

The Heroes of Broadford

An Endhaven Novella

Draft #1

by Douglas Milewski

GNU Freedoc License

March 29, 2008

Preface

All empires fall. The Griffon Empire once dominated Cydea. Her rugged and able emperors kept a diverse and dangerous land united under their rule. They championed civilization, keeping the Wild at bay. They ruled under the Charystan gods, and the Charystan gods favored them.

In time, there emerged among the people new philosophies. Some followed the Axiomite way of law, order, and station. Others turned to the Transgressor philosophy of innovation, independence, and achievement. In time, these philosophies clashed with each other, producing a series of wars called the Wars of Law and Chaos. These wars made enemies of allies, and allies of enemies.

The Griffon Imperial Court supported the Axiomite cause, as they sought to tame the land that they ruled. Their subjects, children of the Wild, embraced the Transgressor cause. This difference led to civil clashes, and clashes led to civil war.

When the Captain of the Imperial Guard executed the Emperor and sat himself on the Griffon Throne, the empire died. Every general and governor now fought for themselves. Among those was Ecklus, an archmage of significant power. Ecklus had served the imperial throne for many years and had embezzled considerable wealth. He put that wealth to use by hiring a large goblin and hobgoblin army, and using them to conquer the province of Maig Bab.

"Emperor Ecklus" lead his armies in a conquest of his neighbors. By all rights, he should have conquered all of Cydea and sat upon the Griffon Throne. Instead, his own ego lead to his downfall. Ecklus declared himself a god and demanded that all his people and all his armies worship him as a god. He threw down the Charystan idols and the people despaired. The people rose against him.

In the midst of battle, a hobgoblin war-captain called "Bonegrinder" saw the madness in his Emperor's eyes. In desperation, Bonegrinder held his sword up to the sky, begging all god that could hear that the goblins needed help. If they were to be slaves, let them be slaves to a true god. In that moment, Samael first spoke to Bonegrinder. He bade Bonegrinder to kill Ecklus, and so he did. That day, the Prophet Bonegrinder declared the Feral Nation, and the goblins swore their fealty to their new god.

The other warlords expected the Feral Nation to collapse upon itself in ruinous civil war. They each

planned to move in when the pieces were sufficiently weak. To their dismay, the Feral Nation did not weaken. The Feral Nation grew. Bonegrinder lead the fanatic goblins through a series of brilliant and decisive victories against his enemies. He put down all rebellion. He seized surrounding provinces. He built a war machine unlike any ever seen upon the earth, for Samael was the god of brutal aggression and Samael demanded war.

In response to this new threat, the human provinces put aside their differences to form the Griffon League. The Griffon League placed its capital in Ferra Nea, the imperial capital, and there began to coordinate a cohesive response to the Feral Nation threat. With a unified human army, the hobgoblins were bound to lose.

The Griffon League failed. The league failed for many reasons. The result of that failure was the conquest of one third of the alliance territory and the sacking of Ferra Nea, the imperial capital.

The downfall and sack of Ferra Nea shocked what remained of the civilized world. Ferra Nea was among the most beautiful and the most well defended cities in all the world. The wealth of an empire was poured into her for five hundred years. The best, brightest, and most gifted citizens of the empire dwelt there. Ancient orders of knights and heroes defended her. By all accounts, she was impregnable. Her loss represented a level of mismanagement and infighting once considered unimaginable.

Having lost its capital, the Griffon League reorganized. They moved their capital to the ancient imperial capital of Fort Resolute. They renamed themselves the Border League, recognizing their losses. They threw out the old system of imperial nobility. Rulers would now be ranked according to their manpower: the more that you could raise, the higher your rank. To be a ruler in the Border League meant that you could hold territory. Those who could not hold territory pledged allegiance to their more powerful neighbors, or were conquered by them. Ability, not nobility, was the watchword of the day.

Reorganized and rededicated, the Border League stemmed its losses. It held the border fast, denying victories to the increasingly professional Feral Nation forces. It hired armies by promising lands to the veterans, enabling them to bring people back to the territory, strengthen their militia defenses, and pay their soldiers despite their lack of gold. Soldiers brought their families. The population of their lands swelled.

Three years ago, the Border League raised an army for their most ambitious campaign in a generation. They marched fifteen thousand men north along the old imperial highway to Ferra Nea. The Border League retook the city. In the second year of that campaign, the goblins retaliated, pushing the Border League out of Ferra Nea, splitting the Border League army, and forcing the Border League back across the border.

Most Lords believe that the Feral Nation will launch a retaliatory incursion into the Border league. The only question is where and when. Last year, the border was quiet. There were skirmishes and

raids, but no significant military engagements took place. Meanwhile, the humans work furiously to rearm for war.

Chapter 1: Individuals

The dwarves of the Great Dwarven Union viewed the Loam, agricultural dwarves, little better than the artless dwarves who knew no trade. Even the coal digging clans ranked above the Loam.

At the top of the dwarven hierarchy were the Smelters who ran the blast forges that turned iron into steel. Few knew these secrets, for they were taught only by Lord Basileus, and he only taught this to the dwarves of the Union. These were the high priests of molten metal. It is they who spoke to their god, and they who interpreted his will. Below the Smelters were the smiths, the workers of metal. Whether ferrier, tinsmith, or etcher, those who worked metal stood as the aristocracy. Below the metalworkers were the stoneworkers. These dwarves carved rock faces, raised buildings, and undermined castles. Even lower were the tradesmen, such as brewers, merchants, and mercenaries. Lower still were the diggers, the haulers, and the porters. These dwarves knew few skills, instead earning their bread through the strength of their backs. At the bottom, below all others, were the earth-workers: farmers, potters, and brick-makers.

The dwarves have many ethnicities as well. The Hadeans first claimed the Hadean mountains, explored its depths, and took service to the Lords of Earth. Their clans hold the highest posts of the Great Dwarven Union. The Randsfjorden dwarves migrated from a plane that no longer exists, and they settled all over the world. When one says "dwarf", they usually mean a Randsfjorden. Some dwarves lived a long time away from their cousins, developing their own culture. The Farsund are the wandering crafters and diggers of the dwarven world. They have no true clan and come from a mixed heritage, or some clan other than the Hadean or the Randsfjoren. Some dwarves wandered in from lands unknown, possessing little or nothing in common with the great dwarven clans. Some were highly regarded, but most were lowly regarded.

There is no lower race of dwarf more lowly regarded than the Loam. These dwarves hailed from a land so steep in the power of earth that they themselves appear as stone, such as malachite or azurite, but are not literally stone. Their native tongue is unique to them, and this tongue has no relationship to dwarven. Every custom, belief, and tenet that these dwarves believe have nothing in common with any other dwarven clan. Adding derision to alienation, these dwarves were people of the soft earth: farmers, potters, and brick-makers. They found places to settle on the Hadean mountains, taking up new lives farming and herding, and working the impure earth.

Maram was a Loam. She grew up among farmers. When she was old enough, she went to Jura City to earn money for her family. She became a hearthtender, which is the lowliest job in a house. It was she who woke first and started the fires. During the day, she removed the ashes, stoked the fires, and carried the coal. This was hard and tiring work, as dwarven halls had many fireplaces, and rarely did she get a rest. On occasion, they let her visit family, and she returned to her grandfathers farm to give them what little she had saved.

On one such visit, her grandfather called her into his presence. Her grandfather was a quiet man, like most Loam. He liked nothing better than to sit in silence and contemplate the earth below his feet. Maram sat with him, in silence, for an hour before he spoke.

"Maran," he said to her, "I have a request of you. It is a request that you need not follow. Several years ago, your cousin went to war. He has not returned. We do not know if he is among the living or the dead. Would you take a trip for us, for a foreign land, and there discover what you can? We would all like to know if Famrum is among the living or the dead. Myself, I do not know whether this task will be hard or easy. If it is easy, you will surely come home quickly. If it is not easy, then I depend on you to use that intelligence that you have so much of. I am very confident that you will do well at this task."

This offer surprised and complemented Maran. She had worked very hard for her grandfather's confidence.

The news delighted her family. Her mother and aunt were both very proud. Oerek's mother entreated Maran to do her best in finding her missing son. What they knew was this: that Oerek went to Jura City and he joined their 4th general volunteers. He wrote a letter home from a boarding house that he was staying in, and this house was on Middlepark street, near Toro plaza.

To Maran's surprise, her aunt brought out a bag full of coins. "I have saved my pennies, just for a chance to find my son. I feel that you will do better than I could. I was never good with outsiders. Here. Take this. Find my son. Bring him home."

The next day, Maran's father Heurek saddled up the bull-goats they rode to Jura City. The goats were far better in the mountains than any horse and could easily navigate the narrow and steep paths of the land. The bull-goats also grazed on anything, making them very easy to keep where good land was dear.

Heurek took a different path than she expected. They rode the long way around Jura mountain where they looked down into the "Pit", the vast and exhausted adamantine mine that made Jura City its fortune. Where the pit lie, an entire mountain once stood. For the ambitions of empires, the dwarves carved that mountain down to its very roots and beyond. What lie there now was desolate stone and a stagnant lake of poisons and scum.

"That is our shame," said Heurek, "That is our great failure. When you think of right and wrong, remember this place. During the war with the Psychotic Assembly, the Hadeans made many laws and made many decisions, and we stayed silent. When they took away our weapons, it was to keep the young on our farms and food in the mouths of all. Who could gainsay that? When they forbid our travel, it was to keep our young on the farm, and who could gainsay that? When they put their overseers over us, it was to keep up the food. Who could gainsay that? Yet here we are, many years later, and those laws have not been rescinded. We were comfortable; willing to believe their words.

"During the war against the Psychotic Assembly, the Union placed many prisoners in that pit. The Hadeans placed a guard upon them. The people in that place slowly starved. They died of disease. They fought among themselves. We decided that we could not accept that. We asked the Hadeans to let us take prisoners who volunteered to work. They said yes. They helped us to grow food. We fed them, and we sent food back with them. We looked for the women and the children who were there, and we got them out. We did much good.

"Maran, we were fools. We only pretended that we did good. We were not willing to do what needed to be done. All of use, in the thousands, were unwilling to stand up to a hundred Hadeans. We had given them our weapons. We threw away our courage. Because of that, many died who should never have died. That pit is our failure. When you go out into the world, and you see things that are wrong, do not make our mistake. We did not do great things because we only saw what harm it could do us. We failed to see what good it would do them. Remember that: ask yourself, what good am I doing for them?"

Traveling through a gate is much like jumping into a pool of cold water. This act does not harm you, yet your are overwhelmed.

Maran stepped from Jura City to Fort Resolute in one jarring step. She stepped from one gate citadel to another.

Gate citadels are unusual fortifications. With most fortifications, you want to keep thing out. With gate citadels, you want to keep things in. A gate itself is a landing point; a place where things arrive to. The gate has no control over who shows up there. This fact makes the establishment of a gate inside a fortification a glaring weakness in a fortification, for anything can arrive inside the place that you meant to defend. In order to protect themselves, places with gates built fortifications to prevent large numbers of opponents from rolling through unopposed and attacking.

Maran looked up. Above her, a large grate with spikes stood ready to be released upon any opposing force that appeared.

Once she exited the gate keep, Maran found Fort Resolute a rather simple city. Unlike Jura City, it was essentially flat. Getting from one area to another proved quite simple. A few questions here and there and she soon found herself in the right place. She knocked on the boarding house and an old woman answered the door and answered her questions. She remembered Maran's cousin. The woman's face showed consolation. "We lost many at Ferra Nea. I am afraid that your cousin is lost. Too many did not return." Maran pressed the issue. The 4th dwarven volunteers marched to Broadford, then moved north along an old imperial highway. If she wanted any news, she needed to head to Broadford. That would not be easy. The road to Broadford was closed due to bandits.

As they talked about Broadford, a new voice caught her ear. His voice was resilient and optimistic.

"Who wants to go to Broadford. I must meet her!" The elf who entered was unlike any elf that Maran had ever seen. Given how few she had seen, most elves would look unusual to her. This particular elf's hair color was as dull copper streaked with the gentle green of old copper. His skin was as new copper, burnished bright and red. His eyes were an intense green, like that of very weathered copper with the intensity of a full furnace melting iron.

Even as Maran looked at this elf with amazement, this elf looked at her malachite skin and bald head with amazement. "By my Lady, I have never seen such as you. I must meet you. I am Zebra, master of the dueling blade. Who do I speak with?"

Maran blinked for several seconds, then resolved. "I am Maran, Sir. I am a hearth tender in Jura City, Sir." She curtsied her best curtsy. This elf seemed her better.

Zebra looked a little more surprised. "That is a holy job, hearth tender. You are to be honored. Yes, indeed! It is I who should speak better of you." The elf knelt to her on one bended knee.

Maran shook her head, "No. You misunderstand. Being a hearth tender is a lowly job. I feed the fires, collect the ashes, and clean the hearths, Sir. Do not kneel to me."

Zebra doffed his hat as well, "No, my good dwarven woman, it is not lowly or unworthy. To care for fire is a holy calling. There is no calling more hold. I honor you. Among my people, the Schan, who live in the fiery land of Schanderna, we live with the great Lady Plasm, Lady of All Fire. To be a servant of hers is our greatest calling. It is a calling that I do not follow, but that I do honor with my deepest conviction. I must honor my Lady's servants. Be it known that I will be as a servant to you."

Maran stood nonplussed by this action. This strange elf made no sense to her with his babbling. She looked to the landlady, but that woman shook her head with frustration. Maran could tell that this strange elf did things his own way.

Zebra stood with a flourish. "I see now that my Lady has led me here. Fate has joined us. Adventure is to be had. My fighting blades have been long silent and so they shall sing. I am in your service. I will take up arms with you. We shall defeat the bandits who block the road, and you shall lead us to victory. I shall gather others of like mind, and together, we shall remove this blight from this land!"

Before Maran could stop him, Zebra stood, swirling out of the room, leaving a bewildered Loam in his wake.

With this demonstration, the landlady took pity upon Maran. "He's like the wind," she said, "And he accomplishes just as much. About the only thing that man is good for is a good fight."

In times of peace, swordsmen are uneasy.

Tazebra learned the way of the sword. He made his living by the sword. He joined the Schan army that marched in support of the Psychotic Assembly. He fought against the Charystans in dangerous raids. He felt the arrogance of the Psychotic Assembly. He was there when the Schan turned against the Psychotic Assembly, joining their enemies, the Axiomites. He fought in the final battle against the Assembly, at Ajembo, but he did not join the slaughter when the city fell.

To wield the sword is a sacred joy.

The Schan are elves of a sort. Long ago they left their lands in Glittering Vale to serve the Fire Lord who dwelt in Schanderna. The elements of fire and ash filled their being. They learned many strange arts there. They lost something of what they once had, making them strange to their brethren. In the Time of Heroes, some men journeyed to them to win their legendary blades. During the War of Good and Evil, they served on both sides of that conflict, helping one side or the other. "Fire works that way," is what they said. During the times of empires, they became remote and legendary, working their forges.

The Wars of Good and Evil changed them more than any had foreseen. The Elven Gods prepared an ambush against Nomos, the great Lord of the Charystan Pantheon. Inferno, the Elemental Lord of Fire, came to the battlefield that day in support of the elves. At the end of that fight, the Elves knew woe. They killed Nomos, but the price was unbearable. All the Elven gods save Passion were dead at the hands of Nomos. The Land of Glittering Vale, once the most beautiful of all lands in all the worlds, lie desolate and emptied. Passion fled the battlefield, fearful that she too may die. She took refuge in Schanderna, becoming Plasm, the Elemental Lord of Fire.

With one god remaining, the Schan abandoned temperance and measure. They threw themselves into the art of whatever lie before them. They could only act one way and one way only: with great passion. Passion, pleasure, excellence, and art merged into a single, overriding ideal. And so the Schan were changed.

With peace, Tazebra wandered from his home in burning Schanderna seeking fights wherever he could find them. Sometimes he won. Sometimes he lost. His dueling career soon took him to Charystos where fought the finest duelists in all the world. He made his gold letting blood on the streets. Never had he been so happy. This was a good life for a dualist.

In times of conflict, the peaceful are uneasy. The peaceful appealed to the Queen. The Queen stood on her balcony and made a proclamation. "Effective immediately, all dueling is banned in Charystos."

At first, no one thought much of this ban. Many things were banned in Charystos. All too soon, the excitement and the words would be forgotten and things would return to normal. Unconcerned with the situation, the dueling continued. It did not continue for long. The Queen's men quickly found the great duelers and expelled them. Some duelers did not go easily. Xetoc lost his right arm. They tried

Jelta for murder and hung her by the neck until she was dead. Taruman fought rather than be captured, killing fourteen men before he himself lie dead on the cobblestones. With his death, great age of dueling in Charystos was over.

As for Zebra, the Queen's men kidnapped him, took his sword, then threw him on a boat for Tasa Kora. Zebra tried to dual on Tasa Kora, but the street gangs there were bloodthirsty and had no honor in a duel. Their bookies always tried to fix the fights, which is something that no one dared to do in Charystos. Seeking a better place, Zebra traveled to Venalicium, but they too had laws against dueling. No one there dared to defy the law. Realizing that his life lay along a new path, and desperately short of money, he journeyed north to Fort Resolute seeking what fortune had to hold. Better to go forward. Fortune favors the bold.

Maran sat in the sitting room and made herself think. This needed sorting out. Her goal was this: she needed to get to Broadford. Zebra wanted to get to Broadford, too. Judging by his outgoing personality, he would successfully assemble more like-minded people. A group of people going to Broadford was far more likely to successfully cross the wilderness to reach Broadford. A larger group would also be more likely to gather attention.

Given the elf's attitude towards Broadford, Maran concluded that the road there must be dangerous. If it was not dangerous, Maran did not conceive that Zebra would act with such enthusiasm. He also assumed that she needed a group. He assumed that he needed a group. That meant that her best chance to reach Broadford was with a group, as even the reckless would not take on such a journey alone.

That made this plan the most workable one. A smaller group made survival chancy. They needed enough force.

As Maran turned over her logic repeatedly looking for errors and weaknesses, a knock came to the front door. The landlady soon came to her with on offended look to her eye. "There is a thing outside looking for you." The woman looked accusingly at her, as if she knew that Maran would know that something odd would come to this door.

"Can you let him in?" The woman sighed, turned about with overacted misery, and let the thing in. What came in was a wolf-headed creature with bright eyes and a greying muzzle. It wore a leather jerkin, had a knife in its belt, and carried a small brace of javelins on its back. He stood proudly before her. "I am Sleepless Crow," he said, "Are you Maran, leader of this expedition."

Maran signed. The Appaloosa were known to the Loam. Her father often hired these strange people to herd his sheep in high summer. They were very proud and very sure of themselves. They liked straight and firm answers. This was a sign of great character to them. "Yes, I am the leader. I am Maran."

Sleepless Crow nodded, "I come to you as a warrior and a scout. My deeds are many. I lead my people away from the lands of the goblins to the twelve kingdoms. I have faced and outrun many orcs. I have passed all tests of manhood, been accepted into all great lodges, and mastered all the skills of an Appaloosa Warrior."

Maran smiled, then said the only words that she could say. "I am glad to have you, good Appaloosa. We need a good scout and a stout heart."

The Appaloosa nodded back to her. "I will do what I can to make this task a success. I know that the way before us is difficult. I will advise you as best as I can. Let me advise you this, young one. Do not be daunted by the obstacles before you. Respect them, but do not be daunted." With that, Crown turned and walked out the door. The landlady slammed the door behind him.

When the Appaloosa left, the landlady brought her quite a few cracked dishes, vases, and trinkets. "You can mend these," she said dryly. This was yet another offer that Maran could not say not to.

The time had come. Spinning Crow, elder of the Appaloosa stood among the many leaders of the many assembled tribes. His wolfish head turned to view all who gathered, his eyes gleaming from the fires.

"I am Sleepless Crow, hero of the wars with the Feral Nation. I have seen our suffering. Long have we suffered.

"I was born far away from this place. I was born in our homeland. I was born where the fields of grass travel to meet the sky; where deer and bear move in the wood; where the bison move like thunder; where the great tigers stalk the mammoth; where the great spirits dwell with their animals. In this place I was raised by my father, Spinning Tiger, to be a hunter and a warrior. At twelve I was sent into the wilderness and I returned with a doe as my kill. I went again into the wilderness, and I heard the spirits. The Crow talked to me, which many consider the best of all the Totems.

"The time came when the Groll came to our land. They said that the goblins now owned us, and we belonged to them. Many battles we fought against them. Many times we drove them out. Many times we thought that they would never, could never return. Return they did. They returned as numerous as the buffalo. So many came that all our spears killing all day could not have turned the tide of victory for us. They took us in chains to their villages. They placed chains about our hands and feet. They bade us to dig in the ground. Long did we toil.

"It was in this time that my heart grew afire. Many others spoke of the same fire. We planned. One winter's night, we broke our chains and fled that place. We traveled long and hard through snow, swamp, and field. Many died. Many turned back. Many disappeared. In time, we came to this place

where they call themselves the Twelve Kingdoms. The people looked askance at us. They thought us Gnoll. They mistook the wolf for the hyena. With much long talking, we found our place among them herding their sheep and their goats.

"Today, we live in a time of trouble. The young do not join our lodges nor do they seek the spirits. Those who seek the spirits do not find them. Those of us who once knew the spirits know them no longer. One day, men said that we should stop carrying bows, as you did not need bows to defend sheep. One day, they said that we should not carry spears, because you did not need spears to defend sheep. One day, they told us that we could not carry armor, for who needed armor to herd sheep? One day, they came and told us that we should pay for our food, but they always paid us less than the food. If we owed them money, we could not leave. Little by little, they enslaved us as surely as the Gnoll did, but we did not fight.

"Today I stand before you. Today I tell you this: I owe no more to the men who hire us. I hold javelins of stone and wood, as in days of old. I hunt again, as in days of old. I say the prayers, as the old days. This is not enough. I do not hear the spirits, and without the great spirits, we are nothing.

"I do not know what will make the great spirits happy with me again. No medicine man can tell me this. So I shall go into the world, doing whatever great deeds that I can find, helping all who need help of any people, until I do that thing that will make the spirits pleased again. No deed shall be too big, and none too small. I vow to strive until I do the right thing, when the spirits again know us and again bless our people."

Mending the pottery actually did her quite a bit of good. She relaxed quite a bit, getting into that peaceful place of clay and glaze. The Loam had many talents that others found interesting. They had little or no connection with stone, but had a strong connection to things like mud, clay, and sand, along with objects derived from those substances. It was no harder for a Loam to join broken pottery than it was for an elf to improvise a poem. It was these associations that caused the true stone-dwarves from looking down upon their lesser cousins who only knew dirt.

Another hour passed when Zebra arrived carrying a heavy case and leading a woman. This woman wore a silken robe and a mantle of gray feathers. She walked with considerable authority. The woman sat even as Maran stood to greet her. "You may go, Zebra." She looked towards Maran, I am Altyn Tag, Air Adept."

"I am pleased that you can help us," responded Maran.

Altyn examined Maran more closely. "I was expecting more from you. Zebra spoke of you as if you were a priestess or someone of good blood. You look like a dustmaid."

Maran nodded. "Yes, Ma'am. He believes that is a holy position. I could not convince him

otherwise."

Altyn took off her gloves. "Be that as it may, it is best if you continue being in charge. I will direct you. You need not worry. Now call the landlady. I wish supper. You shall join me. What would you like?"

If she was going into a fight, Maran needed some protection. The Loam were fairly unique in using pottery and ceramics for armor and weapons. Most people would never use these substances as they were brittle and impossible to repair. The Loam did not suffer from these problems. As the Loam were people of the living earth, their living being strengthened the pottery and ceramic, making it harder and more flexible. The Loam also knew the secrets of working with such materials, allowing them to shape and repair such things.

Using an old robe as a base, Maran began sewing the plates on. The armor would look patchwork and rough, but it would be enough. This something would be much better than nothing. When she had time, she would sit down and make a far better suit for herself. In the meantime, she saw herself staying up all night just to get the armor wearable.

For a weapon, she made a mace. Broken pottery made serviceable flanged mace. On the journey, she hope to do work on it.

Altyn found herself fascinated with this project. She had never seen any magic or technique that worked with pottery in such a way. Someone like that would be very valuable on Astrea, where anything of any value must be imported. "Maran," she asked, "Why aren't your people all over doing this?"

"By dwarven law, we are not allowed," Maran replied, "They consider this technique primitive and embarrassing. We may not export such items, nor may we take contracts or employment to produce such items, nor may we give them as gifts. However, we can produce these things for ourself to trade among ourselves. My bracelet is another example of the work." Altyn looked at the bracelet and found it beautiful.

Altyn eventually tired for watching Maran work, opening her large book of runes to refresh her mind. She went over the runes again and again into her head until their knowledge lie deep and sure. Magic requires high-confidence in the knowledge possessed by the practitioner. To doubt is to die.

Sleepless Crow arrived again at dusk. Shortly behind him, Zebra showed up with a womanly woman in a shift, little more than a night shirt. She looked a little hollow-eyed and fey. On closer inspection, Maran saw that she was a fey. Her skin had a wood-like look. This surprised her. She must be a dryad, and a dryad were a rare race indeed. Few ventured away from their homes, and

even fewer made their ways to large settlements.

Before anyone could consider the dryad and her situation, Zebra began speaking. "My friends, welcome. Welcome one and all. We begin today this task of driving off the bandits who raid the road to Broadford. I do not pretend that it is an easy task. No. It is not an easy task, and that is what make this task so sweet. We must use our wits and our courage together to secure victory. And we shall secure victory. We shall go forth, engage the enemy, and vanquish him."

Zebra stopped. Everyone expected him to say more, but Zebra stood there, apparently finished. Altyn took this opportunity to take the meeting and move it along in a more productive way. "That is an excellent approach. Maran, you have been tasked with developing a more detailed plan. Please discuss the difficulties that we face and possible mitigations of those difficulties."

All eyes turned to Maran, and Maran froze. This she did not expect. Her brain did not work. Then, as if on cue, she knew what to say. "I have been thinking about this all afternoon. Our first problem is that we do not know where their camp is. We can safely assumed that their camp is walled or otherwise defended, so we must find our way into those defenses. Third, and by no means least important, we must out-fight an unknown number of bandits to take the field.

"They have the following advantages: they have numbers, they have equipment, and we do not know where their camp lies. Until we can proffer advantages on par with that, we will not see victory.

"The one advantage that we have is preparation. We know that we are going to attack them in a few days. They don't. We get to choose our battlefield and the time. We get to choose the stakes."

Everyone nodded at this.

"Here's my plan. We need to find their camp. The best way to do that is to let them capture someone. I volunteer me. We also need bait. That will be alcohol. I get caught transporting alcohol. They capture me and take me to their camp. They take the alcohol and get drunk. You follow us to the camp. I open the gate. We kill many drunks."

Everyone nodded at the plan except Zebra. He saw the wisdom of the plan, but he was clearly disappointed that they were not charging in, fighting all the toughest enemies across the walls, and earning victory by a plan more dashing than wise.

"Now, we need to review our capabilities. How are we on armor and weapons?" Maran looked about, only to realize that they were considerably under-armed and over-matched. Maran held up her crude mace and half-sewn armor, "I have these. I am tolerable archer. I'm an acceptable warrior. I believe in meeting my enemies head-on."

Zebra showed his dagger. "This is all that is left of my weapons. With this, I will gain victory."

The dryad spoke up. "I am Ebon Sol. I will make weapons and armor by the time that we reach the bandits. I know the dryad techniques of weaving and shaping wood. I fight with sword and shield"

Sleepless Crow showed his javelins. Altyn showed her javelins and spellbook. All-in-all, they were a very poor showing. Maran did not know how they would overcome these obstacles.

"Who has seen combat?" Crow, Zebra, and Ebon indicated yes. Both Maran and Altyn were green.

Maran continued, "I need you three holding down the toughest part of the fight. I will spot for you. Altyn, you know what you know. Tell us what you need from us, and we'll do what we can. Warn us when you can." Altyn nodded.

With a plan established, they retired for the evening. The landlady kicked Zebra out of his room, placing the three women into his room. Zebra slept in the kitchen. Crow slept on the porch.

Maran avoided sleep. She sewed until she could sew no more, falling asleep on a chair. Altyn looked at her new accommodations with a leery eye, choosing in the end to sleep on the bed rather than in it. The dryad Ebon Sol left the house.

On Astrea, the purpose of an air apprentice is to become an air adept. There are many government positions open to air adepts. Some air adepts wanted more, and most sought the position of air master. Some sought even higher positions. Some became Storm Hands. Some rose further to become Storm Rievers. Only the greatest achieve the lofty title of Storm Sage. Altyn Tag had her eyes firmly on the position of Storm Sage.

Becoming a Storm Sage was no easy matter. Not only did you need sublime mastery of the air, you needed mastery of politics as well.

Altyn's family's fortune gave her easy access to the highest levels of education and power. Her ascendancy looked good until her parents were assigned on a mission to the Library of Rhakotis. This was quite the high-profile assignment. Neither of her parents could say "no" to this assignment. This favor showed how highly regarded her family was within political circles, and how close she too was to power.

Once Altyn's parents were away, false rumors about her own behaviors soon circulated, resulting in her "temporary exile" from the flying city. She would not finisher her final years of schooling. She would not be among those picked for the highly-competitive apprenticeships of the Storm Hands. This mark against her would make it very hard to gain any lofty position or even a favorable marriage, further blocking her. Others would get those positions and marriages that she deserved. She knew those others. She thought them her friends. She should have known better. In Astrea

politics, ambition is all things.

All could have been lost to her. When the officers came to remove her, the headmaster, a Storm Sage emeritus, refused to let them into the school. "Here, I am GOD, and you may not step. We shall deliver her to you, then I shall personally guarantee that she is taken directly to the docks."

"Old Thunder-Ass" put those men in their place. Not only did he ensure that she had time to pack the things that she needed, and that was necessary as those men certainly had orders to take her implements of power from her contrary to law, but he also guaranteed that she should not suffer for this obvious injustice. The Headmaster took great pains to ensure that work and ability, not politics, were the order of the day inside the school. In front of several faculty, the Headmaster placed the feathered mantle of an air-adept on her. "I recognize your achievements. From this day forth, you are an Air Adept, with all its ranks and privileges." The then slid a signet of Astrea of her finger. With that simple ceremony, he hurried her to the gates. "Here is your woman. Now let us go."

The Headmaster escorted her to the docks and stayed with her until she was on her ship. The Headmaster did not do this for her. He did this so that those who interfered in the school should know that any interference would be met by politics of the highest power.

Once the ship was away, Altyn readied her fans. Several men eyed her with caution, but they did not approach. They expected to find a harmless student who would "have an accident" and fall from the ship. Unwilling to risk themselves, they avoided the adept.

The boat dropped her at the dockyard near Fort Resolute.

They left early, walking out the east gate of the city. The first day they traveled the road well traveled, across those lands close to the great city.

Altyn traveled with great trouble. She was a creature of the air and unused to life on the ground. Her clothing, though beautiful, was layered to keep her warm among the clouds. She soon had to shed a few extra layers. She had Maran carry her things. The only thing that she did carry was an umbrella, two fans, and a sponge painted with arcane symbols.

They rested at an inn. Ebon slipped out into the night.

Ebon Sol returned in the morning transformed. During the night, she had made herself a curious armor of branches woven and spliced together. The archaic look of the armor gave her a magnificent look that bespoke reliability. Across both her armor and her shield was a stylized sun pattern woven into the pattern. "This is the sign of living light," she told Maran, "It is my guide and my life."

Ebon also made weapons for herself. The bow and the sheaf of arrows appeared normal enough, though on closer inspect the arrows had fletchings of leaves. What caught her eye most was Ebon's sword. The blade appeared to be formed from great thorns, with vicious slashing spikes along the edge. The swords was more like a koa than a sword. The dwarves had a ceremonial weapon something like this sword, but made with ebony or flint. Sometimes the priests fought with them. Against lightly armored opponents, they were formidable weapons. She called the weapon a thornhacker.

Zebra stopped when he saw her in her full regalia. He stood there smitten, amazed at his own reaction. "Magnificent," he said, looking her up and down. "I saw you and knew you to be magnificent, and there you are. Do you doubt now that we will be successful?"

The second day proved harder than the first. They crossed through the emptied land of Whitthorn, with its ruins and its homesteads showing up at irregular intervals. They rested at the Hawick inn, a heavily fortified compound with high walls and thick doors.

Once night fell, Zebra, Crow, and Ebon slipped away, heading into the craggy lands where the bandits lived. Maran should have known that would happen. Those three feared too little and were ready to show that they were able. Maran paced a long while, but the innkeeper pressed her to sleep. "A scout's job is to scout," he told her, "Your job is to sleep."

With morning came three friends, tired and hungry.

Zebra laughed between bites of food, "Ah, what a time we had. One almost had me. For a moment, I thought that I would need to slit his throat, but he failed to look down." Maran frowned, and Zebra laughed again. "My dearest Maran, this is what I do. This is what I breath for. I am a Schan Infiltrator. I go where no others can. When you need someone behind enemy lines, I go there. When you need someone to deliver a message inside a heavily armed fortress, I deliver the message. If you need the enemy's battle plan, I bring it out along with the general's breakfast. That is what it means to be an infiltrator. Fire and shadow, they go together, no?"

The trio had taken a terrible risk, but they returned with solid information. They did not know where the hidden bandit camp lie, but they knew the locations where the bandits had men. The men watched the main road. Most likely, they used a signal to call for reinforcements, in necessary. They would guide Maran to the place where there were few watchers. If something went wrong, there would fewer opponents.

Before they left, Ebon gathered the others together in a circle. "Living light, we commit ourselves to this coming battle. We fight for what is right. We fight against those who inflict woe upon others. We fight for the welfare of the good people we have met. We fight so that others see what we do, and are inspired by our example. For these reasons, living light, bring us your blessings and lead us

to victory."

Chapter 2: The Encampment

The Prophet signaled to the companies. Advance. Ebon Sol lifted the Banner of the Sun, making the banner shine with all her might, lighting up the dark plains of Knessex before them. The mass of men, each and every one a veteran champion of good, leveled their pikes, then moved forward in measured time. Their wills were fixed and their resolution firm. They would stand in this great battle and see the forces of evil destroyed.

Before them, a wave of dead things shambled, unintelligent, and unfeeling. Little did they feel the pikes pressing forward, always pressing forward. Their lances blazed, over and over, but the dead things kept coming. Where were their reinforcements? Where was their cavalry? Were they even in the right place? Over the din of fighting and shouting, Ebon could no longer hear the shouts of the other companies.

Their battalion stood firmly, but the dead pushed steadily. Little by little, the line gave ground.

Someone or something came with the dead. It directed them. It used them like pieces on a chessboard to push and pull the companies. Ebon could see it vaguely, a great antlered headdress upon its head.

Too late, the Prophet saw the trap that they were in. He signaled for the companies to take a defensive arrangement, but the lines could not shift fast enough. The right flank, too disciplined, held together and separated from the center. The dead surged, driving a wedge of death between the lines and around them. They overwhelmed as a sea of rotting hands. Many gathered around Ebon Sol, the standard bearer. All others fell, yet these men held, one by one succumbing to the overwhelming numbers. The Prophet shouted prayers until his voice tore the world asunder, as the evil thing uttered its blasphemies. Their struggles were to no avail. She went under the sea of hands.

She fought the hands pulling her. She fought them pulling her upward. She kicked in the water. She pushed at the crook around her waist. She gasped as if she had never breathed before. The hands were black and warm. The arms were thick and strong. She struggled against the dawn and the great things that held her. It wrestled her about, then dropped her into its boat.

Light. A boat. Warmth. Quiet. Peace.

Ebon coughed a deep cough, spitting water from her mouth. She gasped, breathing all that she could breathe. Her head spun. Her limbs felt cold. Leadened. Clay. She collapsed.

The jackal-headed thing carefully placed a blanket over her. It made no sound. It stood so great that she felt a child before it. She knew him. She had always known him. All souls know him. This was Eth, the silent librarian of the Lake of Souls.

The Lake of Souls.

She was dead.

She was alive.

Why was she alive?

Eth took up his great oar, turning his boat about. He paddled in the morning light. Around her, the still lake the snow capped rim of the lake shone in the morning sun. She felt cold. She suddenly realized that there was cold. Her body trembled in a deep shiver.

A deep shiver.

She had not shivered like this, so deeply, so painfully, since she left her tree.

The boatman paddled on, saying nothing. He never spoke.

Across the placid lake, a hound bound across the surface, its steps bringing ripples across the water. Its tail wagged and play danced in its eyes. It held something in its mouth. The thin yet tremendous dog, the size of a pony, hopped into the boat, sniffing furiously. The boatman stopped briefly, petting the dog. He took a colorful sphere from the dog's mouth, examined it for a moment, the dropped it into the water where the it would rest for all eternity.

That was a soul. She saw a soul.

The boatman soon brought them to a small island in the lake. On the island grew a few trees. Among the trees was a cave. Ebon Sol walked the cave. It was what she had to do. She knew who she would find in that cave.

Inside sat the gods of gods: the Mother of Storms. The great goddess sat upon a woven mat, made in a pattern of diamonds and lines. Her ancient face stared across a small fire. She motioned to another mat before her. "Sit, young dryad. Speak with me." Her voice sounded old but strong. Ebon hesitated. The old woman's brown face leaned forward. The beads in her hair swung above the fire. "Your legs are tired and unused to walking. Sit."

Ebon realized that the old woman was right. Her legs burned. Exhaustion overwhelmed her. She collapsed downward, deeply exhausted, eager to sleep. How long had she been awake? On the Lake of Souls, there is no time.

The ancient goddess gave to her a bowl. "Drink this." With great lethargy, Ebon sat upright. She drank the bowl of liquid, feeling the bitter and pungent herbs rolling down her throat. Her lethargy fled, replaced by epiphany.

The old woman sat with her hands in her lap. She looked magnificent in her beaded leather dress precisely because she was old. The great goddess looked at the standard bearer. "I offer you a deal, dryad. You may choose."

The dryad shook her head. "Your deals are too dear for mortals."

The goddess laughed. "And so they are, my dear child. So they are. This offer is not one of those deals. I offer you a different deal. There is a being that has offended me and attempted to hide himself from me. He does not pay what he owes me. It is incumbent upon me to collect what is owed me. I offer you this arrangement: if you collect what I am due, I shall give you a new life."

Ebon paused for a moment. "I do not trust this deal."

The goddess nodded. "Many men come to me seeking power. They offer everything that they have for the power that I can bring them. Too many take what I give them, but do not pay me what they owe me. That leaves me to collect my due. I do that as I please. This is what I please. One soul owes me much. You shall profit from his foolishness. If you destroy his mortal form and send his soul to me, then I consider this contact fulfilled and I leave you to live the life that you live."

For a moment, Ebon paused, then asked, "What if I do not do as you ask?"

The woman looked backed at Ebon, and those tempest-eyes ripped her soul apart. "That is not your nature."

This was true. Ebon Sol would do as she promised. That was the way of the Living Light.

The goddess smiled. "I see your heart. You will speak true. Now speak your choice: I will send you back to your eternal slumber, or you may have a second life. If you promise to end the existence of the Lord of Lagan, I will consider the contract fulfilled and ask nothing more of you."

Ebon Sol's face drained of color. "Great Mother, he is the being that destroyed us!"

"And so he was," said the Great Mother. "I did not say that the task was easy. I said that it was a task. I do not say that you must do this task immediately. I say that you must do this task. You are not free until you do this task. Will you do this task?"

Ebon thought for a while, daunted. How could she do such a thing. She tried to think her answer through, but the tea made her thoughts swim. The faces of her company swam before her. She saw them, one and all. She thought of them in their earthy graves. She cried, then nodded, "I will do this task."

The old goddess showed no emotion by this. She nodded. "Go to Fort Resolute. It is much changed

from your day. Someone will ask if you are going to Broadford. Say yes, and follow him. Go where you will. In time, you will go where you must."

Maran moved along the path while her companions stayed near or in the trees. She walked easily with her heavy load. Her shoulders were used to the hard work of carrying water. Before long, she began enjoying the day and the sunshine. She enjoyed the clouds rolling across the sky. She smiled at all the stones and gravel. This place would make a fine home for a Loam community. She wondered why her people had never come here to settle, where there was so much available land.

That quick, a knife touched her throat. She stopped breathing. "Hey, its a dwarf WOMAN," one said, "Today is our lucky day."

"Can't I just go?"

"I think you are coming with us."

"I'll give you my firewater. Please let me go."

One of the men picked up a jug and smelled it. "Mmmm," he responded, "Good stuff. Maker her carry it. I'll get her back to the camp. You keep a lookout."

Some minutes later, Zebra stuck a knife in the bandit's back. He did not say a word. Zebra took the sword the man was wearing. "Very bad sword," he admitted to himself, "But it is all that I get. I thank you, and warn you to stay alert when looking for trouble." Zebra stripped the scabbard off the man, affixing it to his own sword belt. Crow took the bow and a sheaf of arrows.

Crow lead them down varied paths. They soon found themselves looking down on a log palisade built before a maw in the hills. The construction was crude, but done well enough to provide a front gate and an additional gate before the cave itself. Inside and outside the gate, cattle grazed quietly.

(Greatly rewrite this.)

Altyn grew worried. "That is an unusual defensive setup. That and the cattle are a give away. Those are not just bandits down there. They are bandits lead by a dragon. I am afraid that we have sent Maran into mortal dangers, and woe will soon be upon her. Time is of the essence. We must get in as soon as possible. I've never known a dragon to love a dwarf. The both love gold too much."

With that, they rushed for the gate.

The halfling woke up. He stood, dazed, and looked about him. Nothing was familiar. He felt that he should go somewhere, and do something, but he could not think what this was. He stood, propping himself on his trident, then thought for a bit, drifting far away. After that pause, he strode up the hill, away from the stream that babbled behind him. On seeing a path, he followed the path. He soon came to a walled encampment with many men inside. The guards outside stopped him.

"Hold it halfling!" they said, unsure of what they saw.

"Good morning," the halfling responded cheerfully, "How are you today."

The men looked at each other, then smiled. They looked back at the halfling with his trident and armor. "We're mighty fine. How are you my Lord?"

"I feel great."

"That is very good to hear. We get very few lords here. Perhaps you would like to come in and have a bite to eat. Would you like that?"

The halfling thought for a second. "Yes, I am hungry. I would like to eat."

"Wait," said the other, "There's no weapons allowed in the kitchen. I don't see how you can go in."

The halfling sighed in disappointment. The other man perked up. "Wait. I can hold your spear."

The first man responded, "But he can't wear that armor, either."

The second man nodded. "I can watch both your fancy spear and your armor. Then, you can go get something to eat."

"Oh, yes," the halfling said, "That should be good."

Once his armor was removed, the men called their friends over. They beat the halfling until he was senseless, threw him in a cage, then argued about him.

The halfling dreamed. He heard voices. The voices sang to him. "Come to us child. Come. Jump! Swim with us! Come have fun. Jump halfling child. Jump!"

The halfling awoke a prisoner. The bandits could not decide what to do with their prisoner. After long arguing, they decided that he was worthless to sell. They decided to "shoe him" and put him to work. "Shoe him" meant placing iron cuffs and chains on his legs. The smith sealed the cuffs with a hot rivet, ensuring that their clever prisoner would not slip his bonds. The smith called his new helper "Sweep". All the while, Sweep went about his job happy, but somewhat confused, never realizing there were cobwebs within cobweb inside his head. Only when he slept and heard the

lithesome voices urging him onward did he know that something in this situation was wrong.

Once the bandits shut Maran into a small cage, she began worrying. This was not her plan. Even if they did get drunk, there was no way for her to get out. These men were so afraid of their boss that they did not dare to drink. When Maran's friends arrived, they would get a hard fight.

Her only relief came when a chained halfling came by to give her water. He wore chains riveted to his feet and she pitied him. She drank what she could, figuring that later on, she might just wind up in goblin territory and would not get any water. She did not see it at first, but there were a few hobgoblins among the humans. They walked around like they ran the place. The humans saluted him.

After a while, Maran put the clues together and saw the obvious. These were not bandits. These were raiders from the Feral Nation. They were using humans as their cover. They were gaining control of the road and splitting Border League territories apart. Maran thought that a clever plan. Get your enemy on the wrong problem is a staple of the field general's arsenal.

Maran prepared to ask the halfling for help, but she did not ask fast enough. A tough looking hobgoblin with rippling muscles emerged from the tunnel and pointed to her. The halfling waved two men over, then opened her door. They carried her to the smithy inside the hill and tied her to a post. Inside the smithy, the strong man heated metal and rivets in a coal brazier. He would soon rivet chains to her, making escape difficult to impossible. You can not pick the lock on a rivet.

Even as Maran's spirits sank, she heard a noise from above. Was it her companions here already? She hoped so. She desperately needed to get free now. They needed the gate open.

"Halfling, my fingers are getting numb."

The halfling looked to the smith, and the smith nodded, so the halfling moved to Maran. "I'm Sweep," he whispered, "Who are you?"

"Maran. Can you get me out of here."

"He'll kill me. I can't do that."

"I'll help you."

The chatter outside turned to screams. Bandits had started dying. The fight outside grew more serious.

"Be a hero," she exclaimed, "If you free me, you will be a hero."

The halfling looked surprised by this, as if she had stated something clear and obvious to him. So

clear and obvious, in fact, that Sweep suddenly felt enlightened to the obvious facts before him. "I can do something about this," he said dreamily, then with more earnest, "I can DO SOMETHING." Sweep started untying Maran's rope. The smith yelled over. Sweep responded, "They injured her arm. She's worth more if she's got two good arms." The smith nodded with agreement. He delivered only quality goods.

The smith's delay was enough for the Sweep to get into the next rope before the smith understood that the halfling was not adjusting the ropes. The man picked up his small hammer and sprang over to them, Sweep dodging, and Maran waving about with one arm tied to a post. The smith aimed a shot at the halfling, but the Maran blocked the swing. He then swung at Maran, but Sweep deflected the swing.

Sweep dove across the smithy, grabbing a fire poker in his hand. He now stood armed against his opponent. He took the poker in both hands and stood ready, feet splayed until the chains were taut. The smith charged the halfling, but the halfling won the first blow, cracking the man in the ribs. Maran used the opportunity to loosen up the second rope, allowing her to pull free of the post. Having no weapon nearby, she picked up the manacles destined for her own feet.

The smith now saw that he was against two, but he did not show fear. He held great confidence in his own ability to beat the daylights out of these upstarts. He was right. He connected several good blows in a row, bowing both Maran and Sweep. To Maran's surprise, Sweep took his blow, then slammed the smith equally hard, pushing the smith back. Maran took advantage of this to spin a manacle into the man's head.

Bleeding now, the smith grabbed Maran and tossed her into Sweep. Both tumbled down. That gave the smith a second to pick up a maul instead of his small hammer. The smith had the strength to wield this tool like his own arm. He came at them again. Maran responded by sliding her own chains across the floor, stumbling the man for just a moment, killing his momentum. They rolled away, ready for more.

Sweep wasn't fast enough. The next blow tumbled him to the ground with an anguished cry. The smith took a moment to gloat, and that moment was too long. Maran grabbed a bar of iron and tossed it at the villain's head. The brick hit so hard that the man lost his feet entirely, then slammed dying onto the ground.

Maran ran up to Sweep and helped him up. "We've got to get that gate open! Those are my friends out there. Shake it off."

They stopped for a moment. Sweep grabbed the large hammer, Maran the small. They rushed out, up the corridor, through the great inner door, to courtyard beyond. Men fired madly down. Loud bangs peppered the air, usually followed by a flying corpse slamming onto the dirt below.

Many were hunkering on the catwalks. Many bodies strewed the walls. Maran quickly assessed that

their opponents were busily looking outside, now inside. She dashed for the door, with Sweep behind her. Too late, she saw a hobgoblin taskmaster spot their run. He dropped off the parapet, swinging his barbed whip with practiced hate, catching Maran around one arm, sending her spinning to the ground. A return motion caught Sweep across the heels, causing him to stumble.

Sweep turned, angled in to get a swing, but the taskmaster moved fluidly around the advances. He quickly had Sweep off-balance and retreating. With his long whip, the taskmaster controlled the courtyard. Maran and Sweep moved in again, this time together, each threatening a flank. The hobgoblin maneuvered, keeping himself in a strong position.

That's when Zebra caught him from behind, his knife entering the brute's back. Zebra expected the taskmaster to collapse, and so made a mistake. The taskmaster brought his arm about as a blind reaction, catching Zebra with a well-placed whip-handle to his face. That opened a chance for Maran, who charged in, catching the hobgoblin with her dwarven heft, shoving him backward to the wall, pinning his whip behind him. Sweep rushed in, downing the taskmaster with a two-handed swing with a forge hammer.

With the taskmaster down, the bandits in the courtyard backed off. Zebra darted into the gate, lifting the bar. Seconds later, Crow, Ebon, and Altyn were through. The remaining bandits broke, attempting to flee. Altyn stopped them. "Stop. We have bigger problems. We need to close that inner door."

Altyn seemed agitated, which should have told Maran everything that she needed to know. In the middle of the battle, she was not so swift. They dashed inside and pulled the large doors shut.

"Why are we closing the door?" asked Maran.

"There's a dragon inside these caves. If it catches us in the open, we're dead. We need to fight it close up."

A dragon?!!! This was not something that Maran was ready for. Crow helped her into her pottery armor. She belted it and took up her flanged mace. She felt good to be ready. She looked to Sweep. He now had a goblin spear in his hands and he stood as if he knew exactly how to use it.

"Thank you," said Sweep to Maran, "You told me the right thing earlier. I had forgotten that I was a hero. I am a hero. This is what heroes do."

Crow nodded at that. "I am a hero, too."

Maran thought to herself, "Is this what being a hero means?"

"Aye," joined in Zebra, "Heroes do great things. I am glad to be a hero with you."

"I followed heroes," said Ebon, "And that was the wrong thing. I now have a second chance to act as a hero and I shall not waste that chance."

Altyn opened her fans and stood to the ready. "If I can't go with fortune, I may as well go with flame. Maran, give your words."

Maran stood to the fore. For the first time in her life, she lifted her voice to the gods. "Stand to the ready. There's a dragon in there, and our job is to kill it. Strike where you can. Protect each other. Don't hold back. Dragons don't give you a second chance."

"No," said a thing sliding up the shadows, "I give only once chance. Open the door, and I shall let you live." The sound of scales stirred a deep enmity in her. All dwarves, deep in their souls, know the stirrings of dragons.

"No," Maran responded confidently, "We are firm. You shall die here today. Move forward at your peril."

The dragon had no more words after that. The thing surged forward, shadows slipping with it, slamming Maran, Ebon, and Sweep out of his way. The thing reared to bite, when Altyn brought her two fans together in a cacophonous thunderclap. The creature staggered, unsure of itself for the briefest moment. That moment was enough. Zebra dashed in, forcing the creature to avoid his deadly stabs, pushing the creature back from Altyn.

Ebon too that opportunity to pour herself into her sword. Her body and leaves glowed with inner light, dispelling the darkness that gathered about the dragon as a gloom. She swung that wholesome light with her entire body, shearing into the dragon's flank, scraping away scale and hide. Feeling itself vulnerable, the creature twitched about, its tail swinging wildly. The wyrm bit quick and hard against Ebon, crunching and breaking a hunk of her shield. It was only that shield that kept Ebon from losing her entire arm.

Sweep rolled back onto his feet, thrusting towards the creature's eye. The dragon let go of Ebon to preserve its own eye.

Maran shouted. "Aim for the flank. It's weak on the flank."

Maran's voice grew hoarse. The fight degenerated into a flurry of wild blows and narrow escape, each side unable to wrest the victory that it expected. Victory would soon go to the one that capitalized on the mistakes of the other.

Crow took a swing at the flank, but the dragon was ready. It kicked back, missing Crow, but preventing him from making his attack. The dragon twirled with this attack, keeping everyone off their toes as it nipped and kicked where least expected. After a few circles like this, it filled its chest and breathed again. Its deadly breath missed Crow. Dragons do not often miss unless

something was amiss.

In the flashes of light and shadow, Maran saw the creature's plan. "The door. It's destroying the door!"

The dragon heard her. The thing flicked its tail at Maran, knocking both her and Sweep back again. Both their weapons rolled away. Sweep grabbed Maran's mace and rolled back into the fight, using both hands to land a solid blow on the dragon's jaw, knocking one great fang from its mouth. Maran rolled across the floor, grabbed Sweep's spear, then shoved herself back into the fray.

A sudden wing sweep sent them backwards again. At the end of that sweep, the dragon brought its head about again and breathed into the wooden doorway. With its massive legs, the creature hurled itself at the dissolving door, bursting it asunder. The tide had now turned. The dragon roared at them with disdain, then it turned and launched itself into the air, jumping the wall as a cat might jump a fence.

After a few more moments, everyone looked around. All were alive.

Crow bent down and picked up the dragon's long tooth, placing it in his belt. It would make a good knife. The Appaloosa knew the way of the bone, and he would turn it into his weapon.

Sweep found his armor locked in a chest in the smith's quarters. He donned it, a magnificent suit of shell and mother-of-pearl. For his hand, he found his trident, opalescent and beautiful. Maran had never seen anything like this in her life. Across his chest was a nautilus shell: the sign of Dauphin, Queen of the Waters.

They sent word to Broadford and their people came. They town claimed everything in the bandit camp. Everything. They even took the weapons from Zebra and Crow. The Missus, the leader of the town, listened to Maran's complaints, then put them in their place. She was the Baroness of Broadford, and she would brook no challenge to her authority.

A bit of exploring exposed a deep pit in the caves. The dragon lived in that foul and stagnant pool. They tried dragging the pool, but that did not bring up any treasure. In the end, the townsfolk organized a bucket brigade to empty the pool and find the dragon's treasure.

During a rest break, Maran complained. Zebra lectured her in return. "What did you think would happen?" has asked with great honesty, "The dragon robbed and killed these people. Do they not deserve their possessions in return? Do they not deserve reparations for the harm that they have suffered? And given these things, what would you have done with them? Would you have sold them for gold to people who have no gold? Would you have accepted a thirty cows in trade? No. It is better this way. To live as a hero is to live without burden. There are many who are not heroes

because they fear what they might lose. We have nothing, so we need not have fear. Better we should live that way."

"But what about your sword?"

"I will find something someday. When I do, it will be worthy of me."

Chapter 3: What Lies Below

To speed up emptying the pool, the townsfolk busted down a few ancient walls deep in the caves, then tossed the stinking water deeper into the caverns. Their noises caught the attention of the creatures that lay beyond the walls. The only warning that anyone got was a horrific scream.

Maran yelled, "COMING THROUGH" as she ran towards the site of the scream. She whipped past a corner to find Sweep fighting a giant, multi-legged bugs with his trident, slowing them down as they advanced. A crack from across the pool caught her attention. Altyn held forth her umbrella, sending rending cracks into the water in an effort to slow a second bug. The thing barely stopped, but that halt gave them men time to drop their buckets and draw their swords.

Looking back to Sweep, Maran saw another multi-section bug emerging from a gap in the wall. She dashed forward, slamming into it with her whole body, forcing it back into the hole from which it had come. Her brief glance into the hole revealed several more bugs waiting for their turn to get to the sweet treats which lay beyond. "There's three more!" she yelled, letting everyone know the situation. "I need spearmen up here, now!"

Crow rushed in to cavern, wielding the dragon tooth as if it were a large knife or a seax. That tooth sliced through the creature's chitonous plates, opening an oozing wound. Zebra ran up next. "Help Sweep," Maran ordered, seeing Sweep wrestle the thing with his trident. He fought well, but the creature pushed him hard, grabbing at him with pincers. Zebra took that opportunity to aim well, sliding his blade deep between the creature's armored joints. Blood welled from it. In reflex, the thing spun about, tossing Zebra back into the water.

On the far side, Ebon dashed through the waters, ending her charge with a chopping leap. Her koa slammed into the creature's shell, but failed to penetrate. Altyn's follow-up did penetrate, blasting an eye off the creature, spreading its ichor across the men nearby. The sheer mass of men pounding on the creature ended its life, its ichor spreading across the pool in an oily mess.

Spearmen came up to aid Maran. She gave quick orders, and they obeyed swiftly, spreading out to keep the creatures penned in. Quick spear-thrusts quickly killed each creature, allowing another through. This time, they were ready, butchering the next centipede even quicker. A few minutes later, every one of the foul creatures lie dead at their feet.

Maran sighed relief. Only a few were dead, as they were surprised by these creatures. No one died once she arrived.

From behind, Missus patted her on her shoulder. "You did well. Thank you."

Maran turned to look the aging woman in her deeply lined face. "I only did my job."

The Missus looked back at her, "Then keep doing it. I wish I had a hundred like you."

As they spoke another arrived. Maran turned to see a Hadean Stonebrother standing firm and tall. He looked Maran up and down. "Raise your hands, Loam," he said firmly. Maran did so, and the Missus looked intruded upon. The old woman frowned at the dwarf, "I am talking to this woman, Flint."

The dwarf stared back at her, unflinching, "Baroness, this is Union business. It does not concern you." With that, he looked Maran up and down. "Who do you think you are, Loam, dressing is that ridiculous getup? Dirt armor and weapons? You disgrace us. At least you have the piety to carry no steel. Show me your travel permit." Maran showed her pendent. Stonebrother Flint nodded, then looked back at the Baroness, "Make no account of her and her kind. The same goes for the Schan."

The Missus fumed at this. "What was that about?" she asked.

"The Loam are restricted, Baroness. We may use no steel, and we may only travel with permit."

The woman looked aghast. "I have never heard of such a thing. We have no such laws."

"The Union's laws apply to all dwarves, Baroness. It is the right of the Stonebrothers to enforce that law."

"I don't care what their law says. You fought well. You deserve respect. Come to Broadford. We need folk like you."

"Thank you."

The Missus examined the situation, looked down the old, sealed up package, and shook her head. "I want guards here until we get the treasure out. After that, seal it up."

Zebra stepped up just then. "Missus," he asked, "I am curious about what else may lie down such tunnels. Do you mind if we explore these?"

"I don't see why not. I won't go in to rescue you."

"If we find anything, will you lay claim to it?"

"I am Baroness, and everything in this land is mine. However, you have driven off a dragon and

saved the lives of many men. I offer you this: everyone who goes in gets an equal share, plus you make one share for each dead man that those creatures killed, and one share for me."

Zebra nodded, "That is a fair deal, should we find anything."

Maran posed this question to Zebra, "Why are we going into the darkness?"

"Don't you want to know what is there?" he asked, "Are you not curious? The lure of the unknown is sweet. You never know what you will find until you go there. Have you never done this? Sometimes you find nothing, sometimes you find something, but if you are lucky, you find a puzzle of clues that tell you about some bygone age or missing people. Unraveling a puzzle is a treat more valuable than gold and sweeter than wine."

For the darkness, they needed light. Ebon wove tangles of leaves that let glow a soft light. "These will last about an hour each," she said, "I have eight. That should be enough."

Zebra found torches and lanterns among the bandit's stores. He liberated a few from their new owners. "You always need a backup plan," he said.

Ebon move in first, her shield ready. The darkness reluctantly ebbed, unwilling to let go of the secrets that it shrouded. Sweep moved in next, followed by Maran, Altyn, Zebra, and Crow.

The passage wound through narrow ways until it opened into a larger cave, its walls glistening with pyrite. Up above, motes of light eked in. The creatures here likely at whatever fell through to them. Elsewhere around the cavern, holes lead in various directions.

Having no better direction to pick, Maran chose right, leading them down another winding, narrow passage, often forcing them to stoop or climb. This lead to a place where purplish water perked up from below in a strange and luminescent pool. "Earthblood," Maran said, "That is a rare thing indeed. No wonder these creatures grew to such a size."

Zebra stuck his fingers into the pool and tasted the liquid. "It is rich in earth," he said calmly, followed by a sudden spurt of vomit from his mouth. "That I did not expect," he said, "Fire and earth do not mix."

With a little daring, Maran let go her pride and tasted the earthblood. It tingled her toes. "This is very tasty," she said, "I could live on this stuff." She dipped her mace into the substance, letting the pottery soak up the liquid like a sponge soaks up water. "Oh, that should do very nice things for me," she said.

They turned about, returning to the large cave. Maran now lead them down the second passage. The walls here showed signs of intelligent life. There were many places where edges and corners had been chiseled down to make the passage easier. They soon came to an ancient wooden door, crudely made, standing askew. Creeping inside, their lights revealed a gruesome scene of skeletons amid a cave. Walls of sticks and branches still separated the cavern into makeshift rooms. Ancient mats, woven from reeds, still lie upon the floor. Stains from cooking fires still marred the walls.

Crow looked over the skeletons. He identified them as orcs. The skeletons themselves were of various sizes, from adults to children. The children were found in a mass, presumably killed together. Crow also found the culprit. He held up arrows, showing the leaf-like heads. "Some type of elf," he said, "But I am unsure of which people. I have not seen this type of arrowhead before."

Zebra concurred. This was an elf arrow. They had butchered this orc settlement. "Most likely," theorized Zebra, "They wanted the adamantine here. They came in and killed the orcs who lived here. They then sealed up the tunnels, to protect themselves, and hollowed out that pit back there."

"How sad," mused Maran, looking down on the smallest skeletons, the smallest of which would fit on her arm.

"Do not weep for them," said Crow, kicking another pile of bones. He pulled forth a femur, cracked and gnawed. "This is a dwarf bone. They cracked it and sucked the marrow out of it. They were cannibals. They killed and ate many victims. I do not weep for them."

Curious, Maran knelt down and felt the soil. She concentrated. In a few moments, she joined the soil, feeling where things were inside it. She looked about, spotting what she could spot. Looking this way is much like finding an object in the dark. She could see tell there was an object there, but she could see little more.

Maran dug beneath someplace which she supposed an altar. In a few minutes, she uncovered a coffer of stone and copper, about the size of a loaf of bread. Those around her gathered, curious about what she might find. On opening, she found a collection of ancient coins bearing the names and faces of long forgotten kings.

The last passage went very far into the mountains. They walked a long way, passing many side tunnels. Underneath the hills was a maze of passages. After a while, they turned around and returned to the pool.