. They still had a marginal amount of treasure to each of their names, but Riona could tell that the group definitely preferred the original price; but they couldn’t deny that Pearin had taken a marginal risk on his part. Even Mog expressed doubt’s on taking goblins of those numbers by himself; and with bows.

“Thanks for sudden save my Halfling friend.” William said.

“You can thank me by doing me a solid next time you are in North Pass.” Pearin sneered. “I have a branch in the town of North Pass for my company; and seeing as this mission of yours is something related to the army...I would dare say that the Lord could be willing to...maybe reduce the lastages on my offices there.”

“I can have a discussion with the Colonel should I pass that way.” William stated. “I’m sure with enough witnesses he could probably settle with something of the sort; though nothing of the sort will happen if we fail in our quest; and without approval of Lord Aron.”

“Then I certainly wish good health to you in this regard.” Pearin said, giving him a small bow to the group. “Now I have wares that need selling...so be off with ya!” And with that dismissal, the group separated from Mog and Pearin.

They first stopped at some of the food market to replenish their food supplies. It seemed that this town might have had more access to the local farms than Aldin as all of the food that they purchased had cost only a few mere gold coins. They bought several loafs of bread, barley, and much fresh fruit. After they had purchased their food, they then decided to procure something more wholesome as they went to the Sara Donnell inn. The Sara Donnell was the name of the grandmother of the woman who owned the inn, and it was named after her when she passed away. Emily went inside and brought a pitcher of ale to a table to where the group was at. They kinked their glasses, and enjoyed the taste of the ale...well at least all but Marcus did. Marcus downed some of the ale in his mug. After swallowing, he spluttered for a second. The ale here was much lighter than what he was used to, which left a strange taste in his mouth. Riona grabbed a nearby napkin and gave it to Marcus.

“Not a fan of rye ale I take it?” Riona asked.

“Not...particularly.” He said, looking at it.

“Best get used to it.” Ron said. “Rye is more available here than in the south of the Westernfold. Cheapest thing here.”

“I figured since it has been a year since we have been here, it would make a thrilling occasion to enjoy what me, Little Em, and Ron over here used to sneak out to drink.” Emily said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

“Stop calling me that!” Emma groaned. “And don’t remind me...you said that would taste good; and I gagged for minutes on that foul brew,”

“Does Little Em prefer her wine?” Emily said in a joking sarcastic manner.

“Yes she does!” Emma sneered back.

“I think I’ll spend the extra gold on something more my taste then.” Marcus said, as he ordered a darker ale from the servant wench who passed by. After he got his mug, he turned to his group. “So...what now? We’re in Goldioz. How do we proceed William?”

“Simple...you stay here at this inn.” William grunted. “I will discuss with the Captain of this region our situation, what we are carrying, and events that transpired to the east. Lady Riona will go to Lord Aron’s manor and verify her existence; so that we can store the tome there. We will then send messenger to Aldin to inform any survivors from the attack, the Captain there...and more importantly her father.”

“Oh...” Riona said, before lowering herself into the table, her head resting on her arms. “I...I suppose that is for the best.”

“Don’t act like that; you left your father to find us knowing he would irate with your decision!” William barked. “And appreciative of it as I am, you should already know the consequences.”

“Do not remind me further.” Riona groaned.

“Isn’t Lord Aron in Aldin?” Ron asked.

“I heard there was an incident before we left Aldin that required his attention at his manor.” Marcus said. “He’s probably still in Goldioz.”

“Once we have that affair sorted out, it will merely be a waiting game then.” William said. “And hopefully nothing will occur further, now that we are behind the walls of a major city.”

“I wish I could concur with you...” Chorin said. “But we were already in the safest region of Tritenia, and look what befell us in the wetlands.”

“That’s why you whelps need to stick together!” William snapped. “If something happens here, we need to be ready to flee; yet again. I personally believe the worst is behind us. If anything goes wrong, we shall flee to the southern entrance of town, or move to the second level of town; and make our way among the plateaus.”

“And if the enemy is there?” Emily asked sarcastically.

“Then we bloody improvise!” William shouted. “And if that means cutting through a line of orcs, we damn will do it! If it is the will of the queen this artifact be taken for study, or Master Knight, then it is our job to do so!”

“Yes sir.” Emily moaned, taking another sip of ale. William downed the rest of his and then got up.

“All right...” William said, looking at Riona. “Come along young lady.”

“Young lady!?” Riona barked with surprise. “I am eighty years your senior.”

“Would you prefer old lady then!?” William snapped.

Riona shot William this extremely frustrated look at William, but she centered herself after a moment.

“Young lady will do.” She said, perking her head upwards. “I trust we shall be brief then?”

“You and I will be at our respective places as long as needed.” William said, him and Riona disappearing out of the inn.

The group then remained at the inn waiting for the others to return, but they did not for the longest time. Marcus was certain it was more or less the shock factor with the elven lord’s daughter far where she should be. More or less, the situation concerned magic so unless a mage knight was present (or any mage really), it might not be something the soldiers would be overly familiar with.

In between the time they were gone, Emma was working on her fourth glass of wine, and was acting noticeably silly as compared to everyone else. In her frustration from Emily’s teasing (and partially from the fact that she knew she would eventually return home to face her father), she had drank quite a bit and was not longer able to hold her stature.

“I think you have had enough.” Marcus said.

“I...I think you need to...shut up and get me another.” Emma said, slurring the entire sentence. “Now...either get me another...or give me a kiss you handsome devil.” Marcus raised an eyebrow immediately at her statement, and recoiled even more when she leaned in closer.

Emily and Chorin on the other hand were too busy laughing...thinking Emma was merely drunk. Not wanting to have his sister embarrass herself further, he took her by the hand.

“Yeah...she’s done.” He said. “C’mon Em...we’re going to your room.”

“Oh...co...come on Ron...” She slurred. “He’s not doing anything ‘rong...in fact I kinda want him around...I need a big...big stron’ man with me to deal...with dad.”

“Nope...done.” He said, taking Emma by the hands. She acted belligerent for only a few moments before he managed to get her to walk with him. Ron took his sister into the inn room where he laid her down to sleep. The inn room was a simple room with about two beds with a desk and table. She was sleeping very peacefully from the wine minutes later.

“I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to show you around town.” Ron said. “But I’m not one to leave her.”

“Drinking herself drunk does not seem like your sister...” Marcus added.

“She really does not like her father.” Ron replied.

“I can see that...” Marcus replied. “I thought she was serious about the kiss too.”

“Are you blushing Marcus!?” Emily said. “Did someone not want Emma to drink and act like a total harlot?”

“No!” Marcus shouted. “Never! I would use someone like Emma in such a degrading way!”

“Good!” Emily said sternly in a sudden change. When Marcus turned to face her, Emily had her spear to his neck. “Because if you did, I’d gore you like a boar. That little one is like a sister to me...anyone who wants her has to go through me.”

“You...you have my word on your friend’s integrity!” Marcus said, his fingers extended outward and his hands moving back and forth.

“I’m sorry again for touring you around...” Ron said.

“Pay it no mind Ron.” Marcus said, moving toward the inn door. “I will simply wander around town myself.”

“Are you sure?” Ron asked.

“I will be fine.” He said.

With that, he left the group and began to explore around the town himself.

There were countless sights that Marcus had seen while he toured the town. He had been to this town yes...but never long and could not go off on his own...as he had a task to do. He first traveled east from the main road from the fountain. There was more of the bazaar, and more mancipia as he went further in. Aldin was usually very quiet, lacking most of the dancers, comedians, and fortune tellers that seemed to inhabit this town. Golidoz was actually lively. Bards and minstrels played actively in the streets, the peasants, burghers, serfs, and merchants we're all fairly easy to get along with. And his soldiers crest on his brown belt helped to gain their trust as well, as soldiers were well respected (except in annexed territories of course). He stopped at the fountain and watched doves that flew down for a bath swim through the water before moving onward.

From there on the lower east section, he moved to the north side. A foul smell permeated from the direction, and further inquiry that the town's cesspits were on this side of town. The north side did not have as much merchants and markets, and seemed to focus on town commodities and peasant buildings. Marcus saw many inns and many homes all around this side of the town. The wealth disparity in Goldioz did not seem to be noticeable as it seemed a good number of people here were well off. It was only where the nobles and men of wealthy status where differences showed. There was also a toft of land set aside for the constable to manage civil affairs. And unlike Aldin, the only wall of the town was the one surrounding it. No other wall separated the sections.

The west side of the city varied similar to that of the North...however...this side had a military barracks and keep on it, assarting a large portion of the city away from the common folks. Marcus had seen bigger establishments before so it did not impress him. Most cities had their own barracks and places for soldiers to stay should the need arrive.

Now for one getting to the second level of the city, they must travel from the north side and go along the cliff of the hill until they find a pathway that lead them up towards the hill. The uphill portion of the city was very similar to the bottom. However, it was here where Marcus saw the noble households, and royal estates. And even more so...Marcus got to see Aron's actual estate from a distance.

“So this is where Sir Arin and his brother lives...” Marcus said. He stood there, looking at the estate from a distance. And as he stood there, sitting on a nearby bench, he began to think back to the battle in the wetlands many nights ago as the sun began to fade and cast the shadows of buildings over him.

“Lord Arin; what kept you!?” Master Knight shouted.

“Forgive me, I was ignorant to their movements till a half hour ago!” Arin shouted. “I cantered back as quickly as my horse could take me! Where is my brother!?”

“His scouting unit has not reported back!” Master Knight barked. “No matter...it is time to skewer these lot that have come to bear upon us!”

“No one will hurt my beloved Marcus!” She shouted. “No one!!”

“Karin; I need your help!” Marcus shouted.

“Of course; anything for you!” She shouted, moving by him.

“Master Knight...Sir Arin...” Marcus said quietly to himself, his eye closed and face up to the sky. “Karin...Please be safe...”

“YOU WERE WORRIED ABOUT ME!” A shout came to Marcus side. His entire body froze up, and he yelped loudly; nearly hopping into the air. As he fell back into the bench, he looked up to see Karin...right in front of him.

“K...K...KARIN!?” He shouted in complete surprise.

She gave him little to react before diving into his arms, knocking him off the bench. She stood there, embracing him on the floor...drawing a bit of a crowd from a few passerby.

“Oh my beautiful Marcus...” She moaned. “You are safe...when I had heard you were not part of the unit...I...I...” She began to tear up and painfully cry in his chest. “Oh my wonderful Marcus...I feared the worst...”

Marcus felt extremely uncomfortable as she stood there, crying into his arms. Not truly because she was crying...mostly because it had happened far too fast for him to really digest all of this new information...what with Karin alive and well; and how she herself was also in Goldioz. He was glad to see her alive and well.

“Wha...what are you doing here?” He asked. “I am pleased to see you survived the battle...but...”

“Ha!” She said, pulling herself and placing her hands on her hips, and twirling her hair in her hand. “As if I would allow such cretins to fell me so easily. I come from here under command from Lord Mediva to seek out survivors...I had a feeling you or others would have gone to Goldioz...so I came here.”

“Really?” He asked. “What came to that conclusion...that we might be here...”

“...Just an inclination.” She said, running her hair through her hands. “I dabbled a bit in magic’s of divination and foresight to further gather my analysis...as any master mage should. You were the first one I thought to look for...so I used my powers to find where you were a few days after the battle. My divination pointed towards a city. Even more so...next to North Pass, it would be the only other civilized town out there. I lost you in the wilderness as we fled...so I did not believe the North Pass would be it.”

“All of that seems like such stretches and guesses...” Marcus said, pulling himself to his feet. “But...when it comes to the art of magic, I am afraid I am ignorant to its ways. You mages understand it much better than I.”

“Divination and foresight tends to focus around guesses.” Karin said, smiling. “Even my powers did not give me a reading that would truly come to pass...just a possibility. But...my divination came to pass...and now we are reunited! Here! In Goldioz! The merchant’s paradise of the Westernfold!” She moved to Marcus and put his arm around her own. “Please show me around...I have not been in this town long and would absolutely love a guide.”

“I am not much of a guide Karin.” He said, blushing and rubbing his head. “I have never been here.”

“Then show me to the best of your abilities!” She said. “We shall make it a day for us two together! Just like old times! Will that not be wonderful!?”

“...It would certainly be fond memories to relive.” He said.

“Then we are agreed then!” She said. “Now come!! Show me everything! Let us walk around town like the days of past.”

Marcus stood there, unsure of what to do. The memories of the feelings of fear and escape were there; but the feelings were not erupting in the moment he and she were talking. He pondered why those intense feelings were present there, and why they were absent now; but Karin gave him little time to think on such things. Soon, he found himself being whisked away into the town.

Chapter 14 –Possessed Barracks

Marcus didn't know how long he and Karin were in town, but they stayed until the sun had finally gone down. Marcus took Karin back to the inn that he was staying at, and ordered her and him another pitcher of ale, and the two kinked their glasses. Night had fallen, and the inn was beginning to ask for last calls as the lights began to go out.

"I apologize for my actions back at the North Pass..." She said. "Putting you up against a wall to taste your sweet lips again; and feel your touch that ignited such passion. We had not seen each other in years...I probably should have started things small beforehand. I hope you were not made uncomfortable by this...I had up until then believed it was a vain hope in seeing you."

Oh Marcus could go on how both comfortable and uncomfortable he felt in those moments. But he was glad she was safe. It did not change his feelings for her... at least in this moment. For now, she was merely a friend who had known long past.

"This is much better." Marcus said, downing the ale. "I'm sorry if I disappointed you when...you took me into the alleyway."

"Oh my...did I offend you!?" She asked desperately. "Did I do something wrong!? Please tell me what I did; and I shall amend it."

"You did nothing wrong." Marcus said, placing his hands on her own. "Nothing at all. Karin...our romance we shared was six years ago. You inherited money to go to a splendid school to lengthen the power that you and I both knew you had. But...the school came with a price of you leaving for it. The night we shared prior...that was effectively my farewell to you. I did not believe you and I would cross paths again...so I buried my romance with you deep in my mind and simply let it die." Karin looked shocked from Marcus' revelation, but she seemed to understand why. Marcus and she (because of military affairs) never really had an opportunity to speak. She was here on Seaside division whereas Marcus belonged to the Westernfold...two entirely separate army entities. The two interacted very little. He shook his head as he looked at her. "Forgive me...the meeting that we are having now I can only surmise is one interwoven by fate. I did not want to hold to a false promise that we would meet again."

"I...see." Karin said, looking sad into her ale.

"Are you upset?" Marcus asked.

"No...your response makes sense." She said lamentably. "You thought it through and gauged everything before making the call. It would have been unlikely we would have seen each other. I am well read and intelligent enough to know what could be going through your head." And as she spoke, she then gripped his hands and leaned in closer on to him from her seat. "But your thoughts are folly! Look at us now! Six years and we are now once again united! Surely you cannot believe that there is fate in this!?"

"I...I do believe that it might just be." Marcus said. He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Then...could we perhaps begin anew!?" She asked with excitement.

He couldn't answer it. He had loved Karin years ago, but he (and already had told even her now) that he had let the romance from years ago fade away. When it came to matters of the heart, his focus was more Riona...as the beautiful elf girl had already swayed

his interest...and her own as well. Karin being here now complicated those emotions, and he did not know how to respond to her.

"I...I do not know." He said. "There are many emotions right now since seeing you that I have been dealing with." He wisely left out the emotions that made him desire to be as many leagues away from her as he plausibly could. "More or less...with the situation I am in right now, love is the least of my concerns."

"Situation?" Karin asked. "What situation!? Tell me what is plaguing you...and I shall do whatever is in my power to help." She leaned in closer to him. "Anything..."

"It is not something I could involve you in." Marcus said. "I have already involved five others; and one more of her violation. I could not bear bringing another into this."

"Well I want to help!" She said defiantly. "Anything that would cause you to be in peril, I will see to it that is solved! You can trust me!" She got off of her seat and then took him by the arm, sitting in the seat next to him. "You...still trust me?"

"You...are not one so easy to trust if I remember our past." Marcus joked.

Karin smiled slyly as he spoke that. "Okay my dear Marcus...I see why you would not." She said, while laughing. She then ran her hand through her hair, moving the bangs that concealed her left eye, pink shimmering dust like energy going through it. "But...I do not joke in this instance. If you are truly in peril...would you trust me to protect your life?"

He did not know what to do for a moment. But soon...he thought it would not be a terrible idea to have her join. She was a powerful mage from everything he remembered in the past even without formal training, and he was certain she was even more powerful now that she had such an education. As quickly as he was bewildered on the idea, he quickly changed his mind as he looked into her eyes.

"You're right..." He said. "I do trust you."

So he divulged to her everything that had transpired with what had occurred in the battle of the wetlands. He started from how he had grabbed the Lughglen, and then escaped with it in the wetlands. Karin recalled he had something in his hand, but the battle pressed her attention elsewhere. After the fight from the dark mage, Karin had been knocked unconscious and was unable to discern where she was. As the servant wench went to put out the candles, Karin continued her story of what had happened from there. The battle had been one and the enemy driven off, but most of the convoy had been separated from the attacks and split off...and fighting still went on for several days. Golton rallied who he could to find survivors and was able to get several companies back together. With her captain in the mage knights dead, she was assumed under the command of Lord Mediva; who commanded her to aid in find the survivors. "I used my magic to find those that I could, but there were not many." She said while twirling her hair in a strand around her finger. "Some days later, Mediva and Arin surmised some of the survivors might have broken off and fled towards towns. Arin was especially concerned for you and ordered us to find you by any means necessary."

Her story seemed a little farfetched, but there was little Marcus could do to prove her wrong. After all, Riona spun a similar tale with finding them with her power...though he felt Riona's story was more believable. He simply though choose to ignore it, believing that her power to some degree aided her.

"And that leads you here then." Marcus said.

"It would seem." She said.

"And there are others?" Marcus asked.

“My company consisted of three other mages.” She replied. “They were searching the town for any known rumors of survivors...but they had yet to come back to me yet if they did. It seems I succeeded first...as I should with my abilities and all.”

“But still...all the way out here...in Goldioz?” Marcus asked.

“As I said, my divinations led me here.” She said, twirling her hair. She adjusted a few bangs and then turned back to him. “I did not know if they spoke truth to me, but I see to it that they were right. You were here...and you are safe. Where is the Tome might I ask?”

“Captain William and Riona took it to the keep.” Marcus explained. “Lady Riona Florale of the Kel-Ford woods is there to affirm her status, and confirm William’s story. From there, William hoped to find a way to contact Master Knight...or anyone who could guide us back to Aldin where it was supposed to be.”

“Then fear not...” She said, twirling her hair again. “I can contact Lord Arin and Mediva. I know they survived the battle. Fear not...you shalln’t remain here much longer.”

“You can do that!?” Marcus shouted. The barkeep shushed him and he sat back down. “I mean...you can reach him from here?”

“I’m a mage Marcus...top of my class and expert in multiple types of magic.” She said proudly. “Such sendings and telepathic messages are easy for me to handle. You’ll see.”

“That is amazing.” Marcus said. “Karin, you are the best.” Karin’s face instantly went red, and her face turned to that of complete joy. In that moment, Marcus looked upon her, and began to remember the times that the two had shared in the past. Seeing her happy like she was when he had defended her from bullies had brought him a similar joy.

“Have I earned a kiss?” Karin said slyly.

“I...I can’t imagine why not.” Marcus said, moving out of his chair.

Karin then walked over to him and moved her head to kiss him. Feeling that she had earned something for going out of her way to help him, Marcus this time allowed her to kiss him. The was very passionate, very romantic. Soon after, Karin pulled away and repeated the same motion as before where she created shimmering pink energy on her lips. Marcus saw it before, but paid it no mind. She then reached in for a second kiss, and this time attempted to press herself against more seductively.

I just want you to love me again. Marcus heard her whisper.

Things went wrong fast for Marcus. The romance he felt for Karin disappeared instantly as suddenly the world went dark. Something was wrong in his head as she was kissing him; as he felt multiple emotions inside his mind screaming to break away from her. As they kissed, Marcus found himself being enveloped with seductive thoughts about Karin, but they would dissipate soon after to how he felt about her now; though not after an intense struggle to focus in on other things. His mind was shifting around between how he felt about Karin then, and how he felt about Riona now, as if someone was playing with his feelings and trying to adjust them. He attempted to obey what his mind was telling him to do, but Karin wasn’t letting him. She moved her hand behind his head to keep him pressed against her lips. His mind continued to swap between wanting to make love to her, to thinking of Riona...and even more alarmingly...warning him to stay away.

As if he was in actual danger.

He broke away from Karin for a moment, which caused her to look at him with an expression of shock and confusion. All he could do was stand there and pant, unable to look away from her. “Marcus...” she whispered. “Is something wrong?”



The door to the inn opened as she spoke. A few individuals entered the inn, all of them appearing to be mage knights. Karin broke away from Marcus' lips as the two were there, which caused whatever internal struggle in Marcus' mind to disappear. He shook his head and attempted to recollect himself as Karin looked away at the men moving towards the inn's bar. The barkeep told them that the inn was beginning to close, and they said they would not be in for long. They looked at Karin's direction and then walked over to her. Marcus couldn't see their faces of all but one, but he had this unsavory feeling of them as they approached the table.

"Karin...there you are." One of them spoke. "Did you find any survivors?"

"I did Dundin!" She said ecstatically. "Fortune favored my search, and I found my dear Armani in town!"

"...I see." He said back. "Excellent...and here we thought our mission would have been for naught. Do you have more information to share with us?"

"I do in my findings...but that can wait for another day." She said. "I just want to stay here now with my Marcus and reconnect from years of separation."

"We have tasks to do Karin." Dundin replied. "We need you to report back with us. Lord Mediva will want contact."

"Surely you jest!?" She barked.

"We do not." He said.

Karin shot him a look of disgust and disappointment. Eventually, she sighed and pulled out her chair.

"Fate separates us again I see?" She moaned.

Marcus didn't answer. The bewilderment of what he had just gone through had shook him up so much, he was ignorant to the world around him. He stood there, looking at the entrance for a minute, before a small push by Karin woke him up.

"Uhh...ye...yeah" Marcus managed to get out. "It...it sounds like you will be here for a spell."

"Truly!?" She asked.

Marcus nodded. Ecstatic, she went over and embraced him. After kissing him on the cheek, she left with the mage group...except for one who stood where Marcus was as he put down his mug.

Something was wrong. The moment Karin kissed him, he felt as if he was losing his mind. He could not tell as to what had transpired; only that something was very wrong. And...could...could it have come from Karin?

As Marcus thought upon this further, the mage tapped him on the shoulder.

"Excuse me...did you she call you Armani?" He asked.

"Uhh...yeah." Marcus said. "Marcus Armani...at your service."

"Darin at yours." He replied.

"Was there...something about my name?" Marcus asked.

"Yeah...you wouldn't happen to be...the Marcus Armani who Karin talks so much of?"

Marcus merely nodded.

"I see..." Darin said. Marcus was a bit piqued by his response and pressed to find out why. Darin shook his head. "Nothing that need concern you; I suppose. I went to the same academy as her and joined the mage knights. We were study partners. I actually had asked her out for some ale or coffee to try and get to know her better...but she told me she

would only speak to a Marcus Armani on that account. She only wanted to talk at times about this Marcus Armani as well. I recognized your visage from her descriptions and the statues in her room?”

“...statues?” Marcus asked with some confusion.

“Yes...some statues she conjured for her Creation Magic class that match your visage...if you had no vest or shirt on.” He elaborated. “She said they were of her lover and gave her the inspiration to continue. She adorned her dorm with a couple others, I just remembered it now when I heard your name.”

“That...” Marcus said, completely adorned with bewilderment. He was having very strange feelings on this account brought to him that made it difficult for him to surmise how he felt about this. The appearance of him with no clothes in his upper torso not only made him feel off, but humiliated as well. “I...I truly don’t know to feel about this...honored or disturbed.”

“Your friend always seemed...off.” Darin said. He then shook his head. “But...that might be me not reading everything in this regard, or jealousy towards you.” A voice from the outside beckoned Darin to come out. He then turned back to Marcus and bowed. “You are truly fortunate to have such a fetching woman.” He then left Marcus alone in the inn to his thoughts.

And many thoughts he had. The information he was given about Karin in school were...difficult to process. Creating statues of him in her room? It seemed like a nice gesture...but there was something off about it as well. He didn’t know what yet.

He did not see Karin for two days afterwards, though she sent him letters every morning to remind him he was still there. They were just what he had expected; inquiries about his day and profession of her love and desire to reconnect like olden times. Confused on how to proceed with Karin, he confided in the others to some degree. Ron, Emily, and Chorin said that it would not hurt. Emma’s opinions however were that he should tell her how he truly feels and try to leave her at that. She believed from the description that the romance had ended, and she remain that way...and she heavily reinforced this point in almost childlike pouty way. Riona jealously told him to have nothing to do with her, and he was wise enough to not ask William on such an affair. The group however was happy to hear that Karin would be able to contact the army and Lord Arin, so they were very appreciative of her...and glad that their time in Goldioz would soon end.

It was on the third day Marcus and his group had a truly bizarre encounter. Karin had sent him a letter saying that she had contacted Lord Mediva, and he and his men were within seven leagues of the city. Upon hearing of the Tome’s recovery, he was beginning to speed towards Golidoz. He had ordered Marcus’ unit merely to wait at the inn for further instruction. After hearing about how Karin had contacted Lord Mediva, William decided that night he should inform the Captain of the guard in the keep that they would soon be departing and would require the item that they had originally requested be put under guard. Though it somewhat disobeyed Mediva’s orders, he felt merely being sure the item was still secure would not bring much harm. They left in the night, as William had other affairs he went to see to at the time. It was very dark that night, and the streets appeared empty.

“You sure that this mage of yours can aid us?” William asked.

“I haven’t had a chance to fully observe her power; but she seems confident in her ability to do so.” Marcus replied.

“I’m just glad to hear the army drove them back.” Ron said with hope in his voice.

“They haven’t taken care of everything yet.” Marcus replied. “Karin said that there were still reports of fighting throughout the fields; and many companies being pushed south or separated from the main force. There could still be monsters moving across the plains...we’ll need to be vigilant even when we reconnoiter with Mediva. What do you think Riona?”

Riona did not answer. She in fact almost looked like she was paying little if any attention to what Marcus was saying. At first, Marcus thought she was merely thinking of what her father might do when he discovered she was this far out on her own without his permission. But the thoughts she had appeared to be deeper than that. She had her fingers on her chin the whole time, and held a stoic confused look; the polar opposite of how she tended to act. Marcus went over to her and tapped her on the shoulder.

“Riona?” He asked. “Are you paying attention?”

“Huh?” She muttered. “Oh...uh...sorry.”

“Is something the matter?” Emma asked. “You never usually keep to yourself like this.”

“I apologize.” Riona said. “It’s just...well...”

“Well what!?” William barked.

“It’s about Marcus’ friend...Karin I believe she was called.” Riona began. “Marcus told me that she had inkling of an idea that survivors would be here. I just find that sort of divination somewhat unlikely.”

“Why is that?” Marcus asked.

“She said that she did it sometime after the battle.” Riona said. “But...you were all were out for days before I found you. It was nearly a month before any of us arrived here in Goldioz. Her divination should have led you all to the spider’s cave; not to Goldioz.” Marcus looked at her with a look of confusion, but Riona then merely shook her head. “I’m sorry...I merely am voicing something that has me in a bit of bewilderment.”

“But...did we not end up in Goldioz?” Marcus asked.

“What did she say her divination was for?” Riona asked. “What were the words she used?”

“Hmmm...” Marcus moaned as he continued to walk. “She said that she used her power a few days after the battle. Her exact words were where we were at the time; or where I was more specifically.”

“A few days?” Riona asked. She then returned to her confused position.

The only difference is now Marcus was joining her in tangent. In retrospect, there was something a tad peculiar about her story, and Riona seemed to know what she was talking about when it came to this. A few days? Marcus tallied up the days being lost in the wilderness and realized that he was only at the mouth of the cave at the time, and nowhere near Goldioz (in fact farther than two hundred leagues from it if anything). Now Marcus was starting to doubt her story...and a lot of her words as well. He couldn’t remember why exactly he was beginning to doubt her, but it had something to do with how she acted in the past.

And he wondered if it had anything to do with that strange assault on his mind when the two had kissed three days earlier.

As he was walking, he then turned to Emma. Emma was looking around the city, her ears adjusting and moving in different directions. She also appeared to be concerned as

well; but he was certain for different reasons. Sooner or later, Riona herself started to look around in a very confused state as well; and Marcus was further unnerved when the two began to talk to each other.

“Are you hearing what I am hearing?” Riona asked.

“No.” Emma said.

“...My point right?” She asked.

“Yeah...” Emma said.

“What’s going on?” Marcus asked.

“Where are the guards and the night watch?” Emma asked. “We are approaching the keep, yet I have hardly seen a flicker of a torch or anyone watching for criminals.”

“Huh.” Chorin muttered. “She has a point; this city has much mancipia moving about the markets. The night watch is usually very active, yet I have hardly seen a soul since were walking.”

“The streets are not normally empty?” William asked.

“Not at all.” Chorin said. “Never seen it once; and I lived here for nineteen years.”

A strange sight in the night of the town broke Marcus out of his concentration, and the others from their talks. They saw someone wandering in the road, appearing out of the torch lights to the side. He was a town soldier, but there was something off. He looked to be a clean shaven man with his appearing like he had a buzz cut. He appeared to be normal externally, but he was walking in what appeared to be a daze. His head was pointed straight ahead without moving or blinking (though only Emma and Riona could notice this), and there was this small groaning sound he was making. He approached the group, and ended up bumping into Ron and Emily without taking notice that they were there.

“Hey!” Emily shouted. “That was rude!”

He took no notice. In fact, he didn’t break eye contact other than moving straight forward. That’s when Riona looked even more concerned. She broke away from the group and went over to the soldier. She attempted to try and garner his attention, but her attempts did nothing to sway his attention.

“Hey...are you alright?” She asked. “Did you not notice my friend as you were wandering in the night?”

He didn’t answer. At this time, the others had stopped moving towards the keep and then went to where Riona was. The man appeared to be trying to walk through her, though Riona tried to hold him in place. Riona of course relied more on being swift on her feet and arms; and did not have nearly as much arm strength as one would initially believe. The man was slowly pushing her forward as a result, but was quickly held in place when the others came to stop him.

They attempted to coax the man’s attention but all efforts to communicate with him seemed to fail. On occasion, he would softly whisper: “Go outside of town and slit your throat.” He would say this every few minutes or so, and he said it in such a chilling manner. Riona continued to try and call out to him, but it seemed to be of no avail.

“What’s wrong with him!?” Marcus asked.

“He looks like he is under an enchantment!” Riona barked. “We cannot let him go outside of town; he’ll kill himself if what this geas he has over him is telling him to do!”

“But how do we stop him!?” Marcus shouted.

“I don’t know!” Riona shouted. She then went to his face and began to shout at him. “Listen my friend! You are under a spell! You must try regain your sense of self! Do not adhere to the geas you have been placed under! Listen to my words!”

It did no good. The man still seemed to be mentally out of everyone’s beckoning. Many others attempted to reach out to the man, but all of their attempts failed. In the midst of the arguing and yelling, William simply removed the man’s helmet, before delivering a large right hook onto the man’s face. The soldier flew 5 feet back before falling down unconscious. The others shrieked for a moment from William’s attack, as the older soldier merely adjusted his gauntlet.

“William; you have knocked him out cold!” Marcus barked.

“We’re trying to save the man; not kill him!” Ron shouted.

“Aye...that we are.” He said. “And look...he cannot complete his task if he is out cold on the road like this. Drag him to the side and let’s wake him up...see if that punch did anything to knock some sense into him.”

“And if it fails...?” Marcus asked.

“We knock him out again; and hope the spell wears off when we return!” William barked.

“AGAIN!?” Ron shouted.

“If you lot have a better idea, then please feel free to stop withholding it!” He snapped. “Am I the only one who speaks any kind of sense around here!?”

There was much to argue about the physical harm the man had received, but none could argue that William had achieved a result in some form. They dragged him off the road and onto a nearby bench.

Riona then spent the time examining the magic exerted onto the individual. Enchantments were not her forte due to her power being more focused on the elements of nature, but she knew a thing or two about dispelling them. Within minutes, she worked feverishly to dispel the magic that had been placed on the individual. To Marcus and the others, Riona was merely whispering incoherently and speaking in tongues as she spoke the incantations to dispel the magic, and her hands were enshrouded with a bluish energy. After ten minutes of working, Marcus saw a pinkish outline around the man’s head appear, and it shattered as if it was glass. The shards of the outline faded into nothingness soon after. Riona pulled her hands away, and then touched the man’s head, speaking one more incantation. A golden energy went over the man’s head, and he began to awaken.

“Ahh....auuuggghhh...” He groaned. “My aching head...where am I?”

“You’re out in the middle of the street.” Marcus said.

“Middle...of the street?” He asked weakly. “That...that isn’t right...I’m supposed to be at the barrack’s entrance.”

“You guard the keep whelp?” William barked.

“Yeah.” He groaned, trying to pull himself up. Riona helped him up until she was certain he was able to stand on his own two feet. “My shift was supposed to last until the sun rises; but it’s still the dead of night...what am I doing here?”

“What do you remember?” William asked.

“I...not much.” He muttered. “I just remember staying at my post...then this bellibone showed up. Fetching lass; much more than any woman here. I just remembering exchanging pleasantries with her...and...”

“And what son!?” William barked.

“I...that was it.” He said defiantly. “I remember not anything after that.”

“Nothing?” William asked. He shook his head. “Do you know what the girl looked like...”

“I...I don’t know.” He said. “I’m trying to remember her appearance, but I can’t think of it. She was gorgeous...that is much as I can remember....I...I need to get back to my post.”

The man (whose name was Stanley) then slowly walked back to the keep. The others went with him just to see him safely off. Riona eventually explained to him that he had been placed under some form of enchantment; to which made him very cross and irate. “Never liked mages...” He muttered. “Always make me feel like our jobs are irrelevant; when they can just conjure or evoke whatever they need. What use is an army if you can rip the fabric of the earth apart with a mere thought?” Riona tried to explain to him how magic worked to a more specific degree, but he angrily refused to hear any of it. She eventually conceded there was little to try and sway his belief. As they ran, Stanley himself also began to take note of the emptiness of the street he was on, an oddity that the others explained they had already taken to heart.

They arrived at the keep a minute later. The keep itself was a large fortress like building that stood inside the barracks; a series of stone buildings encased in a walled in area. The barracks itself looked very similar to the barracks he was accustomed to, save for the fact it was much bigger and looked like it held more sophisticated equipment. The keep had four round towers on each of its corners, and it appeared to be two to three stories tall. Series of torches lit by tinder and oil hung at the walls by the windows. The guard post at the entrance appeared empty...something that immediately concerned Stanley.

In fact, most of the barracks seemed empty.

“Are the gates normally supposed to be empty?” Marcus asked.”

“Or the entire barracks this empty?” William asked.

“No; there is always to be two men stationed in front of the gate.” He said. “And I remember a lot more men running patrols and laps around the training area before my vision went dark. Something is wrong here. You all stay out here...I will investigate. I will not draw civilians into matters of the army.”

“We’re part of the army.” Chorin said. “Our Captain William here left an item in this keep of great importance. We came here to check to see if it was still being under watch.”

“...You know I vaguely remember that.” Stanley said in a voice that looked as if he had immediate concern in him. “Yeah that’s right...you came by three days ago holding an item that Lord Mediva informed us to keep safe. That thing in the white cloth with the sigil of Father Constantine of Esruweh’s high cathedral.”

“Yes; and we came by to make sure it was still safe, as Lord Mediva is coming to retrieve it.” William said. “We came to send word about it, but it seems we found danger brewing. We are allowed to enter here...the Captain can verify us.”

“...Kind of a coincidence this all began to happen, do you think?” Stanley asked metaphorically.” Stanley went to the door of the keep and found it to be unlocked. The group entered into the keep. They were in the main hall, which appeared to be room with several openings on the side, each leading into other hallways, storerooms, and even

armories. The room had a foyer which led up to the second floor. The room had extremely dim lighting, making it hard to make out any specific details

As they entered the main room, they saw several soldiers guarding the foyer. They seemed a bit off, as their helmets were casting more of a shadow on their faces. William knew the path to where the Tome was upstairs, and the group began to walk over; except for Riona and Emma, who stopped moving at the entrance. Marcus and the others did not notice.

“Move aside!” Stanley said. “We need to verify that the item brought here three days ago by people approved from Lord Aron is still here.”

“No one enters.” The soldier said in a dark raspy voice.

“It’s urgent!” he shouted. “We need to get to the second floor storeroom! I ask you to move!”

“No one enters!” The man shouted again.

“I said move!” Stanley shouted, pressing his hand against the man’s armor. “I’m the lieutenant...and you will do as I say!” He pushed the man forward to press his point; and did so hard that the helmet fell off. As he did, Marcus and Stanley recoiled back for the armored figure was actually an orc. Stanley himself appeared more horrified at this revelation. “Who are you!?”

The armored figure immediately reacted and drew his sword to stab Stanley. Were it not for Riona’s quick shot with her bow that she did the moment she saw the sword being drawn, he would have succeeded. The arrow flew in and the man fell down. The others immediately reacted and drew their weapons.

And then a battle began in the armory. The orcs and men drew their weapons and immediately charged the individuals who were there. There were fourteen of them, and eight of Marcus’ companion, putting the advantage of numbers to them. Marcus and his companions drew their weapons and began to engage them. Riona let her arrows fly and dropped two more of their numbers before they got to where she needed to flee.

They were outnumbered and actually out classed as the enemy was using heavier armor to fend off blows. They fled to the entrance as to make them come at them two at a time. William backed off to draw his bow, while Marcus and Stanley held the front with their swords and shields. Ron and Chorin sheathed their swords and retrieved long spears from the outside barracks, while Emily used her own to aid Marcus and Stanley.

“What are orcs doing in the armory!?” Stanley shouted.

“They must have infiltrated when you were under a spell.” Marcus shouted back. “Emma...stay out of this fight!”

The orcs and men continued to try and fight their way through Marcus and Stanley’s defense. Marcus had never fought so hard in his life, as he did not have his armor on (as he did not expect to be fighting). He blocked many attacks of which should have taken his life. Stanley held well, feinting the orcs and even bringing two of their number down with stabs to the face. But they could hold their position and were pushed down.

At this point, Riona had dropped her and waved her hand forward. Her arms enveloped with what looked like lightning bolts all across it, and she pointed her hand forward; unleashing a bolt of lightning against the orcs. The orcs convulsed as the bolt hit each of them, and remained there until they had been killed. Smoke rose from their bodies as Marcus and Stanley pulled themselves up. They both looked relieved, but Stanley looked also disappointed.

“This only proves my notion against magic.” He said. “What would have taken the effort of several men was reduced to nothing by a mere wave of a hand.”

“Would you prefer if I did not do that?” Riona asked smugly.

“...I suppose I can look past it this once.” He said with a look of humility in his face.

They went to investigate the bodies. In total of the fourteen there were ten orcs, and four humans. The humans appeared of Tritenian origin, but none of them looked like honest men. They all bore names on their soldier’s crest, but Stanley knew that seven of them were not who was in the suit of armor at the time. “I do not recognize these men.” He muttered as he looked at each one of them.

“The Tome!” Marcus barked. William nodded and led the way, as he had been here before. Along the way, other men of unknown origins appeared and attacked the group, but they did not so as a group, allowing Marcus and his group to fell them more easily than before.

A loud sound on the side of the keep was heard. The group came to a large hallway; and looked to seeing one of the glass windows shattering. At the end of the hallway were four individuals, and what looked like a aranrider as well. Marcus and his companions had arrived in enough time to see the center one blast open the glass window, and leap out of the window, along with the aranrider

But Riona’s elven eyes saw what they were carrying.

“Those cretins have the Tome!” She shouted.

Chapter 15 – The Enchantress

Riona did not waste a moment in letting the others grasp what she had claimed. She quickly notched an arrow into her bow and fired. Her arrow met a mark, and one of the mages fell from where he was. The others took notice of her and each pointed their wands, unleashing several spells. Each of their wands fired a bluish ball of energy out. Riona attempted to fire an arrow, but she and the others were forced to move out of the way. The spheres impacted onto the ground, where they created several eruptions of stone and cobble. Ron and Chorin were too close to one of the spheres, and were knocked into the air. They lay on the ground, injured and bleeding; something of which Emma screamed about and ran over to her brother. As they were all recoiling from the spells they unleashed, the men put their wands down and each fled down the window, using spells to float over the wall that surrounded the whole barracks.

Riona fired, but her shot failed to land a mark. She spat several curses in elven, running over to the window and fired again, leaping out as she did. “RIONA, WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?” Marcus shouted; but she ignored him, her focus entirely on her aim. She would have hit that one, but the man turned around and raised a wall of white energy around him to deflect the shot before it landed. The man then retaliated with raising a wand another shouted something back. A bolt of lightning came out of it and clasped Riona, hitting the elven girl and electrocuting her badly. In mid air, she was forced into the wall of the building and tumbled downward onto the pavement.

“RIONA!” Marcus shouted in a terrified manner, swiftly running out of the building. The others moved in an unbridled panic along with him. As soon as he exited the central part of the fortress, he turned the first corner of the building; and then the next. In his mind, he believed her dead. She had fallen a story; and had even been hit by a spell.

But amazingly, Marcus turned the corner to see Riona on the ground...pulling herself up. She slipped only once back onto the ground; but still managed to get back on her feet. She was injured most assuredly...but so much as Marcus would have expected. The most distinguishing injury about her was merely scorch marks on her arms and belly. But aside from that, she still managed to stand proudly.

“Riona...are you alright!?” Marcus shouted.

“I...I’m fine.” Riona said, slowly standing; eventually using the nearby wall for support. “I-I...I think I’m fine.”

“You think!?” Emma shouted. “You just fell a whole story on your stomach...let alone the injuries from the spell!”

“Yeah...” Riona muttered. “I...I could see how someone would believe me further injured than before.”

“You fell out a story Riona!” Marcus shouted. “And that was stupid what you do!”

“Yeah...” She said. “That was fadoodle...no debate there Marcus.” As she stood there, she felt around her legs against the folds of her dress. “I dare say I think I emptied my bladder on the way down too.”

“But you’re alright...right?” Emily asked.

“Yeah...” Riona said. She took a few steps forward, attempting to be certain she could still walk properly. “I...I think I’m fine.”

“You should still be examined.” Emma pleaded. “You could be far more injured than you are letting on.

“I’m fine...” Riona barked, slowly removing herself from the wall. “We have far more pressing matters than my injury...” Afterwards, she stretched for a moment and began to walk...sluggishly, but walking. Soon her walk turned into a light jog, and then she appeared to have recovered fully...as if nothing had happened to her.

The others could not have fathomed what they had seen. Never had anyone seen someone fall from two stories after being knocked into the building by a large force recover so swiftly; and with what appeared to be very little injury. And although everyone was still concerned for Riona’s well being, the immediate situation forced them all back into the fort.

The entire group returned to the upper story where the man Riona had fatally injured still lay. He still clung onto life by threads, drawing one of her elvish curved swords to his throat; though he appeared to be dying so the weapon appeared unneeded. Marcus and the others walked over to where he was.

Marcus recognized who the individual was. He appeared to be one of the mages that Karin was with; one of the mages whom he could not distinguish the features of because of his cloak.

“Where are they going?” Riona barked, her sword pressed against his throat. “Tell me now; or I will make your passing into Oblivion unbearable.”

“Ack...ahh...” He coughed as he looked at her. “ack...you...can’t stop us...ack...”

The man passed in front of her and breathed no more. Riona kicked his body in frustration, and then walked away from it.

“We cannot tarry!” She said. “They’re moving towards the East side of town! They may have an escape there! We need to press forward; lest they all escape!”

“Hold!” Marcus said, moving in front of her. “Are you sure you should be going?”

“Marcus; I appreciate your concern, but I am fine.” She stated.

“Riona...” Marcus said softly. “No one falls from a height like that unscathed.”

Riona sighed for a moment and then went over to Emma. “Emma...will you put your skills to examine me?” She asked. “I feel no one will let me assist further until I have your reassurance.”

Emma looked at Riona and nodded. The two then walked off for a moment while Emma took Riona to a room to get some privacy. The others simply waited outside the room for them to finish. Emma put Riona on a bed in the room and stripped her down to her small clothes and then began to press and check her body for fractures and injuries.

“Ouch...not so rough...” Riona squeaked. “That area is sensitive...”

“Sorry...” Emma said.

“And your claws do not help either...” Riona moaned.

She continued her practice for a few minutes more. When no injuries (aside from the scorch marks) could be found, Riona put her clothes back on and returned to the group.

“She’s right...” Emma said. “There’s no serious injury.”

“Truthfully?” Ron asked. Emma merely nodded.

“Mages...” Chorin groaned. “Probably used some form of spell to break her fall.”

“Bu-but of course!” Riona said, though Marcus noted that she had some slight hesitation in her voice. He had known Riona long enough to know that she was lying. He

couldn't fathom in his mind why she would lie about something such as this; especially since it had saved her well being.

But he never got time to inquire further. Riona then moved forward to the group.

"Alright...we can't tarry here any further." She said. "They've made off with something that the royals of your country have tried to protect. We must pursue them!"

"Bloody damn right we need to." William grunted.

"Emma!" Ron shouted. "You go back to the inn; and you stay there!"

"Why!?" She shouted.

"Because it's too dangerous!" He shouted. "We're going up against wielders of magic; you'll be much safer at the inn!"

"But..." She moaned.

"Emma he's right." Marcus said. "We can't risk you getting hurt. Beforehand you had little choice back at the abandoned inn. Now you do. Stay here; we shall come for you when we have recovered the Tome."

"I shall also remain in town." Stanley said, putting his hand on his chest. "I will gather what men I can find, and send word to house Aron of this theft. Hopefully I can garner enough of the garrison to aid you in this plight. If you find where they are, send a spell of light. Your she elf with you can conjure magic; so I surmise it shall not be a issue."

"If not magic, I will send word another way." Riona shouted. "Good luck my friend...be swift in your search."

They all ran out of the keep and into the barracks grounds, leaving Emma to herself. She shouted at them to come with, but her bellows were ignored. As they did, Marcus's thoughts went wild. He couldn't discern what it is, but he felt he was missing something. He had seen this before, back at North Pass. No; he had not physically seen men walking in a zombified state wandering around. But an entire section of men and women...just vanishing. That he did see before. It was right around the time...

Suddenly he stopped in his tracks. A euphoria and realization came over him and he knew what was going on. In the mere moment he had thought about the North Pass, the mages, and now the Goldioz barracks, he knew what was going on.

It was Karin.

"I just finished my training back at Seaside. I've actually been here since Master Knight's convoy with Constantine arrived."

"Well...at the school I was considered a master enchantress!"

"Now I must leave...there are forty men in my unit that have gone missing since the day the before the meeting."

"We were contracted by an agent of the dark army growing in the land."

"Enchantment magic. Magic spells used to bewitch and control the mind. It can change how a person is thinking or acting without them realizing it."

"Resisting an enchantment spell takes quite of mental focus to handle. I applaud anyone who can resist such spells...especially the more powerful ones which can alter your memories or perception."

"My company consisted of three other mages."

"I just remember staying at my post...then this bellibone showed up. Fetching lass; much more than any woman here. I just remembering exchanging pleasantries with her...and..."

The realization hit him as if a horse had charged into him and knocked him over. He stopped moving from where he was at, and stood there, stunned from the realization. Karin was the one behind all of this; and behind the disappearances at North Pass. All of it made sense! Karin was there when Constantine arrived, meaning she was with the convoy Master Knight had retrieved from Seaside. The incident with him and Emma on the tower took place sometime after he had arrived. Karin must have manipulated the soldiers on the top with her magic to disappear. Was...was she the shadow he and Emma had seen on the fortress?

There was more to it, and Marcus dug into his past memories of her to discern what else could be amiss. He knew there was something else upon this realization that was concerning as well. It then hit him again when he thought of their past as youths. Karin was an avid liar back in the day when she used to pull pranks on Marcus to get his attention of her. Eventually he became good at reading when she was about to pull something, as she would always play with her hair when she was fibbing (usually by twirling it in her fingers). Marcus then remembered that she had been doing on every instance she spoke to him; except on matters when it concerned the two of them and their past relationship. Her stories and circumstances for being here in Goldioz were false.

And then the spider's den! The aranrider had said that he was to be kept alive. In any other situation, he would have been nothing but meat to them. In other words, someone demanded that the beasts keep him alive. More or less, they knew he was carrying the Lughglen.

The evidence towards Karin was infallible.

Marcus stood there, overwhelmed by both grief and anger from this revelation. He stopped moving and propped himself against the wall of the barracks, fearing he would lose his balance and fall if he did not. Riona noticed that he seemed in distress and walked over to him.

"Marcus..." She said. "Are you okay?"

Marcus shook his head and his hand gripped his face.

"No; I am not okay." He said. "I am not hurt...but I know whose responsible for this!"

"Who!?" She shouted.

He didn't answer Riona's inquiry, or attempts to cohere his attention. He instead began to run, swifter than he ever had run before. Even though the others had a considerable head start against him, he not only caught up to where they were, but soon began to outrun them. Sooner or later, he began to move further and further away from them as they exited the town's walls, so much so that the only one keeping up with him was Riona.

"Wait for us boy!" William shouted, but his words fell on deaf ears. Marcus had no interest in waiting after he realized what was going on.

They were now in the wilderness before Marcus realized at, and in the dead of night with no light from the moon; making everything a large veil of blackness. The air around Marcus and his group began to feel moist and damp. A storm was coming.

Marcus knew there was little he could do on his own when it came to tracking; whereas Riona had far more experience. The others soon caught up as Marcus held himself up to recover his stamina.

“Boy what is going on with you!?” William shouted. “I haven’t seen you run like that since I threatened to make you clean the latrines with your only shirt if you failed to make my mark in physical training.”

“No time...” Marcus gasped. “We got to find them now; or else the Tome will pass beyond our ability to find. Riona...can you track them?”

“There must be a sign; they could not have gone far!” Riona shouted. “They were not even a league ahead of us...but they must have some means to see in the dark. Even an elf will get lose in this blackness.” She picked up a large stick that she had found on the ground and used her magics of fire to ignite the top of it as a makeshift torch; for even the elves cannot see in the dark unlike orcs, dwarves, and goblins. They can see however much farther with torch lights than humans can. She gave the torch to Marcus and began to search amongst the ground for tracks. She moved frantically as she knew time was limited. If they had failed to find them in at least an hour, then all might be lost.

She searched feverishly, and located a set of four footprints...one similar to that of an eight legged creature; which might have been the aranrider seen with the four (now three). The tracks did not stay for long though. As Riona followed them swiftly, she noticed that all four sets of tracks had vanished. Given how the soil did not appear to have impacts of footprints, Riona believed that some spell had been cast to remove them.

Having been trained as a ranger though, Riona then looked for other signs. She found some bushes and plants appear to have been stomped and crushed. Looking for similarities, she found that a line of grass, twigs and plants also appeared to have been bent or moved out of place...and in some instances broken. She continued forward into the thicker brush where they led to...but soon this led to folly as well.

At some point, the four might have realized there could be another form of trail that they were leaving behind, and the trail soon led into a large green field. The trail ended there with no sign of where they went. Riona looked are for minutes, but could not find anything that could lead them to something.

“De’as I Turok!” Riona shouted, an elven curse which roughly translated to *Damn the gods!* “I see nothing! The bastards realized footprints are not the only thing I can track by.”

“How is that possible?” Emily asked.

“Same as how they leapt out the windows.” Riona said. “They must have used another spell to hoist them off the ground...like a levitation or flight spell. Maybe they have magical scrolls or wands that had spells of such kind in place.”

“Can you not track that?” Ron asked. “The magic I mean...”

“Maybe...” Riona said, looking puzzled and angered. “But...it will take time, and I know we have little of it. It is far quicker to track by stimulus and observations observed than magical auras...at least for me. Srying has never been my forte.”

Riona sat down, her legs crossed in a myridian style, and she put the palms of her hands together. She began to mutter something, and remained like that for some time.

Marcus, irate with his discovery on Karin however did not wait for her to finish. He used the torch and looked around the area to find anything that could be of use. Ron followed, lighting his own torch to give to Emily so Riona would have some light. He had to find something, anything that could be used to track down Karin and her cohorts. For the longest time, he could find anything...anything that could lead them back to the group.

For minutes, his searching seemed to be an exercise in futility. It was not until a few minutes later; and moving farther away from where Riona was that he found something.

There was a piece of sticky silk on the ground. It appeared like the spider's silk that he had seen in the spider's cave so many days ago. He shined the torch forward, and saw that the silk was leading off towards the south. The silk was not in a straight line...it appeared it spurts...but consistent enough that it laid out a trail. Riona did not see this, as it was too far into the darkness to be seen from where she was at; even with her eyes.

"Riona!" He shouted. The elven girl did not take notice of him right away. It took Marcus to physically coax the girl to come with her, to which annoyed her as she lost the manna trying to focus the spell. She appeared to calmer when Marcus had found the trail of spider's silk...as well as puzzled.

She examined each tendril of silk that had been spurt out. Afterwards, she examined the next one. And the next one. Throughout the time she examined the silk, she continued to look at it when bewilderment and confusion.

"What's wrong Riona?" Ron asked.

"This...this appears to have been spawned deliberately." Riona said. "The aranrider that went with them...she was deliberately spurting out silk in such a fashion that suggested she knew what she was doing. She's making a trail."

"What for?" Marcus asked. "Is she not in league with them?"

"Maybe..." Riona said. "Maybe not....I don't know. The trail definitely appears to be intentional."

"Then we follow it!" Marcus shouted.

Without waiting for anything, Marcus sped forward and ran into the night. The others soon followed suit and they sped forward in the night.

The darkness continued to deepen around them. A flash of lightning cracked off in the distance. A drop of water fell on top of Marcus, and he knew rain was coming. He regretted not taking his supplies as he was unprepared for oncoming storms, but going back would make his quest futile. The trail still appeared to be warm; in fact the silk appeared to be appearing more frequently. The trail led them to a deep forested area southwest of Goldioz. The silk did not appear on the ground, but now in the trees and foliage above them. It hung just low enough for Riona to catch it with her extended vision from torchlight.

They came to a thick brush in the center of the forested area. It was here that Riona began to hear voices straight ahead. She bade the party to stop moving, and then quietly directed the party to the edge of the brush. From there after dousing their torches, they came upon a gathering a series of individuals in a clearing in the forest. Riona could make out that there were several goblins, gnolls, orcs, and other strange monstrosities all around the area. Riona knew orcs had a keen sense of smell, but fortunately the rain may have dulled it; a mixed blessing all things considered. The three mages were there and the aranrider.

The aranrider was immediately familiar to Marcus, as it was the same one from the spider's den that had commanded the deaths of the others. An anger swelled up in Marcus as he saw her...especially since he had pleaded with Riona to heal her. It was exactly as she had said...his decision had only brought undue hardship. He knew that if Riona and he were not in the situation that called for silence, she would then lecture him about his kindness and mercy towards such creatures, and he would then spend minutes trying to placate her.

The three mages appeared to be arguing. Indeed as Marcus had surmised, Karin was indeed with them. If Marcus was not furious before, then it certainly began to outwardly express it. This was the girl that he had known as a notable hoodlum and prankster, but truly a caring individual. If someone was in trouble, Karin and he would always be the first to intervene.

Why did she bewitch Stanley, and possibly others to destroy themselves?

“Do you doubt us Darin?” Dundain asked. “You were inclined to aid us earlier...you’ve been with us for months.”

“I cannot stand with you on this anymore!” Darin shouted. “I cannot abide with this group after what I have seen.”

“You had no trouble taking his gold earlier...what changed?” Dundain asked evilly.

“What changed!?” Darin shouted. “How about murdering an entire barracks of people who had nothing to do with this! At first I needed the gold...I needed it so she could actually pay back the debts she owed! But...I...I just can’t do this anymore! How many men must die to acquire this wretched tome?”

“As many as needed,” Dundain muttered. “They would not have handed over something so easily. You’re the one who originally introduced the dark swordsman to the powerful enchantress those months ago. And you’re the one who told out the layout on the barracks and keep. Do not think you are innocent in this.”

“I understand I am no saint.” Darin moaned. “But...at least I am beginning to realize that. I should never joined up with you and that woman! Oh how right I was about you Karin! You truly were off!”

“Gifted...Darin.” She said sultry. “I did not believe for myself that was a gifted dark mage...but the dark swordsman said that I could very much be! And he promised to reunite me with my darling Marcus! And he was right!”

“And what would Marcus do if we he realized you were both a dark mage; and in league with those creatures!?” Darin shouted.

“He does not know; and it shall remain that way!” Karin snapped. “Once we hand over the Tome, that dark swordsman will remove the...obstacles that stand between me and him! He seems to be too resistant to my magic from whatever is blocking my enchantments. Once I remove the obstacles in my way, he will be too stricken by grief. He will come back to me...and I shall save him from his grief! And we shall be happy! Together!”

“You are mad woman!” Darin shouted. “If he discovers your enchantments brought the death of people here and the North Pass, he will certainly come to despise you! How do you plan to keep your dark magic and foul acts you have committed from his ears!?”

“Simple...” She said.

And then she changed. Originally, she still looked to be the same Karin, still the same childish look that one would have when they were able to pull a joke on them. But then her look changed quite drastically. Her face immediately cast a shadow over it, and her eyes looked as if there was complete malice and madness within them. She turned to Darin and shot him this look, one which made him recoil in terror.

“BY SILENCING THOSE CRETINS WHO WOULD SPEAK OF SUCH TALES!” She screamed. She pointed her hand forward.

There Marcus saw a manifestation of energy appear on her hand, though it did not look like energy he had seen before. With Riona, her power’s manifestation brought an aura and euphoria of hope and glory. Karin’s manifestation appeared twisted and foul, as it

produced a sickly green and purplish hue. Her hand then became enveloped in a fire, and pointed her hand at Darin. Darin soon recognized she was intending to cast a spell on him. Darin moved to mutter an incantation, but he could not prepare it quick enough. Karin unleashed a burning beam of energy forward piercing Darin's body through his heart; smiting him where he was. The act nearly caused Marcus to yelp in anger, but he choked it down realizing the numbers were not in their favor. Darin's body crumpled to the ground dead. The dark energy that surrounded Karin now appeared to emanate all over her body.

"NOW WHOSE GOING TO TELL MARCUS!?" Karin screamed evilly as she walked over to his corpse, kicking it. "SHOULD HAVE KEPT YOUR MOUTH SHUT YOU LITTLE MAGGOT! MAYBE YOU COULD HAVE LIVED LONGER!!"

"How pitiful." Dundain said. "He could have been paid handsomely and got his sister out of debt; or so we told he could. The dark swordsman truly did pick a mage prodigy if I saw one."

"I am a High mage!" Karin shouted. "Both of my powers comes from my study, my control of my manna, and my blood, unlike you whose powers only descends from your bloodline! And don't you forget it Dundain!"

"How can I not when you shout it in my ear every day?" He calmly said, walking over to the body of Darin. "Still...he was useful. A pity he chose his words poorly." Dundain then looked to the orcs and goblins, who were eyeing the corpse with desire. "Do with it however you choose...eat it, desecrate it, whatever floats your fancy. Continue patrols around the area...we must wait till our envoy arrives."

The monsters each nodded their heads and began to make rounds around the area. Realizing that they were no longer safe as the creatures began to approach; Riona bade everyone to back off from the foliage and retreat further into the forest. As softly as they could, they fled outward towards the exit of the forest. They fled for at least fifteen minutes before Riona believed that they were safe...for now. They relit their torches and used their light to guide them back.

Marcus however was engorged with rage. As soon as Riona said they were safe, he lashed out into the darkness, even lodging his fist into a nearby stone. He had done so with so much force that he left a small crack in it; as well as cut most of his fingers. He barely noticed the pain and the fact they were bleeding as he did.

"I cannot believe this!" He shouted. "She executed that man for speaking out...she thrashed at his corpse! The Karin I knew from so long ago would never had done this!"

"Marcus..." Riona said softly to calm him. "She is wielding dark magic. I recognize the taint from her use of it. Her mind might be gone."

"Gone?" Ron asked.

"Dark magic is different from that of arcane magic; the magic of which most manna and blood mages wield." Riona said. "It is a corrupted design of magic based of the magic of the Dark World; where the demons reside. Dark Magic is far more powerful than arcane magic...but comes at a terrible price. Individuals without strong mental abilities find their will and sanity to gradually become eroded and corrupted with time." Marcus looked at Riona sorrowfully as the memories of who he remembered Karin to be came rushing back. Riona looked at him with empathy, understanding that this was a difficult time for him. "She must have found maybe a dark magic tome or relic, and attempted to harness its powers. If she used to be kind years back, then it appears that she was unable to properly control it...breaking her will to the Dark World."

“There must be a way to break her from it!” Marcus shouted. “She cannot be that far gone!”

“She seemed pretty mental to me.” Chorin said, as he stood there with his arms crossed.

“It is not as easy as one would expect.” Riona said. “How we would restore her sanity I do not know. But I can already foresee that it may be impossible. Her sanity seems broken like many other dark mages before her.”

“Then what do we do!?” Marcus shouted. “We have to stop them!”

“How!?” William shouted. “We’re but seven people! I counted over forty creatures there; along with dark mages! We’re out numbered; and it is far easier to defend than it is to attack!”

“What about Stanley?” Ron asked. “Did he not say he would come to our aid should we need it?”

“Assuming he has the garrison ready.” William muttered. “But if Riona sends them a signal through her magic, the enemy will be alerted. They may flee farther away. If we plan to recover the Tome, it will be risky. We need to find a way to stall for time...but that again entails on the fact we have but seven of us against their forty or more.”

They stood in the fields as the rain came down (possibly harder in the time that they had fled from where Karin’s dark coven was and them returning out in the middle of the field). They had very little options to launch an attack with. Riona would likely be unable to assist with her magic, as she would be more or less trying to rally the garrison to Karin’s location. In addition, Riona would also be going up against dark mages herself. A mage who had their spells ready against one who was not more often than not won most engagements as they had a vast number of options that they could use against one who relied on spear, sword, or axe. This was not just included to offensive, but defensive options as well. A man or creature with no magic had to rely on what tools they could use, if even. This is why Riona easily defeated the spiders with her power. Mage versus mages however were extremely variable. Riona had made claims that she had vast power; but had never formally tested it against other mages. The fact that both were dark mages made the situation no better.

“I bet the wench didn’t even contact Lord Mediva.” William sneered.

As William brought up Lord Mediva...a chilling thought then crept down into Marcus’ spine.

What if Mediva was involved with this affair?

Marcus could not think long. He was suddenly stopped by looking at Riona suddenly jerking her head away from where she was originally staring at. She continued to look in that direction. Marcus himself looked over her shoulder and saw a series of torch lights heading towards them from the North. Within minutes, Marcus heard the sound of hooves beating down into the earth. The others soon caught the sounds and looked off into the distance.

What came upon them was a series of men on horseback. Some of them appeared to bear Tritenian armor, but most appeared to wearing armor purchased from shops or made by them. The Tritenian soldiers appeared stoic, where the others looked as if they were marauders; dishonest men who made their living off of disreputable crimes.

The most notable looking man at the front was Sir Mediva Sorin at the front.

The men noticed Marcus and his allies, and the horsemen encircled them before they had a chance to react. They continued to encircle them for minutes, before they finally stopped and pointed their lances at them. A number of them moved to the side as Mediva rode up to them. He glared at Marcus in a menacing way for a moment, before giving Marcus this false appearance of relief.

“Marcus Armani!” He said. “So...you are alive. I had thought you slain from when the creatures had besieged us in the Wetlands. But it seems you managed to survive!”

“That I have Sir Mediva!” Marcus said, though he kept himself on guard. Mediva nodded to him and looked in surprise to see Riona there.

“Why Lady Riona!” He gasped, before giving her a half heartened bow. “I...I did not foresee you being among Marcus’ company! What in Aladonia are you doing here?”

“I...I went to search for Marcus.” She said. “I had a foreboding feeling that something terrible would befall him, and I arrived in time to prevent it from happening. I have been in their company since.”

“I see.” He said. “Fortune favors you Marcus! You seem to have won the favor of a elven duke’s daughter; a foreigner to these lands. My brother would be most jealous to learn this.”

“Thank you for the sentiment.” Marcus said, still being wary of Mediva. Mediva himself also seemed to be doing the same thing as Marcus noticed. Even though he appeared calm, there was a tense look in his face. “We must leave now Mediva. We are trekking towards the city of Goldioz.”

“No we aren’t.” William shouted. Marcus turned to Mediva with a terrified look; as he knew William was about to tell him what they were truly trying to do. “Lord Mediva! We found a coven of monsters that had stolen the item that you and your brother were charged with bringing to Aldin and then the capitol!”

Mediva stood there in silence for what seemed like an eternity. For a moment, Mediva had a serious look of determination in his face. “Oh...” Mediva began. “Have you now?” And it sounded as if he was concerned for the situation. Even the men began to relax with their lances. And Marcus found himself moving his hand away from his sheathe.

It is only when the rest of Marcus’ group had lowered their guard did Mediva’s expression change very fast. A shadow cast over his face and he looked at Marcus evilly.

“Well...then fortune favors me in more than one way then!” He barked. “Seize them all!”

Chapter 16 – The mercy granted to her

Marcus and his party were overwhelmed in a moment. Each one was injured in some form or way, or captured before they could do anything; except for Marcus who Mediva ordered to be brought in unharmed. All of them were bound and hog tied to horses, and then led off to where the monsters were, except for Marcus and Riona. Their equipment was all taken from them, and placed into a saddle bag on Mediva's horse.

Mediva rode in proudly with the group, with Marcus being led bound by ropes. When they arrived at the camp, each one was held by a monster, with Riona bound by the aranrider. The aranrider who they had met in the spider's cave, held Riona, giving her a stoic look the whole time. Marcus remained bound to Mediva's horse. The monsters cheered for Mediva as arrived, and then got off of his horse, as he approached Karin and Dundain.

"Welcome my lord." Dundain said as Mediva walked in front of him. "Praise be to the dark swordsman!"

"Yes yes yes...all that dribble." He groaned. He looked to Marcus who was glaring at him. "You don't seem too surprised by my deception Armani."

"No...I'm not." Marcus snapped. "I suspected minutes before you arrived you had involvement. And even if I did not, I still would not be surprised. Even your brother would not be surprised at this deceit. You have had much eyndill against him since he was chosen as successor."

"How do you know that!?" Mediva snapped, walking over to him, picking him up by the collar. "How did you come by that!?"

"I heard it from Sir Arin's mouth." Marcus sneered. He then spat on his face, to which Mediva responded by swatting him in the face. Riona frantically tried to escape from the aranrider, a burning look of hate in her eyes and frantically screaming under the aranrider's arm.

"What is going on here!?" Karin shouted as she walked by. "I leave to use privy for one moment, and the whole camp is in an uproar!"

Mediva's face turned ice cold as he heard Karin's voice, for he knew if Karin knew that he had harmed her, she would turn her attention against him. He then walked over to Karin who was standing them with a strange look on her face. "Hail my compatriot. I have done so as I told you and him. I have brought you your beloved."

"You brought him to me!?" Karin asked in surprise. She immediately shot Mediva a look of hatred. "HE WAS NOT SUPPOSED TO KNOW! I WAS SUPPOSED TO WISK HIM AWAY AFTER ALL THE OBSTACLES TO HIM WAS GONE!!"

"Yes...after the elven wench was eliminated...as the original bargain was struck between me, you and him." Mediva said. "However, your soon to be husband did a bit of eavesdropping on your gathering, and apparently has heard I assume all that he needs."

"Impossible..." Dundain groaned. "We took every precaution. The elven wench should not have been able to track us."

"Then it only shows further credit my dear Riona to your hideous race." Mediva sneered. "You still found a way to uncover where our meeting was to take place. Even when these fools used magic to lessen their footsteps, and hell even ascend into the air, you still found them."

Riona tried to say something, but the aranrider kept her mouth closed by tightening her grip on the elven girl. Unknown to Marcus, the aranrider lowered her lips to Riona's ear and whispered:

Stay still...don't say anything...

Riona looked at the aranrider. The aranrider shot her a serious look, one that had the elf in a bit of confusion. The aranrider did not say anything more, other than continuing to look out at the scene unfolding.

"Marcus..." Karin whimpered as she walked up to him. Marcus glared at in the most inhuman way that he could. He found himself having difficulty in placating his anger. "This...this isn't what it looks like! It truly isn't...this is all a misunderstanding! All of it!" She placed her hands on Marcus and brought them to her face. "Truly my lovely Marcus...I only did this for..."

"Get your hands off me." Marcus sneered softly.

"What?" Karin asked.

"I said get your traitorous hands off of me!" He shouted. Karin recoiled back in shock at his outburst. "Do you take me for a fool!? Do you not think I am fool!? I watched you confess until Dundain and Darin before you cut him down of your crimes! Do you truly think I have any interest in you after this!?"

Karin felt as if she had been pierced by a spear the moment Marcus had shouted. She recoiled backward and clasped her chest. She looked as if some invisible force was beginning to choke her where she stood. She eventually fell down and began to scramble backward away from Marcus, who continued to curse at her for all that she had done. Eventually, she huddled up into a ball, almost appearing as if she was sobbing.

"Do not give me that sorrowful look!" Marcus screamed. "You knew exactly what you were doing! If you were truly ignorant to this cause, the Karin I knew would have walked away years ago! You've changed Karin; and it makes me nauseous looking at you!"

Karin stood there, silent and unmoving from Marcus' words. For a few minutes, she would only quiver slightly. She eventually picked herself up, facing away from Marcus. Eventually, she turned to Marcus, a twisted grin in her face.

"Of course I knew what you I was doing!" She said, her twisted grin widening. "The dark swordsman told me that if I obeyed him, he would plan our reunion! And look...he has reunited us! The dark swordsman has spoken truth! Praise to his power!"

"I have no interest in you Karin!" Marcus shouted. "Not after this! Are you not listening to me!?"

Karin didn't answer him. She instead walked over to him and grabbed his head, burying it in her chest. She seemed to be completely enamored in a madness that was taking her.

"Oh dear Marcus..." Karin moaned. "Fear not...soon we shall be rid of all that stands between us! Then you and I shall be together...forever!"

Mediva bellowed in laughter as he watched Marcus helplessly become violated by the girl whom he had once loved. Mediva then walked over to Marcus, looking at him with malice and pride.

“This...is my revenge against you Marcus.” Mediva sneered. “I have long waited for an opportunity to avenge my honor against you. My brother is not here to stop me this time!”

“What are you doing this for!?” Marcus shouted.

“Revenge.” Mediva said evilly. “My father...despite my achievements that I have brought to our demesne, has decided to choose my straight fingered, heanling, feeble brother Arin. The thought of that man being the sole inheritor to our household is maddening! I should be the one there; not him! I should be the one with the wealth and power! And then...while I was in North Pass...I met him...”

“Him!?” Marcus shouted.

“Yes...” Mediva sneered. “Him. He called himself the Dark Swordsman. He knew much of what was going on. He told me I could be rid of my brother...and damn the one who humiliated me to a life of torment. At first, I was somewhat disappointed with the offer. Yes I could be rid of Arin...but you would continue to live. But...once I thought about it, and realized how you would live...I liked the result better.”

Terrified of what Mediva meant, Marcus pulled himself out of Karin’s chest. “What result!?” Marcus barked. He quickly was forced back down, and now Karin had moved his hands onto her hips as well.

“Oh Marcus...” Karin interrupted. “Don’t worry...soon you won’t have to worry about these vile memories. It’ll only be of us!”

“Yes...only you two.” Mediva said. “Fear not Armani...you will be better off than your friends...but not before you watch them die.”

It hit Marcus there. Mediva couldn’t harm Marcus because Karin was his cohort. She would not allow Marcus to be brought to harm; even in her madness. Actually...when he thought about it, perhaps it is because he and her had separated at the end of their relationship on why she was acting this way. The statues of him in her room as spoken by Darin...she must had become so obsessed with him that she let a madness take hold. The dark swordsman she had spoke of must have met her then and offered to teach her dark magic. And now if he could not escape, she would use her enchantments and alter his memories so that none of this...his friends...his life...anything would be in the way from her and him. He did not know if his theory was sound, but it was enough to make him panic.

Especially since Mediva sounded like he wished to execute his friends in front of him!

“You’re nothing but a low life marauder.” Chorin shouted. Mediva turned from Marcus to Chorin as he stood there, held down by an orc. “I’ve seen how the public thinks of you when you were at your manor.” Mediva did nothing but walk over to him. “All of the soldiers at Goldioz...the place you grew up in have nothing but contempt for you! I’ve seen it all as a lad before I joined with my friends! It won’t matter how much power you take...we will still despise you!”

Mediva walked over to him, giving him a look of anger. As Mediva approached Chorin, he himself also spat on the traitorous noble. Mediva looked angered as if Chorin had done a greater offense to him.

“You know what...” Mediva sneered. “You first.”

With that, Mediva drew his sword and swung forward. The swing cut Chorin’s throat open. Chorin gurgled as he realized what had happened, and began to cough on his blood. As he stood in the orc’s hands, the orc released Chorin to allow Mediva to stab him

through the stomach. Chorin managed to stay on his feet for three seconds before he fell over dead. The orcs cheered and screamed in delight of his death.

Marcus' eyes widened as he saw Chorin die in front of him. He nearly flew into a rage and attempted to escape to run at Mediva; and he nearly succeeded in overpowering Karin were it not for a magical ray she fired that knocked Marcus to her feet. Emily screamed in sorrow and terror as she watched her friend die, and struggled now in a rage to escape. Riona herself also tried to escape, but the aranrider held her down.

"YOU BASTARD!" She shouted, tears rolling down her face, and sometimes hiccupping from it. "I'LL KILL YOU! I'LL KILL THIS ORC, THEN YOU, THEN EVERYONE ELSE IN THIS GOD FORSAKEN CAMP! YOU HEAR ME!! ALL OF YOU ARE GOING TO DIE!!" She of course could do none of that, but some of the more sniveling of the creatures and men there backed away from her in fear...in case she did manage to free herself.

"Damn you Lord Mediva!" Ron shouted. "How could you!?"

"I can't have witnesses to claim my deceit here!" He said. "Especially Riona and Marcus! They are too close to my brother that he would indeed take their word!" He held out his sword and a soldier came to wipe it for him. Mediva then walked back towards where the bulk of his creatures were. "All right...let's get this over with. We have to get this Tome to where the dark swordsman said we were to meet." Mediva licked his lips and began to look at the ones that were still alive. At last, he looked at Riona, to where the elves eyes widened greatly. "You first...I have had quite enough of dealing with your snide comments to me." Riona began to act more frantically as Mediva approached her with his sword drawn. "You have been a thorn to my side ever since you and your father arrived. It's a shame really though...you and I could have made quite the couple."

Riona looked furious the moment she heard that...more so than she did when she watched Mediva strike down Chorin. In rage and with strength, she managed to pull herself out of the aranrider's arm and then screamed at Mediva, in both fury and tears.

"I will never side with you!" She screamed. "I will never be involved in anything about you! And more importantly...I will never marry you! I will continue to turn away every advance you have tried to commit against me! I have no love for you; or ever shall! You should consider yourself lucky that my father and I even gave you the grace of being in my presence; more or less myself even acknowledging that you even existed! May your life forever go cursed and deformed, and may revenge for your crimes come swiftly!"

Mediva looked extremely offended from her comments, and smacked her across the face. Marcus' anger at Mediva continued to burn and fester like a fire, almost now to the point of hate; something of which he never truly felt before. But Karin prevented him from moving.

"It's alright..." She said. "It'll be all over soon...then you won't remember her. It'll just be us...forever..."

"Karin..." Marcus grunted. "If you truly cared for me, you would rise up against this villain. Help me save Riona!"

"But...she's an obstacle!" Karin snapped, very quickly. "It's what the dark swordsman told me! You are enamored with her! That...that's not right! It should only be me! I'M THE ONLY ONE WORTHY OF YOUR TIME! ONCE SHE'S GONE, THERE WILL BE NO ONE LEFT! IT'LL JUST BE US! WE CAN BE TOGETHER FOREVER!! ISN'T THAT GREAT MARCUS!? ISN'T IT!!??"

Marcus knew then it was all for naught. The Karin he knew was long gone...eroded by a madness that had taken control of her. She might have been able to be saved, but the dark magic saw to any hope of that. What was replaced now was an obsessive mad woman whose only thoughts were on him.

Mediva reached for his sword, and pointed it at Riona. Before he delivered the coup de grace, he looked at the aranrider, who still possessed a stoic look to her face. After a minute or looking, he grinned and sheathed his sword.

“Why don’t you take care of it?” He asked.

“Me?” She asked stoically.

“She killed your kinsman did she not?” Mediva said. “I think it is more fitting that you do it.” He then drew a small knife and handed it to the creature. With that, he walked away from the aranrider, leaving her to deal with Riona. And as he did, Karin and Dundain began to speak:

*Praise to the dark one!
Survivor of the fallen
May the shadow thrive*

*All is his to rule
All is his to subject gate
All to dominate*

*Through him we have strength
And through that strength we conquer
Through death we are free*

The aranrider continued to look at Riona with a puzzled confused look. She appeared to be confused by something, even somewhat frantic and fearful. Her head constantly kept changing around, as if it was looking for something. Many of the creatures continued to shout and utter cachinnations to get her to skewer the elf; especially the orcs as they held fierce hatreds for the elves. Yet the aranrider kept remaining still, unable to ponder her actions.

But then she changed. A shadow was cast over her face as she looked at Mediva.

“Certainly.” She sneered evilly; although there was something different in her voice from last time. “I shall deal with this cretin myself! She has robbed me and left me without my brothers, my sisters, my children! I will gladly take her head for you...and leave her nothing but a withered corpse! But first...I’m going to make sport of her...like how you made sport of that Armani.”

Mediva was busy drinking from a wine goblet when he heard that. He spit the wine out in just enough time to see Karin turn to him with a near demonic stare at him. Marcus and the others nearly stopped too, especially Riona who was captured by her. She turned to Riona.

And then winked.

“YOU DID WHAT TO MY PRECIOUS ARMANI!?” She shouted.

“Now...now...Jezebel...” Mediva said, looking at the aranrider. Marcus surmised that Jezebel was her name. “What...what in Aladonia are you saying...Why would I after agreeing to this lovely dark mage here do something of the sort?”

“What?” Jezebel asked. “Did you not inflict bodily harm to Marcus while the mage was relieving herself? Surely she elf you saw that? You have perceptive eyes...did that not happen?”

Riona looked at Jezebel for a moment, before realizing what she was doing...or so she thought. She then turned to Mediva and gave him a look that Mediva never forgot.

“Why yes...” Riona said nonchalantly. “I do believe I saw Mediva smacking your precious Marcus a few moments ago.”

“YOU TOLD ME YOU WOULD LAY NO FINGER ON HIM!” She shouted.

“Now...now Karin...” He said, backing up with fear as Karin began to approach him. “Don’t act too rashly...remember...I was the one who brought Marcus to you.”

“AND YOU SAID HE WOULD COME TO NO HARM!” She screamed. “YOU PROMISED YOU WOULD NOT EVEN TOUCH A STRANGE OF HAIR ON HIS HEAD!”

“Some promise.” Jezebel sneered. She then shot Mediva a similar look to that of what Riona was giving him, though Mediva did not interpret what she was meaning. “Karin...I do believe Mediva has lied to you.”

“So he has...” Karin said. Karin’s arm then became enveloped with a frost like aura around her hand. She raised her hand upward, and extended out her palm. A large stalagmite of ice appeared in her hand and was aimed at Mediva.

“Cease Karin!” Dundain barked. “Do not act rashly...this boy is not important enough that we...”

Karin not only ignored him, she launched the large spike of ice at Dundain. Not expecting this sudden attack, Dundain found himself impaled on the spike, and was sent hurdling towards a tree. He died seconds later, and Mediva fell to the ground in fear.

“Mercy Karin!” He shouted. “Mercy! I did not mean to offend you!...Jezebel what are you doing!?”

Jezebel did not answer. She merely held Riona in place (and secretly cut her binds, even without Riona noticing). The aranrider stood there, glaring at Mediva with this wicked look as Karin approached him, another spike of energy appearing in her hand.

“No one harms my Armani...” She sneered. “No one!”

As she moved to launch another spell, some of Mediva’s men charged in. Karin saw the guards and reacted, but enough to stop them. She launched the icy spike to kill two of Mediva’s men, but was soon bound like the rest of Marcus’ party. Jezebel looked at the turn of events with a bit of bewilderment, but did not outwardly express it. Mediva himself soon found himself moving from fear to anger towards Karin. He turned to her and smacked her in the face...twice. And as he unleashed his anger on her, in the midst of the storm, Marcus thought he heard the ground shake.

“You insolent bitch!” He shouted. “Pray to the Dark Gods you are fortunate I need you to assume control of the Westernfold; and the whole kingdom!” He then turned to Jezebel who was busy fiddling with a knife. “And you! What were you thinking!?”

“Oh...” She moaned. “Just...stalling for time.”

“Stalling...for what?” Mediva screamed.

“...The Tritenian army.” She moaned.

With that, she released the bonds that had been held on Riona and dove out of the way. Within roughly five seconds as she did, it was then that all began to notice the rumbling on the ground. One of the marauders who was with Mediva emerged from the forest.

“Tritenians!” He shouted. “We have...”

He did not get to finish. Out of the forest several horses emerged, each with a rider on them, skewering the brigand where he stood. And then more...and more...and more. And soon it became apparent that a Tritenian force had appeared in front of Mediva’s.

“Ambush!” A goblin shouted. “Flee!”

The Tritenians emerged so quickly that few of the monsters and men had time to react. The first charge of cavalry already reduced much of Mediva’s coven within seconds. Soon after that, soldiers and mage knights emerged from the tree line, charging and screaming. Among the foot soldiers was Lord Arin, who stood out with his noble steed, armored and ready.

“Find him!” Arin shouted. “Find my traitorous brother and bring him to me!”

“Yes sir!” The soldiers shouted, moving in the fray.

“Impossible...” Mediva said, a look of fear and worry in his face. “How...how have we been discovered!?”

However, even with this sudden surprise attack, they were not so easily defeated. Many of them had become agitated with Karin’s sudden attack against their dark brother; so some had prepared for battle. A line of orcs and Mediva’s marauders that had taken place in treelines reached for their bows and let loose a volley. Many soldiers and cavalry fell from the barrage as arrows hit them. With the front line scattered, Mediva’s men charged forward, and a fierce battle began.

In the midst of the battle, a crack of lightning came, and the monsters saw a looming silhouette in the air. Seconds later, a resounding earthquake was felt by all as Master Knight landed on the ground, creating a massive eruption of dust, rock, and various plants everywhere. Steam seemed to be emerging from his visor as he drew his inhumanly sized sword, and pointed it at Mediva.

“MEDIVA SORIN!” He shouted. “SURRENDER NOW TO THE KINGDOM OF TRITENIA, AND SUBMIT YOURSELF TO JUDGMENT FOR TREASON AND CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE CROWN!”

“Master Knight...” He whimpered as he pulled himself up to his feet. “This...this is not what it looks like...this is...all a great big misunderstanding...”

“Don’t even bother Mediva.” He shouted. “I heard you confessing to your sniveling crimes from passed the tree line! My scouts have confirmed it...and I’m certain my missing soldiers; and the heir apparent to the elven duke will also testify against you! Now...make this easier on yourself!”

Mediva looked at him...defeated. He was nearly shaking in his boots, as no man had ever fought Master Knight and lived. He looked to his hirelings and pushed them in front of him, grabbing Karin as he did.

“STOP HIM!” He shouted. “KEEP THAT MONSTER AWAY FROM ME! DO IT AND I WILL DOUBLE YOUR PAY!”

Any fear the men had in their hearts was given way to greed when they heard that (except for a few who still had some sense and had moved away to fight others that they

could handle). One of the more deluded marauders charged forward and brought his sword against Master Knight.

The blade cracked off the moment it hit Master Knight's armor, falling uselessly to the side. The brigand could never have looked more defeated.

"Adorable." Master Knight said, chuckling to himself. He then pulled back his arm and punched the man. The force of the impact was so strong that not only was the man's torso's split in two, he went flying into the darkness; never to be found again. The other men quaked in their boots at the sight, and Master Knight finished them off in a single stroke.

"All men!" He shouted. "Do not let Mediva get away!"

Another volley was launched. Many more Tritenian soldiers were getting killed from the line of arrows descending onto them. Arin noticed this, and rallied as many of the cavaliers that were returning to him.

"NEIS!" He shouted. The cavaliers rushed forward, their lances pointed forward. The orcs fired another volley, killing some of Arin's men; but not before Arin and his line riposted with a swift charge, stamping down on all who were foolish enough to remain still against the cavaliers. Arin dropped his lance after an orc had been impaled onto it, and drew his sword, carving down with precision any who were not part of his force. Not once did he fail to distinguish between the two, and each man who fought against him was brought down by his horse or blade.

Chapter 17 – Battle of Brothers

Jezebel, still holding onto Riona moved quickly to where each of Marcus' friends were. As the men looked for direction with their captains broken off and Mediva fleeing, she used the knife given to her to swiftly cut down each man, while Riona tended to their bonds. They ran into Tritenians on the way, in which Jezebel was forced to fight off; though Marcus noted that she against the Tritenians went for blows that would only injure or incapacitate a man; whereas the monsters she would go for a bit with her venomous fangs; or attacks that would leave them easy prey. In the midst of the fight, Jezebel recovered their equipment which Mediva had piled in his saddle bag, to which they were...somewhat grateful. Afterwards, Jezebel moved them to the side, where they watched the fight commence. Soon she managed to pull them away, enough for them to catch their breath.

"I think here is safe enough..." Jezebel said. "Bastards were late."

"You..." Marcus shouted. "You had something to do with this!?"

"Of course." She said. "I sent word to the Tritenian army via letter attached to arrow shortly after I joined up with Mediva and his crew. They did not know who sent it...as I am sure I would be cut down where I stood if I tried to hand it personally to them. I still can't believe they followed the letter...tis a miracle from your Gods more or less."

"But why!?" Riona shouted.

"There is no time to explain my actions!" She shouted. "Flee away from here while you still have a chance!"

"We can't!" Marcus said, drawing his sword. "Mediva has to be stopped! If we don't get the Lughglen now, it will be lost!"

"He's on the other side of the battle Marcus!" Ron shouted. "You'll never make it!"

"Then flee!" Marcus snapped back. "But I am standing my ground here! I will continue to do so until Mediva is brought to justice; and Chorin avenged!"

Shouting the name Chorin cleared Emily's mind of the shellshock she had received from the sudden appearance of Tritenian soldiers. A fire then kindled inside of her and she gripped her spear with a profound passion.

"HE'S RIGHT!" She shouted with anger and hate. "THAT ROTTEN BASTARD KILLED MY FRIEND! I WILL NOT LEAVE HER TILL I SEE HIM LODGED AT THE POINT OF SPEAR, OR IN PRISON!" Ron at first said nothing about what Emily had declared for a moment. She then pointed the spear at Ron (in a non hostile manner) and looked at him. "He killed him in front of you...that youth who you and I spent years playing games with. Is running how you want to honor him?"

At that moment, the same passion Emily had seemed to awaken within Ron...and he nodded. "I grew up with Chorin all my life! If I didn't try to avenge him, then what friend am I to him!? As foolish as it is, I cannot flee from this fight!"

"And I shall remain as well!" Riona shouted.

"You humanoids continue to impress me with your stupidity!" Jezebel barked. "But if you are so inclined to do so, then I shall stand at your side."

"You still haven't told me why you are doing this!" Marcus shouted.

A silence protruded around the group, so much so that the only noise that could be heard was the sound of the battle ensuing all around the forested clearing. Horses neighed, bows twanged, swords, shields, spears, and axes clamored down on each other. Jezebel

looked in a very somber state despite all of that, not really answering the question. It was only till Marcus pressed the inquiry again that she spoke.

“Up until I met you boy, I have only met and felt nothing but hate, gluttony and anger.” She said. “I have seen your kind attack and fight my kind with us being seen. Your kind would hurl curses at us as they pushed us to the fringes, and we would curse back when we fought back; and when we first started to hunt your kind. I will admit...I was taken aback by your pleas to this...she elf to spare my life. I thought it was madness that my mind was feeling from being so close to death. But when I awoke in the middle of the field with my wound stitched and healed, I wondered if what you had told me was real. When I came to the conclusion it was, I was bewildered. Your decision to beg to spare my life was so befuddling that I...did not know what to do. I wandered around the fields, void of any direction or goal...almost in a daze.” Jezebel turned her face away from Marcus as she continued. “Eventually...I met with Mediva and Karin who offered me a second chance in recovering the Tome...and initially I agreed to the plan; mostly to get revenge on the she elf for my humiliation. I even managed to track you all to that inn you were staying at. But...I eventually heard you discuss with the she elf about my fate. And...I felt moved by the words. I then thought back at your actions...and soon even interest in revenge waned. Eventually...I could not bring myself to go through it; no matter how much I wanted to. So...I worked out a plan to betray Mediva and Karin by luring the Tritenian army here. I shot a letter attached to an arrow around where I noticed this Lord Arin was. And it seems that Arin took the message I said to heart. I then made sure I left an easy trail to follow to lead them here...the silk I produce is useful for more than one thing.”

Riona’s jaw nearly dropped when she had heard all of this. From everything that her upbringing had taught her, such notions of mercy and compassion should be beyond a creature like Jezebel. Yet...here she was...moved by Marcus’ plea to spare her life. More or less, it explained why the trail of silk was there in the first place. Marcus of course was filled with a pride for his beliefs having some aspect of payoff. But there was no time to relish in it...Mediva and Karin had to be brought to justice.

“Then we welcome any aid you can bring us!” Marcus shouted.

“Good...now for starters...” Jezebel shouted. She then reached into the bag with Riona’s belongings and recovered her bow; right as Riona was grabbing it. Jezebel seemed to be physically stronger than Riona so she easily pried the bow off of her hands. Riona shot her an ugly look as she did, and Jezebel responded in kind. “This...is mine!” She then took a series of arrows and a quiver from the pouch and strung one into the string. “I will provide you with covering fire! Fear not...I’m certain I can outshoot the she elf.”

“You wish abomination.” Riona sneered. “Marcus; go! Fear not for me...I will remain safe! Fly...fly and face your destiny!”

Marcus, Ron, and Emily nodded. William, Riona, and Jezebel then stood with their bows ready. They took shots, each hitting a member of Mediva’s ranks.

Then Marcus charged forward into the fray. Some of Mediva’s men took notice of the soldier, and engaged him. He parried the first marauder that came at him, and stabbed forward, just in enough time to cut down an orc who came to his side. Even as its battle rage took hold, he went for a back swing and skewered it. Two gnolls came rushing forward, dashing on all fours until they got within thirty feet of him, in which they moved onto their hind legs and drew their battle axes. One never got to fight as it was hewn right there by a charging cavalry lance. The other one brought a horizontal slash down, to which

Marcus backed off and then stabbed forward into its heart. Filled with rage for the loss of his friend and of the betrayal, he took no prisoners, striking each foe he ran into without mercy. It contradicted his ideals; but he had no time to think on it. If he didn't go through them, he could not catch Karin.

Ron and Emily were much of the same. Ron was not the swordsman Marcus was, but his strikes were on mark all the same. He moved into a group of goblins, who noticed his approach. Backed by his ally's arrows, Ron moved in, cleaving two of the goblins before they could put up their defenses. A goblin dashed to the side to backstab him, but Emily came charging in, stabbing the beast through her spear. She even pulled enough strength to lift the beast off the ground and hurl it behind her. She stabbed into the group, and stabbed again, each stab on mark, as she screamed curses at them. Terrified of her near demonic look from her rage, some of the creatures dropped their gear and fled.

"COME ON ALL OF YOU!" She screamed. "COME AND FACE ME!! SEND EVERYONE YOU HAVE; AND I'LL SEND YOUR FAMILY YOUR CORPSES!"

She charged forward, impaling three orcs on the spear after she rushed forward. She dropped the spear she was carrying, and picked up a nearby javelin, hurling it into one of Mediva's archers. The javelin hit on point, hitting the man in the throat.

"Excellent toss Emily!" Marcus shouted. He turned in enough time to block an oncoming stroke from a zealous gnoll, and his compatriot. Another gnoll came at Marcus, but Riona shot him where he stood.

Emily moved recklessly against them, piercing the stomachs and hearts of numerous evil creatures...though many of the beasts took advantage in it. As she moved to fight an orc, he received a nasty gash and wound from its falchion, but Ron dashed in to finish the beast off by stabbing its throat before pulling her away. Emily of course did no such thing, moving back into the fight to slay more of Mediva's men, killing many; but receiving numerous wounds herself. By the time Marcus his friends moved into the tree line on the other side where Karin and Mediva had fled, Emily was quite wounded, with minimal injuries on Marcus and Ron.

"You need to stop!" Ron said, pushing her up against a tree.

"They killed him Ron!" She shouted. "They killed yours and my friend! I'm going to kill them all!"

"It would sully his name if you died in a pointless rampage!" Ron shouted. "I'm angry...angrier than I have ever been in my whole life! And I have to fight to honor him! But I can't recklessly throw my life away on some wanton crusade to avenge him without any regard for my own life! Do you think Chorin would feel good knowing that you threw away your life recklessly just to avenge him!?"

Emily stood there, using her spear and Ron's strength to hold her up. Eventually she broke down in a bitter streak of angry tears. Ron held her up as she began to lose her balance.

"Marcus...keep going." Ron said. "She's not in any condition to keep fighting as she is. Can you manage by yourself?"

"I will." Marcus said. "Meet up with me when you can!"

Ron nodded. With that, Marcus sped off towards where Karin and Mediva were.

As Marcus fled deeper into the woods, a burst of light erupted into the air. Marcus looked up to see this bright white sphere appear in the air. The ball of light conjured into the air was so bright, that it did not even seem to be night out. The entire area was

illuminated and Marcus surmised Riona was adhering to Stanley's order. It was unknown to Marcus if Stanley had managed to rally anyone, but it was better to give him some form of guide to the battle.

Marcus ran through the trees, alone and devoid of direction. He was unsure if he was heading the right way. Only the occasional enemies that he fought gave him any kind of inclination he was heading the right way. A orc there, a human here, and a gnoll would pop out. But he indeed was heading the right way as he came out of the forest to see several of Arin's men; and Arin himself pursuing a lone horse with two occupants on it. Evidently, Arin had managed to hit the horse with a javelin as it fell down to the ground. Filled with excitement, Marcus ran over to assess the damage.

Mediva's horse had indeed been hit by a javelin, and was brought down. Mediva was scrambling to get to his feet before his brother arrived, where as Karin was already on her feet. Arin cornered his brother before he could escape.

"You!" Arin shouted. "I cannot believe this...that anonymous letter spoke truth about you! In leagues with vile creatures, theft of the Tome we were charged to protect! How can you do this to me...to your kingdom!"

"WHY!?" Mediva screamed in hatred. "Because I am sick of being your shadow brother! I should have been the one in charge when father passed! I should be the heir! And here you are as father's successor! It isn't fair! It should be me! It will be me!"

"By the gods..." Arin whispered. "You've let your eyndill of father's decision erode your mind. You are not the brother I remember!"

"The brother you remember is long gone!" Mediva barked. "As well as you will be! Karin! Use it! Unleash it's power against them!"

Karin didn't say anything to Mediva to affirm what she was doing, but she did do as he asked. She unwrapped the Tome. A wave of fear and terror manifested in Arin's heart as well as his men, whereas waves of pleasure and obsession manifested Mediva and Karin's mind. Mediva looked at his brother, as a wave of sweat and terror took him, preventing him from holding his lance straight.

"Do you feel that brother...?" Mediva screeched. "This...this is real power! Even I with no magical ability can feel it's euphoria just from standing near it! Feel it brother...let it consume you!"

"Mediva..." Arin whimpered, though holding firm as best he could. "Don't let it in Mediva! ...It...it is tainted with evil!"

"This is true power!" Mediva shouted. "Come brother...has any other feeble magic that any other mage has ever presented to you ever amounted to this! Even the very earth around us shakes from the mere opening of this Tome."

Arin continued to struggle against the might of the Tome's aura. Marcus felt it from where he was at, but the feelings of fear and tension like before dissipated in seconds; where as everyone else still struggled against it's power. Knowing Arin needed assistance, Marcus sped off towards them.

"I wanted to kill you in a more proper fashion brother..." Mediva said. "But I suppose that this will have to do! Karin...slaughter them!"

Karin again said nothing, but she still appeared to be loyal to Mediva in some way. She opened the tome (an act which further amplified the fear caught in the men...half of the soldiers fled and all of the horses bucked off their riders), and began to look through until she came to a particular lightning spell that caught her interest. The men were still

struggling against the might of the Tome's mere presence, so none of them realized what Karin was doing; even from so close to it. Karin then muttered the incantation. Above, Marcus watched as a funnel cloud above Karin formed. Lightning cracked above her, and landed directly down into the palm of her hand, coalescing into a single sphere. Mediva looked frightened by the display, but soon returned to his twisted façade.

"Good bye brother." He said.

"KARIN!!" Marcus shouted.

Karin invoked her spell the moment Marcus had shouted that. Ironically though, it had saved Arin's life. She ended up moving her hand so the spell arched away from Arin and towards the southwest. What Karin unleashed was an extremely large blast of lightning that arched in various directions. The beam was so large that it was bigger than Karin herself. The beam itself split off in various paths. Unfortunately, the blast consumed all of Arin's men, reducing all of them to ash, but had spared Arin save for a minor injury. Mediva was also caught in the blast, but the arch he received merely rendered him unconscious and injured. The arch continued forward for an unknown distance before exploding in a large marvelous display; so big that it consumed an entire league of land. Nothing that was there survived should they have toiled in that location.

It now was just Karin and Marcus standing in the middle of the field, their eyes meeting each other. Marcus held his sword in both hands, rain and sweat pouring down onto his brow, while Karin stood there uninjured, but terrified. She even dropped the Tome. A silence came between them.

"Why?" Marcus asked, some minutes after they met, shattering the silence that they had. "Why all of this?"

"Why?" Karin asked. "Why? Because I love you!"

"And you truly thought...that I would love you back?" Marcus asked, stupefied. "After...all of this!?"

"What was I supposed to do!?" She shouted in desperation. "Stand by and wait for you to return to me!? The dark swordsman told me your heart belonged to someone else now." Marcus could see her tearing up as she stood there, releasing the emotions that she had about him. "He told me...in exchange for learning his power, he would give you to me. I remember everything you did for me. I was born with light blue hair...a sign of magic. The village called me a freak. Don't you remember?"

Marcus remembered. Although Karin was his friend, she was not too trusted in the village. The village youth where Marcus grew up with had little concept of signs of magical lineages. Because of Karin's unnatural hair and eye colors, she was regarded as a freak by her peers. The only one who showed her some form of compassion was Marcus; even stepping in the way to stop the abuses. This ended up often times with Marcus becoming hurt in some form or way; and he did not always win the fights (mostly because of being outnumbered). However, he did earn Karin's favor...and apparently her love.

"I do." Marcus said softly. "And for what it is worth, I am sorry."

"Sorry?" Karin asked softly. "For...what?"

"Sorry for leaving you alone." Marcus said with lament strewn all throughout his voice. "You are right...I have affection towards another right now. But...if I had known what would have happened to you when we left...what you become...this. If I had known any of that, I would have traveled to the end of Aladonia to stay with you. And I would have made you my wife...if it made the Karin I knew from years back return!"

A silence protruded from where they were for minutes. Marcus' heart rate increased from his declaration at Karin. Karin's eyes looked in Marcus in awe and shock from his statement. Her knees began to quiver from looking at him as emotions welled up inside of her. Marcus could not tell, but tears were running down her face from this outburst. Marcus stood there, still keeping his sword ready.

"Oh...Marcus..." She moaned. "Do...do you truly mean that?"

"I did." Marcus said. Karin looked at him as if she was ready to fall to the ground. But then Marcus shook his head. "But it's too late now...how many people Karin? HOW MANY PEOPLE DID YOU KILL!? All of those people at the North Pass! All of those people in Goldioz! How many minds did you bewitch! How many people died from those enchantments!? How many people died from your magic!? Innocent people who had nothing to do with this! Innocent blood shed! What in Tritenia would make you think I would ever go with you willing as your husband after I know this!?" Karin recoiled back as Marcus went from a sweet declaration to anger. "It pains so much to say this Karin...especially since it had to be you...IT JUST HAD TO BE YOU!" He then pointed his blade at her, tears welling up in his eye. "Karin Cisor...you are under arrest!"

Karin looked at Marcus with fear as she began to back up. As she did, her foot touched the Tome and she looked down at it. At once, an evil shadow cast over her and she looked at Marcus with that maddening look as before.

"NO!" She shouted. "YOU ARE MINE! I WILL MAKE YOU MINE!! AND IF YOU WON'T BE MINE, THEN I WILL MAKE SURE YOU ARE NO ONE'S!"

Karin used magic's of telekinesis and brought the Tome to her hand. She began her attack, unleashing a massive bolt of lightning at Marcus. An aura of sickly bluish fire consumed Karin, yet she was still visible and appeared unharmed within it. Marcus rolled out of the way, letting the thunder clap smash into a portion of the hill behind him, creating an eruption of stone and rock.

As he ran, he began to formulate strategies on how to deal with Karin, and her new found power. Karin raised her hand above her head and sent a thunderous bolt of lightning from the sky towards her former lover. Marcus leapt out of the way and dodged the deadly attack. The blast created made a massive crater in the ground, sending dirt and gravel everywhere.

Karin saw her lightning magic wasn't getting anywhere and then switched powers. The continuous volts of electricity in her hands disappeared and were replaced with shimmering balls of white energy. Karin stretched his hands forward and unleashed pure white spheres of energy at Marcus. Marcus rolled under the first sphere that was thrown at him and then pivoted to the side. Karin changed magic's again and plunged her hand into the ground. Marcus saw the earth split and the rocks shake towards him. She was causing a minor earthquake. Earth magic was very difficult to deal with, and for an ordinary warrior, there was little one could do. All he could do was sit on the ground and wait for the spell to pass. Marcus bumped up and down, sharp rocks poked him straight in the rear, but the damage he received was minimal.

But Karin also knew the disadvantages that a regular soldier had. She pulled her hand out of the soil and switched her magic to Wind and Alteration. Alteration magic...as it says, alters an object that the magic enters into. It can alter its shape, size, and trajectory. Karin summoned the winds on the ground and brought many blades of grass on the ground and then altered the shapes of them for them to blades. The wind then pointed towards

Marcus, and hurled each of them at him. While some of them pierced his skin, he managed to dodge most of the attack.

Marcus then saw an opportunity. The earth and rocks splitting had brought many smooth round facet stones to the surface of the ground. And Marcus before he became a stalwart swordsman, enjoyed hurling rocks at empty bottles. And Karin, although she was at an advantage against him, had made one fatal flaw. She was flat-footed and had made no movement since her initial barrage. Marcus grabbed the stone and hurled it at Karin with blinding force.

The stone hit Karin directly in the head. Without concentration, her magic disappeared from existence. Marcus took the opportunity and charged at his friend. Karin recovered, despite the fact the force Marcus hurled the stone caused an open wound. Marcus got too close for her to concentrate anymore magic to her hands. Karin was armed with a sidearm though as she grabbed a small curved sword then clashed blades with Marcus. The two fought, parrying and striking the each other, trying to land a lethal blow on the other. Karin looked at Marcus with both lust and hate, while Marcus stared at her stoically and uncaring.

Karin used her free hand and fired an energy bolt at Marcus, sending him back. When Marcus regained balance, Karin switched her magic to the Magic's of Fire, simultaneously drawing a dagger. Karin ran her hand from the hilt to the end of blade, causing thick, choking, flames to burn on the sword. Magic could be scribed onto objects, such as sticks or weapons, although the effects would be temporary.

Marcus used his reflexes and dodged the flurry that came from Ryan. Karin was a powerful mage in every aspect, but inexperienced at swordsmanship. All that the flaming sword did was making her appear somewhat intimidating. The moment that Marcus was able to put on the defensive, he began an offensive on against her, interfering with each one of her attacks. Marcus managed to inflict several cuts and gashes, using his superior prowess with a blade. During their feud, Marcus swept Karin off her feet. Karin quickly put the sword to his chest as Marcus brought down the steel upon her. Karin casted a spell of energy, creating a glowing sphere above her. The sphere levitated directly above the white energy before exploding, knocking both herself and Marcus back. Both of them landed on the ground, badly injured.

But Karin was hardly finished. Karin got to her feet and fired a sphere of magic energy at Marcus. As Marcus tried to pull himself up, the sphere hit his chest. Marcus flew as if he was attached by invisible strings and they were pulled back towards a wall. Marcus fell right into the trees, causing many of them to be pulled out of the ground.

As Marcus tried to get back on his feet from the shockwaves knocked him down, Karin prepared another spell and launched a freezing bolt into Marcus. The small ice ball contacted Marcus's shoulder. An excruciating pain shot from his nerves all over his body, while his arm felt as if no warmth or blood was flowing through his arm, and the feeling slowly worked through his arm and towards his neck, rendering him unable to pull himself up. Karin stood there laughing hysterically at her accomplishment.

"NOW I HAVE YOU!" She shouted maniacally. "I'M GOING TO ERASE EVERY MEMORY ABOUT MY CRIMES FROM YOUR MIND! THEN YOU AND I WILL GO INTO THE COUNTRYSIDE! WE'LL LIVE TOGETHER...JUST YOU AND I...NO LUGHLEN...NO TRITENIAN ARMY! JUST US! IT'LL BE GREAT! WON'T

IT MARCUS!? WON'T IT BE GREAT...US TWO! TOGETHER! I LOVE YOU MARCUS!!”

“GET AWAY FROM HIM!” A voice shouted.

Karin looked up to see a girl with black hair, cats ears and tail leaping off the ground from all fours on top of her. It was Emma! She had somehow found her way to Marcus and the others. Unprepared for this sudden attack, Karin was knocked to the ground, and soon the two women were wrestling with one another to try and overpower the other.

Although Emma was swift and fast on her feet, she was physically weaker than Karin. Soon despite Emma's best effort (even using her tail over Karin's eyes), she found herself unable to hold the estranged woman back.

“I won't let you hurt him!” Emma shouted.

“Be more concerned about protecting yourself!” Karin shouted, pulling her hand back and smacking Emma. Emma looked horrified that she did that.

“How dare you!” She shouted, pulling back her hands and extending her claws. She managed to plunge them deep into Karin's arms, causing her to recoil back. Emma backed away from Karin, only to find that Karin drew her sword and had it pointed it at Emma. Emma drew the spear that she had been practicing with.

“Emma...” Marcus groaned, trying to pull himself up through the blood and sweat pouring down his face. “Don't...do it...”

“And leave you to this wench!?” Emma shouted. “Never! I don't care how feeble how I am at this...I am not losing you!!”

“Die you furless one!” Karin shouted.

Emma recoiled back at the sound of furless one. Furless one were usually given to nyanitas who had no fur and looked like humans save for their tails, claws, ears, and fangs. These ones were usually considered outcasts to their society and rejects; many abandoned at birth. Emma soon became enraged at being called one, and held her ground.

Her stance was still off.

Karin sluggishly moved to stab Emma. Despite her injuries, she still managed to hold her stance properly. Emma managed to get out of the way, but she still received a gash to her side, blood leaking out. She stabbed three times, all of them never getting close to Karin. Karin then swung her sword, cutting Emma's face and leg as she parried Emma's next blow. Emma was never used to injuries like this, and fell down to the ground, though she fought vigorously to stay up. She managed to get up in enough time to avoid being stabbed in the stomach.

“Emma...” Marcus said, doing his damndest to pull himself to his feet. “RUN!”

But Emma refused to budge. She could not let Marcus come to harm!

“You can't beat me girl...” Karin screamed as she approached. “The only thing you will ever be able to do is fall like so many others before.”

Emma stood there by Marcus, absolutely in terror for her own life. But she never relented, not even once...even though she was certain she would not survive. Karin drew her sword back and went for a stab; but this was merely a feint. Emma predictably went for a block, and then Karin drew her sword upwards, intending on cutting her down from her shoulder to her hips.

For a split moment, Emma thought this was it. That she was going to die.



But she didn't.

She somehow knew the attack was coming and raised her spear in the same moment that it was about to come down on her, blocking the attack. She then, as if she had an instinct for combat develop in her at that mere moment, raised her foot and kicked Karin in the face, knocking her down. Emma stood there, stupefied at her feat; but she had little time as Karin charged forward at her. Emma reeled back her spear and then thrust forward.

Getting a clean stab in Karin's thigh.

The stab was enough to bring down Karin. She fell to the ground in pain, and rolled down to her side. Emma stood there, stunned by the actions that had taken place. And during this time, Marcus pulled himself back to his feet. As he did, a strange glow seemed to permeate from around Emma's neck, but Marcus could not tell if it was from Karin or herself.

"Emma...that...that was amazing!" He shouted in surprise.

"I...I did it!" She shouted in just as much surprise. "By the gods, I actually did it!" She jumped and down where she laughing and celebrating as she did. But as she did, she did not realize Karin was still up. Karin looked and Emma with hatred and disgust. Marcus caught this and pulled Emma to the ground.

"To hell with you...to hell with all of you!!" She screamed. It was fortunate that Marcus had pulled down Emma, as if he did not, she would have been obliterated by the blast of fire that Karin had unleashed.

Unwilling to let Karin do any further harm, Marcus charged at her. He swung his sword, twisting it to the blunt side and hit Karin right in the face.

That was too much for Karin at that point. She finally fell down and was defeated. They had won.

And the rain began to stop.

Chapter 18 – Return home

Marcus and Emma quickly located the white cloth that had been over the Tome and drafted it over it, wrapping it up inside. The oppressive aura that permeated all over the land finally dissipated. With this, Arin was able to pull himself up; just about the time Mediva himself was recovering from the blast. He never stood a chance as Arin leapt onto him, using his cestuses to brutally assault Mediva by barraging him the face.

“You traitorous snake!” He shouted. “You tried to kill me...your own brother! How many men died because of you! How many!?”

Mediva could say nothing as Arin continued his assault. Soon Mediva’s face barely resembled what it originally looked like as his face began to swell from the barrage Arin unleashed on him. He was rendered unable to speak, communicating in little more than grunts and moans for mercy. It got to the point where Marcus had to limp over to him and pull him off.

“Lord Arin; enough!” Marcus shouted. “You’ve got him! It’s over!”

Arin turned to Marcus. He nearly fell into shock, as he had not taken into account that he was here. In fact, Arin had not even seen Marcus for some time since the battle. After the racing feeling in his heart ended, he looked to Marcus.

“Marcus!” He shouted. “You’re...you’re alive!”

“Sir.” Marcus said. “You’ve got him...you have no reason to harm him further.”

Arin looked at Marcus in what looked a combination of anger and bewilderment. He turned himself away from Marcus and then closed his eyes, attempting to center himself. Soon he managed to do just that and then looked to him.

“I’m sorry.” He said. “A madness had taken me. It had passed.”

“I understand.” Marcus said as Emma walked to him. “A madness took me with that woman over there...the dark mage he had enlisted to his cause.”

“A dark mage?” He asked.

“Indeed.” Marcus said. “Mediva had enlisted the aid of three dark mage; or so I believed to be dark mages.” He remembered Darin, the mage Karin had slaughtered with her power; and he did not seem to act in the same way a dark mage tended to act. And then there was the one Riona had killed long before they even left the fields. “The two other two...Dundain and Darin...they have been killed. That one over there was the last one of Mediva’s group...and she was the one wielding the Lughglen.”

“Is the Tome safe?” He asked frantically.

“It is...my lord.” Emma said, bowing to him. “We...just draped the cloth Constantine had made over it.”

“Who is this?” Arin asked. “And...more or less...where have you been Marcus!? We have thought you dead since the battle!”

Marcus shrugged his shoulders. He then began to divulge the entire journey that he had with Arin. He introduced Arin to Emma, who was one of the battle leaches. Arin greeted her kindly, and even moved to kiss her hand...as he said any kind gentlemen should to a lovely girl like her. Emma blushed profusely and swatted his hand, saying she was unused to such attention (and secretly Marcus found himself a tad jealous at the sight). After the flattery, he thanked Emma for all she had done for the kingdom today. Marcus then started with talking how he and his companions who fled with him began lost in the

wilderness, taking the Tome with them before the creatures brought here by the so called "Dark Swordsman" besieged the convoy. From there, he went to the spider's den, and how Riona managed to save them with her power. Arin showed great astonishment and shock when he heard Riona was here.

"LADY RIONA IS HERE!?" He shouted, nearly falling to his feet.

"Ye...yes." Marcus said, scratching the back of his head with astonishment.

"She...through her power had an inclination of us being in danger and snuck out of the town to aid us."

"By the gods..." Arin said, pulling himself to his feet. "Her father said that she was reckless; I never expected anything of the sort like this! This...this is a brazen disregard of so many aspects, I can't even speak! Did she even tell anyone!?"

"I truly believe she most assuredly did not." Marcus said nonchalantly.

"What a truly unique woman." Arin said, his hands running through his chin.

Marcus then filled in the rest of the tale, from the inn, to the city of Goldioz, and then to the battle that had happened. Arin then turned to where Karin was, still unconscious on the ground. "Is she dead?"

"No..." Marcus said. "I've rendered her unconscious."

"Why!?" Arin shouted in surprise. "Why have you not slain her!? She's a danger!"

"Both her and Mediva spoke of someone who was in charge of all of this...someone they referred to as the Dark Swordsman." Marcus began. "But they never explained who he is; other than he is a man. Both of them have spoken of him. If we kill them, then such knowledge that they possess will be lost."

"Dark swordsman?" Arin asked.

"Do you know what it means?" Marcus asked.

"No...no I do not." Arin said, sitting down on the ground. "I don't think even Master Knight would know where to begin even with that...and that...thing tends to know everything when it comes to tales about combat. It's too vague...maybe the leader of a cult."

"I'm sorry sir." Marcus said. "It was all I could get."

"No...it's fine." Arin said. "Your actions have brought to light two traitors to the kingdom; and unearthed some plot that we were not aware of until the attack came. Master Knight pondered the attack might have been among our most innermost followers; as the creatures that were captured seemed to have too much knowledge of where we would be at the time."

"Mediva was part of that inner circle wasn't he?" Marcus asked.

"That he was." Arin said. "Who knows how much my idiot brother has also divulged unto to this Dark Swordsman. We'll need to get these two to confess his identity. I fear that removing these two from the equation is merely the precursor to something much bigger." Arin walked forward to where his horse once stood before being obliterated by Karin's bolt. He picked up what gear he could find that was scattered around on the dirt. He then went over to Mediva and picked him up, dragging him back towards the forest line. "Still...we have earned ourselves a well warranted rest. Let us return to our camp." Marcus nodded, and he began to move with him towards it.

But as he did, a wave of pain shot through him. Now that his adrenaline was gone, he was starting to feel the detrimental effects of all the injuries he had taken from the fight. He even found himself shivering. How Marcus managed to stave off the pain and injuries was truly commendable. He could tell to some degree the injuries were not severe, but they

definitely were enough to keep him from doing any further strenuous activity. He must have through perseverance managed to ignore the injuries long enough to accomplish all that he needed to. Arin noticed that Marcus was clearly in pain as he walked over to him.

“How hurt are you?” He asked, not needing to ask if he was injured after seeing him struggle.

“I have truly had better days sir.” Marcus said, finding it hard to stand. “My skin feels cold and I am bleeding from splinters and impacts. Fighting a dark mage is not nearly as easy as I had thought.”

“I will send for soldiers to help you back to camp.” Arin said. He then turned to Emma who had received less injuries than him, and the injuries she did have she was shaking off. “Miss Emma...can you watch over him? As a battle leach, you had expertise in this correct?”

“I’ll keep him safe.” She said. “Just please hurry...there were many creatures in the woods and I in fear that a lone one may appear to gut us. I attribute me injuring the dark mage as luck; and do not wish to test my skill again tonight.”

“I disagree.” Arin said. “I believe that the display with the spear was a show of skill. I do not believe it was a fluke; as your parry seemed to be on point. Still...if you are worried, that I can understand. I promise I will not be long.”

With that, Marcus fell to the floor and allowed his body to have a much needed rest. Arin disappeared off into the night, and managed to locate some soldiers that were passing by. He instructed them to move to where Karin was. Each of the soldiers appeared, pulling Marcus to his feet while Emma did as much aid medically wise as she could (as the potions were not on her person at the time). With Emma and the soldier’s help, Marcus sluggishly was brought back to the clearing.

The forest had been cleared of monsters. Whatever creatures and men foolishly lingered had been slain. The others had fled off into other lands, but would not live for long as Tritenian cavalry hunted them down. Yet the force Lord Arin had brought was in no state to celebrate. Many men and women had been killed on each side, and there seemed to be far more humans slain than creatures. Some of Mediva’s followers appeared to even be soldiers within the Tritenian army, worrying Arin further on how many more may be in league with this supposed dark swordsman. Soon all the cavalry met in the clearing with several wagons and caravans arriving. Master Knight (as predictable as ever) went to do one final hunt for any stragglers.

Arin met up with Riona, who turned away from him the moment they locked eyes. He went over to her and grabbed her hands, as she kept her face turned away from her.

“Sweet Riona...it brings me great joy to see you alive.” He said, with a massive wave of relief. “I cannot believe it...when Marcus said you were out here, I could not believe it.”

“Greetings Sir Arin...son of Aron...” Riona said, trying not to look in his direction. “It is an honor to see you again; though here was not the intention.”

“What were you thinking out coming out here!?” Arin said. “Do you not realize how dangerous it is!? What was so important you would risk your life!?”

“Saving my friend...whom I have deep compassion for.” Riona sternly said.

“You realize your father is going to be quite irate...as well as my own because of this?” Arin asked.

“My father is my business...yours is your own.” Riona said. “Do not concern yourself for my behalf. I am already mentally prepared for the verbal thrashing he will give me.”

“He truly said you were something out of a story book.” He muttered.

“Like this whole ordeal that has transpired.” Riona asked.

“...something of the sort.” He said.

Marcus eventually emerged from the trees, and Riona saw he decrepitated state. Both Arin and Riona fled over to where he was as they laid him out

“Marcus you look terrible.” Riona said. “Oh gods; you’re hurt too! Badly! Are you alright!?”

“I...I could be much worse off.” Marcus said, assessing their injuries. They were bad; but not fatal. “I’ve never pushed myself to such a degree before.”

“What did that rotten witch do to you!?” She said, caressing his cheek. She felt the icy cold feel to his skin from the ice spell he had been hit by. “And you’re freezing as well.”

“Almost hypothermic.” Emma said, touching his skin. “But...not that dangerous. I can’t believe Marcus you managed to stand on your feet for so long after you defeated Karin.”

“Me as well.” Marcus said, clearly appearing to feel better that he did not have to move around as strenuously. “Are you injured Arin?”

“Minor burns from Karin’s spell.” He said. “I was very fortunate unlike my men to be only caught in a small arch of the spell...though these burns are becoming painful now that the battle has died down. I will live.”

The two began to exchange pleasantries while Emma gathered supplies to begin treating both Marcus’ injuries as well as Arin’s. As she worked, Ron, William, and Emily eventually walked over to where they were, and embraced Marcus for surviving. Ron swiftly apologized for not assisting him against Karin, to which Marcus forgave, especially since Emily’s injuries seemed slightly worse than his own. Marcus of course jokingly admonished her for being so reckless, to which she responded by nearly punching him in the face. William merely stood there where Marcus was, snickering to himself at the display Emily gave. He truly seemed happy to be alive.

They were all very surprised to meet Lord Arin on a personal level when they realized he was sitting right next to Marcus, and of course gave him courtesy all the same. He told them not to mind it at this moment, as he himself was more grateful to be alive at this moment. He then suggested a cup of tea, to which everyone was very thankful and appreciative of.

For the moment, things seemed calm.

The calm was quickly shattered when several soldiers emerged from the forest, each appearing to be struggling with something. Seconds later, it appeared that Jezebel was being forcibly escorted from the forest with the soldiers, with Master Knight at the front of them.

“Drag it to the center men.” He shouted. “Bring the abomination forward.”

Jezebel was dragged to the center of the clearing, before each of them men tied her down to the ground. Arin looked with confusion on the situation and pulled himself up, as best as he could. He limped over to where Master Knight was.

“What’s going on Master Knight?” He asked.

“We went to scout out for any survivors of Mediva’s treacherous band.” Master Knight shouted. “On the way, we managed to encounter this wretched creature. Oddly enough, she surrendered to us willingly; so I thought I would bring her here first.” Master Knight then turned to see Marcus alive and well. “Oh...you’re alive!? And here I thought I would have to send your family a letter of your passing in combat. I see that it is no longer needed. Golton will be pleased to hear of this.” He then turned to a soldier nearby him. “Go get the letters I have in my wagon that are labeled ‘To dead soldiers families’ and find the name Armani if you could and burn it.” The soldier nodded, as Master Knight then turned to Arin who approached Jezebel.

“What are you doing here wretch?” He asked.

“My lord Arin...” Jezebel said, struggling under the weight of many binds that had her ensnared. “My name is Jezebel...I was an arandrider who lived in the caves on the fringes of the Westernfold. I have surrendered myself to confess to several crimes I have done against the Tritenian kingdom.”

“Speak.” He said sternly.

“I am afraid I am responsible for the deaths of over fifty-three individuals in my lifetime, many of which were families and passerby’s who came to close to my domain.” She said with a hint of depression in her voice. “My actions were done solely out of ill intention to the people. And although I am responsible for shooting the arrow that has led to your discovery of your brother’s deceit, I am afraid I was also involved within his ranks to conspire against your kingdom. I have become filled with regret from my actions from seeing the kindness of another towards me, and I submit myself to your judgment.” She then lowered her head in disgrace. “I am at your mercy...I accept whatever fate becomes of me for this.”

A silence fell upon the soldiers, Arin, Master Knight, and Marcus who had listened to his. Never before did Marcus feel such a tension in the air. He feared something that he would find distasteful was about to take place in front of him, and he would not be able to prevent it. At last, Arin spoke.

“Jezebel...was it?” He asked stoically. She merely nodded. “Do you...have any information concerning a dark swordsman?”

“No.” She said. “I was vastly kept out of the loop when it came to that.”

“Then you are of no use to us.” He said. “And we have no cells that can hold you...we execute this filth here.”

Marcus was horrified at the decision. Yes Jezebel had tried to kill him, but she had also saved him, and helped him fight off Mediva’s men. And now they were going to execute her!? No! This could not come to pass. He feebly pulled himself up and tried to walk over to where Arin and the others were. When it was apparent he could not, he found himself being aided by Riona to get to his feet. Riona nodded to him, knowing what he was going to try and do...and where she normally would have let it happen, she decided to gamble on Marcus’ beliefs.

The soldiers pressed her binds even tighter, and began to forcibly position her upper half so that her more vital parts would be more easily exposed. Her shirt was ripped off so that she had nothing but a brassier on. Jezebel to Marcus’ horror, also seemed to be making no effort to try and stop them. She allowed them, no matter how uncomfortable to position her according to what they need. In her eyes, Marcus could even see what resembled a tear.

“Master Knight...if you can make this quick?” Arin asked.

“Ahhh...a good execution!” Master Knight shouted loudly. “FINALLY! Oh I have missed a good old fashioned off with the head execution! Though I’m certain my blade will leave quite a mess.”

“The citizens who died at her hands deserve retribution.” Arin said. “Do what is needed.”

“ARIN; STOP!” Marcus shouted, as Riona dragged him over. Arin and Master Knight turned towards him. “Please...my lord! Do not execute her!”

“Do not!?” Arin asked. “Do you have any idea what you are saying!?”

“I do!” Marcus shouted. “My lord...she has accepted judgment for her actions...how many other creatures that we regarded as evil have ever come forward willingly to accept judgment for their crimes? She has repented!”

“Yes...she has come seeking judgment.” Arin said. “And judgment she is getting! She has murdered many people and conspired with the crown!”

“We have also killed people Arin!” Marcus shouted. As he tried to move closer, soldiers appeared in front of him, barring his way. He tried to push them out of his, but to no avail; as he had no the fortitude to do so. “Tritenia is not perfect! We have done many share of crimes that are unknown to me! I do not have the writing to back my claim up, but I know deep in my heart that we have! And she has even granted you the means to find the traitors within the kingdom! Is that not worth a pardon!? We used to think the orcs were nothing but vile creatures, and now we have them as citizens.”

“No!” Arin shouted. “They are the exception...not the rule! As the heir to my father’s house and ruler ship of the Westernfold, I must adhere to the laws that we have written! I am supposed to pretend that the crimes she committed did not take place!? I cannot! It is not in my nature! For the sake of those who have lost family to her people’s love of fresh meat, and everything that I stand for, I cannot abide her! She must die Marcus!”

“But...” Marcus began.

“Marcus!” Jezebel said. “It’s okay...I am fine with this.”

“Fine!?” Marcus shouted. “This is your life we are speaking of. It is being taken from you!”

“As was the many lives I had watched devoured in front of me.” Jezebel said sadly. “I told myself that if I could escape, I would better myself in reparations for what I had done. But if I was caught, then I would accept my fate. I already knew if I was captured, I would die. I felt it in my bones.” She shook her head. “No Marcus...my life was taken from me when I was defeated by your she elf compatriot. My survival at yours hands was only time borrowed. But it all ends here. I will go to Everlasting Spire and accept my fate. I do not think it shall save me from Oblivion...” She then smiled to him, her eyes almost appear to be tearing. “But...we all must die one day. If I must die, then I wish to do so while I still have this...feeling in me.”

“Feeling?” Marcus asked.

“I...I have experienced this thing in me since I heard your words in the inn.” She said. “I think it must be...empathy. Sympathy and regret for all I have done. These...wretched emotions of are making me tearfully regret my actions. And all because a single Tritenian lad foolishly thought that evil, deceptive, lying monsters like us had a chance to be redeemed. If I must die, then let it be while I pray to your God...Esrueh. I believe his name was...for mercy for my actions. Please...I am okay with this. I truly am. Let me go while these emotions still ravage me.”

Marcus stood there, unable to do anything. In fact, he no longer felt like intervening. Jezebel despite all odds seemed perfectly resigned to her fate to die. Unable to proceed forward as the soldiers pushed him back, Marcus could only helplessly watch as Master Knight had his sword drawn.

Remarkably, Master Knight must have been moved to some degree, as he then sheathed his sword. He then turned to Arin.

“Lord Arin...” He said. “Why don’t you handle the execution?”

“Milord?” Arin asked.

“I feel you to be more suited with this one’s current fate.” He replied. “It seems likely that my stroke will leave the arandrider in much distress before she passes; or not leave much of a body behind. A death by your hands would be painless, swift, and certainly more dignified. Do you think you can handle this?”

Moved by both Jezebel’s resignation, Marcus’ plea for her life, and the fact Master Knight acknowledged both, Arin nodded.

“Very well...I will handle the execution.” He said. He turned to a page soldier who was nearby. “Get me a horse and a lance. Get Constantine over here. She should at least have her rites laid out before her before her passing.”

“But sir...” A soldier said. “She’s a wretched abomination.”

“Indeed.” Arin muttered. “Something that should cease to exist in this lifetime in the domination of man. And she also is the reason we discovered the deceit of my brother. At the very least, we should give her a formal execution.”

The soldiers did not approve of the situation, but they nodded to Arin in approval; as he was the lord and knight in charge. They called over Constantine (who was in the fight, but passed the vision of Marcus and the others), who also seemed to have apprehension over this. But he saw that Lord Arin was serious, so he went through with it. He made Jezebel read the Hymn of Esruweh, to which she sang tearfully...as if she was free of something that took hold of her, and was even baptized with water and wine. After this, Constantine moved out of the way as Arin mounted his horse and held his lance in place.

“Jezebel...” He asked. “Are you prepared to go to the other side?”

Jezebel nodded. With that, Arin pointed his lance forward, and angled it till he had a good aim at her heart. He intended to make this death as quick as painless as possible.

“Jezebel!” Riona shouted, in somewhat of distress from this situation. She did not seem moved to tears...but she might have been close. “For what it is worth, I am sorry! Sorry to believe creatures like you had no chance of changing!”

Jezebel turned to Riona. She remained silent as she was the whole time, but nodded to Riona to show she heard. After a minute of alignment on Arin’s part, he clicked the side of his horse and the steed galloped forward. Marcus turned away as he heard the horse charge. Arin despite his injuries charged forward and gave a firm thrust when he was in range of Jezebel.

The lance pierced her heart. She fell over and went limp in an instant as he rode by. She went smiling.

Arin pulled back the reins on his horse and then dismounted after the horse had moved to more comfortable pace. He walked over to where Jezebel had fallen. Constantine was already checking her pulse.

“She has passed.” He said.

“Did she feel any pain?” Arin asked.

“No...” Constantine said. “I believe she died instantly.”

Arin nodded to Constantine as he walked away from her corpse. As he did, Marcus turned to him.

“At the very least, bury her!” He shouted, tearing up. “She at least deserves that!”

Arin turned to Marcus. He originally shot him a look of frustration, but he soon turned passive. He then nodded to him.

“We can do that.” He said.

Eventually as the night passed and moved to morning, Marcus disclosed to Emma the fate of Chorin. Emma never in whole life according to Ron looked so devastated. She cried in Marcus’ arms for hours, wishing that she had been there for him. Her crying moved her brother to tears as well, who had been doing his damndest to hold them back. Truly it was a terrible time for the group...as many had been lost that day. The only one who did not mourn was William; as he said his tears dried up years ago from how many friends he had lost in his years of service.

The armed force entered Goldioz in the early morning. There, Jezebel, Chorin, and the fallen Tritenian soldiers that had perished in the battle against Mediva’s accomplices were laid to rest at the god’s acre in Goldioz. Constantine requested a funeral be done in their honor, as he had written a sermon all night from the events he had witnessed.

At Arin’s request, Jezebel was given a marker to her grave for her valorous sacrifice to aid Tritenia. Arin had done executions before, but this one he admitted brought him no satisfaction. There was even much regret in his voice when questioned further. But...he knew that her life was forfeit the moment she was caught. For if Arin did not execute her, Master Knight would have. And the execution would not have been as merciful or clean.

During the early morning, Marcus went down to the god’s acre to look at the graves. He found himself scanning the names of each marker to try and see if he recognized any of them. Some he unfortunately did. It was only the marker of Chorin and Jezebel that made him stop.

*Here lies Chorin Anderson
Son of Anthin and Terry Anderson
Private 1st class Tritenian Footsoldier of Aldin*

Rest in peace

*Here lies Jezebel
Murder of many
Savior of more
May her sacrifice not be forgotten*

Rest in peace

Upon reading the markers, he sat down to where they were and just stared. From there, he tried to run as many scenarios in her head where this could all have been prevented. He never wanted her to die after everything she had said; and eventually even did. And despite it all, she still fell.

“I figured you be here.” He heard Riona’s voice say to his side.

Marcus turned to see the elf girl some feet away from him. He simply nodded as she walked over and sat at his side. For a moment, they really said nothing to each other. There was little to say over what had happened, and what could have been done. Riona simply sat with him, and let the long minutes passed.

“I was wrong.” She said after a few minutes.

“Huh?” Marcus said.

“I was wrong.” She said again. “You were right. I let my judgments get the best of me...and you proved me wrong.” As she said this, she leaned up next to him, and rested her head on his shoulder. Marcus felt his face turn red as she did this, and almost felt his body shutter from her touch against his. It felt like a tingly sensation all over his body. He however felt calm when he realized Riona herself was also shaking. Once he felt this, he moved his hand across her waist, to which she responded with the same. “I hate being proven wrong...my pride as an elf finds it abhorrent.”

“Do you hate me then?” He asked.

“No...silly.” She said, her frown turning into a smile. “I make exceptions for you. So I will look past it.” She gripped his waist tighter as she did. “I always will make exceptions for you. The kindness that you have for others...the emotion, mercy, and compassion. Even in your anger you try to maintain your beliefs.”

“I am not perfect Riona.” Marcus said. “I have killed people before...and I have let emotions get the better of me...to my dismay.”

“Is anyone truly perfect?” Riona asked. “The malevolent Gods of the Dark World were once in legend supposedly divine beings like Esruweh; and yet they succumbed to evil. I do not believe in true perfection. But you...I have never met a human like you before. You know that you are not perfect, and yet you strive every moment to maintain your convictions...even more so begging to someone to grant mercy to an enemy. And it’s this compassion makes me unable to stop thinking about you.”

“You think about me?” Marcus asked, turning to her head.

“Every...waking moment.” She said, turning to him. “Where others would imprison, you would forgive. Where one would take a life, you would spare it. And if one causes a great calamity, you let them walk away with their lives. You gamble with your emotions, knowing that your beliefs will cause you great harm in the future; of which I have no doubt will come to pass...if not now...then soon. But even still...you would still walk forward on the path you chose...knowing what will happen one day. It is possibly the kindest and most commendable thing I have ever seen in my life.” Marcus smiled, knowing his face was probably beat red from Riona’s compliments. And then he felt both of her hands reach behind his head. “And that...has won my heart.”

She then pulled Marcus to her, and kissed him. Not like Karin who dove into him to give him pleasure. A wonderful passionate kiss, with their lips pressed together. Soon...Marcus’ hesitating hands relented and put his arms around Riona’s back, pulling her closer in. She soon shared her tongue with him as they kept themselves locked in a passion that seemed to last for an eternity. It was only after Riona broke away that they stopped, to which she then rested her head on Marcus’ shoulder, holding him in a long steady embrace.

“Run away with me.” She whispered.

“Huh?” Marcus mumbled.

“Run away with me.” She said, pulling away. “Run away with me. Let’s start a life together far away from here.”

“Far away?” Marcus asked. “I...I don’t know...”

“It’ll be wonderful!” She said. “My father will never approve of me marrying a common soldier. It would be disgraceful to his name; and would have no political benefit to him in this land. Let’s go...both of us...in secret! I have no intention of choosing anyone else other than you...I want you Marcus.”

The offer was tempting. Extremely tempting. Marcus had wanted Riona as his own for many days now, and the opportunity to have her was now in his grasp. Her body, her mind, her love, everything. This is all he had desired for years now.

But...to throw everything away? He wasn’t sure if he could do that. In fact he knew he couldn’t. Arin would need every honest man he could muster in the coming days. And as long as the Lughglen still existed and this “Dark Swordsman” still walked the land of Aladonia, there would always be a danger. Indeed, a thought passed his mind on the Tome and its power; and somehow he almost foresaw a destiny with him intertwined with it.

“Riona...” Marcus said, looking at her. “I do not think I could do that. I have an athena to maintain as a soldier of Tritenia. And...I would have to abandon everyone else who I pledged servitude to.”

“But...” Riona moaned.

“You and I both have duties to each of our respective fields.” Marcus said. “I want you...I truly do. But I can’t do so while compromising everything I have worked for here. I am a soldier...and I have to do a soldier’s duty.” Riona looked devastated at the response, as this was not the one she had hoped for. But then he placed his hands on Riona’s shoulder. “But this is not a rejection. I will find a way to win your father’s approval. I swear to you on that. We will be together; I promise. But I will not have you throw your livelihood away on my account. I will win his favor...I promise you.”

For a moment, Riona seemed stunned. She was all ready at this point to pack up and leave her father’s influence forever. But...Marcus seemed dead serious on the pledge he had just proclaimed. And how much he would risk being with her; not in a way that complicated her position as an heir to her father’s position. Once again, Marcus demonstrated his extraordinary kindness and compassion, and to that she smiled and kissed him again.

“You’re right...” She said. “But you know the road to winning my father’s favor will be long and hard.”

“A soldier’s life is no easier.” Marcus said. “I have toiled for four years...and I think I will toil for many more. So do not fear on my account for that.”

“I know...and I know such things do not scare you.” Riona said. “It’s just that...well...”

“Well what?” Marcus asked.

Riona didn’t answer. She seemed to be long in thought. Her face suggested that there was something that she was hiding...and something that she was having difficulty trying to get out. Maybe even feared getting out.

Or so he thought...Riona acts strangely on many different occasions so why should this be any different. She eventually shook her head and looked at him.

“You’re right...winning my father’s favor will be a much harder road.” She said, twirling her hair in her hand.

“You are sure?” Marcus asked.

“When am I not?” Riona asked.

“Fair point.” Marcus replied.

“So be it then.” Riona said. “Then...I eagerly await for to pop me the question. Just promise me...”

“Promise you what?” Marcus asked.

“That if you cannot fathom anything that can win his favor, that you will run away with me.” She asked.

“I promise.” Marcus said.

“Then we are in agreement.” She replied. She then kissed him one more time before she then got off of the ground and then began to walk away. As she did, she whistled to him and she gave a sultry smile to him. “Of course...do not be surprised if I sneak out before hand time to time to meet you at your place. I trust your cot fits two well.” If Marcus wasn't blushing before, he truly was now (actually so much so that he fell over on his side). Riona giggled as she watched the display. “So easy to tease and embarrass...another aspect I love about you.” And with that she was off, back to the inn, leaving Marcus to recover his wits.

It took him far longer than he thought. Eventually, renewed with his romance now reciprocated by Riona, he pulled himself up and walked out of the graveyard. He turned to the graves of the two he had come to visit.

“Till we meet again.”

Epilogue – The deal

At least one week passed after Chorin's, along with the other fallen soldiers' funeral. For the time being until Master Knight gave the order to leave, he remained at the Goldioz barracks. The barracks he was given was just as uncomfortable as the one he had lived in prior before he (in what he described as the best idea that he pulled the depths of his mind) his own hovel. He had not been sleeping right during that whole week, with everything that had occurred. His lover from his past had tried to murder his companions; and assumingly him in a state of crazed fervor (it certainly seemed like it with many close calls from her spells). Mediva had slew Chorin in front of him, Arin had executed Jezebel...it was all too much...too fast. At times when he lay at his cot, all he could do was either think or mourn.

To complicate matters, the times when he could not think or mourn, sleep became impossible even then. The barracks now consisted of both Goldioz's garrison and the convoy that Master Knight had under him. The barracks soon became filled to the brim with soldiers, so that there was always activity moving about. The week had been nightmarish for Marcus, with the only reprieve being when (and if) he was allowed to leave to the barracks to an inn if he so desired.

But neither of the two was what was truly draining him.

It was the task he had been assigned...a task he had believed to be futile.

He woke up in the cot, with probably half of what he needed to stay awake. Better than previous nights; but still it plagued him. He had of course worked through worst, so he shook it off and then went off to prepare. He retrieved his sword and then his standard armor a foot soldier would be given for the day. Afterwards, he sluggishly departed for the prison. The prison was a dark place in Goldioz, having very little light for those who had been impounded. It consisted of a main office at the entrance, and an archive that contained various documents (such as records, names, schedules, etc). The prison carried dark imagery using stones and materials in the design to dishearten anyone who was unfortunate enough to have been impounded behind its walls. Some prisons carried much more pleasing aesthetics, but these were generally for those who had committed less violent crimes, or political prisoners who were too valuable to risk with other inmates, had the influence to buy their way there, or otherwise. The main office was generally connected to the hallways that would lead to where the cells were...and a section in the back that would connect to the oubliette. That is where prisoners who had committed more heinous crimes would be kept at. Most of them were very secure, usually having foot soldiers and sometimes mage knights on site; with their own armories usually hidden in the building. There were other rooms as well...rooms where things sometimes went on that Marcus did not want to fathom.

In the case of where Marcus needed to go was the oubliette. He checked into the main office, and presented himself to the guards. They nodded in his direction; already informed by Sir Arin to let him pass. He was led in the hallways where he disreputable men, thieves, barbarians, and other terrible individuals linger in their most deserved cells. He then led him to stairwell that connected underground, into the oubliette; the only means of egress for such captives. It was dark...so dark that the torchlight he had been given barely seemed to push back the darkness. They came to a door fifteen feet under the earth.

This is where the real horror was. Prisoners who were above the oubliette were generally treated fairly (fairly being a loose term). Ones who were in the cells for pettier offenses such as failing to pay taxes or minor misdemeanors were treated even more so.

Not so much here. Only hardened criminals, mad or deranged men were put in here. Guards as torturers here were given full permission to do any means necessary to get them to confess their crimes, reveal what they know, or simply to alleviate boredom. Ones that they could do so without fear of reprieve from their superiors were the general targets, where more heinous criminals, murders, psychopaths, or even political criminals were often left alone due to the guards feeling their safety might be compromised, or in the case of political prisoners...their families using influence or power to threaten their well being. More often than not, men of noble or even royal origins were always placed in nicer accommodations. Those who were brought into the oubliettes were generally those who had committed abundantly apparent crimes against the crown that could not be ignored even by the families...or those who did not wish to free them from their imprisonment.

Mages were often the more difficult ones to ensnare. A mana mage could be easily disarmed by removing their spellbook, wand, and/or staff. A blood mage (and a high mage by extension) however were far more tedious due to the fact they did not need to rely on such means to invoke magic. More often than not, captured mages of these traits were executed on site, as it was considered too large a gamble to attempt to incarcerate them. Those that had no choice but to capture were often placed in Draining Bars, a set of anti-magical manacles used to impede and inhibit the mana flow in a mage to where they could not even invoke a simple cantrip.

The room that Marcus saw in question was a pitch black hallway with a door at the end of it. Moans, cachinnations, groans, and shouts of hate came from all the men incarcerated in the cells to Marcus' sides. Marcus was led to a cell near the very end of the pitch black hallway, where he was given a set of candles. The guard lit each of them with the torch he had in his hand, and then left Marcus alone in the darkness. Marcus found a nearby stool next to the cell's wall and pulled it up to sit down, putting the candles down in front of him.

"So...what will your answer be today?" He asked the woman in the cell; the woman in question being Karin Cisor. She looked extremely decrepit as compared to when Marcus had seen her before, and in his past. She had been beaten and abused to some extent. Her hair was in shambles, so much so that Marcus was even able to see her left eye...which was normally covered by her bangs. Her mage knight dress had been replaced with a torn up tunic that barely a dress. Marcus had many qualms about the efficacy of her treatment, but he had no say in the matter.

All he knew is that if he wanted to spare her from death, he needed to make her divulge anything that could lead to the whereabouts of the Dark swordsman.

At first Karin feebly looked over to where Marcus was. Once she saw him, her expression of shock turned to joy. She attempted to run over to where he was, but the Draining bars and her chains prevented her from doing so.

"Marcus!" She shouted. "My dear sweet Marcus...you've come to rescue me!! Hurry...undo my chains so that we may flee!"

It was the same thing as it was before. Karin refused to cooperate with any other individual, and the only one she seemed to speak anything other than jests, insults, or even

threats was Marcus. And when he was here, she only spoke of him rescuing her and taking her to Esruwehknows where.

“Karin...” Marcus said softly. “You need to give them something... anything!”

“Marcus...please...” Karin moaned desperately, yet with a hint of delight. “We don’t have to talk about this! Please...come...I need you...”

“And I need you to talk...” Marcus said, ignoring her statement. “You’re in danger Karin...the soldiers are talking of executing you. They counted how many you slew with your enchantments and spells...it’s over ninety people.”

“Obstacles...nothing more.” Karin said extremely fast. “The Dark Swordsman gave me this wonderful power...these amazing abilities! I had to acquire the Tome Marcus...I had to! Otherwise...he would never release me from my service! He would have killed you! You have to understand that!”

“I do.” Marcus said. “But it’s over now...you can’t hurt anyone. And I don’t want to see you hang...or worse. It would break me more so than it did when I fought you...so please...give me something.”

“That’s what I love about you...” Karin said, her voice getting increasingly erratic. He couldn’t see her exactly with the darkness, but he could tell that she was twitching. “Even after everything that I have done, you still have these feelings for me. You always came to my side...even when I did things to you and everyone else!” She lowered her head from Marcus’ and then appeared to become complacent. “People rejected me for who I was...for my mage blood in my veins. But you...you didn’t reject me. You consoled me...you treasured me...you loved me.” The twitching on her body continued to get more and more erratic. And then shot up, glaring at Marcus. “And that’s why you are everything to me! YOU WILL ALWAYS BE EVERYTHING TO ME! I LOVE YOU MARCUS! I...need you...”

“And I need you to come back to the waking world.” Marcus barked standing up. “I told you before...it’s over between us.” Karin looked at him for moment, allowing herself to process Marcus’ claim. Her deranged smile quickly fell as Marcus looked at her. “The time between us has passed. You have murdered people Karin...you wield dark magic that has corrupted your mind...you barely resemble the girl I knew from years past! There is nothing that will be between us...ever!! Now...please...give me something so I can save your life and be done with you!”

Karin stood there, completely stunned at Marcus’ declaration. Beforehand, Marcus had merely exchanged small talk with her and repeatedly demanded she release anything that she knew. Now he had declared to her that it was all over; and saving her life would be the last thing Marcus would do before he was done with her. Dispirited by this revelation, she merely lowered her head and said nothing. Marcus looked at her for what seemed like minutes before he eventually realized that prying anything further would be fruitless.

“Once again...I have wasted my time coming here.” Marcus said. He retrieved the candle off the ground and set out away from the cell.

Before he got too far away from the cell, he heard Karin moan something:

“If I talk, he’ll kill me and you.”

For a moment, Marcus wanted to turn around and run to the bars. In that moment, her voice had appeared reminiscent of who she was years ago. By pure force of will he abstained from doing so and then continued onward back towards the exit of the oubliette.

“This isn’t over boy.” A voice came to Marcus side before he exited. The voice was from Mediva Sorin...Arin’s traitorous brother who himself looked to be in about the same state as Karin...probably worse off. “He’s still out there...as you as the kingdom has the Tome, he will not stop to seek it out.” Un-phased by his threats, Marcus kept going forward. “Don’t you look high and mighty to me like that you filthy serf! You are nothing to me! You will be nothing to be! You hear...” The voice of Mediva faded as the guards closed the doors behind him. With that, Marcus left the prison, leaving the burning candle on the desk.

The first thing that he did as soon as he exit was lament and vent his frustrations in a nearby alley. Lament that it had come to this. He did this in the form of slamming his fist into the wall, until his knuckles became bruised and bloody...and the whole time he did so, he thought upon the events.

It was not Karin’s fault that this fate had come to her. This Dark Swordsman knew of her connection to himself...how he did was unknown to him as there was very little to go off of...but the Dark Swordsman had some form of dark magic as he originally awoke Karin to such powers. Perhaps he extracted something from her mind and used it against her. After all, Karin was a high mage...a powerful mage title. Karin not only possessed a powerful magical lineage that had awoken within her, but also had the ability to comprehend any magical runes on any spellbook. High Mages were not as rare as an arcanist who could weave, write, and even break laws of magic, but rare enough that having even one was valuable. If he had just gone with her from the start, none of this would have happened. Consequently, he would have never met Riona...but if he had went with her, she would have been but an enigma to him if anything.

He found himself putting more power into his fists as he thought about this. He knew Emma once she saw his hands would be most displeased at him, but he had lost all interest in her complaints. A burning anger was awaking into him. It had been but a small spark over the last few days, but his fervor in trying to save Karin and thinking more about how this came to pass was kindling it slowly. He soon began to despise this Dark Swordsman on a personal level, beginning to hate him...whoever he was. Marcus had never felt hatred before. Open disgust and dislike yes...but never to a point where he wanted to see a man dead in front of him. He fought others because he was ordered to, and it was either him or them...never because he hated them. This was different...much different.

He lost focus for so long that he didn’t notice the shadow of a man approaching him. He made one final punch before he felt a hand on his shoulder. Marcus turned to see Sir Arin Sorin glaring down at him. He was fully clothed in his armor, and his long hair still appeared wavy and majestic as usual. A shining example of a royal knight’s son geared for battle.

“Venting anger I see.” He said calmly. Marcus would have normally saluted him instantly, but the two had been meeting each other often on a personal enough level to where Marcus felt more comfortable interacting with him casually...as well as Arin who now considered him a friend. “I suppose she has said nothing still?”

“Not a word.” Marcus said. “Nothing at all.”

“I see...” Arin said, sitting down next to him. “Then you and I share much on this sensitive ordeal.”

“Your brother is even less cooperative.” Marcus said.

“As I would have anticipated.” Arin moaned. “I have tried as many times as you have to try and pry a confession out of him, but I have failed in all attempts. Despite the fact we have him perfectly in our custody, he seems to go under the delusion that he will be freed from our dungeons. He clearly means to throw his life away...the fool.” Arin looked up to the sky to watch dark rain clouds begin to cover the sky. “I told my father yesterday about all that had taken place.”

“How did Lord Aron take it?” Marcus asked. “With betraying the crown and threatening to murder him and you?”

“Not well...in fact utterly devastated him.” Arin whispered. “I’ve never seen my father so taken aghast by such a claim. But when Master Knight verified his betrayal, as well as any we brought back alive, he could deny it no longer. My father retreated to his solar...and the chancellor informed me he has yet to leave it.”

“I can only imagine he is suffering all the same as you.” Marcus said.

“I have little doubt that he isn’t.” Arin softly said back. “He is probably in the same somber state as I am...no...I am suffering the worst of it.” He turned to Marcus, his face sullen and full of despair. “I...I think I had an idea this would come to pass.”

“Why?” Marcus asked.

“...There was...an incursion between me and him days before we left North Pass.” He said. He looked up to the sky, and held his hand to his chin, in deep thought for a few moments before he resumed speaking. “We had attended the assize as was proclaimed by the heralds all across the area. During the assize, Mediva said some...questionable things. We then exchanged a bitter argument between the two of us on the following day...in an...”

“Alley?” Marcus asked. Arin turned to him with surprise on how quickly Marcus was able to deduce his location, and finish his statement before himself.

Truthfully, Marcus had listened in to the argument between the two, as he had run to get some air after making out with Karin and remembering Riona. Even more so, Marcus has listened in when the assize had gathered.

But he wisely withheld that information.

“Ye...yes.” Arin muttered with some astonishment in his voice. “How...how did you know about that?”

“I had decided to relieve myself in the alley instead of trekking to the privy.” Marcus lied...though it was a believable one at that. “I happened to overhear the argument between you two...I wisely decided to not reveal myself. The shouting was so loud though that it was truly impossible to not take notice.”

“I...I see.” Arin said, running his hand through his hair. “I admit...I was acting very unknighly back there...I guess I should not be surprised you...and maybe others might have overheard my bellowing. You were not spying on us now were you?”

“Of course not milord.” Marcus said, moving to his feet and bowing in front of him in a salute. “You the lord of the land, and I am a loyal soldier. For me to do such a thing to you is impossible to conceive.”

Arin chuckled softly.

“Of course; to doubt you was an insult.” He said, bowing to him, if slightly. “Forgive me assumption. By any chance...did you see others?”

“I did not see others.” Marcus said. “Only that Mediva had this...truly frightening look of malice in his eyes.”

“I noticed it too.” Arin said lamentably. “And then is what I meant to continue on. I saw it but a moment when he looked at me. The anger...the eyndill. I had an eldnyng that he may try to do something; and that his apology was insincere. But I foolishly did nothing! I was blindsided by the monstrous attack that I failed in regarding some minute details. And then...the arrow from that beast...”

“Jezebel.” Marcus interrupted.

Arin turned to Marcus, looking as if he wanted to argue his point on what he believed when it came to creatures such as Jezebel and other monstrous races. Marcus however shot him an angered look at him, and Arin decided he would say no more on the matter.

“Jezebel...” He said. “Sorry. Only prejudices die hard.”

“Just continue.” Marcus snapped.

“Right.” Arin muttered, clearing his throat. “When she fired that arrow that...mind you...nearly hit me...I at first was in disbelief on the ordeal. But I thought back to when I last saw my brother...and I wondered...what if it was true? I should have acted there...but I relented to what I thought was reason! And then...”

“Arin...” Marcus said. “I understand what you are trying to do and say.”

“Do you now?” He asked.

“I do.” Marcus said. “You are blaming yourself for all that transpired over the last fortnight and a half. You’re brother was a black hearted fiend...and you didn’t stop him.” Arin didn’t look too thrilled to hear that, but Marcus continued. “But...you can’t let this weigh on your shoulder. If you continue to blame yourself, it will erode you. You could falter when the kingdom needs you to make a decision should you reminisce about these times...and people could prey upon that weakness. I regret things as well...like not going with Karin to Seaside when this...’Dark Swordsman’ destroyed any semblance of her that was left. If I married her there, she’d be the same. Her weakness was me...Mediva’s was jealousy. I don’t want to see another friend I care for be destroyed as who they used to be...by being swerkered into guilt. Accept what happened with your brother and keep moving forward. You have people who look to you for everything. You can’t disappoint them.”

Arin appeared to be somewhat surprised with Marcus’ responses. Normally, it was him teaching the men under him of such concepts...not the other way around. Yet Marcus was clearly displaying a wisdom that he had not seen before. He placed his hand on his shoulder as he rose up.

“You are much wiser my friend that I have given you credit for.” He said. He then looked off to the side and then shot him an astonished look. “And clearly much stronger as well...did you make that crater in the wall?”

Marcus turned to where he had been punching the wall...and he noticed it as well. Frustrated with anger and rage, he didn’t take knowledge of the surrounding area, but now Arin bringing it up had brought it to his attention. There was a large hole where he had punched about a few centimeters deep. It was quite the display...Marcus never considered himself strong...he more or less relied on speed and agility in contests of the blade. But this...this was a sure display of strength he never knew was there.

“I...I believe I did milord.” Marcus said in surprise, examining the hole for himself. “Though I would never believe I would have done this.”

“Me as well.” Arin said.

“Looks like something Master Knight would do.” Marcus joked. Arin seemed to enjoy the jest as he chuckled.

“Nay...” he said. “Master Knight would have destroyed the building had he needed to vent rage...and just using his fist.” The laughed off the jest, even though they both knew that Master Knight could very well do that to the building and more if he truly desired to knock it down.

“I am proud to have met you by your sword.” Arin said after some time.

“And I you.” Marcus responded, pulling himself up.

Arin nodded to him slightly, and then began to leave the alley. He didn't leave the alley though before he again turned around to him.

“Meet me at the Sara Donnell Inn tonight.” He said.

And then he walked off. Marcus himself also left.

But before he did, he turned around to look upon the hole that he had made in the wall.

This is solid stone. He thought. *I should not have been able to do such damage.*

He looked at his hands to see that little damage had been done to them.

Marcus knew not why Arin had asked him to go to the inn, but for some reason he felt a wave of excitement within him. From Arin's tone, he must have desired to talk to him about something that he would be pleased to hear; as his tone suggested. Whether or not that was a façade remained to be seen, although Arin was very direct when it came to much of everything. As he patrolled around the barracks, his mind seemed to consistently think about Arin's request.

Evening passed by and Marcus removed his central army armor. After he changed into something more suitable to be seen out in public, he left the barracks, departing to the inn that Arin had instructed him to arrive at.

The Sara Donnell inn was just as busy as it was when Ron and Emily had first brought him to it. When they had arrived in Goldioz when they had escaped a platoon of goblins, this was the first inn that they had stayed at for the night. Currently, Marcus was the only one at the inn. Riona had been staying at the Sorin household, as she was a elven princess. Losing her would put quite a stain between human/elf relations. Ron, Emily, William, and Emma were currently at the barracks performing their tasks, although Emily on a much more reduced basis due to her injuries had yet to fully heal. Emma of course still had the healing vials from Jezebel's treasure, but Emily insisted on not using them, telling her to save them for more grievous injuries. So, Marcus would be alone at the inn with Arin for the most part. He went to the inn's bar, which only held right now four others. Marcus sat a couple stools away from the folk, and ordered an ale (specifically one that he would enjoy...the first ale he tried was mostly made with rye; something that he found himself not enjoying). There was only one barmaid at the counter, with a few servant wenches, as the inn seemed to be moving to it's last call stage. The barmaid appeared to be younger looking girl (about Emma's age, probably older) with long blonde hair bound in a ponytail. She wore a typical dress one would expect a servant wench to wear, albeit much more appropriate it. The barmaid poured him a mug and moved to hand it to him.

As he took his ale, another patron took a stool next to him, and his hand accidentally brushed up under Marcus' elbow, causing him to knock the tankard up into the air as it was being handed to him. And were it not for the reflexes of that patron, it would have fallen on the barmaid's head.

"My...my apologies!" The man said, quickly handing him his mug.

"It's...it's alright!" Marcus said, somewhat startled. "Nothing happened beyond a display of dexterity. As he looked a bit more thoroughly, he immediately recognized the figure. It was in fact Golton! Golton immediately recognized him as well.

"M...Marcus!?" Golton asked.

"Golton; it's you!" Marcus said. Golton's expression upon this confirmation turned from that of bewilderment to joy as he saw his friend again, so much so that he embraced in a brotherly fashion.

"My friend you are still alive!" He shouted. "I can't believe that you are alive!!"

"And you as well!" Marcus shouted as he got up to embrace his tighter. "I did not know what became of your fate after I fled into the wilderness!"

"My tale after we parted is of little interest." Golton shouted with joy, releasing him from the hug. "I suspect yours will be far more interesting."

So Marcus spent this time, divulging the entire tale to Golton. Because carrying the Lughglen was still considered a secret, he never divulged why he fled in the first place to Golton. Luckily, Marcus was able to convince him he merely fled due to the onslaught bellowing towards him, and was unsure if they could fight them off.

"Your tale is no different to others." Golton said, drinking an ale he ordered. "Many of our soldiers had been dispersed by the creatures who assailed us. Most of my time afterwards ensued trying to find the displaced soldiers and rally them back to the caravan. I tried searching for you...I truly did. But business continued to call me elsewhere. Where I would think I would find you, I would find some other individual. Not that they were not a concern my friend...but I only knew these people as associates and little else. You I know beyond that of an associate."

"I'm glad you were concerned for my well being friend." Marcus said, giving Golton a smile.

"Me as well." Golton said, resting his arm on Marcus' shoulder. "Who else will I fluster beautiful bellibones in front of them, and give me the most astute reactions that I crave for?"

"Oh...I'm certain you could find others to indulge your sadism on." Marcus said, shaking his head.

"None that will ever react in such profound ways as you." Golton said, returning back to his stool.

"I feel like you associate me as a friend if only just to fluster me." Marcus moaned.

"Yes...one who I will fluster one day, and die for the next." Golton responded profoundly.

"I'm glad to hear that." Marcus replied. "So...how long are you to stay in Goldioz? Or are you here with the army?"

"With the army." He said.

"Did you hear about Mediva?" Marcus asked.

Golton remained silent for a few moments. He actually looked away from Marcus as when he did, the grip on his mug noticeably tightening. He actually tightened his grip to

such a degree that he cracked the mug's grip, leaving several splinters there. He must have been ignorant to what he was doing, as he withdrew his hand and shook it wildly afterward.

"Gods!" He barked, holding his hand.

"Are you alright!?" Marcus asked with some surprise in his voice.

"Yes; I am fine." Golton barked, removing some of the wooden shards that were now protruding out of his hand.

"You...seemed awfully irate there for a moment." Marcus asked.

"An anger took hold me...and clearly did not see it." Golton

"An anger?" Marcus asked.

"Yes." Golton barked. "An anger that I did not stick my sword in his gut beforehand. I hated that man, but never thought he was capable of betraying the kingdom he served in such a manner. Collaborating with such foul cretins like dark mages. I'm glad to hear that Arin left him quite agrum when the two fought."

"Don't bring that up Golton!" Arin's voice snapped. Golton and Marcus turned to see Arin; dressed in more kingly attire instead of his usual armor and battle gear that he would normally be seen with. He was dressed in a fine tunic, with a beautiful surcoat over his tunic. He also had his blue cape, dark brown leather boots. His family crest was shown on the surcoat, which appeared to be a black spear pointed upwards with several circles and designs around it. The spear was chosen for the family crest as the Sorin family had history of being famous spearmen. Most of the patrons and bowed to courtesy Arin, who waved to them all to acknowledge their honor to him. It looked like he had draped a black cloak over himself to hide when he first came in...whenever that was. "It pains me every time I had to think of laying my hands on my brother, and admonish him in such a way."

"I had to be done milord." Golton snapped back. "Mediva made a clear attempt on your life. You should not lament over your decision."

"Alas I do." He said, sitting down in between the two. He then looked to the barmaid who appeared to be delighted to see him. "Evening Dolora."

"Eve...good evening milord!" She said ecstatically.

Arin smiled kindly to her and bade her to move closer to him. He moved his mouth to her ear, speaking softly. "Do you have a place in the inn where I could speak privately to these two?"

"Of...of course milord!" She squeaked. "There...there is a meeting room next to the inn's office. I'm sure the Donnell family will not mind you using it."

"Thank you Dolora." He said. "You two...with me."

"Two?" Marcus asked. He then looked to Golton who Arin seemed to be eyeing as well. "Golton as well?"

"Yes; I had asked for him before I had asked for you." He said. "Think nothing of it...I just saw Golton before I spoke to you. Now...in the room. We must be brief as I have many affairs to attend to, and little time to spare."

"Yes sir!" They both said.

They were taken to the back of the inn, led by Dolora. Afterwards, she bowed to them all and then returned to the bar. She inquired if Arin needed something, but Arin took no ale; merely water as he was far too busy handling affairs to even consider taking in ale. The meeting room was small, merely a large table in the middle of the room with several chairs around it. There were smaller tables on the side, probably use to adorn with decorations or hors d'oeuvres. There of course wasn't any of the sort here, aside from some

unlit candles. Mediva lit the candles with some alchemical pieces of wood known as lighting sticks; small strands of wood with a easily ignitable resin on them. Often they were used for lightning candles, lanterns, and pipes for smoking. After lighting them, he had the two sit down.

“I apologize for meeting you here.” He said. “Under normal circumstances, I would have you two meet me at my manor for the proposition I have for you all. However, I have little time to work with at this moment, so I decided an informal meeting would have to suffice.”

“It’s alright...just proceed with the meeting.” Marcus said.

“Very well.” He began. “In the short time you two have been in the army, you two have each done extraordinary feats of prowess of ability.” He first turned to Golton, who had propped his feet up on the table, resting his hands behind his back. “Golton...you have been the most exemplary swordsman in all of the Westernfold’s providence. I hear a few bards have already written epics about the fight in the fields of Dustin where you slew one hundred orcs single handedly.”

“They give me too little credit.” Golton responded with a grinning expression on his face. Arin snickered slightly at Golton with his proud display of arrogance. He then turned towards Marcus.

“And Marcus...” Arin began. “Not only did you manage to hold onto the item that we were carrying to keep it from being pried into the enemy’s hands...” Golton spat out his ale when he heard that, but continued to listen. “You even managed to uncover who was behind the plot to steal it, and unmasked and even deeper plot against our land. Needless to say, I have been grateful beyond measure for both of you two.”

“Marcus did what!?” Golton barked.

“Ahh...yes.” Arin said, shrugging his shoulders. “We were tasked during the assize to guard something that was originally to be sent to Aldin, and then the Tritenian Capitol city of Sanim Bethelm. When the attack came, they came with intent to pilfer the item; as we had stolen it from them. Marcus retrieved the item and fled into the wilderness, guarding it for days against multiple attackers and cohorts of this Dark Swordsman.” He then turned away from Golton and then directed his vision at the two of them. “More importantly...you two have been both my friend and companion for years now...and I damn well proud to have known you both personally.”

Golton stayed silent after this had been brought up. Marcus had also stayed silent, but he seemed to more confused on why Arin was telling Golton this.

“Umm...Arin...” Marcus asked. “Why are you telling us this?”

Arin smiled, and then continued. “I shall be direct then...I want to transfer you two from the Tritenian Central Army into my own personal forces.”

“You mean that!?” Marcus asked with surprise.

This was a large deal. There were of course two divisions to the Tritenian military. The central military which was run by Master Knight, and used by the queen’s vassals whenever they needed more men; as well as had an army ready to fight a way when it happened. And then there was the private armies owned by the dukes, earls, barons, and knights of the land. The Central Army while it would be used by vassals to help reinforce their borders and assist when they needed to fight, only answered to the crown and Master Knight. They could not be used for personal ambitions or expeditions by any of the vassals. Often times in a vassal liked soldiers from the Central Army, he could put in a formal

request to Master Knight to transfer them to his armies permanently. Marcus heard that Lord Arin's units (while kept to a strict regimen) were paid at least fifty percent better than the Central Military. The Central Military was funded by the taxes of the land, so fees were usually lower; especially taking into consideration of the other branches, the size of the Central Army, and how money was divvied out.

"I have had the requisite paperwork filed in as of three days ago." Arin said. "If you are willing, I will hand it to Master Knight tomorrow. As for your jobs afterward, they will remain much of the same; though I will be transferring you to Goldioz at some point."

"A post out here as well!?" Marcus again barked.

"Aye." Arin said. "And...there's more." Marcus could barely keep himself contained. He was already getting a marginal increase to his pay; and still Arin had yet to divulge everything. "Three fortnights from Woonday, there will be as you all know a festival held in Aldin. A hastilude will take place there...you all know as the Aldin Battle Tourney. A competition in which swordsman may be up against spearman, axe wielder against daggers, magic versus physical strength. A forty man contest in which the winner is presented with a large feoh of gold. You all have heard of it...and I know Golton has been undefeated for two years." Where Golton normally would have said something however, he strangely remained silent. Arin looked somewhat confused by this, but he decided not to pay it any mind. "In any case, this year will not just be a feoh of gold awarded to the winner. There is another prize on the line."

"WHAT IS IT!?" Marcus asked excitedly.

"A job offer..." He said. "To be one of my personal retainers...and I want you two to enter in it."

Marcus could barely contain himself when he was given this information. He felt ecstatic...nearly going faint when he heard such a proposition. His blood was boiling and his heart racing. He felt as if he was having a flutter. Golton however remained silent on the matter entirely. Arin sat there still, gauging the looks of the two.

"Your...personal retainer?" Marcus asked excitedly.

"Yes." Arin replied. "The position of personal retainer will be given to the final two who make it to the end of the hastilude. The final fight will be there to determine who wins the gold prize. I wanted to personally tell you both this. I have long distrusted my brother when it came to certain affairs, and have unfortunately forced me to pick up slack for him. Mediva's cunningness for the Tritenian military and political affairs have been useful at seldom times. I have not noticed it until some months back that I was having difficulty with my life as a leader of this providence to get everything done. If I had someone who could assist me, and even attend meeting in my place if needed, I'd have more time to devote to other affairs that I often times must sacrifice to attend to something more important. I need retainers; no matter how much I try to deny it."

Marcus easily looked like a fopdoodle with how he was reacting. Normally he was calm and collected; but considering how he was looking for a method to impress Riona's father (more or less meet him), this offer could not have come at a better time.

"I don't get it..." Golton said finally. "If you are personally asking this, why not name us retainers now?"

"I am a careful man Golton." He said sternly. "The position of my retainer is demanding; as I am unceasing in work. I need people who will be able to have the endurance needed for the work I shoulder onto them. I know you two personally...but there

may be someone else...someone more skilled and more deserving of the position. I know of thirty others who could fill the role, but I find myself having difficulty in making up my mind. I am overseeing the tournament as a way to make a calculated decision as I have asked all of them to attend it. In addition, I had already set the arrangements for this nearly months in advance. I am a man of my word, so I cannot pull the prize away having already announced it to those men. I do regret making the offer known now...as I would match rather prefer you two with all that transpired. But...I have already made the offer public. The offer to my personal army still stands regardless of the outcome. You will of course...attend the tournament?"

"Of course!" Marcus shouted. "We would be fools not to!"

"Well...if I am to attend the contest again, then you have already named one of your retainers by my presence being there." Golton sneered.

"There it is!" Arin barked. "There's that confidence that I have yet to see for some peculiar reason. That's what I want to see."

"Will we still keep our current ranks in the army?" Marcus asked.

"Yes; you Marcus will still be ranked as a private, while Golton a Captain." Arin said. "Of course...if you make retainer, then your job in the army will be a relic of the past. You'll find my retainers are rewarded handsomely for their work."

"Then we won't fail you." Golton said, getting up to bow to Arin. "We accept your proposition of transfer, and your offer to be your retainer should we win." Marcus hearing this, got up himself and also bowed.

"I look forward to it my friends." Arin said, getting up himself. "Your new jobs will take place after I return from my task with Master Knight."

Some small talk took place with the three for a few minutes, but eventually Arin had to depart from their company. He needed to get rest to attend a meeting concerning the economical affairs of his town at first light; and needed to be in his private solar to sleep for it sooner than later. He left the inn then and left Marcus and Golton to digest the offer given to them. Marcus could barely contain the excitement, while Golton remained somewhat stoic.

"Is this not a wonderful occasion my friend!?" Marcus barked.

Golton did not answer. He merely looked at Marcus with what he thought was an angered look, but that might have been from the shadows cast by Golton's shadow from behind the torch he was standing in front of. When light did shone on Golton's face, he seemed to look normal.

"Of course..." Golton said sternly. "I fine advancement to both of our careers. But...enough of that matter...I'm a bit more curious on your tale now."

To be Continued...

ARCHIVES OF ALADONIA

Lesson 1: The Military of Tritenia

I...the World Overlord, will reveal unto you Fantail's secrets.

I know you have other questions about Fantail at this time...but they are not important...for now. You already know most of the land from reading all of the chapters. There is more to know...but at this time, feel free to not worry about it.

What was however discussed in great detail however was the military of Tritenia; as both our hero and villain were in fact servants to this vast militarist power. The story mostly focused on Marcus' life as a soldier as well as other aspects of it. I feel starting with the Tritenian military as a whole is a place of discussion.

Bear in mind that this is merely an overview of how the military as a structure works. The grand details and the inner workings of how each particular military branch functions will not be discussed in great detail...merely enough so that you as a person have an idea of how the units and ranks function.

TRITENIA:

First and foremost, we must probably discuss the actual nation itself before moving into its militarism structure. I will convey to you all a brief history of the kingdom.

Tritenia was beginning to form roughly in Age 432 of the Written Age so writing was just beginning its popularity. The kingdom originally started off as a series of tribesmen who shared in common views towards life, religion, philosophy, and other drivel such as that. You understand I'm certain. Well...the tribe increased in size and power...and with such increases, they needed suitable land in order to continue expanding. So they secured more. And then more. And then more. And so on and so forth. Neighboring villages that had already secured a suitable ground for either joined the tribesmen, or were assimilated by force. Yes...this glorious kingdom has its own share of blood on its hands. I'm sure you can think of some countries on your world that has their share of..."justifiable" crimes against humanity (justifiable being a very loose term mind you).

Tritenia officially formed in Age 532 where Ludwig Von Tritenia managed to bring the tribes together, and officially formed the fledging land into a nation.

Tritenia is a very large kingdom; probably one of the largest. Its neighboring kingdoms didn't form nearly as quickly as Tritenia did, so Tritenia managed to get a larger helping of the land in this continent in Aladonia; which is why many of the kingdoms are jealous of Tritenia's might and power. Of course, beyond slaughtering other tribals who fought against them, or taking other villages land who didn't comply with them, Tritenia rarely

acts in aggression. It's neighbors however...not as much. In fact, one of its neighbors (though their ghastly behavior hardly qualifies them as even a neighbor) Vionkahno, often engages in acts of terrorism and military strikes against the large kingdom.

It is with these acts that Tritenia eventually created an organized central military. That's not to say that they did not have a substantial military; heavens no. Their military may have been easily one of the best around at that time; but it lacked organization as their military at the time was mainly any military units the vassals and knights had. Without a structured military regiment for a country so large, it led to some...problems. Yes...Tritenia lost many battles due to structure and organization problems.

With this, Tritenia eventually led to creating its own military structure, which was originally formed by the very first Master Knight, hoping that having the troops properly disciplined, outfitted, and with clear given instructions would be able to perform much better than a bunch of mindless apes running into a battle with no clear instruction or knowledge of what to expect.

And as logic would dictate, the more disciplined army clearly produced much more sufficient results than what it was doing earlier. Thus, Tritenia standardized its military.

MILITARY STRUCTURE:

Tritenia's central military is a large scale fighting force that serves under the crown. This military unlike any military owned by knights or vassals, follows a distinct code of regulations and organization. In terms of numbers, the central military generally keep up to fifty to two hundred thousand men at a time.

Anyone who lives in Tritenia can apply for service for a set period of time, which is usually around 4-10 years. After this time, they must either reapply for service or leave. Only those who are peasants may apply, whereas serfs cannot. Upon when applications are accepted, the peasant is sent to a four month initial training to hone their skills, and see where they stand. At the very end of it, depending on how the peasant handled during the basic training will determine where he is placed.

The central military in most cases are sent to areas where additional soldiers are needed. While the central military follows all orders from Master Knight, and his chain of command, vassals of the crown themselves can request additional soldiers from the central military, and reacquisition them at any time. In a sense, the Central military allows vassals to buffer their lands and increase their garrisons at anytime if they are in danger or states of emergency, though leaders of the units can deny the orders should they choose to. This is one of the few cases where a man with no royal or noble standing can refuse an order from nobility or royalty.

The Central Military is very large, and that means it is also expensive. The central military is directly funded by the people and vassals themselves through taxes. The military tax is

something that is paid by everyone, and that money is used to pay the soldiers and their leaders, and fund their equipment. Without it, the central military would cease to exist. It's important to note that any fees that you see here are the averages, and times of inflated numbers or war can change the fees they paid easily.

Most soldiers live on site to the fort or base that they have been assigned. Others who manage to have the income and gold (as well as being in a fort or other military building that is in a town) do have the option of living at a home and then reporting to the fortress; however this option is only available until after four years of service...and with permission from a Captain.

Tritenia has seven military branches: Foot soldiers, Calvary, Engineers, Naval, and Mage Knights. While some of these branches perform similar tasks that another would do, most of them focus on specific jobs and duties. We are going to look into each branch separately.

FOOT SOLDIERS:

Foot Soldiers are the bread and butter of Tritenia's military. They are the most vast and wide of all of Tritenia's militaristic power. Their training is not as sufficient or as brutal as anyone attempting to become a Knight, but still enough to mold someone into a sufficient killing machine.

For one to become a foot soldier, they simply need to go to their local barracks and register. The recipient before registering must have been at least the age of sixteen in order to train as a foot soldier. Tritenia of course has no way to prove someone's age is true or not, so most of them generally go on assumptions or looks to ensure the person's claim is vindicated. If someone appears to be younger than the people at the barracks believe is sixteen, then the person is not qualified to enter. If they appear older, they can register. Of course, a parent or guardian who can say that the child is of age is also accepted.

The foot soldiers used to be a strict male only. In fact, all branches of the Tritenian army used to be only males. However, during the invasion of Azal, the decision was immediately changed. Without admitting women and girls into the army, Tritenia would have been overrun by Azal within years. Of course, adding women as part of the army did not change the outcome of the battles, but bolstering their ranks with new recruits did provide Tritenia a means to hold them back longer. Fortune favored our little setting that the mythical Darian Folcre came and slew Azal. Ever since that war though, women and girls have been allowed to serve on the frontlines among the men and the boys.

Once someone has registered, and is enlisted within the army, the individual is granted two fortnights to prepare themselves for the inevitable harsh training. Everyone experiences it; and everyone knows about it...so anyone who signed the document blindly is a fool. If at this time the individual has not shown up to the assigned barracks; unless he has letters and documents proving that he was at the time unable to arrive, the person has broken the law. Soldiers will be sent to collect the man, and ensure he carries out the athas that he has sworn himself to. This system of collecting deserters is not up to date yet, so some people

still manage to evade the system...but Tritenia is happy to report that the numbers of people deserting is less and less; and the number of people who have managed to escape desertion is becoming fewer and fewer.

The training roughly consists of a series of physical training and exercises to ensure competency in battle. If the individual cannot perform this competency, they are discharged from the barracks, and may not reapply for half a year. Of course, those who possess skills that are not necessarily combat related, but useful skills none the less may be brought into the army to serve on those sides...such as leaches, smiths, etc.

Once an individual has completed the training, the brass then issues the man's assigned position. The soldier is sent to the location of where he was assigned, and from there performs the tasks he is assigned from the brass at that location. The graduated of course are granted a week reprieve to recuperate from the intense physical training that they were given much earlier in the few months, but they must depart for the fortress they were assigned after that week. Any delay may result in immediate repercussions, short of immediate discharge from military service. Tritenian soldiers serve for a six year term, and are generally paid a salary of twelve gold pieces a week. Soldiers who are of higher rank earn more, but more will be divulged into that when we move into the rankings and salaries section.

From here, the soldier begins his service to the King, Queen, King/Queen, etc.

Although this branch is by far the largest, it is probably the lowest ranked among the whole Tritenian military. Most of the higher ranked branches have complete authority in whatever the Foot soldiers do. They handle no important tasks other than peace-keeping, charging in the front to keep monsters away from more important soldiers, keeping areas secure, and assisting in small operations. They are never informed of any secrets within the kingdom, and may be asked to protect or guard things of which they have no knowledge of, yet are still tasked of keeping it as secure as possible.

FOOT SOLDIER EQUIPMENT:

Most of the foot soldiers carry the standard Tritenian equipment. The standard Tritenian equipment from most basic foot soldiers is as follows.

The standard private for Tritenian soldiers wears a chain shirt, light pauldrons and cowters to allow for ease of movement. They wear a simple breastplate, which they place over the chain shirt they are given. Vambraces, gauntlets, and greaves are given to the private, which they place over their arm, along with a simple helmet to protect their head from arrows. As part of Tritenian standard, the soldier also wears a chain skirt on their waist, which they use to help deflect blows that might be aimed for their lower torso; though this skirt obviously does not deflect much. The front part of the skirt is torn slightly to prevent it from inhibiting any form of movement. This skirt is not the most protective part of the armor, and is merely symbolic of the nation of Tritenia.

The armor and its appearance have slight variations when it comes to dealing with men and female soldiers. The female armor is made to help adjust for the waist, chest, and other identifiable parts of the female anatomy. However, armor to help conform to females is very lacking; as the implementation of women to join the army is very recent. Often in times of great peril, women may have to wear armor meant for the male figure, which will work; but grant the individual obvious discomfort.

Weapons issued to soldiers are based usually entirely on skill. When they are doing their basic training, officers are on site that assesses the skills of the individuals as they do their training. A soldier who seems to be far more proficient in archery has a high chance to be part of the archery line. Others who have more proficiency bashing people in with heavier weapons may be issued heavy axes, halberds, or other weapons clearly meant to be wielded by someone of a better physique. Soldiers who show great finesse with weapons may be issued blades or even bastard swords. In other words, soldiers are usually assigned the weapons that they fare the most in; though in times of severe shortages of men, soldiers might forcibly train other recruits into fields that they are not the best in. Duty calls I'm afraid. Tritenia weapons for foot soldiers usually involve using spears and lances; with swords being the secondary option.

The equipment listed above, as well as the armor is standard to all Tritenian privates. As one moves through the ranks or gathers accolades from the result of great fighting prowess, the soldiers can appeal for different armor than they were originally assigned. The higher ranked one is, the more that one has a chance to garner such equipment. For example, Lieutenants, captains, majors, etc etc, may be outfitted with heavier armor, and something much more identifiable from the distance. Or perhaps a soldier who shows great prowess in battle may be given a full plate to elongate his usefulness in battle. Or a foot soldier who shows more fighting ability with merely just wearing light armor may be given that. In addition to different armor variations, other soldiers might request weapons that are modified to look much different than the standard ones, or made of higher quality metals.

FOOT SOLDIER RANKINGS:

The Foot soldiers have a hierarchy like all military units do. This section will in brief discuss each of the rankings.

Recruit: The lowest form of soldier ranking; and technically not even an official ranking in the Tritenian army. A Recruit it merely someone currently enduring the physically straining physical training that all men and women who apply endure. Recruits are paid no gold for their training, and are in a constant state of training.

Recruit applies to all rankings and branches of the military who are training.

Private: A private is a man or woman who has been formally accepted into the military. They are the lowest of the low, expected only to take orders, and follow them. Privates are issued the most widely available armor, and are assigned weapons that they appear to be the most proficient with. Most privates are headed by a single or group of lieutenants, who take orders from a captain. The starting salary for privates starts at fifteen silver coins a week,

and can increase up to a maximum of twenty-five. Increasing pay and wages requires the consent of all the lieutenants, as well as the captain those lieutenants are under.

Lieutenant: The next expected rank to get. Lieutenants are placed under Captains to help relay orders to groups of privates. Lieutenants have some say when it comes to battle plans, but they are limited in what they can suggest. Lieutenants still use the same standard equipment that most privates used, with some notable exceptions. The pay for a lieutenant starts at twenty-five silver coins, and can increase up to a maximum of forty. The requirement to become a lieutenant requires one year of service, and consent from the Captain who leads the individual's team.

Captain: Captain is the next rank up that one in the Tritenian foot soldiers would be able to achieve. Captains generally have command over large teams of soldiers, which are under the control of lieutenants to help ensure his orders are safely delivered and received by his troops. Captains possess much authority, so much so that they might be able to run the defense of an entire village if given the option to. Captains are limited to standard equipment like everyone else, but have a lot more options on what they can take. A Captain can use any weapon he/she wants, and can wear any armor that they want. Captains start out at fifty silver pieces a week, and can increase up to silver pieces. Most generally achieve the next highest rank long before they hit that threshold. Becoming a Captain in Tritenia requires five years of service, approval from the Colonel; or Colonels of the region, and has been able to prove competency in a battle at least three times in times of war. In times of peace, Captains are chosen based solely on competency and services performed.

Colonel: A Colonel is one of the next highest ranks in all of Tritenia. Colonels have much control over most military affairs, and are generally in place over cities to help maintain military affairs. Most Colonels generally only answer to the Knights or higher rankings of nobility. Colonels don't generally go into battle, but rather plan attacks, and order troop positions. The Colonels are not to be underestimated, as most of them have prolific military careers; and those who have seen battles are generally much more frightening. Colonels have access to their choice of armor and weapons, and can request for custom made weapons. Colonels start off earning one hundred gold silver a week, and can earn up to two hundred.

This is the highest rank anyone in the Foot soldiers can earn.

CAVALRY:

No kingdom is complete without a group/or groups of people who know the arts of facing down enemies on their trusty steed. Tritenia has a pretty sizable cavalry force to suffice for this; and it is what they are well known for.

To enlist as a cavalry member, one must perform the same registration procedure as the foot soldiers. Obviously, the peasant or commoner will enlist himself as a cavalry, but the cavalry is much stricter when it comes to who they take. For the individual to become a

cavalry member, the commoner must not only ensure proficiency with weapons, endure the brutal training, and competency when it comes to taking orders, they must also demonstrate the ability to successfully rear, mount, and ride animals. This includes ensuring the animal charges when commanded, being able to turn the animal suddenly when needed, being able to use a weapon adeptly when mounted, and other aspects of this nature. Those who are unable to perform these tasks are disqualified from entry. Those who are unable to perform the tasks on the animal, but are still capable warriors in their own regard are given the option to transfer as a foot soldier. Soldiers can always reapply for something new after they have served out their term. Those who deny this must wait a month before they can reapply for the position again. Those who can perform the tasks are admitted to the cavalry.

Once again, becoming a cavalry member requires the person to be at least age sixteen or higher. As mentioned again, there is no way to track for accuracy of this, so it requires one to judge based on appearance. In most cases, they do usually accept everyone who applies, but there are unfortunate cases of denial.

Cavalry members other than the differences mentioned above are no different than the foot soldier branch.

CAVALRY EQUIPMENT:

Cavalry in Tritenia use the same equipment as the foot soldiers, though the cavalry tend to where lighter or heavier armor; depending on issue and preference. In addition, the obvious piece of equipment that is noticeable is the war trained animal.

Cavalry in Tritenia can use any weapon that the foot soldiers have access to, but most of them tend to use longer ranged weapons. Tritenia's cavalry were actually well known from the use of spear charges from their steeds.

Other than this, there are very little differences between the issues of weapons and armor between the Foot soldiers and the Cavalry.

CAVALRY RANKS:

The Cavalry uses the same ranking and pay system of that of the Foot soldiers, though the salary is notably higher than that of foot soldiers.

ENGINEERS:

The engineers are not necessarily a combat orientated section of the army. Rather, they are in charge of maintaining and repairing the necessary engines of destruction Tritenia uses to siege other lands. Engineers have very little engagements in terms of combat, and are in most cases staged in the back.

Engineers when it comes to admittance to the military have much stricter criteria when it comes to opting into the guild. In addition to the usual endurance in the basic training, one has to have proper schooling in order to become part of the guild.

When one wishes to apply for the engineers, he is first graded on his comprehension in terms of mathematics, sciences, wood and steel workings. If the levels of comprehension are in line; or above acceptable terms, he/she is admitted to the preliminary training. This training is marginally less severe than the other branches, but still brutal enough that should combat with swords and not engines result, they should hold their ground still.

The training however does not stop there; in fact it continues on. After one has passed the preliminary training, they are then sent to a military school for a full year. This school is a military funded locale, which is used to further develop concepts that the engineers should know when going in, in order so that they can apply what they know out in the field. The schooling lasts one year, in which the grades the candidates receive ultimately determine the rank of the individual upon start up. If the grades plummet, they are dismissed from the academy, and must reapply when the military training season begins again; and must endure the brutal physical training all over again. Despite this encouragement to keep people from slacking, many students are still dismissed, and forced to try all over again.

The most common task the engineers do is the building, maintaining, utilizing, and repairing siege equipment and engines of war used to dismantle an enemy's walls or keep's defenses, and further improve the already grand war designs that Tritenia has. In times of peace, engineers simply perform research on how to improve upon their designs. In times of war, they are in the back of the offensive or defensive lines, ensuring that the equipment maintained, and delivering the righteous fury that it is intended to. In most cases, the engineers of Tritenia will never see combat and all of its horrors. And...who would want to? If you saw how brutal one of your said weapons of war was on the population, would you ever want to continue building any? If so, you must have a perverted mind to even think that...that or you have accepted that losses are inevitable and will happen in a conflict.

The Engineers are the one division in Tritenia that does not accept everyone. The engineers every recruiting season will only accept oh so many candidates, and will generally only take the ones with the highest scores on their tests. Those who fail are recommended to other branches of the military so that their ventures are not wasted. Those who do not take that as a deal after that must reapply during the next recruitment season. In other words, you need to be both smart and strong to make it into this section of the army.

For many people, that is very difficult odds.

There are many cases in which some engineers circumvent the whole schooling all together. Most of these cases are people outside of the army who demonstrated the fact they are capable of performing the assigned duties. Most of these are simply brilliant minds who make modifications to siege engines, or even create their own siege engines using their own smarts acquired on their own. If people such as these apply for the engineers, are able to pass the preliminary training, and have proof of what they did, they are sometimes inducted in almost immediately.

Once someone completes the schooling, and are even chosen to become an engineer,

ENGINEER EQUIPMENT:

Engineers have a wide range of equipment that they can use. Most of it isn't worth going into grand details with. Those equipment falls within the range of the tools they use to repair and construct their siege equipment.

Engineers for their field equipment are issued a light armor, usually consisting of a chain linked shirt, as well as a simple breastplate. The weapons they are issued in battle are generally weapons that can be mass produced easily, and are still lethal. Engineers in battle have very little choice in the weapons that they are issued; for the simple fact that more lethal weapons should be issued to soldiers who utilize them more frequently.

The biggest (and well most obvious change of equipment) is the fact that the engineers are the only ones allowed to handle and move the engines of destruction Tritenia uses to make their attacks and defenses of and/or on cities goes smoothly. In addition, they are issued tools based on availability to help them ensure the weapons do not break down in battle.

ENGINEER RANKS:

The Engineers of Tritenia do have their own ranking system they use in the Tritenian army. This ranking system is very small and very crude, but it helps dictate who is in charge, and who performs the work.

Graduate: Graduates are the lowest ranking of the three tiers of engineers that one can earn in this corps. Those who pass the tests in the school, as well as pass the preliminary training are given this rank upon completion of their schoolwork. Graduates retain this position for roughly six years before they are allowed to apply for the next achievable rank. Graduates main duties involve moving equipment, setting equipment in position, managing the siege equipment in the middle of combat, repairing and/or replacing siege equipment in the middle of battle. Graduates are generally paid a salary of eighty silver coins a week.

Head Engineer: The head Engineer is like the Captain of the Engineers. He performs the same duties as the graduate, but he/she has more control of what equipment is utilized. Other head engineers utilize what technological expertise they know to create new weapons, or improve upon old designs. They also control any of the graduates, and are able to issue them orders. Head Engineers are paid a one hundred silver coin salary a week. A Head Engineer cannot earn the rank of Taccola until after the have held their position for over ten years.

Taccola: The highest achievable rank in the Engineer division. The Taccola rank is owned by a very few selection of Engineers, usually only one per region. Taccolas have complete control over all equipment and weapons used in combat. Taccola never generally go into any form of combat or are even close to it. Most of their work is usually the work a tax collector does, as they track all equipment being used, and how much any losses incurred totaled up to are. They also are the ones who issue weapons to fronts and positions based on both availability and need. Most people who reach this rank generally start projects to improve on weapon and siege engine designs, usually having a team of Head Engineers to

assist them. Taccola are paid a salary of one hundred and fifty silver a week, and can generally make up to three hundred depending on their fame and all they managed to accomplish in they're careers.

NAVAL:

Tritenia for the longest time was one of the few kingdoms of this world which did not have; or at the time a need for a navy. However, after Tritenia became a superpower (as well as draw the ire from all of its nearby neighbors) the reason to make a well-established navy became far more prudent. It was the oldest known Master Knight which wrote in the order for its creation, which then resulted in the one of the most powerful navy's in the whole wide world. I speak that strictly from the sense that the other neighboring nations either have no need for a navy, or are landlocked nations.

Applying for Tritenia's navy is a very similar procedure to applying for any other regiments. Like with the cavalry however, there is an additional prerequisite in addition to the training. When you apply for the Tritenian navy, you must be able to demonstrate competency when it comes to dealing with all aspects of dealing with a ship. Physically, you must also be able to handle being on a ship. Everyone knows what sea sickness is...and the Tritenian navy can't have people on board who are sickened often because of this. Those who get this sea sickness, but can shake it off; and/or still able to perform their assigned tasks when doing so are accepted and assigned to ships. Those who aren't, but appear to be able to function in other branches are recommended for those branches, and allowed to enter in. Those who can't do either of the above are thrown out.

In addition, there are only a few barracks which have the navy option. Those who wish to join the Navy must apply at a barracks where the option is available. Most of these places are generally coastal cities.

Once someone completes their preliminary training, they are then assigned to a boat or ship that is currently looking for sailors, or soldiers. Tritenia has done a lot of sea trading with other neighboring continents, so they generally are looking for sailors.

NAVAL EQUIPMENT:

Most of the Navy Equipment is the same of that of the foot soldiers, though heavier armor and heavy weapons are generally not used. Obviously, this is because if a man falls in with this armor, he is doomed to drown. At least with lighter armor, one has a chance to pull himself to the surface.

The obvious changes in equipment which differ greatly from that of other branches is the fact that the sailors are piloting ships. Yes...quite a difference there. Most of Tritenia's war vessels are what you would expect a medieval nation to have...though Tritenia's vessels are far more reliable and a lot more technologically advanced than most medieval ships. Many of the ships already have cannons mounted onto, which they use to drive back invaders, or to intimidate them into subjection. But other than that, there is very little varying differences between the two.

NAVAL RANKS:

The Navy of Tritenia uses the same ranking system of that of the Foot soldiers, though the names are different:

- Seaman
- Sergeant
- Captain
- Admiral

MAGE KNIGHTS:

Magic...that is where things begin to get unusual.

Magic is one of the things that Tritenia excels at than its other nations. This acceleration is why Tritenia receives so much ire...because it's the reason why Tritenia has advanced so far ahead of the other nations; and why it has been able to defeat others in times of war. While not everyone in Tritenia is able to use magic, there are still enough of them that a standardized military unit is made from them. It's more of what you would compare to a more specialized section of the military, as the Mage Knight's duties work behind the scenes as actively as they are on the front lines.

Most soldiers when planning operations generally have the placement of Mage Knights in the back. Because their magic can sometimes be more reliable than siege equipment, their magics are employed in a frontal battle as intermediate defenses in the line. Other times, they are placed on the front lines, directly behind soldiers, utilizing magic to make the first wave of soldiers push as far ahead as they can, and then teaching the Mage Knights to know how to flee immediately if the battle even then takes a turn for the worst. Other times, they employ their magic's from distances, destroying enemies from large distances. In a way, they are trained to be mobile artillery, or at least that is how they are taught to utilize magic.

Application for the Mage Knights is one of the more difficult branches to apply to. Like the engineers, the individual has to display both mental and physical fortitude in order to be considered. Common folk who can't read or write; and/or unable to perform any forms of mathematical talent are generally disqualified for this position; the only exception being if the sorcerer born into the world requires not staff, wand, tome, or rod to unleash his evocations. Those who can afford to learn to read and write have a much better chance of being accepted; but even then must be able to display sufficient physical prowess as well. Because of this, becoming a Mage Knight is very difficult, but is generally one of the higher paying positions in the military.

Once the individual's application has been accepted, the individual is taken into the barracks, where he endures the same physical training as any soldier for any branch. After this however (like the Engineers) the man/woman is taken into a standardized military

school, which is run by the Arcane Council (A guild of magicians in the land of Tritenia...such organizations were not mentioned earlier due to the fact it did not concern yourself at the immediate times; and that our hero and villain was not part of this branch of military). These wizards train the students who arrive here in the arts of specific magic, deviating only from the course material when they believe they have a better approach to it.

In order to remain considered for the Mage Knights, the individual must retain average marks throughout all of a year of teaching. It is true then when it comes to the magic arts that a single year will not teach them everything; but it is not enough to allow them to lob balls of flames at approaching waves; the kind of fire balls which explode upon impact. It also may teach them to employ the use of magic's to defend their colleagues from the sword, and as well as using other methods to fell foes. I know of how the magic works in this world...but we shall save that bit of knowledge for another time.

Mage Knights who complete the schooling, and maintain average marks are then inducted into the army.

The Mage Knights of Tritenia is sometime seen as the first venture any rising wizard or sorcerer would want to do. Mage Knights serve shorter terms of service than other sections of the military, and individuals who become part of the Mage knights gain access to the same study materials that one who pay high tuition rates for formal magical education would have. The only difference is that those in the Mage Knights are likely to be sent off into battle, and are expected to perform the same competency. And Mage Knights are called in often in battles, and sometimes to perform other services to Tritenia that isn't always directly related to a military affair. If one can handle that stress; and the likelihood of perishing in doing so, then one would be ahead of the game with spending very few, if any amount of money.

A Wizard with a formal education; and with proof of it can bypass the year of schooling, and must merely endure the physical part should this man or woman wish to join the Mage Knights after their schooling. Sadly, most do not. Most of those schooled wizards prefer to leave the fighting to the more younger and zealous of them.

MAGE KNIGHTS EQUIPMENT:

The equipment of Mage Knights unlike the Foot soldiers is completely different. Mage Knights when they are in battle are given only a select amount of weapons to work with. These weapons are generally only for self-defense, but some Mage Knights have shown exceptional prowess with using them. No armor is issued for the Mage Knights, as the bulky movements armor inhibits magic. Some wizards do request armor, but these are mages that clearly have been able to master moving and performing their ritualistic requirements to unleash their spells against an individual.

Most of the other equipment that is used by the Mage Knights are generally their own. When one goes to the school to learn magic specifically for war, they are taught how to

inscribe their own magic into Tome's, staves, etc. They are given study materials such as other tomes and staves to work with, but they generally have to use the equipment that they make in battle. Other more expensive magic items, or items that are difficult to produce, are not given to the mages, unless they have achieved a particularly high rank.

MAGE KNIGHTS RANKS:

The Mage Knights have a ranking system that is similar to the Foot soldiers. However, unlike the foot soldiers, the Mage knights Rank is not only based on quality of service, but their proficiency with their magic's and abilities. When a Mage Knight is given the ability to promote, they are then given a series of tests by mages of higher rank, who judge the individual's ability to channel and unleash their powers. If successful, they are given their promotion. If not, they must wait for a whole year before they can take it again.

Due to the fact magic is another nature all together to be discussing, we will not be discussing the aspects of the test to rank up.

What is listed below is the following known ranks for the Mage Knights section of the Tritenian military:

Acolyte: Acolytes are the first entry anyone who joins the Mage Knights can reach. Acolytes have access to basic magical study equipment and limited access to most libraries that contain magical Tomes. Acolytes are usual in field of battle, supporting their allies with spells that either shield them, or cause destruction on the enemy's side. Acolytes are paid a salary of forty-five silver coins a week, and can make up to sixty.

Adept: The next rank that one can hope to achieve in the Mage Knight's section of the Tritenian military. Adepts gain access to a bit more study equipment that acolytes normally don't have access to freely. In addition, Adepts are sometimes issued magical items or objects in battles to aid them. Adepts do the same duties in combat as acolytes, but they also work with replacing magical items which have been expended in battle; and that are even replicable. Adepts are generally paid a salary of seventy silver a week, and can upwards of ninety as a max. Adepts generally control a squad of Acolytes that can range from up to thirty to fifty. Becoming an Adept requires up to four years of service, and the consent from at least one master; and five adepts.

Master: Masters in the Tritenian army are one of the next highest achievable rank in Tritenia army. Masters have unlimited access to the library and study equipment to help create magical trinkets and objects. They have unlimited access many different parts of Tritenia that others are not able to view. Masters at this point are not usually seen in battle, unless Tritenia has need of them. Masters perform the same duties as Adepts, but also usually begin their research, since they now possess the means to research as they see fit. Masters are generally entrusted with several adepts, and their acolytes that they command as well, and are there to provide input to other members of other military branches for input, information, and advice. Master's are paid a salary of a hundred silver a week. Becoming a

Master requires six years of service as an Adept, possess powerful magical talent, and requires the consensus of the Archmage, several other Masters, and a prolific military record. There are only a limited number of spots for those who are of Master rank.

Head mage: Highest rank one can achieve in the Mage Knights. Duties include all of that of Adepts and Masters, and have complete command of all known units within the Mage Knights all together. There is generally only one head mage per region, and are usually employed for life. Head mages generally listen in on important affairs on all that is going on in Tritenia at the time. Head mages are paid generally two hundred silver coins a week, and can make as much as four hundred. Requires over fifteen years of service.

See the next installment for Lesson 2: Races of the land

GLOSSARY

Agauw: To be horrified.

Aini: Goddess of Trees, Springs, animals, and Fey. Creator of the Elves.

Aladonia: The continent in which Tritenia exists on. Exceptionally large, home to six other nations; and much contested and uncontested lands.

Aldio: Common men or serfs.

Anima magic: Magic in its purest state, neither tainted by Light or Dark Magic. Has access to all forms of magic, such as healing, fire, ice, etc; but is very weak in combating light or dark magic.

Aonumain: The fourth day in a week, and the third business day in a week.

Aranriders: Half man, half spider creature. Evil creatures that tend to either have the upper torso of a human and spider body, or a human body with spider like qualities. Not to be confused with spiderlings.

Arcanist: A powerful mage that can bend, write, and break the laws of magic. The original Arcanists were the ones who created the first spells. Arcanists are very rare, as it requires one to have lineage to the Wandering Mages, and/or have a magical bloodline above 75%.

Asnom's Scale of Magical Leagues: A scale created by a wizard named Asnom that places magical objects and items within a general scale that allows one to gauge the overall power to a magical item or spell. The scale ranges from Tier 1 to Tier 10.

Assart: Assimilate land under control; deforesting land to be used for farming.

Assize: A meeting, generally of royal and of high ranking members of society.

Athas: An oath or vow for an organization.

Atheling: A prince or royal.

Azal: A powerful demon whose demonic army nearly forced the kingdom into subjection. Believed to have been slain by the patriarch Darian Flocre.

Blood Mage: A mage whose power doesn't come from interacting with magical objects, but who has a direct magical lineage, and gains his/her power from that. In most cases, a blood mage is usually confined to excel at a certain element or type of magic, but lag behind in others.

Blashy: Thin or weak beer.

Blue Flamed War: The Age in which Azal laid siege to Tritenia.

Bellibone: A woman excelling in beauty and goodness.

Brotban: Money set aside for bread; and other easy to obtain food.

Byrban: Money set aside for ale and beer.

Crug: Food.

Cult la Jericho: The name of Azal's cult.

Daggle Tail: An Untidy woman.

Dark Magic: Magic infused with demonic essence or dark essence.

Darian Flocre: Legendary demigod warrior chosen by the Gods to defend humanity. Was able to supposedly slay Azal. Disappeared from known history sometime after he succeeded.

The Dark World: A dimension created by demons, devils, and Evil Gods. Said where evil beings reside.

Demon: One of the denizens of the Dark World that serve the Dark Gods will to destroy all that is good.

Demonic Magic: Magic employed by the Demons and Evil Gods. Very few mortals come into contact with it.

Demesne: A noble house

Divine Magic: Magic used by the Gods, and all beings of divine origin. Very few mortals come into contact with it.

Dverger: God of forges, mountains, craftsmanship, and gold. Creator of the Dwarves.

Dwarf: Short, burly humanoids whom usually reside underground.

Edor: Homestead, Home, Farmstead.

Elf: An near immortal humanoid whom live long life spans. Commonly attributed to fey like creatures. Usually reside in glamorous cities deep inside forests.

Esruweh: God of all creation.

Etchings: A popular board game in which the objective requires a player to advance pieces up into opponent's territory, remove other pieces that form a line on the opponent's side, and then attempt to move three pieces behind the wall. All of this while blockading the opponent from doing the same. Called Etchings because most commoners make their own makeshift boards; all of which have markings on them from the cutting.

Everlasting Spire: A mystical tower surrounded in mist where souls pass to await their judgment.

Exegesis: Critical reading or interpretation of a scripture.

Eyndill: Jealously.

Faia: The third month of the year after the Spring Interlude.

Fantail: The world.

Fell Tomes: A series of six magical Tomes whose dark magic was potent enough to sustain a demon summoned into this world indefinitely.

Furless One: A nyanita who has no cat like fur on their body, usually from a genetic defect, or being a half breed. Usually shunned and rejected in nyanita communities.

Gnoll: A hyena humanoid like creature who have less honor than orcs; as they possess skills that orcs do not, but prefer not to use them. Possess tribal like mentality and most commonly sighted in savannas and deserts.

Goblin: Chaotic creatures who like to cause untold havoc.

God's Acre: Common slang for a graveyard or church ground.

Grey Magic: Mysterious magic that is neither light nor dark, but is not considered anima magic due to having some form of godly essence. Granted to those who serve deities that are not inherently evil, but would not be considered benevolent either.

Halfling: A race of generally petite people who usually live in grassy fields and countryside's.

Heanling: A humble or base person.

High Mages: Mages who are capable of casting all forms of magic, without the need for spellbooks, rods, tomes, etc. High mages are protégés in all fields of magic. High Mages differ from Arcanists as Arcanists can create spells, while High mages like other magic users cannot. Very rare.

Hydro: A strange creature that has a water like body. It appears to be a water like visage of a spherical creature with a cute face and long beady eyes, but it's a true form is a large heart like apparatus that swirls around the water body. It uses magical manipulated water which is as strong as rock to crush down on victims and then choke them out.

Kintar: An single edged finessable sword of elvish origins. Has no crossguard. Unlike other similar blades, is effective against armor.

Lastages: Taxes on cargo through tolls.

Leach: A medic sent to the field to recover bodies or injured; nurses used for military purposes.

Ley Line: Intangible and unseeable lines of energy within people that hold the individual's manna.

Light magic: Magic given to one by deities. Used mainly to heal and defend. Very few attacking capabilities.

Lughlen: An ancient White Magic tome written by the Reality Bender; a servant of a being equal to or greater than the deities.

Mage: An individual whom is capable of using magic.

Magic: A energy source that can manipulate reality; believed to have been leftover powers from deities, divine beings, demonic beings, demons that had been slain on the world that humans learned to siphon.

Manna: Energy flowing around an individual coming from the spirit. The more manna within someone, the more magic they can utilize. The denser the concentration, the more powerful the magic one uses is.

Manna Mages: Mages who require spellbooks, Tomes, wands, etc to use their powers. Most common form of mages. Manna mages usually develop latent magical power when they interact with sources of magic.

Myrida: A land north of Tritenia which sieged Tritenia for the war god Goais, and to procure food as a result of a famine destroying their crops. Was assimilated into the Kingdom after the war.

Neis: Older Tritenian dialect, which when translated means “Charge.”

North Sea Wall: A land North of the Westernfold, where the main road follows a large cliff that leads into the ocean. Where Seaside is based in.

Nyanita: Catfolk like race whose origins lie in Myrida.

Oblivion: A place of eternal torment created by Esruweh, God of all creation. to torture evil beings after they die.

Orc: A race of normally evil green skinned humanoids who enjoy terror and destruction. A select few deviate from this path.

Privy: Toilet.

Purelands: A land of great soil where most of the farming for the Tritenian kingdom takes place.

Putrid forest: A decayed forest which had been placed under an evil curse. Undead and ghosts wander the forest in search of prey.

Reality Bender: An unknown mage who wrote the Lughglen.

Rezoilian: An area in Tritenia that is generally colder, and is much more urban than other regions.

Rine sword: A Myridian sword forged with the blade on the other side, specifically meant to be used in the off-hand. Rarely used; considered an unconventional weapon.

Road of Light: A heavenly road that individuals are believed to wander after they die in order to journey to the afterlife. Sometimes evil beings are allowed to wander to try and avoid their fate in Oblivion.

Stallage: A fee one pays in order to have a stand at a celebration, or private gathering established.

Shigurian: The third day in a week, and the second business day in a week.

Spring Interlude: A week that occupies the Tritenian calendar that occurs after the second month, but before the third month. It counts as a separate month on the calendar.

Straight Fingered: Honest.

Terror Throat: An airborne bacterial infection which usually affects people in the Purelands and the Westernfold. Symptoms include sore throat, discharge from inside the throat, fever, vomiting, and

inflammation in the throat. Requires medication, or certain herbs from the Purelands to fight it off. Disease can last up to ten to fifteen days; and is sometimes fatal.

Tetsuin: The fifth day in a week, and the fourth business day in a week.

Tolkeen: The second day in a week, and the first business day of a week.

Tritenia: Largest Kingdom in Aladonia.

UbraRia: A race of humanoids whose power, speed, and strength nearly ended the human race in Tritenia. Believed to be extinct.

Unwritten Age: The age of when writing of events and dealings were so obscure, or used forms of writing no longer use, that none can accurately state of what may or may not have happened. Any point on the calendar past year 1 of the Written Age is considered part of the Unwritten Age as documentation is very minuscule past this point.

Vionkahno: A land West of Tritenia. Tritenia's oldest enemy.

Westernfold: A land which is surrounded by a natural barrier of mountains. Where Golidoz and Aldin are stationed at.

Wizard: The term for any mage who has studied magic for at least ten years.

Written Age: The era when documentation of history, notes, documentation, was done often enough to allow historians to reconstruct accurate dealings and accounts in Aladonian history; and used in conjunction with calenders (example...Aanai 22nd, Year 2321 of the Written Age).