

# A Monster's Job: Rage of the Chaos Prince

## Part One: Before the War

### Chapter One:

Both figures turned back, looking at the a city, a single mark of civilization in an otherwise untamed and unappealing desert. The clouds above were hardly existant and the harsh desert sun glared mercilessly down upon the two. Both stares were filled with a certain longing, like that of a young child forced to leave his first house. Both figures were accompanied by a horse.

The first, a beautiful and attractive young woman, perhaps seventeen years old, looked to her companion for a few moments before shrugging, pausing only long enough for him to match her stare. Silently, she congratulated herself for convincing the other, a thick and heavily built young man, to leave the city Keell, their birthplace. Maria, the girl, smiled and silently thanked whatever higher being that had blessed her with the striking good looks that had immediately caught this ones heart.

She looked down at her clothes, a brown robe that was designed to both keep the heat off their bodies and to hide them from sight, especially at long distances. Her distaste was all but palpable as she considered the way it hid her body. She wasn't a thin and skinny girl, whose beauty was founded in her thin waist line but rather she was voluptuous and thick, but all the excess weight was in the perfect spots to attract the attention of almost any man.

The second figure, a stocky and powerfully built young man named Tank. His arms and shoulders were thick and muscular and from that point he looked as though he was lean with muscle only, which was the result of years of being a blacksmith. Both sides of his body, oddly enough, were evenly built, which was unusual for blacksmiths of this age, but that was the result of familial wisdom. Tank had learned at a young age that throwing off the balance of his body was quite often fatal for both warriors and for workers. Thus, he'd trained his body to be equally effective on both sides.

Oddly enough, his thighs and calves were heavily built also. The entirety of his work didn't remain in the forge, for to do so would make him dependent and unbalanced. Thus, he'd begun to lift his own metal and help one of his close friends with their horses.

Maria, the beautiful young woman, looked upon her companion with much pride, if not love, and Tank looked back, his eyes filled with some emotion that was not reflected in by the Maria.

But Tank didn't notice that.

"It is time we left," Tank said quietly, looking at his dear Maria then back at Keell, "the Copper Bulls will bring their wrath down on us." He referred to the law force of Keell. Maria looked at him somewhat doubtfully but then nodded when Tank looked back towards her. He nodded then turned, leading their equine companions away from the city of their birth, away from their home, away from their lives.

As they walked, Tank shifted uncomfortably. His horse, a beautiful brown horse, was of the Przewalski breed. Silently he patted the beast's side, quietly muttering, "'S a good girl, Deina, 's a good girl." They walked in silence for many more minutes, Maria atop her horse, Tank's holding all of their supplies, the majority of which were Maria's. Tank walked beside his own horse, whom his friend had named Deina.

Maria offered no such reassurances to her own horse, an almost black female named Leata.

"So your father made the law force angry because he was trying to halt a smuggling and was framed for it, huh?" Tank said after three or four hours of travel. Maria looked over to him and nodded curtly. Tank shrugged and continued to walk.

Maria, realizing she may have hurt his feelings, spoke again, "I am sorry. It is just an emotional

time for me," Tank silently thought to himself that it wasn't just her life that was changing, "and I don't wish to speak of the circumstances that force me to abandon my life."

Maria's father was one of the wealthiest merchants in the city, controlling the entire trade of metals, salt and wood, three things that were ever so important to the peoples of Keell. And particularly important to Tank, who lived off of the metals that her father had brought in.

It was a few hours before the sun began to sink and immediately Tank stopped the horses.

Maria began to ask why when in the distance she heard some sort of howling.

"We will need a fire and a tent," Tank said absently, not expecting her to help but thinking it prudent to inform her as to what steps were being taken for survival.

The horses could easily fend for themselves, for the desert hunters, coyotes, but the horses would enjoy the fire's light. Tank, bringing out his favored weapons, a heavy hammer and a flail, and kept them towards the middle of the camp as the night went on. On his back lay a shield, not very large but enough to offer protection from most weapons. In the distance they heard the howl of hungry predators and occasionally they heard some yipping.

Tank often wondered if wolves were out there instead of the more numerous coyotes. He was thankful to the horses for carrying the wood that provided the fire. He smiled over at Maria, whose eyes barely stayed awake, whose eye lids were hardly up. She gave the ghost of a smile back, which was all that she could manage in her current state, and he silently thanked whatever higher being might listen for letting them meet.

Maria opened her eyes and saw that the sun was barely up. Their tent, which she'd been carried to by Tank, was the only thing not packed up in the camp. She rose to her feet and began to help with the tent. After it was put away, Tank thanking her for the help, she looked down at her clothes with no small amount of distaste.

"I must wear new clothes," she informed Tank, who sighed and shrugged, smiling to himself. He nodded and turned around, giving her the privacy she obviously desired. Or so he believed.

Maria sighed and had hoped to gain more influence over the stocky Tank in the next few moments as she changed clothes, showing off her voluptuous body almost entirely. But Tank, a boy at heart and a man in head and body, never looked back once. Maria was almost disappointed, but she knew that his respect for her was a good sign.

They were moving soon after, Maria riding on Deina this time while Leata carried the majority of the supplies, aside from what Maria wore and Tank, walking next to Leata, wore in his backpack. Tank's flail, the lighter of his weapons, hung on his hip and the heavy metal ball bounced on the end of its chain with his every step.

Tank was silently appreciative for the relative non-lethality of the weapon. The heavy ball was not spiked as most flails were, and though the ball was very heavy, Tank could maneuver it the same ease, if not skill, as most warriors could wield a rapier. Even as they walked Tank went through his physical exercises, making sure his entire body was at equilibrium, making sure both his upper and lower body were thoroughly stretched.

Maria watched him the entire time, taking some interest in his body but not much. His shoulders and chest had ample muscle, as did his legs, but his midsection was flabby. His gut was not especially large, hardly enough to slow him down in running, but it was enough to ward off the attraction of most girls not worried for their future.

"We will be at Sprinkleberry within two days," Tank said as they stopped for their first break of the day. Maria ate very little, as did Tank, but the male's lack of eating was more for the conservation of their supplies. The two sat in silence after Tank informed her of their arrival date and Tank could tell she was not happy about it at all.

"I am very happy you came along," Tank said and Maria nearly blanched. She was unsure as to how Tank came to that conclusion, seeing as how it wouldn't have happened at all had she not been in

trouble, but she smiled and waited for him to elaborate.

"I had enough to pay for the horses, not for the supplies to get here. We could be out here for another two days and not go thirsty if we drank whenever we wanted," he smiled at her, "But if he take care of our supplies were could easily go for an entire week. I appreciate it very much and I understand your sacrifice."

Maria suddenly began to feel bad. How was he so... naive? How did he not realize that this was all because of her? He would be back home, happily crafting weapons if she hadn't brought him along.

She almost apologized, trying to explain some guilt that she was unused to, when he began to speak once again.

"I was never happy before I met you," Tank said, silencing her thoughts. Maria stared at him for many moments, her soft brown eyes matching his light blue orbs. She was struck by the passion in the eyes, by the... love?

"My father died when I just thirteen years old," Tank began, "I was... destroyed. My mother died at my childbirth and I couldn't bring myself to accept that I was on my own. After a couple of years, I finally decided to end it. My father had always told me that if something wasn't worth doing, then you should decide on a new course.

"I decided to end myself, to end my suffering. I was going to do it the day that your father sent you to my smithy. I was going to..." he stopped and brought a sleeve up to wipe his eyes, then looked at her again, "I didn't. I stopped and now I'm still alive."

"I didn't do anything..." Maria said softly, looking at him and wondering about everything she'd thought about him before.

"Maybe not," Tank said quietly, looking up at her, "But you did save my life."

They sat in silence for a few moments.

"I am glad that you chose me to go with you, even if I'm not the best," Tank said after a little bit and Maria couldn't help but feel that she, too, was lucky. But she'd never say that. She knew that he was only there because he was so deeply in... love... with her, though she didn't really understand it.

But Tank seemed to have a basic understanding of how to do this stuff... or did he? She wondered.

Unfortunately, she was far from empathetic. Thus, she lacked the ability to see things from his perspective. And that left her without a sense of security in the way he saw her.

"We need to move," Tank said soon after and that left Maria with her thoughts.

Chance looked down at the feet of his master, a man shrouded in darkness. He almost allowed for his eyes to wander upwards but the young warrior knew better than to do that. He was what could be called a Spellsworn, a warrior who was dependent on magic because his physical prowess, which was far from meager, wasn't nearly as strong as his magical abilities.

The blades at his hip, a dirk in his left sheath, a long blade in his right sheath, were both glowing, even in their sheaths. The room around him was darkened, but in the area around the master's head there was a darkness deeper than any natural shadow. No normal darkness would ever reach that level of emptiness.

And Chance knew that the master thrived in that darkness, the darkness that only a creature of truly evil weal would ever inhabit willfully, and that fact was more than enough to terrify Chance into servitude. That and the fact that Chance had been taken in by the guild of thieves, assassins, rogues and cut-throats when he was a young boy.

But the Black Hoods had no desire to kill their youngest and brightest assassin. And they were giving the young assassin his most important mission yet. To kill Maria Findella, the daughter of a most treacherous merchant, one that had gone into major debt, one that had taken magical devices that were most valuable to the Black Hoods.

Now they hunted Maria and Chance was the one charged with that not so daunting task.

"You will accomplish this with the subtlety of the Black Hoods. We will give you the full forces you require. Do not fail us on this." There was nothing but a firm, even tone to the words. The obvious threat behind the words was not so subtle to the young male, who nodded deferentially to the Master.

"You are our prime student," the Master's deep and dark voice continued, "You are to kill her with no thought as to why and without speaking to her beyond that which is required to make her wail.

"She was last seen leaving the city, a young man beside her. It would be wise of you to end him in front of her, in order to produce the proper helplessness. Her father's spirit, in seeing his single child, his beautiful daughter, murdered savagely by those he stole from."

Chance nodded grimly. The Black Hoods were run by more than reputation and threat, as much by magical power as by skill with the blade and tongue. No enemies could escape them. And because Maria's father had deemed herself an enemy his soul had been stolen from his body, his mortal coil.

And now he was trapped in some holding cell, seeing and hearing from the outside while only those with the aptitude that generally accompanied future magicians or those with the skill, power and knowledge of a magician could see within the orb.

With a nod to and from his Master, Chance left the room after a dismissive wave.

The Spellsword assassin, Chance, strode through the city of Keell feeling confident. At his sides were his powerful blades, the dirk called Furyflicker, which could speed him up to the point that his hands were a blur, the sword called Duskspawn, a blade that could leave a trail of darkness in its wake and, if mentally activated, it would induce a dark, evil poison into the body. The poison's effects varied quite often.

As he walked, he smiled to himself, for as he past the more wealthy part of Keell he noticed that a large portion of the girls were smiling up at him, as many blushing as not when he looked back with a wink. He grinned at his long blonde hair moved in the soft breeze. His dark brown eyes had, in the past, caught the eyes of young girls and gotten him very far with them. As he considered the attention he felt himself swell with power, as if he were growing stronger for it.

Without much thought, he quickly found himself in the far east of the city, in a quarter of the city known for its assassin. Long ago it'd been aptly named the Assassin Quarter, though in reality it was little more than a few streets.

As he thought of the fact that he was there he looked upon exactly the place he'd been going.

"The Spellsingers," he mouthed to himself as a sly grin spread across his face. He hadn't really thought of them but had somehow shown up in front of the only well kept house in this neighborhood, the Assassin Quarter.

The house itself seemed a mixture of many different colors, bright reds and greens mixed with somber blues and browns, all of it mixing together to produce a somehow pleasing picture, one filled with much contrast. Above the single door hung a sign, upon which read, 'The softest Soprano with the deepest bass, the darkest Baritone and the lightest Alto, will blare loudly in any warrior's face, and bring down any foe.'

Chance grinned broadly again, then nodded to himself. These musical, powerful and ultimately deadly warriors, the Spellsingers, were the perfect answer to his little problem. And years before, he'd made friends with the leader of the group, a powerful bass Spellsinger called Figaro Low.

As soon as Chance stepped up to the door he could hear the voices of the warriors within. Immediately the Spellsword assassin had a deep appreciation for the power within, for even outside he could feel the power of their voices. And even as his hand reached for the door knob a loud, painful sounding screech that was somehow harmonic sounded from above.

Chance was dazed and the door in front of him whipped open. A hand from inside flashed forward, grabbing the Spellsword by the chest, and pulled back within. The high pitch screech sounded again and as the Spellsword realized what was happening he was knocked back in dizziness. He felt his

heart seem to stop and then saw the ground rushing up at him.

Tank wiped sweat off his brow and sighed, knowing there had to be some method to recycle that. He chuckled as he thought of Maria's opinion. She had a particular dislike for anything that might be dirty, something that Tank, as a worker, had to get over years before.

The sun's heat was enough that even Maria, who rarely, if ever, spent much time working hard physically, to sweat. He'd never seen her sweat and whether it was weird or not that didn't really affect him. He'd grown up with workers and hadn't gone a day without pushing his body to fatigue limits. He was the best blacksmiths and his wares and weapons were without equal in quality. He'd not gone a day without getting an order for weapons or armor or any other metalwork a merchant might need.

In all honesty, the look of Maria glistened with sweat was actually attractive.

"What time do you think it is?" Maria asked and Tank looked at her in confusion.

"3:00? That would be my guess," Maria said, trying to make conversation. She was introverted but was used to people caring about what she felt at all times. She was used to people talking to her and now that they sat in silence, for what seemed hours to her, she was uncomfortable.

"I, uh, never really... worried about time," Tank said to her after a few moments of thought, "As a blacksmith I never really had to worry about what time it was because I just worked until I couldn't anymore."

"What about when you talked to me?" Maria asked to me, "You weren't working then." Tank chuckled and nodded.

"Some things are more important than work," Tank said softly to the point that Maria barely heard it. He had never really been comfortable displaying feelings beyond anger or frustration and now that he was alone with Maria for more than a day it was becoming more and more hard to find other things to talk about.

And because she'd been the basis of his fantasies for years it was hard for him. The image of her in his head was different than she actually was but it didn't really change anything. She was relatively the same, much like red and maroon are the same, with only a variation of a single shade off. But as both colors are attractive to someone who liked the color red, she was still pleasant to the eye and heart.

"Tank..." Maria said with a small smile, one that Tank didn't see as he trekked forward, his head down. But even with the obvious affection in her voice, which wasn't lost on Tank, he was still unsure and uncomfortable.

She was the daughter of a rich merchant and he was the son of a blacksmith and a serf. He was no one openly important. The possibility of them being together had never been real before and even at that point it still seemed a fantasy. She had the manners and mannerisms of a noble. And as much as he tried he had the etiquette of a stable boy.

He sighed and shrugged, feeling as though whatever happened it would end with her and another.

But even that feeling wasn't enough to dissuade him. She was special and he knew he had to stay with her for as long as he could. He had to protect her and had to get her to where she had to be. She was special, he knew in his heart, and she had given him a life again. Whether intentionally or not, she had and he owed her for it.

Or at least that's how he saw it.

And sometimes he didn't feel that way... sometimes he felt that he had a chance with her. And that was enough.

"I am thankful that you are here," Maria said quietly to herself.

The sun was nearly at the horizon when they stopped moving again. Tank looked over at Maria as he made their tent. She slowly got off of Leata with the grace that only a noble could pull off. With a

look she knew exactly what Tank was in the process of doing and exactly how to help.

She didn't help, of course, for that would be against the way things were supposed to be. Tank served Maria, whether out of love or lust she didn't care, or so she tried to tell herself. He was getting her from a dangerous place to a less dangerous place. That was all that mattered. He was just the means for her transportation.

She looked at him for a few moments and her emotions ranged from a type of love that she knew she felt for the nice young man, one who had helped her through many problems, both physical and emotional, to a detachment that she knew she had to have.

He wasn't the one for her and she knew that if they were to be together he would end up getting hurt. She refused to reduce herself to his level. She was the daughter of a proud merchant after all! She was worth enough that dozens of men had died to protect her and her house and twice that number of Tank's.

He... was just a means of transportation. She had to believe that.

"One day," Tank said to Maria the next morning, "One day and night, then that morning we'll be there." Maria nodded and felt different than the night before.

"Can I help with the tent?" She asked as he worked to pick everything up. Tank chuckled and shrugged as he crouched over part of the tent.

"If you can," Tank replied.

"If I can?" Maria asked defensively, "What's that supposed to mean?" Tank smiled and fell into a sitting position, looking up at her.

"It means exactly what it sounds like it means," Tank said.

"You don't think I can help?" Maria asked and accused.

"I didn't say that," Tank replied with a chuckle as he began working on the tent again.

"Well, what are you saying then?"

"I'm saying that you're not a do-er, you're an influencer," Tank said. Maria looked at the young man doubtfully. Sighing, Tank stopped working again and smiled, "Look, you grew up with servants who you had to organize and order around." Maria was about to object when he cut her off, "That's not easy and I understand that it takes work to be able to keep people in line. I couldn't do it except maybe with force of will, and that never lasts." Maria looked at him for a few moments, then shook her head, amused.

He was notorious for overthinking things and for arguing with concepts no one else understood.

They were but a day out of the city when a low buzzing sound assaulted both Tank and Maria's ears.

"Oh no," Tank immediately muttered, looking around with more than a little fear. Maria looked at him for a few moments.

"What is it?" She asked him, some concern bleeding into her voice. She immediately tried to think of all the creatures she could but none of them matched the sound that was being given off.

"Boozers," he said to himself. He looked around for several moments before he got off his horse, "Get down off yours too." Maria stared at him for a moment.

"This is a joke!" She said loudly as Tank prepared his flail for battle. He began to ready his favored shield. The hammer lay on his hip, tightly connected to his thigh that way the heavy head of the hammer wouldn't hit his leg were he to dodge.

"They are a legend," she said when he looked to her.

"Get down off the horse!" He said loudly, "They will be able to see you..."

"They don't exist," Maria argued with him. The buzzing grew louder and as soon as Maria began to get down the buzzing was almost too loud to ignore. She looked up and saw what a boozier actually was.

The creature looked somewhat similar to a giant mosquito, but rather than one proboscis, or mouth, it had three and each one dripped acid all over the ground below them. The creature flew right down towards the young woman, who stared at it in shock.

"Oh," she said softly as the creature closed in on her. She could almost feel the beat of its wings through the air when the head of a heavy hammer slammed into it, splattering its body all over her.

She looked over at Tank for a few moments, then, eyes wide, fell from the horse, unconscious.

## **Chapter Two:**

Chance looked around at the three figures, all three standing tall over him, as he considered the thick rope, knotted expertly, that strapped him to the chair he sat in. His eyes, struggling to adapt the darkness, were narrow and quick-moving as he looked at their faces. He was genuinely worried until he noticed Figaro Low.

"Ah, Low, how are you?" Chance asked and the large figure, plump in the gut and broad in the shoulder, grinned backwards, though it was hard to see behind his red beard running down to the top of his considerable stomach. The grin was short lived, for beside him stood a striking young woman and a proud young man.

The striking woman, not overly pretty but somehow still very attractive, glared at Chance for a few moments while the young man glared at him with open contempt.

"I assume your best prodigies?" Chance asked confidently. Figaro Low had a way with his next best assassins that made them defensive and irritable. He produced the most aggressive and angry spell-singers in the land. And they were almost always the most powerful in the land also.

"They're the best," Figaro said in a surprisingly deep voice. "And they're up for hire."

Chance looked at the two for a moment, then back at Figaro, "I do believe a demonstration is in order... would you agree with that?"

Figaro grinned broadly, his fat cheeks puffing up as he looked to his most recent students, "I do believe you should show the non-believer."

Chance watched as the two stepped across from each other. The male, Fargo Baritonans, slowly stepped forward, looking at a statue of a warrior. Chance could see several spells of protection had been cast upon the statue, giving it strength beyond the ability of all but magical blades and weapons.

Fargo sucked in the air around him, seeming to bring energy into his body, then broke out into song.

It was a sweet sound, almost, edged with a darkness that somehow split the air and vibrated the walls. The voice wasn't overly deep but it was deep enough to be considered a bass. The statue began to vibrate then, as magical protections that would have taken a dozen blade strikes winked away, he took another breath, sucking in as much air as possible.

"He's known for this next move," Farigo said with obvious pride. Chance watched intently, wondering if perhaps the Spellsword would have serious competition with the Spellsinger.

The air was launched back out in a different note, a different pitch, and rather than simple pressure a blast of energy, barely visible, launched forward. The second the energy hit the statue it burst into flame, producing a wide radius of perhaps ten or fifteen feet, and once that fire was gone Fargo was releasing a third blast, this one the pressure again.

The wave of pressure hit the statue and where there had been stone there was now only dust and pebbles. The effect had been devastating and Chance found himself gripping the hilts of his blades subconsciously. He took comfort in the power they offered him.

"And now Sierra Dugazon," Farigo said, motioning towards a second statue, similarly protected.

Sierra, the striking young woman, stepped forward, scowling at the statue. Her face seemed to be locked in a perpetual scowl but none of that went through the Spellsword's mind as he watched her.

She sucked in air for a moment then immediately she released a blast of energy in the form of a

soprano voice, a high note that cut through the air and stone alike. A crack formed in the ground in front of her and before the note had reached the stone, wearing down at the protections, a second blast had been released.

She continued to gasp in air then release notes of power, each one hitting the statue and destroying the magical protections, all within a second of each other. Then she sucked in air for a long moment.

She opened her mouth and the sound that came out forced both Farigo and Chance to fall back a step, the energy of it nearly blinding them as a darkness surged forward from her body and into the statue.

Before the darkness hit Chance gasped, for the statue burst into a thousand pieces. Then once the darkness hit the stone, which had been shattered only because it was fully solid and attached to the ground, began to float for a moment. Then the darkness ended, all of it flowing into a single spot, and every piece of stone caught by the darkness flowed inward towards that spot.

Each piece that hit shattered into a hundred pieces and those on the inside were shattered into a hundred pieces once again.

She stopped her note, the power of the song only lasting a moment afterwards, then looked at Farigo. She was lathered in a thin layer of sweat and, like Fargo, she was already regaining energy. Fargo, standing next to Chance, seemed almost completely recovered already.

"Impressive," Chance said to Farigo, who grinned.

"The fee is five hundred for a week," Farigo said to Chance. The Spellsword nodded.

"I don't think it will take them a week," Chance said to the master Spell singer.

"I don't think it'll take them an hour to finish it," the master responded.

The inner part of Sprinkleberry, a giant castle with forty foot tall, twenty foot thick walls with guard towers every thirty to forty feet, each one with mounted ballistae on top. Each tower had room for four to five men to stand with little discomfort and in the base of the towers there was, no doubt, enough ammunition for the men to refill their quivers half a dozen times each. Within the walls of the city, which housed thousands, catapults were prepared to shoot over the walls at any army threatenings siege.

Outside the walls, there were three walls to defend, were villages, each one surrounded by fields that grew the crops for the city, and there were nearly a thousand serf-peasants that worked the fields. Nearly all of the house-centrals were surrounded by wooden walls, each wall surrounded by trenches filled with wooden stakes. The walls were three logs thick but there were no parts for people to stand on.

Tank walked into the outer parts of Sprinkleberry and was immediately assaulted by a sense that he was being watched. After a few moments, the feeling was explained.

The Golden Hornets, the elite guards of Sprinkleberry, stepped out of two small buildings, each heavily built and stored with weapons enough to arm an entire battalion of warriors. Their armor was black and gold, their helmets shaped in the likeness of a hornet's head, all of which added to their factor of intimidation and their likeness to the mascot of their city.

The guards were a trio, all three heavily built and armed, all three well-fed and clean shaven.

"State your business!" the tallest of the guards, nearly nine inches taller than the stocky young man Tank.

"I just come to the city for a new start," Tank said with humility, bowing before the guards. The tall guard eyed Maria's unconscious body for a few moments, taking in the sight of her body, then, with a lewd smile, he said, "She is yours?"

Tank began to nod subconsciously, his predetermined plan being to agree with whatever the guard says so long as it didn't impeded his journey, then it dawned on him what he implied. Then he

nodded his head the negative vigorously.

"Ah," said a dark haired guard from behind, this one the shortest of the guards, though he was still nearly three inches above Tank's height, "Then she owns you." The second guard chuckled and all three soon joined in. Tank, still young and some proud, blushed a little but didn't make note of it.

"Pass on through lover boy," the third guard, a blonde, said with something of a mocking tone underneath it.

Tank stepped just inside of the main gate to the city, just inside the laws, when guards stopped him again.

"We'll have no slavers in this city, unless she's your daughter, though you're looking somewhat young to have a daughter of her age," said a thin, similarly armed and armored guard. His hand slowly reached down to his crossbow, silently and gently patting the small weapon, that hung on his hip.

"She's not a slave," Tank answered, "And she's not my daughter." He looked back to her as she sat on the horse, still unconscious. He'd taken as much care of her as he could but knew, ultimately, that the most he could do would be to get her inside the city, where he could buy supplies and keep her in a cool and shaded place.

"I'm just trying to keep her alive," he said. The guard regarded him with no little amount of suspicion.

"Let me see her wrists," the wiry man said and Tank nodded. The guard stepped forward and grabbed her arm, rather roughly, then pulled her towards him. The guard had a half-smile for a moment, the fruit of a plan working, when he felt Tank's hand grab his shoulder. The grin, though, disappeared when he was whipped around.

He knew that the grip was love-inspired and not produced by a desire to keep property in decent condition. He also knew, as he saw it coming, that the fist flying his way was also love inspired. And thus when he hit the ground, disoriented, he knew that it was going to leave a mark.

Tank stopped as a crossbow bolt imbedded itself into his back, drawing blood but not digging into his skin, mainly due to his armor. He winced and whipped around, suddenly aware of several more guards, all of which closed in on him.

"I wanted no trouble," Tank began to explain when a small ball flew towards him. Leata, the horse, cried out while Deana, Leata's sister, broke forward. The small but powerful horse plowed into and through two of the guards, sending to them to the ground, while Tank grabbed a hold of Leata, holding her back with his iron grip.

This all happened as the small ball puffed out black smoke, which made seeing impossible. Tank felt a hand grab his shoulder and a knife in his back. He followed its pull and soon he was in a small alley, horse and Maria in tow, a young woman behind him.

"Thanks?" He asked, not sure if she was about to try and rob him. He felt the pressure of the knife and turned around, expecting to see her, but he was alone in the alley. He shrugged after a few moments, then continued on his way.

He was beginning to regret the loss of Deana when she walked in front of the alley. Tank looked around, confused, then once again shrugged, accepting his luck for what it seemed to be. Then, without any more obvious consideration, he began to walk forward.

Deabla sat, watching as Tank stepped out of the alley way. His eyes narrowed slightly and he brought his hand up to his jet black hair, which was neatly combed at all times, then looked down at his dark skin for a few moments. He considered his own build considered to the young man.

Neither was overly tall but where Tank was thick and powerful Deabla was small and thin. He was, in essence, a very small person. With a grin, he turned to look at the second figure in the room.

"Wombly," he said aloud, "we should follow this one. It will be very interesting, I believe."

Wombly, a young woman of medium height with dark brown hair, smiled. She was directly in

the middle of stretching, easily moving her elbows to her toes, then, without putting her hands to the ground, she rolled to her feet.

"Alright," she said with a smile. Her brown clothes, all of which were baggy but still neat, had no wrinkles and her shoes, brown also, revealed her well-taken care of feet. In her hand she held one of the small, black balls that had been thrown into group of guards. Deabla himself wore a simple cloak, pure black, that could put a hood over his head.

She and their third companion, Ashe, stood there. Both of them knew to follow Deabla's suggestions and feelings. He was, more often than not, the only reason they got involved with some of their most profitable times and how they got out of trouble.

The third young woman had blonde hair and bright blue eyes, though they were somewhat small compared to the rest of her. And despite that slight variation, she, like Wombly, was attractive. And where Wombly was thin and but not lean, Ashe was lean. Her body, worked for many years in the art of assassination, was strong.

"These are magnificent," Ashe commented as Wombly handed her yet another of the small spheres. Wombly looked to her, a wide smile crossing her face, and nodded.

"Thank you Ashe," she said with genuine friendliness. Ashe nodded, the moment over for her, and looked back to Deabla, who watched them with more than passing interest. When Wombly noticed she shifted her weight, somewhat uncomfortable with their intuitive friend's gaze upon them.

"We should follow them," Deabla reiterated, "It will be... good for all of us, I think." He smiled sheepishly. He was small and aside from to these two what he thought rarely mattered. But he had some weird ability to guess... to feel... when certain things were going to be important and how people were feeling.

"Alright," Wombly said, "I think that it could be fun!" Ashe shrugged and nodded non-committedly.

Tank looked at a particularly average inn. A small, empty stable by the main building and that was his main attraction to the place. He felt the remaining wealth that they owned, enough to pay for at least a week of lodgings, if not food. But there was a second reason the inn called to him.

An abandoned forge next to the inn, the memory of a time when this place had just been a small village, was the main source of interest to him. He stepped forward and left his horses at the stable, for a small stable-boy had rushed out of the inn upon seeing his approach. Before the boy took the reins of the horses he reached out.

Tank dropped a coin into the child's hand, who's eyes stared at the silver currency for a minute, as if wondering if this was a joke, then nodded. Tank watched as the boy enthusiastically went about his tasks as stable boy. It brought Tank some joy to see the effort, even if it wasn't done efficiently or with any practiced movements.

As soon as he saw his horses being offered hay and water he turned to the door of the inn.

Once inside, Tank, carrying Maria like a knight would a princess, saw that a few people lay in the corners of the room, sitting at chairs, most definitely unconscious. And Tank figured it wasn't due to exhaustion alone, his reasoning founded by the empty bottles of liquor clutched tightly in their sleep-grip.

A young woman, younger than Tank by at least three years, though he figured her fifteen years old at the latest, worked hard on the tables, attempting to clean off dirt that seemed to be part of the table rather than on the table. She looked up at him, moving her long red hair out of her face, and gave a sweet smile his way.

He looked into her bright green eyes and saw an oldness there that didn't seem to belong in one her age. He knew that look, for he'd seen it in many of the women around. She was becoming of age to go out and get married, it seemed, and her father, the innkeeper no doubt, would no longer have much, if any, control over her life. And because of the station of her birth, she would have little control over

her own life throughout her time on this realm.

He looked down her body and knew that she would no doubt draw the eye of some richer man. Based on the look in her eyes, he knew she didn't really want to serve him. Thus, when she looked at him, there was a suggestion of something that he didn't really understand, something that he figured he didn't want to understand.

"Esmeralda, quit yer star'in!" the innkeeper said softly but firmly and he looked to Tank, a friendly grin on his face.

"I'd like to buy a room for the night," he said and the innkeeper looked down at Maria with a suspicious expression on his face, "Two beds, if you will?" Tank corrected himself and the innkeeper seemed more at ease.

"Three," the innkeeper said and it seemed as if he expected argument. Tank nodded.

"Alright," the stocky young man said and he sat Maria in a sitting position before he reached into the pouch that held all their cash. He handed three gold coins to the innkeeper, who nodded and smiled again.

"Ye can call me Harold," the innkeeper said, "Harold Housekeep. That there's my daughter Esmeralda Housekeep. Twas named by her mother, who's long dead, bles her grave, an' not by myself, else she'd have an easier name to say. My boy's out there. His name's Alron Housekeep." He grinned and reached out with a hand.

Tank took that hand and shook, then found a key in his hand.

"Up the stairs and first room to the left," Harold informed Tank, who gently picked up Maria.

"Oh, and I don't have'a room with two beds, but I'll get you a chair or some blankets for you to sleep on," Tank nodded as he walked.

He followed Harold's directions and opened the door, the secreted the key in their money pouch, and stepped in. He laid Maria on the bed gently, seeing that she was probably within an hour of waking, or so. He walked back downstairs, locking the door once outside, and went out to find the stable Alron, Harold's son, vigorously brushing Leata's side.

Tank, smiling, flipped him another silver. The boy, with surprisingly quick hands, caught the coin. His hands had been a blur and Tank silently marked that. He'd seen thieves that could do tricks like this and steal from you during that. They fancied themselves magicians but they really just knew a cheap trick with one hand and stole from people's pockets with the other.

He nodded to Alron, grabbed their packs, then turned. He looked back to see Alron moving on to Deana. He smiled as he thought of the way Leata looked before and the dramatic improvement that Alron had produced.

He got back in just in time to see Harold holding several rough blankets and a chair. The chair was somewhat heavy, enough so that Harold, his age at least in the late forties, had a hard time holding.

Tank lifted it easily with one arm then, as he was leaving, allowed Harold to see his heavy hammer, the same one that he used as a Blacksmith. As he walked up the stairs, he turned back, "I take it you have no one using that smithy outside?" He asked.

"Not since I was a boy," Harold answered.

"Seems to be in pretty good condition," Tank said and Harold nodded, "I've got tools."

"I do too," Harold smiled, "You want a job?"

"Only if it pays," Tank replied and Harold laughed.

"I'll give you four gold for four horseshoes," Harold offered and Tank looked at him for a moment, making direct eye contact, as his father had taught him when he was young, and smiled.

"Six eight for four horseshoes," he replied and Harold grinned, knowing he was still getting a wonderful deal. He nodded and Tank grinned.

"A coin off per night?" he said and Harold gave him a mock-serious name.

"Fine," the innkeeper said after considerable mock-thought. Tank turned and continued up the stairs.

After Tank was gone, Esmeralda watched his back and Harold grinned at her.

"I would give it a shot," he said with a wink, "Blacksmiths make a good amount of money. And if he's half as good as he looks like he would be then he'll be leading this part of Sprinkleberry."

Tank sat in his room for around half an hour before Maria opened her eyes. She looked around, wary of her surroundings, then she moved and looked at him. Her relief at seeing him was short lived. For she remembered the look in his eyes when he'd killed the boozier... the intensity still scared her.

### **Chapter Three:**

Maria woke up and heard the ring of metal on metal. It wasn't the kind that she'd heard the night before, the kind that was produced by a sword fight but rather the kind she had heard whenever she had been with Tank. He was working already. She saw that the sun had rose over the horizon just minutes earlier.

She walked down the stairs to see Deabla sitting at the bar, a glass of wine sitting in on the table in front of him. He seemed deep in thought when she walked forward and only when she sat on the bar stool next to him did he notice her.

"Where are your friends?" she asked after they exchanged nods. Deabla had been drinking when she asked and he sat staring at the table for a moment.

"Oh, yes," he said as if he'd forgotten, "They are out. I believe Wombly is getting the items that she needs for Tank to complete one of her experiments... and Ashe is doing... whatever it is that Ashe does." He grinned at her and Maria smiled back.

"So you were born here?" She asked just to keep the conversation going. Maria had the social skills wrought of years of being a powerful merchant's daughter and though she knew exactly how to become friends with almost anyone, she didn't know how she felt about the three newcomers. She had Tank perfectly under her control. These three were variables and could mess with her influence on him.

"I was," Deabla said, "My mother lived near here, actually, or so I was told. My father was a guard and she was a prostitute. Now I'm here... my father's either dead or of some rank in the city and my mother... well, I don't know where she is. She never claimed me after she dropped me off in one of the temples."

"Temples?" Maria asked.

"Children are left in them if we're not wanted by our family," Deabla said in a matter-of-factly manner, as if he didn't care about it anymore or he'd never cared about it at all. She wondered what that had been like but had almost no time to consider it, as Wombly walked into the room. She watched the merchant's daughter curiously, almost suspiciously. Maria returned the look.

"I have the stuff," Wombly said after they traded stares, "How much copper do we have left?"

Deabla pulled out eight pieces of copper, once coins but now just smashed pieces of metal, they were all now just crushed pieces of the soft metal.

"I think that will be enough," Wombly said, her eyes filled with some worry. Maria was about to say that he had jobs that offered gold, which one piece was ten times the worth of one piece of copper, when Harold smiled as Esmeralda spoke.

"I'm sure we can help them out a little if Tank won't accept that money..." the young woman said, "And I think he will..."

"You two and your friend saved his and my life," the innkeeper said to Deabla and Wombly, "I'll help if you don't have enough, but he's a fair young man and I doubt you'll need anymore than that. And if he charges too damn much then I'll raise his rent and get the money from him," he winked.

Maria, the entire time, seemed very unhappy about the entire thing. She noted the horseshoes at the back of the bar, newly and masterfully crafted, and knew that the money had already been paid. She hadn't been there and hadn't seen the exchange, but she imagined that Tank had given some of it to the stable boy, who she thought was called Alron.

He was fond of the stable boy for some reason that Maria couldn't comprehend. It seemed as if his work, something he should be doing either way, was why Tank liked him. She had to admit, their horses looked better than they had since they left. And they'd only been at the inn, which she found out was called Harold's Hill, for a few days.

She was lost in thought when she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned and saw Esmeralda, a small smile on her face, standing behind her. Maria's scowl was more from the smudge on her dress-clothes that Esmeralda had produced.

"What is it?" the merchant's daughter asked impatiently.

"I was wondering if you could help me with-" Esmeralda began but Maria cut her off, hot anger building up in her.

"If I was a serving girl then yes, I would happily work with you. But I'm not. I'm here off of gold that is mine, gold that I have and that you don't. I don't think I will help you with whatever it is that you need help with!" Maria didn't know where the outburst came from but immediately after she said it she regretted it.

She didn't like Esmeralda but the tears that lined the serving girl's eyes were not what she'd wanted to happen. And the way the rest of the inn, even a couple of drunks who'd awakened, stared at her made her feel as though she'd just stabbed the young girl.

"I'm... sorry," Maria said after a few moments. Rather than turn and run away crying, like most girls, Esmeralda shook her head, "No you're not.

"You're just mad because you can't control everyone at all times. You're just mad that you aren't the boss, you're not the only one with any plans. He's not yours to control. He's a person, not just some piece of property!" As she spoke she gained momentum and the later in the words she went the louder she said them.

"I'm... I know he's not property..." Maria said after a few moments. Her eyes were wide and she was somewhat unnerved by the young woman. How did she know that she wanted to control him? She didn't think of him as property, or at least she didn't always think of him as property, and she had no idea how she should think of him.

He wasn't just an animal but he wasn't the type that she would ever be with. He wasn't the type that she could eventhink of living with, much less reproduce or raise a family with.

"No you don't," Esmeralda said, her eyes brimmed with rage and tears, and she turned away, walking over to the tables and cleaning them off. One drunk attempted to console her but she snapped at him, silencing him with a glare and a rude word.

The drunk seemed somewhate offended but instead of getting up and leaving, he lifted his arm, requesting a drink. He lifted three coppers and Harold walked out, moving past Maria without any type of expression. He didn't know how he felt about the interaction. He loved his daughter and knew that Tank would make a good husband. But he also knew that Tank was deeply enthralled with Maria and if this outburst cost them a blacksmith and a good renter, a steady income, he wasn't sure if it was worth the losses.

"Well... I'm going out to talk to Tank about my invention," Wombly said after a few moments of awkward silence. She turned and left, heading out to the forge.

Fargo and Sierra sat on one side of the camp, midday, while Chance sat on the other. They were a group of three and their horses made them six. Also, the smoke that rose up into the sky brought them attention. They heard the dull buzz of boozers and suddenly they all knew that they would be under attack soon.

Chance readied his blades, his dirk Furyflicker in his right hand and his sword Duskspawn in his left. Fargo seemed to be humming while Sierra sat in perfect silence, breathing in and out in perfect form. She gathered as much air as she possibly could while not causing herself to delay at all.

Fargo's humming made Chance feel as though a they were in the middle of an explosion of

energy. The energy flowed just around them, not reaching out any further than Chance could reach but staying close enough that he could feel the tell-tale sign of magic, a tingling of his skin. He almost felt as though his blades, which he gripped tightly, were useless against this kind of power.

Then he saw the drawback of Spellcasting. Fargo ran out of breath, after many moments, and the energy remained for just a moment, then, like water spreading out over the ground, it diffused into the air around it. The magic was lost and even as Fargo breathed in, a lungful that was deeper than most people could hope to draw in.

The boozers, physically attuned to the magical portions of the world, saw the break in the defenses and began a swift attack. Four came at once, Sierra striking three of them down with her own song, an aggressive and almost anger filled swipe of darkness that boozers were used to on the different realms. But here, without the simple abyss that filled many worlds, the fly-like demons were thrown off by not only the darkness but by the magic behind it.

Their wings torn from their bodies and their exo-skeletons broken, they were easy prey for Chance on the ground. Furyflicker stabbed out at one, its abilities speeding up his hands, at the same as Duskspawn's lopping off of a second wounded boozers head. The third one was easy pickings also, its body and sensibilities shattered, but the fourth, which escaped Sierra's attacks, forced Chance into a defensive stance almost immediately.

Though his hands could move quickly the rest of his body wasn't enhanced as well. Thus, as the creature rushed in, pincers snapping and spear-like appendages stabbing at him all at once, Chance was forced to step back and defend himself. One of the appendages almost got through when Chance finally got himself righted.

As the boozers attacked more buzzed as they flew towards the magical field. Attuned to the magic, the disturbance in the normal fields of energy had drawn their attention. Fargo had wanted to finish off Chance's enemy, more to show his dominance than out of any desire to save the spellword assassin, but because of the new attention he had to produce the defensive shield again.

Chance, deciding to live up to his name as a Spellword, quietly chanted for a moment. The words came out undecipherable at first, as he tried to remember the exact words to the spell, but even as he muttered he built up his own magical energy. Without delay, he said the last three words to a short and quick spell, one that wasn't all that effective but would do for a distraction.

Four red balls of magical energy shot from his chest, all of which slammed into the boozers main body. The fly-like demon took spazzy steps back, barely controlling its body as it worked to keep from getting killed, but it was no use. Chance stepped forward, his hands a blur, and only Duskspawn cut into the creature, with barely a scratch. The blade, though, tore through the exo-skeleton and, upon the Spellword's thought, a black, inky poison pumped into the boozers.

It screamed as only a few drops began to flow through its system, turning its insides literally against itself, and the boozers was soon on the ground, writhing in agony. With a cruel and emotionless grin, the Spellword flicked his wrist, Duskspawn following and lopping the boozers head off.

Sierra continued to take down boozers for the next couple of minutes and as the power of the magical field around them grew, less of the fly-like demons flew in towards them. They'd learned long ago, on this realm or another, that when something was powerful enough to take on a dozen of its kin that a single one should avoid that thing.

"Three days out of the city," Chance said. They didn't move with the urgency that Maria and Tank had. Thus what had taken the pair only a few days would take the trio nearly a week. "If we still need to go in."

"The assassin failed, else by now we would have been called back," Fargo said in response, something that Chance hadn't actually thought about. But Fargo's reasoning was sound and the skilled Spellword wouldn't argue about it. And even if he had argued, his logic sound or not, it would have meant next to nothing.

The Spellingers were loyal to each other above anything else and he simply wasn't one of them. He knew this and accepted it. No matter how well he argued his case, to Sierra, or Fargo is Sierra's argument was at stake, it would be a losing argument.

The days went by and Wombly, Ashe and Deabla felt more at home in the inn. Wombly and Tank spent most of their time working on Wombly's experiment. After two days, Tank finished the new weapon Wombly had been talking about but they were still working on it, finishing it for Wombly's version of perfection.

She paid Tank the eight copper they owned, which Tank returned with drinks, food and shelter easily. He had been working much on the side and the new smithy in this part of the city had brought him much attention. And rather than raising the price he'd kept it below everyone else's, allowing him to gain a customer base before he tried to become competitive.

And because people were going to Tank's smithy, they bought drinks and ate at Harold's Hill, which more than paid for the boarding, food and drinks of Wombly and Tank's friends. Maria, the entire time, remained distant but was interacting with the others.

Deabla and Ashe typically sat in the back of the room, sipping on their wine. Ashe trained often, her body moving quick, her blades quicker and her mind quicker still. During that time, after Tank had finished Wombly's weapons, they'd trained together once.

"You're too... slow and awkward," Ashe had said to Tank on that day, "You fight with too much... of something. Here, let's go."

Tank regarded her skeptically. They were standing in the middle of the inn and many of the customers were currently eating. Several remarked at the fact that he couldn't not accept a challenge from a girl. Tank looked at Harold for a few moments, he nodded with a wry grin on his face. He then looked to Maria, who simply shrugged, obviously not happy about it but... she didn't stop it. Tank looked back at Ashe, then nodded.

"Let's clear some space."

The tables, customers still at them, were cleared and a ring was formed by chalk, provided by Wombly, who'd walked in during the process of clearing out the mock battle-arena. Maria went behind the bar with Esmeralda, the two of which seemed to be actually friendly. It wasn't unoften that Maria helped Esmeralda with cleaning or serving, which vindicated Harold, who was happy that he was able to pay the young woman some small amount.

It seemed to him that Tank and she had been growing less... enthralled with one another. Well, Tank was still obviously enthralled with her still. He still did almost anything she asked and allowed her to spend any amount of their money so long as it didn't reduce how much they could give to Harold and on his own craft.

But she seemed less inclined to be nice to him. In reality, he supposed she was just comfortable again. Things were stable and she was living easy. She was still decent to him, nice enough to avoid an abusive friendship, because it was all dependent on him.

In truth, they were all better off for each other. Harold gave the young adults a place to live, Tank brought in new customers, Wombly and the others had saved Tank and Maria, and they all helped each other to feel happy.

And since Tank had been working on Wombly's weapons, something neither were willing to share any information on it, there was purpose. All seven members of the make-shift family felt excited about the project. And though they'd finished her new idea it hadn't yet lived up to Wombly's not-small expectations yet. But now, neither thought of that.

Now Tank stood across from Ashe, his flail in his right hand, his shield, newly created in his new smithy, strapped to his fore-arm. Ashe held in her hands her blades, both of which were long and curving blades, known as katanas. She eyed him and many in the room wondered whether Tank would

survive should Ashe proved the victor.

They stared at each other for a few moments, each weighing the other up, when taunts came from both sides.

"You two gonna sit there and look pretty or are ya gonna fight?" "Here now, we didn't stop to see ye look'in at each other!" "What're ye try'in to bore the other to death?"

Ashe dashed forward and the blade in her left hand jabbed forward, stabbing directly towards Tank's left shoulder. Maria and Esmeralda both gasped, stepping forward towards them, while many of the customers began hooting and hollering, thinking the blood-shed was already upon them. But the sound of steel on steel rang out instead of the squish of steel on skin.

"Hey! He blocked it!" "His shield did it?"

Both people were right. Immediately once the blade came in at Tank he was moving, his shield cutting upwards. He blocked the blade and he spun around, his flail rushing out towards Ashe. The girl jumped backwards, her kantanas close to her body, and many of the customers hooting and hollering.

"He scared the tar out o' her!" "Got so close I thought we'd be clean'in up some blood!"

Ashe rushed in again, ducking under Tank's flail as he swung it about. He bashed forward with his shield, nearly taking her in the face, and only Ashe's experience in battle kept her on conscious. She rolled backwards to her feet. Tank came on quickly, his flail swinging low. She jumped it and Tank tried to bull-rush her.

But when she jumped, it wasn't just high enough to clear the weapon's reach. She landed behind Tank, who hadn't reacted quickly enough to turn around. She put her blades up behind him, in positions that forced Tank into an awkward position.

"Well, that was fun!" Harold said aloud, hoping to diffuse the situation. Upon Ashe's victory he could see Tank tightening up, as if he were about to try something stupid. But as the innkeeper spoke the two fighters both relaxed. Ashe stepped back.

"You're too stiff, too... used to fighting on the ground. You have to use your enemies body and your environment to your advantage," Ashe said to Tank, who turned and looked at her. He nodded, more than aware that she would be more knowledgeable than him in the ways of combat. He was, in his mind, nothing more than a blacksmith. He wasn't a warrior, not like his family before him.

"Thank you," he said and turned to leave. Men almost shouted taunts but they remembered the report of the man who'd been hit in the chest by Tank's hammer. It had smashed his chest in, breaking him and all but killing him. It'd taken a trio of priest to just keep him from dying initially. No one expected the man to ever breathe without weeping ever again.

Tank was just leaving from Harold's Hill to take a walk when he noted three little kids, perhaps ten years old, bent over in a small alley. He took several steps forward, as silent as he could, but he needn't have. The children were very concentrated on something and even if Tank had shouted they wouldn't have turned away.

He noticed that it was a few small pieces of bread, some meat and cheese. They'd probably stolen it, or so it looked at that moment, but he didn't blame them. They were malnourished in the extreme, and the nice meat, bread and cheese seemed to be from a wealthy place. He was well off and even he hadn't had a meal like they were eating.

"Hey kids," he said as one of the children finished. The young girl turned and looked at him, her eyes wide with fear, then she tapped her two friends on the shoulder. Both little boys, the one she tapped initially pulled away, thinking she was asking for some of his, but when he looked up, after finishing moments after her, he followed her gaze and his own eyes widened.

The third child looked up soon after and all knew that they were caught. Tank just smiled and nodded, then reached into his pocket. He pulled from it three silvers, "These will get you food, but if you just show people that you have them, they will get you into a lot of trouble." He tossed them to the children, all of which stared at the silver with shock. "They're worth ten coppers," Tank explained.

He knew they'd never seen a silver before and that they weren't aware of the coins' worth. He didn't bother try to invite them in. They'd grown up on the street and likely seen their friends trapped by slavers because they accepted the hospitality of others. But he knew these kids were in trouble. No one stole from the nobles because they had guards. The fact that these children had risked that much said much to Tank.

"You're too kind sometimes," he heard Wombly's voice from behind.

He turned around and looked at her, then back at the kids as they ran into the alleyway.

"Maybe," he sighed, "Hopefully." Doubtfully, he wondered if he had actually helped the kids.

"So why're you out here, anyway?" Wombly asked, "To help the children of the city with coins of silver and gold?" Tank shrugged.

"I don't know," he said, "I don't even know what I'm doing here." Wombly raised an eye brow and looked at him.

"What do you mean?"

"I just..." Tank sighed, "I am just here. I came here for Maria... and now... nothing's happening. I am just here." Wombly stared at him for a few moments. She didn't know his story, didn't know what he had been through, what he had done. She didn't know why he'd entered this city and why an assassin had gone after him.

She didn't know anything and yet they were friends. And even if he didn't know anything about her, they were on the same side. She was about to say something to him when they heard a low sound, as if someone were singing...

#### **Chapter Four:**

The flame slammed into the ground next to Tank and Wombly. A second blast of flame, accompanied by the deep singing of Fargo, who they couldn't see, flew at them and Wombly stood, paralyzed by fear. She'd never really been in combat, much less been in a magical battle. Tank, on the other hand, reacted even though he had never been in a battle either.

He dove away, grabbing Wombly as he did so, and both of them came up in a roll. She stared up at a small house for a few moments, stunned by the blast of flame, but even as she stared another blast was forming. Several high notes filled the air and suddenly they were surrounded by darkness.

Tank couldn't see what was around him but he could feel the heat and knew immediately they were in trouble. He grabbed Wombly, who was unused to being in combat, and pulled her along. Even though he didn't know what direction they were going in he knew that it was better than where they were standing before.

He came out of the darkness and fire at the front door of Harold's Hill and whether it was luck or some other agent guiding them, Tank offered a prayer of thanks to whatever gods might be listening.

Fargo and Sierra sang while Chance watched. The barrage of magical energy had caught several of the buildings on fire and killed more than a few people on the sides of the street. Chance thought that the extra blasts were unnessecary but Fargo and Sierra had insisted on making a 'big bang'. He'd figured it was just something to feed their ego but now as he watched in amazement as Tank and the girl fled into the inn.

"You going to destroy the entire inn?" Chance asked Fargo sarcastically, feeling a little more comfortable around the spellsingers. He knew they were inaccurate now and the relationship among assassins was never overly stable, much less between magical and carnal assassins. Frankly, people who used their body and people who used spells didn't usually get along.

Chance really didn't like magic, aside from that which sped his body up and fueled his weapons, so he was barely even a Spellsword. Either way, the fact that they were heavily inaccurate made him more comfortable.

"Yes," came Fargo's answer to Chance's question and Chance stared at him incredulously for a

few moments, then sighed, wondering how much trouble this would cause.

"What the hell was that?" Harold asked as soon as Tank and Wombly got inside the inn. Tank stared at him for a few moments, trying to get his head straight, then answered, "I really have no idea, but I think they were aiming at us!"

"Where did it come from?" Ashe asked as she began to run to the back of the inn.

"A small building across the street, the top floor," Wombly said quickly. Tank nodded then began to follow Ashe.

"She's going alone," Deabla said to himself, silently, then looked to the door.

"What are you doing?" the assassin asked him.

"Going with you," Tank replied.

"You'll slow me down," Ashe responded, "and I'll be able to do this better on my own."

"Bye bye," Deabla said in a distant voice as he continued to look at the door.

"I'm coming with you whether you like it or-" Tank began to yell at her when suddenly the entire building rocked. All the customers, Esmeralda, her father, Maria and Wombly's friends cried out, the heat nearly overwhelming them. Tank turned around and before he could even say something Ashe was gone.

"Alright," he said to himself as he turned. He looked at the door, where a pitch black curtain of magical energy covered the way. Tank lifted rushed up to his room, leaving Wombly, Maria, Harold, Esmeralda, a few customers, and Deabla in the room. Deabla slowly walked over to sit in the corner of the room closest to the door.

Ashe crept forward silently. The sun was dropping below the horizon and she knew that soon she would be all but invisible. She held her katanas close to her body as she saw a blast of magical energy fly forward out the building. Quickly she thought of a way to scale the building side. As she climbed she saw a single figure jump out of the building.

He was thick and powerful and reminded him of Tank. As he sang he released flame, all of which flew into the inn. She grimaced as she considered the people within. Hoping her friends would stay alive long enough for her to take on the producer of darkness within the room.

She got to the top of the building then quickly jumped in from behind. She saw a clear path to a female Spellsinger and she took up the run immediately, knowing that she had to strike quick and hard. She was just a few steps away when she felt something cut into her side. It barely pierced her skin but the attacker didn't press the advantage.

Chance grinned to himself as Duskspawn cut into the female's side. She was attractive, he knew, so he didn't want to cut her up. Maybe he didn't have to beat her. She seemed fit. But he decided instead that a quick defeat would be the best and as his blade cut into her skin the blade pumped in a very small amount of poison into her body.

But it was more than enough.

Ashe cried out as her side began to go numb. She looked at Chance for a few moments, her eyes filled with something she'd not felt in a long time. Fear.

She tried to raise her left arm but it just wouldn't respond. She couldn't get her arm up. She couldn't defend herself.

"This..." she started to speak when the magical poison numbed almost her whole body.

"It's just too easy," Chance muttered to himself. Then, thinking that he didn't technically need to kill her cleanly, he grinned to himself. With a thought, the poison that paralyzed Ashe was gone or fully ineffectively. Either way, Ashe could move again.

She rushed at him, anger and denial forcing her moves. She suddenly wasn't Ashe anymore. She

didn't know anyone, anything. Memories of Wombly and Deabla, her only friends, were gone and she was just there.

Her blades struck hard and fast and like always she was aggressive and fought with almost complete abandon. It seemed as if she weren't trying to stay alive and indeed when Ashe fought most enemies could killed her if they'd just got their bearings together. And all her enemies had fallen due to their lack of skill with their blades.

But this was a Spellsong assassin from the Black Hoods.

Chance not only blocked her attacks but countered and in one strike Ashe was forced back onto her heels. She jumped back first, then forward again to attack. She tried to beat him with rage and skill but wherever her blades struck his seemed to wait. And whenever she seemed to have him tricked up his hands seemed to speed up, catching up to her blades and blocking her attacks.

"You're trying to beat me with passion and skill," Chance said in a mocking tone, "But you're fighting the wrong way!" He grinned and pressed his advantage as she was forced to her heels. Several steps backwards and Ashe was just on the ledge, standing next to Sierra, who was still blasting the inn with her magical song.

"You are trying to beat me where I'm strongest, trying to beat me at my own game!" Chance grinned as he pressed her even further, til one of her heels was over the side of the building. Ashe tried to build up her intensity and counter but his blades were too quick and his skills too precise. His movements were well practiced and her movements were seemingly predetermined. No matter how she tried to move he was ahead of her.

Thus, when she poked at his sides with both her blades at once, a desperate and cunning move, she wasn't the least bit surprised, though surely she was disappointed and sent into despair, when his blades blocked them. She was surprised, though, when he lifted his foot and kicked forward, slamming her in the chest.

She cried out as she fell, desperation forcing her body into a roll. She hit the ground hard and tried to recover but her shoulder seemed to be filled with poison again. Chance looked down at her with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

"You're too slow and too predictable!" He gloated.

Esmeralda had lifted a cross bow at the same time as Harold. Both members of the Housekeep family waited as the assault on their inn was continued. Tank was still upstairs and Maria was behind the bar with them, fumbling with their third crossbow. Wombly stood with two of her small black balls in one hand and a weird sling-shot weapon that was filled with similarly colored orbs.

The darkness attack ended and in stepped a figure. Two crossbows and a black sphere launched forward at once, Maria's crossbow bolt flying in a moment after theirs, and all four missiles hit some invisible barrier of magic. Fargo let go of his deep humming, lowering the shield, and was about to attack when Deabla threw a table leg like a club.

The club hit Fargo in the side and threw off the Spellsonger's breathing. He turned and seemed ready to blast Deabla into a thousand pieces when, to everyone but Deabla's surprise, a hammer hit the Spellsonger in the side.

It had little effect, doing no more than throwing him off balance and nearly knocking him to the ground, but the real damage was the fact that it knocked the breath out of Fargo. A second hammer, this one larger, followed it and Fargo barely got his humming back on in time to block this one, which very likely would have been lethal.

Tank followed his hammer and threw his body at Fargo. Tank's shield slammed into the magical barrier and his flail followed behind, the heavy ball at the end of Tank's chain slamming into the barrier.

Fargo grimaced and stepped backwards, feeling the physical power of Tank's flail as it slammed into his magical shield. Fargo stepped backwards, hoping to get to the back of the inn, but Deabla's 'chair-club' tripped him up and only Fargo's humming saved him as Tank's flail came in a second time.

Fargo wondered how things had gone so badly when he realized that he had gotten close enough to the door for Sierra to see that he was in trouble.

Her singing was so high pitch that it almost seemed a scream and the darkness that hit the doorway was enough to force Tank backwards. He was about to let Fargo, who got up, get away when suddenly Wombly cried out.

"Where's Ashe?" She asked and that was all the prodding the battle-crazed Tank needed to all but blindly charge through the darkness. Harold, close behind him, grabbed his and the shocked Maria's fully loaded crossbows.

Chance watched as Tank burst through the darkness almost completely unscathed. Or so it seemed, until Tank suddenly fell forward, his strength stolen for a moment by Sierra's song. But the moment was quick and soon Tank was struggling to his feet. Fargo had his feet also and sang forth.

Unable to get a full breath, his Spell-song attacks were far from full strength and the attack only knocked Tank to his back, nearly knocking him unconscious. But Tank was struggling for his feet again quickly, especially when the back-stepping Fargo nearly tripped on Ashe's limp body. Soon enough, was dodging one of Fargo's attacks while getting up from another.

And every step Tank got closer, to Fargo's horror.

"What are you?" Fargo asked in between breaths, too low, he thought, for Tank to hear.

"Pissed," came Tank's answer.

Sierra saw a clear target and was about to take it when she saw Harold lift his crossbows. He took two shots, both at once, and the aim for both was true. She screamed, sending forth enough energy to turn a bolt. Her aim was true... almost.

One bolt turned around. The other, to both Chance and Sierra's shock, struck her in the chest.

The Spell-singer fell back, looking down at the coin-sized hole in her chest, right below her ribs, in shock. She looked at Chance for a few moments, then back at Harold, who stared up at her but didn't reload his crossbows, then fell to the floor where she lay very still.

Fargo felt the loss of her magical power in the area and immediately he knew it was hopeless. Somehow, his very first mission had been one against impossible enemies. They weren't even that well-trained or skilled! How did they do this? How could they, a group of normal people, defeat the highly trained Spell-singers from Keell?

He found his answer as he looked into Tank's eyes.

"They care for each other..." he said and he was suddenly filled with so much rage that he didn't care what would happen to him in the next few moments. He sucked in all his breath, enough to fill a lung, and knew that he would die to Tank's swinging flail but would kill the blacksmith too.

He was about to release it when suddenly a blade plunged through his chest. He looked down at it for a few moments, then, as all the breath escaped his body, looked back at Ashe. Her eyes were so cold at that moment he was honestly afraid that she would do more to him than he could ever imagine.

Was his soul safe? He wondered vaguely for a moment, until he looked forward. The flail came in hard and quick and he barely had time to comprehend it as the smooth, heavy ball slammed into his head, breaking skull and splattering brain-matter all over the ground.

Tank walked forward, seeing that Ashe was alive, and grabbed her in a giant bear hug.

"I thought you dead," he said, relief obvious in his voice, and Ashe stood stunned, unsure of what to do or how to act. She'd only known him for a small time but somehow he cared for her. It was new, for Wombly and Deabla had almost never forced affection upon her. Soon after, Tank, limping from wounds unseen, began to check the perimeter, doing his best to see if any more assassins were about.

Chance fled the scene as soon as Sierra fell and knew immediately he should have killed the girl he'd fought. But as he left the area the weapon's hold on the poison, which would fade eventually, weakened and soon she would be completely uneffected.

He knew immediately that he'd somehow underestimated these enemies and realized also that Maria herself had done little in the battle. But still, she'd surrounded herself with powerful allies that seemed to care for each other enough to ignore the less destructive Spell-song attacks.

He was about to feel relief when he saw Tank cross the street in front of him, small hammer in hand. Tank seemed to recognize that he was in a hurry to leave and suddenly he realized that Tank saw the purple and black hood that marked him as a Black Hood.

Chance saw the recognition then rage flare in Tank's eyes and knew he'd better leave. Thus, he turned to sprint away. As he did so, he saw Tank lift his smaller hammer up in a throwing position. He was almost four steps too far for Tank to catch up when he felt something slam into his side.

The Spell-sword continued running and soon outdistanced the cursing and shouting Tank but he felt intense pain in left arm.

Tank slowed down, rage filling his eyes, and knew immediately that he was going to be outran. He grabbed his small hammer then rushed back to the inn, where he knew his friends waited. As soon as he was there he grabbed his larger hammer and looked at the hole where the wall had been. The combat itself had been perhaps two minutes but even with that small amount of time days of work, even weeks, had been created. Now Harold and Esmeralda would need him, he supposed even as he considered that the Spell-singers, probably from the Assassins Quarter of Keell, were after Maria and Tank.

He was about to say something when he noticed everyone, Esmeralda, Wombly, Maria, Ashe, Deabla and Alron, surrounding the bar. He saw tears streaking down Esmeralda and Maria's faces and he saw Wombly turn towards him, pain obvious in her eyes.

"What is it?" He asked when she looked to him. She nodded for him to come forward and as he did Deabla and Ashe shifted so he could see.

Blood covered Harold's chest and a quarter-sized hole was dug into the middle of his rib cage. The innkeeper sat on a bar stool and looked at him for a few moments before giving a half-hearted smile, "Friends of yours?" He said with a gasp, his breath coming hard.

"A priest will be here soon," Esmeralda cried and Tank nodded, then turned to run.

"We need a priest!" He was yelling, the world around him falling apart. Guards were running and he saw a single medical priest with them. There were many wounded surrounding the inn and the priest stopped by one, beginning to pray.

But that wasn't good enough for Tank. He ran forward, as if to grab the priest, when three guards stepped between him and the priest, "An innocent man is dying in there!" Tank yelled as he tried to push through.

"And innocent men die out here," an older guard said, "It is just the way things are. He will try to hurry and get to your family or friend." Tank growled and punched one of the guards in the face and tried to get through them again but the priest had finished with that person, delaying the man's death with his magic. He ran to the next and checked for a moment.

No, he nodded, then moved on.

By the time a second and third priest showed up it was already too late for most of the people. Harold sat on his bar stool, every breath labored, as Tank forced a priest to ignore one man and into the bar. A second priest came in close behind and tended to the man.

The priest with Tank rushed forward to Harold, "A cross bow wound," he muttered to himself before he began to chant. Wombly fell back with terror, having never seen her weapon kill someone before. The horror in her eyes was personified by the low moan of Harold, who seemed to wobble.

The priest released some magic and Harold cried out as the crossbow bolt slowly made its way out of his chest, blood spurting as the bolt left his chest. The priest immediately began to chant again but as soon as the bolt had been removed Harold's gasp had been his last.

Harold's head lolled to the side and his eyes stared empty.

"Father?" Esmeralda asked.

"Father!" Alron cried out.

"Father!" Both screamed in terror as they saw him die. The priest immediately cried out, feeling the death himself, and he fell backwards, into Tank's strong hands.

"Save him," Tank said, desperation thick in his voice, to the priest. The words were, in themselves, a threat. The priest turned, "I haven't the power..."

"Save him!" Tank growled, "Save him or give me the one who did this." The priest stared at Tank for several moments, then past him to Ashe and Wombly, both of which wore grim expressions. He saw something that terrified him. Even in gentle Deabla there was a dark look.

"We will find him," Ashe said, grabbing Tank's shoulder to reassure him. Tank looked back and in her saw the same determination he felt. They were allies and on the same page now. The hatred that Ashe had felt for everyone not Wombly or Deabla was now shared by Tank, who looked to the world with rage.

Maria watched her four friends seemingly transform into machines at that moment, into magical constructs fueled by only rage and anger. She felt more than a little anger at the thought of someone killing Harold. She nearly spoke against their plotting but when she looked to Esmeralda and Alron, a son and daughter standing beside their slain father, she couldn't.

Instead, she turned to their room and walked, heading to her room. And there she sat, wondering about the changes in her friends, feeling anger at the death of Harold, who'd only ever been kind to her. Soon, she sat on her bed with her knees wrapped by her chest, crying.

"We would know what happened here," said a high ranking guard as he walked into the inn. Tank turned on him and the look in his eyes gave the guard a pause. Tank seemed about to attack the officer when Wombly spoke up.

"You want to know what happened?" She asked, "An innocent man was killed in his own home and his family torn by a group of random assassins!" As she said random Tank grimaced but showed no emotion beyond that. "I watched as these people were attacked in the place they called their home and not a single guard showed up until after we defeated the enemy!"

The commander looked at her for a few moments and it looked as though he'd respond with anger, when he suddenly saw Tank and Ashe behind her. He knew in that moment that if he spoke back he would be attacked in a matter of moments.

And these people had proven themselves in a battle against Spell singers, which were notoriously hard to battle. He didn't know, though, that a name often held more power than the actual weapon of an enemy. And Spell singers name held much power... thus their real power often didn't take any notice in fights. He didn't know that in reality the Spell singers were best served as Artillery in larger battles, not as assassins. He didn't know that their reputation was what gave them power.

And he didn't know that Tank, Ashe, Wombly and Deabla would kill a thousand Spell singers and twice that number in guards to avenge Harold Hill. He didn't know what fueled the friends: Rage.

### **Chapter Five:**

Chance found himself in a small inn on the far side of Sprinkleberry. He was about to order a drink when half a dozen dark forms appeared in the room. He reacted by dropping his hands to the hilts of his weapons then realized that no one else could see them, as what evident by their lack of reaction.

He thought of the powers that could produce this magic and realized it was the Black Hoods. He sat back and listened, knowing they'd have a message.

A dark and powerful voice spoke in his head, the type of voice that filled a man with fear and

with hopelessness all at once. The voice was deep and it attacked at his sensibilities but he was a Black Hood. Fear was below him.

"Bigger designs have been realized and Maria is no longer to be hunted. Report home after informing Tank, Maria, Ashe, Wombly, Esmeralda and Alron to leave the city. They have earned our respect and as is the law we will give them warning of a great death that approaches their home-city.

"They must either flee or find death. Your wounds are significant and you have no right to hunt them any longer," the voice said, "nor will you find yourself near them. Report to Keell if you can bring yourself to achieve this small task." He could all but feel the mocking tone in the words as they said the last sentence and he ground his teeth.

He wanted to end them, so very badly, and looked down to his still broken arm with no small amount of rage. Especially the big one, Tank, needed to die. He growled and lifted himself up off his stool, wondering if he was about to end his career as a Spellword assassin before he really even began it.

"You have six days to do this. The marching should start in three days. The burning should start in six, the guards of Sprinkleberry will likely stop people from leaving the city after the fire's start" the voice stopped talking and the dark figures disappeared. Once they were gone, Chance turned around, grimacing down at his arm, then nodded solemnly. He ordered a drink and was soon leaving, heading into the city.

Tank and Ashe practiced while Wombly perfected her weapons and gadgets, readying every single idea she'd come up with long ago. Deabla sat in the corner, practicing with two small weapons that Wombly had come up with years before.

Both weapons were really a single one but could act as two due to an ingenious design. A single chain connected two sticks, weighted at the end, which could be spun at high speeds. They rarely could be used to kill an enemy but could very easily break bones and shatter shields, all of which was perfectly sensible to the gentle Deabla.

It'd been several days and while Tank and Ashe weren't training Tank was either sleeping or working. Maria had watched him fall asleep in the dark time of the morning, wake up only hours later, then go to the smithy and start repairing the door to the inn. Then, after he'd finished that, he trained for long hours with Ashe. She also noticed that he'd stopped shaving his beard. The thick hair was dark brown, like the rest of his hair, and didn't grow over his lip in a mustache. Rather, he just had a semi-thick beard that came up on his cheeks and below his chin on his neck. The dark brown threatened to become somewhat red and his light blue eyes all but glowed in contrast whenever they were in a well lit but not sunbathed room.

Esmeralda tended to the inn as best she could, Alron helping as much as a young stable boy could, and Maria helping with most of the cleaning. The inn still somehow recieved customers, which kept the generally down group in good standings economically. And Wombly was producing weapons and new styles of armor that the guards of the city bought.

None of them noticed it, but in the days since Harold's death the city seemed to tense up.

Guards and soldiers were arming up more and training longer. They bought everything that Wombly created, some of which didn't even work well, which was unusual but the ingenious inventor didn't take note. She instead spent her time preparing more flash-orbs, as she called her small black spheres and other weapons of that sort.

Then, after six days, the inn fully repaired aside from a man-sized hole in the inn's spirit, they noticed smoke on the horizon.

"What is it?" Tank asked as he saw guards rushing to the walls.

"Keell is marching on us!" a guard shouted as he rushed by. Tank looked to Maria, Ashe and Wombly in confusion, who shrugged.

"I'll find out," Ashe said as she rushed away.

Tank and Wombly sat down, Tank breathing hard and Wombly still sitting deep in concentration as she tinkered with the weapon she and Tank had been working on.

"The Slide-swords will be a success," she said proudly as she lifted them up, "I think I just perfected them." Tank looked over in some interest. They were two long swords, unusually thick but somehow still light.

He lifted one up and held it by the hilt. He swung it easily and clicked a small button that was just below the hilt. He watched as the blade extended further, becoming half again as long and knew that this would be a devilish trick for any enemy to handle. He grabbed the other sword and lunged with it, imagining an enemy jumping just out of distance, then he clicked the button. He could imagine the look on Chance's face, though he didn't know the assassin's name, as the blade lengthened and slid.

"These'll be tough to fight unless they already know the trick," Tank said and he grinned at Wombly.

"I think I know exactly who'll feel their bite if Ashe gets these blades," he said. Wombly nodded and though she was less enthusiastic about the lethal effect she couldn't help but feel proud of them.

Esmeralda, who was behind the bar, nodded silently as she thought of her father. Tears still streamed down her face for the majority of the day but somehow she still ran the bar as efficiently as before. Alron helped to serve people and Maria taught him to count like his older sister. The young boy seemed to enjoy her lessons but rarely spoke aside from to answer a question or to ask what customers wanted to drink.

"I need some metal if we want another pair of Slide-swords," Tank said, "I'll be back."

"Is it wise for both you and Ashe to be absent at once?" Wombly asked and Tank seemed hesitant.

"If they wanted to strike they'd have done it before this healed," he said as he showed her something only Maria had really seen. The Fargo's close up attacks had done more than knock the wind out of him. The skin was blackened slightly, much less than before, and where there'd been a broken rib jutting out of his skin there was now just a small lump where the bone had been healed incorrectly by a priest.

They'd said the higher layers of his skin were killed and that they could just heal the lower layers. They said that he should have been killed but somehow was still alive. Tank had shrugged and decided not to question it. Wombly, though, gasped even now.

"Is that from the Spell singers?" She asked, concern evident in her voice. Tank nodded then turned, "We were vulnerable," he said, "But now Ashe and I are healed enough to fight well and you've finished several new weapons."

Wombly nodded then watched as he left. Tank wasn't overly tall but he was thick and powerful. And though his torso was thick we still managed an hour-glass figure. Both his legs and his shoulders were thick and powerful and even more so in the last week. It was like the rage fueled him.

She remembered he'd been expressing doubt and though she'd never thought he felt doubtful about anything she suspected that there was now nothing at all weighing on him... aside from the loss of Harold and the damage it'd done to everyone. She didn't know why but he did seem to feel guilt over it. But as far as she could figure it wasn't his or Maria's fault.

"Men," she muttered to herself.

Maria sat in her room, deep in thought. Both Tank and Ashe were gone and she felt less safe. She knew that Wombly had made her weapons but she wasn't as... good... at fighting as they were. The fact that she was still here really did nothing for her.

She was about to go downstairs when her window opened and in walked a young man. He had long blonde hair and his dark brown eyes seemed to pierce through her. She felt almost naked underneath his gaze and she took a step backwards but when he smiled she suddenly found herself blushing.

"Hello," Chance said to her and behind his grin was a sneer. He knew that Tank was all but in

love with her. And if she grew close to him he would be happy... but if he could break her away from him, if he could ruin the relationship, it would almost be sweeter than killing him.

"H-hi," Maria said and smiled back at him.

"Come here," Chance said as he touched a small ring on his left hand. He grinned when he saw her pupils dilate, something that proved his magic was working, and he silently congratulating himself for buying the ring only an hour or so before. She stepped forward and came into his grasp.

"We're going to have a really good time," he whispered into her ear, "And you're never, ever going to forgive yourself for it." He grinned and walked her over to the bed.

About half an hour later Chance walked in the front door. Wombly looked up at him, suspicious as she always was, and she asked, "Want a drink or some food?" She asked. Her hand was on her sling shot.

Chance looked at Wombly for a moment and shook his head, "No, I'm fine." Wombly looked at him with even more suspiciously than before.

"Actually, I'm here to relay a message," Chance said slyly and Wombly's hands closed around two crossbows with her, "The Black Hoods have stopped hunting Maria and Tank. There will be no more attacks..." He grinned for a few moments.

"Though she may wish she had been killed," he said. Before Wombly could lift her crossbows he was sprinting away. Immediately, terrified, Wombly ran up to Maria and Tank's room. She room was locked and no matter how hard she pushed she couldn't get through.

She shot her crossbows at the door but it didn't give. Esmeralda quickly followed her up after locking the door, against the complaints of several customer-to-be's, and once she got up she pulled out her copy of the key to the door. She unlocked it and the two rushed in.

Maria sat on her bed, crying. Her face was bruised and her arms had bruises too.

"He... he hurt me," she whimpered to them and both Wombly and Esmeralda hugged her, quietly assuring her that he'd never be there again.

"They aren't coming anymore, they aren't coming anymore," Wombly said while Esmeralda told her it'd be okay.

"You can't tell Tank," Maria said to them, "You can't tell him. He'll... he'll go mad with anger and he'll hunt him forever and ever, then he'll never rest again... You can't tell him.. you can't tell him," she said over and over again. Neither Wombly nor Esmeralda promised her they wouldn't but neither denied her words either.

Tank and Ashe both returned at almost the same time, both with news. They looked at the lock door with concern and Tank was about to knock it over again when it opened.

"Is everything alright?" He asked Esmeralda, who looked grim indeed. More so than was usual for the young girl who'd just lost her father.

"No," she said and Tank pushed open the door, nearly knocking Esmeralda to the ground. He grabbed her to keep her from falling, apologizing as he did so, then saw Maria and Wombly sitting next to each other.

Immediately he saw the bruises on her face and arms and suddenly where there had been concern there was only rage.

"Who did this?" He asked, "Who did this?"

"I don't know..." Maria said softly, "I don't know..."

"The Black Hoods sent someone who must have done it," Wombly said, "Because they knew somehow."

"And they're at Keell?" Ashe asked from behind.

"Who marches to attack Sprinkleberry," Tank said quietly.

"They've obviously closed their doors... we're not going to be able to get into Keell until after

this little battle or war or whatever it is," Wombly said.

"We?" Tank asked and Esmeralda laughed. Everyone looked at her for a second.

"Yes, we," the young woman said to him, "You fought for our inn and if you hadn't been here we would have been killed. And even if they were after you my father and brother have never been as happy as they are with you. It doesn't matter who's fault it is. We're all in this together now and we're a family." She smiled at Tank, who seemed to grow darker with guilt at that moment.

"Besides," she said with a laugh, "You all are all I have left." She smiled sadly and when Tank seemed about to turn away she reached forward and hugged him. Maria watched it all and suddenly felt guilt beyond anything she'd ever felt before.

*He deserves better than me...* she thought to herself, *He deserves someone who really cares for him... I don't even belong here...* She was about to break down again when Tank turned and looked at her.

"I promise you, nothing like this will ever happen to you again. I will not leave your side unless it's okay with you again," he said and the timbre of his voice, caring and soft but firm, warmed her heart.

"I don't deserve you," she said softly so that only Wombly could hear her and when she looked up she saw Wombly's dark brown eyes staring into her own. Wombly gave a small smile and Maria just stared at her for a moment. Even with Tank carrying the world seemed a dark place at that moment.

"There's only one way we're getting into that city," Ashe informed Tank later that night. Ashe, Tank, Deabla and Wombly all sat at the bar, drinking quietly and chatting softly.

"Which is?" Tank asked.

"We're going to have to join the front lines of the Sprinkleberry army then somehow get into the group they call the Nose Breakers," Ashe said, "Their front lines and their most aggressive units. Most of them are suicidal and only joined because of heart break in the past. But a few of them have survived a couple of missions, which is impressive as it gets.

"These ones are the toughest of the tough and often rebellious. They like to stray from missions if it has an object unless it's just to get in and kill as many enemies as possible. They break the hordes when goblins attack and when the occasional battle breaks out. These are the bravest or dumbest people who live in the city. They wear these weird little black tunics over their armor to show their... something."

Tank looked at Ashe as she finished speaking, a grin on his face, "Sounds like my type of people."

"What are you all talking about?" Maria asked from behind. Tank looked back and saw that she was barely awake. "You're not... you're not going to fight out there, are you?" She asked.

Tank stood silent, his lips tight, "I have to."

"No, no you don't!" Maria said, "Can't we just be at peace for even a little while? I mean it's only been like... a week and a half since we got here and you're already signing up for another fight! Is it like... something you can't help!"

Tank watched her for a few moments then said, "We have to get them or they may never stop attacking us... I have to do it for us, if we're ever going to find any peace, there has to be a stop to it."

"So stop doing it! And they said they were going to stop attacking us..." Maria argued.

"They are taking over the city," Tank said, "I don't think we're going to get any peace. It sounds like these... Black Hoods have an idea of what all is going on before it happens. They have to have a hand in this invasion. Maybe they're even the guiding force. If we can take down some of the leaders, maybe the battle will stop... and maybe we can save some lives that way."

Maria stared at him for a few moments, "You don't think we'll find peace any other way? I don't care about the others, I don't care what happens to anyone aside from us six." The way she said it was desperate and everyone in the room almost felt the same way. They'd only known each other for a little

while and yet they'd been through more than most lifetime friends would go through.

"I have to do this for us," Tank said, "For me and you..." he paused for a moment, "For all of us! For each and everyone one of us now," he corrected himself.

Maria stared at him for a few moments and behind her eyes the memories of Chance's encounter flashed, haunting her as a nightmare even as she stood awake.

"No," she said, her voice quivering. Tank looked at her in a confused manner, "No. There is no we..." The entire group stared at her.

"There is no 'we' and there never was. Don't go after him because there is nothing between us. Don't go after him because he's after me, not you, and there is nothing between us," Maria said and as she said the words she could feel her insides cracking. She felt her stomach grow uneasy, to the point that she felt like puking, but no matter the pain she felt at that moment she couldn't ignore the dumb-founded and pained look on Tank's face.

He moved his mouth as if to speak several times, his eyes beginning to tear up but he refused to cry, and even as he stood there no words escaped his lips. He scowled for a moment and it seemed as if anger would take over, then he turned and stalked away, shoulders slumped.

He turned on her for a few moments, "There may be nothing here for you," he growled as he spat the words, which was all he could do to keep from breaking down, "but there is something... there is something for me... and whether you..." He stopped for a moment, his jaw clenched, then continued, "And I'll fight to protect that... even if you don't feel the same way."

He turned and stalked away, pushing through the door so hard that it slammed against the outside wall. They saw dust fall from the inside of the wall... leaving Maria feeling empty and heartless as she realized that not only had she destroyed something special even as she accomplished absolutely nothing.

"Is there really nothing?" Wombly asked Maria as they stood in silence.

Maria looked at Wombly for a few moments, absolutely silent, then shook her head negatively, not answering Wombly's question. The young merchant's daughter turned and left, feeling empty and alone... and so very stupid at that moment. She walked up to her and Tank's room where she curled up, crying as she considered the results of what had just happened.

"Hey, where are you going?" Ashe asked Tank when she finally caught up to him. The look in his eyes, so filled with rage and pain, gave her pause. She saw a possibility in that look that scared her.

"To find and join the Nose Breakers," Tank said evenly, his entire body tensed in rage.

### **Chapter Six:**

The memory was sharp though old and still it flooded through Tank's mind as it had a thousand times before.

A young boy, perhaps twelve years old, strode through the city, knife in hand. He was glad for the rainy night as it hid his tears as he walked, eyes cast downward. He felt the hilt of the short blade and silently realized it'd likely be the second last thing he'd ever feel in his entire life. Already some blood fell down his hand, falling to the ground in small droplets from a small cut across his arm.

He was about to go into a small alley when he accidentally bumped into another boy. Looking up, he saw that he'd run into a taller boy, not as thick as the original boy but probably a few years older.

He looked forward to see a girl staring at him.

"He won't let you do this," a voice said from the side. Both boys looked over to see a young girl, maybe ten or eleven years old. The knife wielding boy looked back to the taller one.

"He doesn't scare Tiago," the taller boy proclaimed and lifted his fists against the original boy, who now clutched the knife dangerously. Tiago was about to step forward when the boy lifted the knife up into a defensive position, an expert one.

Tiago eyed him for a few moments then looked back at the young girl's purse and decided the small bulge in the coin department wasn't worth the trouble. Turning, Tiago rushed away.

"What's your name?" An obviously younger Maria, the young girl, asked the young boy blushed as he hesitated, silently thinking to himself and about the knife in his hands, why he held it and what she might think. After a few moments he sputtered, "T-Tank."

"Tank?" Maria said as if rolling the name around in her mouth then she smiled at him, "Tank," she smiled at him. And the young boy Tank stepped backward, obviously unsure. Maria, though, took no notice and continued to smile.

"My name is Maria," she said, "And we're going to be friends, I can tell." She smiled at him and there was no calculations in her soft brown eyes just a simple friendliness. "Will you walk home with me? I won't feel safe."

The young boy, an obviously younger Tank, nodded. She grabbed his hand and began to lead him to her house, where they would depart at her steps after talking for a good half hour, the first of a thousand times this would happen. Pretty soon, she was sitting in her window, talking to Tank, who sat on several crates stacked very high. Even sooner she was in bed, Tank still at the window, and then she was asleep.

And Tank, who remembered the feeling of her soft hands in his, felt glad that the knife tucked in his pocket wasn't the last thing he'd felt.

"I am afraid he'll do something stupid," Wombly said to Ashe and Deabla the next day. The young man gave a giant sigh, feeling as though something terrible was about to happen. Wombly and Ashe stared at the young man for a few moments, both knowing exactly what that look entailed often.

"Of course he will," Ashe said with some emotion in her voice. She knew the look that she'd seen in his eyes and knew that if they didn't go with him they would hear about his inevitable death.

But even still they couldn't leave Maria and Esmeralda behind. They'd somehow adopted these two and even though neither could fight they were friends with the three. Now, as they considered the near future they found themselves conflicted.

"And don't you remember what I said about a large portion of the Nose Breaker population? They're heart-broken men and, a few, women," Ashe said, "He follows the orders with rage then gets put into a situation where only a clear head will get you out. And he doesn't have a clear head."

"So I think we should go with Tank," Ashe said, "The assassin did say he was going to leave them alone, didn't he?" Wombly and Deabla both considered the truth of that statement and its validity.

"He wasn't exactly sincere about it," Wombly replied, "That guy will probably come back and go after Maria again. Or he'll hurt her from afar. She and Esmeralda will need support, especially since her father died. And without us, Alron will surely get into trouble. The young boy likes Tank and if he leaves... who knows what will happen if we're not here?"

They sat in silence for several moments.

"Tank won't be able to join the nosebreakers for several days, as they'll be checking to see if he's a spy, so we have time to think," Deabla said, the first time he'd spoken in a while. They'd all been on a walk through the city to the place where Nose-Breaker-to-be's lived for a time.

When they got there, Deabla stepped forward, recognizing the guard, "Ho there Martin!" he said with a smile to the man, who looked back at him. The guard nodded.

"How have you been, Deabla?"

"I've been well, you?" Deabla asked the guard, Martin.

"I've been better... there're some new recruits in there who might challenge my position in the Nose Breakers. Especially this one guy, a huge ol' boy..." Martin looked for a name.

"Tank?" Wombly supplied and Martin nodded with recognition.

"Yeah, that one. He came in, all huffing and puffing, then required to be part of the team. Then, once we give him an order, he follows it like a hound, only thing is, once that order goes south, like all

our early orders do, he improvises like someone who can see the future," Martin said.

"What do you mean?" Wombly asked.

"Well," Martin said, "he and six others went into one of our training buildings and we had our trap laid out, as always. We ambushed him real good," he brought a hand up to a black eye as he smiled in memory, "took three of them down real quick." He touched a billy-club that hung at his hip.

"Then this big guy hits our biggest guy from the side. And instead of using one of his weapons, which would have taken too long to grab, he steals our big guy's club. 'S crazy because Tank takes three of these," he points to arrows with small metal balls, which weight more than normal arrows but weren't lethal if the ball hit someone in the leg or arm or side, "to the chest. He snarled and ignored 'em. A pair of these'll break bone but he's fine.

"Then the crazy bastard lifts his club and launches it at one of the archers. That man was rushed to the temple for healing and may be out in the next couple of weeks if he's lucky. It took twelve men rushing in at once to take down your friend," Martin stopped for a moment, "he's your friend, right?"

The way Martin's hand fell to the hilt of his sword revealed to Deabla that either the man was dedicated to Tank, who seemed to be a Nose Breaker at this point, or that the man was loyal to Deabla and his friends and ready to remove Tank from the equation.

Which one it was Deabla wasn't sure and didn't care to find out at that moment.

"Yes, he's our friend," Wombly responded.

"So he's a Nose Breaker now?" Ashe asked Martin.

"No, but he's looking like he'll be one and a damn good one," Martin said with a grin. He was missing a tooth, "And he's a damn good punch, too."

"He's in there?" Deabla asked and Martin nodded, "When do you all march?"

"Well, we don't know exactly," Martin said, "And even if we did, I don't think I'm at liberty to tell you." With a grin Deabla started forward. Ashe and Wombly hesitated when Martin didn't move but as soon as Deabla got close enough to touch the Nose Breaker he was moving.

Once inside the two young women followed Deabla into the main room. Neither asked how the young man knew so much about the inner workings of the Nose Breakers and followed him into a room with a low roof. Inside they found eleven men and one girl all in bunk beds. Each person looked over, quickly standing in case it was an officer of the Nose Breakers.

When Tank saw it was the three he nodded to them then sat again. The rest of the men, seeing the recognition, sat down on their bunks or at tables to continue their card or games of dice and chance. They walked over and stood in front of Tank, who lay back, his head against the wall and his eyes cast downward and closed.

"Tank," Wombly said and the young man seemed not to notice. "Tank," Wombly repeated, this time louder. The young man looked up at them and made eye contact with all three. Upon that eye both Ashe and Wombly looked away, seeing something there, or rather something missing, but Deabla easily matched it.

"So this is what you do with your life," Deabla said to him, not letting their staring contest end as he stared at the large young man in front of him, "You chose to spend a life in the army when it is better spent with a young woman and protecting your friends! What a noble thing to do, my especially noble friend."

Neither Ashe nor Wombly knew what Deabla was hinting at but they watched in shock as Tank flinched, looking away.

"She doesn't love me or feel anything for me," Tank spat once he remembered why he sat there. "She said it herself, there's nothing there for me. I'm here to protect my new home and protect my new friends."

"You're here because of her and because of you!" Deabla yelled back. Several of the men also in the room looked over expecting Tank to punch the much smaller young man in the face. But Tank just stared at Deabla, staring at the young man and waiting for him to continue or shut up. He was about to

close his eyes again when Deabla spoke.

"You're here because you think that she was being honest and not just trying to get you to stop doing something stupid. You're here because she did try to stop you from doing something stupid and now you're doing something even more stupid," Deabla said, "You're here because you're not brave enough to face your problems, my *noble* friend." He exaggerated the word noble and again the larger man winced.

"Tank, come back, please," Wombly said as Ashe spoke also, "You need to come back home, now."

Tank looked to all three. He was about to respond when they heard someone walk in.

"Tank," barked an officer of the Nose Breakers, "Come with me." Tank was standing already, having learned to stand as quick as possible quickly. He looked to his friends, obviously conflicted. Before he could change his mind he turned and followed the officer. His three friends watched him as he felt and Deabla was the only one who seemed truly defeated at that moment.

"He is lost," he silently mouthed to himself.

"Let's get back to the inn and get Maria to come out here. If she tells him he'll feel better," Ashe said.

"She won't," Deabla mouthed to himself again, knowing where this would lead.

"No," he said, "I'll go. You two join the Nose Breakers." Both Ashe and Wombly stared at him, dumbfounded.

"Look, she won't say anything because she's... internally hurt. He won't come back because she hurt him internally and he doesn't know what to do. Plus, he needs to go back to Keell or they need to come to him because he needs to sort some stuff out. I'll know before an attack comes and how to keep Maria and Esmeralda out of trouble.

"This is going to be a long and bloody war and many inns will become infirmaries. You three can help the cause and maybe even end this war but I'll make sure that if any of you get injured you appear at Harold's Hill. I believe in you guys and he is as much our family as any of us are," they all knew he was right, "and he's hurt right now. He will need help but before this all ends we'll all likely realize he all need help.

"We all love each other and even if Maria is too hurt to show it and Tank is too hurt to believe it it's true. I believe in you, my friends. Please, be safe and keep our noble friend safe," he said.

"Wait," Wombly said as Deabla turned to leave, knowing he'd already sold them on his side of the argument. He stopped and looked at them, "What do you mean by 'noble friend'?"

"I imagine you will find out soon enough," Deabla said with a small smile and both young women knew that was all they'd get out of him.

Tank stood in the main room of the Nose Breakers. In front of him sat two men and one woman.

"You're a great fighter and a powerful warrior, but we've seen your strength already. You have lifted as much as any man can. You should be assigned to the movers, which are arguably the most important part of an army. Why should we accept you?" Asked the middle man, who was rather tall and thin with grey hair that was likely once grey.

Tank sat deep in thought. After a few moments he looked up, "I'm smart, I'm mean and I know Keell very well. I can take orders and I can lead if I have to. I'm the strongest warrior you have and you know you need some strength.

"I'm short so I make great for fighting warriors on horseback and I know my way around horses. I can use almost any weapon you give me and if you need me to learn how to do something I will in less than a week. You need someone in your most forward group who can take orders to a point but can also improvise. I am one of those men. I will get in, I will do what you need me to do, and if I need to I can get out."

The woman, who sat the middle man's left, gave a small smile. She had dark red hair that

reached down to her shoulders and wore armor that was a dark grey. She had bright eyes, which looked to be green, and a headband to keep her curly hair from her eyes. On her back was a pair of light, both physically and in color, swords that were straight. Even as she sat she looked to be of fair height.

"I think he is the sixth member... We need two more after him and it will be complete," she said.

"Aubrey," the middle man said, looking to her, "That plan is a secret."

"Bah!" said the third member. This man looked more like Tank, with broad shoulders and a heavy mace on his hip. He wore little armor, which was metal, and his stomach was very large. With a broad grin he parted his dark brown beard, which was cut at his chest, "He's a strong young one and his spirit'll fit the team perfectly. And everyone's knowing the plan already even if you don't think they are, Seargent Robert you dolt!"

"Bear, shut up," Robert, the middle man, said calmly. He looked back to Tank, "Alright. You're on the team."

Immediately after he said that Wombly and Ashe rushed in.

"You need two more members and here we are!" Ashe said with a grin. She looked to Tank, who seemed almost as if he'd expected it but wished against it, then elbowed him.

"Yes, we're here to fight!" Wombly said with a smile, her hands out by her side.

"Not if you're in that position," Ashe said again, trying to lighten the mood by once again giving Tank an elbow in the side.

"We do need two members..." Bear said almost reluctantly but with some excitement in his voice.

"Did," Aubrey corrected.

"That's not the decision yet!" Robert said.

"Yet?" Wombly asked with a smile and Robert glared at her.

"They do match what we need," Aubrey said, "A quick one who's good with the sword," she looked to Ashe, "and another engineer," she looked to Wombly, who frowned.

"How do you know I build stuff?" Wombly asked.

"You certainly don't look like a fighter," Robert said dryly and Wombly's frown deepened.

"Plus you're the girl who built the crossbows and the swords on your hips look as if they've been tampered with," Aubrey said. Wombly's frown disappeared and was replaced with a smile.

"I do think they match what we need," Bear said to his two friends, though mainly to Robert, who was the only skeptic.

"Plus, I think these three were at the inn fire," Aubrey said, "And they beat two Spellingers, if the reports are accurate."

"And an assassin got away, if they're accurate," Robert said with much doubt.

"Ah, but who among us hasn't let an enemy escape at some point or another?" Bear asked and Aubrey agreed.

Robert sat in silence for a few moments and the rest of the room followed suite. "What do those swords do?" the tall man asked.

Wombly withdrew them and gave it a lunge, the point perhaps three feet from Robert's face. As soon as Wombly's hand had nearly reached the end of her reach she pressed the button and suddenly the point of the blade was only a few inches away from Robert's face. The calm warrior's eyes had widened and he crossed them to look at the point of the blade.

"Oh well done!" Aubrey said with a clap, "You must make me some."

"They're light and don't seem like they could block much, but they could be of great use to some warriors," Bear agreed.

Robert simply glared at the blade as Wombly retracted it.

"Fine," he said, "You two are joined. You stay the night in the Nose Breakers' compound and in the morning we'll get you to training. Your group of eight leaves in four weeks and I need you all battle ready in that time!"

Deabla walked into Harold's Hill to find a gloomy scene. Maria cleaned tables with something akin to lethargy and grief mixed together while Esmeralda poured a mug of ale for an older man, who tossed her a copper. The young girl caught it with hardly a thought and quickly tucked it in under the bar. Alron lay in the corner, sleeping despite the fact it was the middle of the day.

"You two," Deabla said and he got both Maria and Esmeralda's attention. "I have news about Tank." Both looked to him with interest and he began, "He's auditioned and been accepted by the Nose Breakers." There was silence in the room as even the customers, who'd listened to everything Deabla had to say with slight interest.

Everyone but Maria truly understood the weight of the words and though Maria had heard Ashe's description she didn't really know. Less than a hundred men were in the Nose Breakers at any time despite the fact that over a hundred joined almost every year. Many who tried to join weren't accepted and even those who were accepted either quit or died after some time. And those that stayed on were involved with almost every battle that Sprinkleberry fought in.

In years past goblin forces were split down the middle by the insane Nose Breakers, who either marched or rode into battles, always greatly outnumbered. In times of battle against barbarians Nose Breakers had led charges straight into the hordes of men mixed with giants. It was even suspected that vampires had once descended upon Sprinkleberry from the far east and that the Nose Breakers had not only fought them at night but even in their caves, for in the east of Sprinkleberry, perhaps twenty miles away, the fast moving vampires had made their homes from which they could attack Sprinkle-ber-ry at night in the giant mountains.

"Wombly and Ashe joined too," Deabla said after the room was filled with silence for several moments.

"They're... gone?" Esmeralda asked after a few moments. Tears began to streak down Maria's eyes, as she just now began to understand what the news might mean.

"Not gone... but they won't be sleeping here anymore," Deabla said, "They might not even come here except on some nights or days when they're not on duty. And if I heard right, they are going to be out at Keell very soon," he watched Maria as he spoke, gauging her response, without her noticing.

"My guess is they'll lead a charge or get put on some group for special missions, especially if Sprinkleberry is going into a full out war against Keell. And if we want a chance to see them we need to make sure we become an infirmary when the city needs it," Deabla finished and studied Maria, who seemed unable to stop the tears from flowing.

"You know that if you went to him," he said, knowing that it likely wouldn't change anything even if she did, "he might stay..." Maria stared at him for a few moments.

"No..." she said quietly after a few moments, "There's nothing for him here with me." She turned and left, leaving Esmeralda and Alron, who'd awakened to listen, alone with Deabla and several customers.

"She doesn't mean Harold's Hill by here, does she?" Alron asked and both Deabla and Esmeralda looked to the unusually perceptive boy.

"No," Esmeralda said sadly, "But I think she might be more right than any of us want." Deabla looked to her and saw the well hidden pain obviously. He could read people and often guess the way certain situations would end. And he saw then that she knew Tank was in love with Maria and not her.

She knew that he almost certainly would die or stay in love with Maria until he did die. And Deabla knew that it hurt her very much.

Maria sat in her room weeping.

"What have I done?" She asked herself. She still had several bruises from the assassin and knew that if that man hadn't come and... done what he'd done they'd all be happy together. She knew that in her heart.

But she also knew that even if he hadn't she would still be the way she is, still be so... unable to find herself in love with him. Or at least she knew that the only reason she felt anything for him was because of great efforts from him. He'd tried so very hard and had only failed once in his entire life.

And in that moment their entire future had been crushed and ended, torn asunder by a single act. Years of happiness had been destroyed in less than an hour. An entire possible family had been crushed by her helplessness.

And in her heart at that moment she realized that even if things had gone well she wouldn't have been able to return his feelings. And even though she knew, in that moment, that no matter how hard she tried, he loved her more and that all this was happening because of her. And she knew that he'd be gone whether she'd done this or not.

But knowing that didn't make it any less painful.

That night as she lay in her bed, unable to sleep as she painfully noticed her talking partner was gone, she realized just how much he'd meant to her. He'd been there always... and now, because of her, he wasn't there.

He was gone... and she was lost.

Tank sat in his bunk. They were all in a room, their own. He felt as though he should be talking, most likely about something that Maria had interest in but that held little of his. Even still, though most of their talks had been centered around her, inspired only by his love and her boredom, he missed her dearly at that moment.

He lay in his bunk, the top bunk, and knew that Ashe and Wombly were asleep. He knew in his heart that Maria was asleep at that moment and in his mind he knew that she at peace. But he could feel a dull pain in his left breast, underneath his muscle, as if his heart was crying out.

Underneath Tank Wombly lay awake in the middle bunk. She was deep in thought and trying to decide if this was a mistake. She knew that Deabla had never mislead them and knew that his instincts were almost never wrong but she also knew that this was something he'd never done before.

But, as she heard Tank shifting restlessly his bunk, she knew that he would need both of them. As she heard him sniffing, likely from wiping his watery eyes, she knew that this was for his good as well as their own.

She knew that she wouldn't feel like a true friend if she wasn't there. And she truly cared about Tank and knew that he cared about her, even if at that moment he didn't show it. It was late that night when she saw the tired young man give into his exhaustion and a thick arm, bruised from the beatings of the day before, fell limply over the edge.

Right above his wrist she saw a scar from a deep knife cut, just barely high enough not to kill him.

## **Chapter Seven:**

Ashe, Wombly and Tank were up early the next morning. They were all asleep when Bear burst into the room, yelling loudly as he slammed two pieces of hollow metal against each other. The giant of a man seemed to take great pleasure in waking them up so quickly and as soon as the three friends were standing straight, looking forward he began shouting.

"Get out of this room and head to the training yard! You little bastards aren't gonna get out of training with the rest of the boys and girls no matter how much you want to!" He howled with a grin and all three were moving immediately, Tank in front, Wombly in the middle and Ashe in the back.

It took them some time to find the court yard, which was really underground in a large cavern that had been turned into a room by the Nose Breakers. As soon as they were there they realized that their day was likely going to be hell.

Dozens of men and maybe four girls stood in attendance. In front of them lay several machines, all built for lifting, many lines that represented distances and other structures built for hard core work. In the very middle of the room lay hundreds of rocks piled atop each other in a mound perhaps forty feet tall.

"You five!" Bear yelled loudly to another group of five men and one woman, "Get your asses over here!" They shuffled over, all but running, and stood at attention beside Ashe, Wombly and Tank in front of Bear. The other five seemed used to Bear, and he them. The three friends assumed that the five had not only been there a long while but had also been friends for a while, as they grinned to one another as Bear began speaking.

"See that pile?" He asked, pointing to the pile of rocks, "I want that over there!" He pointed to a large clear space with white lines drawn on the inside, "And I want it done by the end of tomorrow!" The other five didn't at all seem surprised by this.

The eight stared at the pile then at each other for a moment when they realized that Bear had gotten behind them. The large man, holding a long wooden stick, slapped Tank on the back. The young, stocky and angry young man growled and almost turned on Bear when Wombly grabbed his arm.

"Let's get to work!" She said before Tank could get in a fight and before Bear could slap another of the group.

They worked all day, Tank being the first to scale the top of the mound, which was where they had to grab the rocks, as Bear had explained in no uncertain terms when he'd slapped Tank on the back with the wooden stick as he grabbed rocks from the side.

Wombly, who walk-climbed up the mound behind him, winced as she noticed blood slowly pouring down Tank's back. The wooden stick had broken skin, it seemed, and at that time she suddenly remembered the scar on his wrist. She couldn't bring herself to believe he'd tried to kill himself but she couldn't agree with the weak thought that it was from another person either.

They spent hours carrying rocks, Tank carrying nearly fifty pounds of the stone at a time, and pretty soon they were stopped to drink water. All eight were drenched in sweat and none of them felt like talking. Even as they got water they breathed deeply and tried to keep their sore feet from getting to their heads. Each member of the group was handed a small piece of bread, which was stale but still somehow delicious, and a small piece of meat. They devoured the small meal in a matter of moments, manners forgotten.

At one point, while Wombly and Ashed climbed, a short, light skinned, thin and wiry young fellow with dark hair and thin arms and legs slipped and fell down the mound in front of Tank. The large blacksmith was about to help the thin young man, who seemed about their age, but suddenly Tank felt agony as a Bear slapped him across the back with the wooden stick.

This time Tank turned on the giant man and tried to punch but Bear was quicker, putting his fist into Tank's throat.

"No helping each other up!" the giant man shouted, "You all work together but you don't give up yourselves for each other! Your goal is the same and if it is compromised by one of you that one is left behind or finished off!"

Tank struggled to get to his feet and when Bear wasn't looking the wiry young man helped him to his feet, "M'name's Benny," he said. As soon as Bear was looking the two, ten feet away from each other, was working again.

All eight bled at the fingers when it seemed that it had to be two or three hours past midday. By five or six hours past midday their feet seemed to be bleeding too. Still Bear worked them. Still Tank glared at him, growling whenever Bear spoke to the man and still they all worked.

Wombly and Ashe both gulped as they looked at the pile. An announcement had just gone up that it was an hour til sunset, nearly eight hours after midday, and the pile was only two thirds of the way done.

"You all are done at sunset and you can spend the night freely until an hour til midnight!" Bear

shouted. They all hurried to quicken their pace and it was Wombly who carried the last load over to the new pile. Bear grinned broadly as the eight all waited, nearly asleep from exhaustion as they stood.

He clapped Tank over the back, which caused the young man to snap to attention, then nudged Benny, who'd actually fallen asleep, then, with a grin on his face, began "Well done my friends! But there is a problem," all looked up at him with no amusement on their faces.

"I told you the wrong place for these rocks to be piled," the giant of a man said, "I meant that one," he pointed past the place they'd just moved the rocks from to another cleared area that was lined with white lines, "and tomorrow you'll need to put them there."

Had Tank any strength at that moment he would have attacked the giant of a man. All other seven members of the group felt similar, it seemed, and Bear knew it. Thus his laugh was genuine and his joy true.

"But for now, you have no more work. Good night and enjoy the rest of your evenings!"

None of the friends had any energy to go out. When they came into their room they saw bandages laying on their bunks. Upon them instructions were written.

"Apply for five minutes then take off," Wombly read aloud. They each applied the bandages to their hands and feet and felt a cold tingle rush throughout their body, the sensation waking them up and filling them with some energy. Once five minutes passed the sensation had wore off and they removed the bandages. They found all their cuts healed.

"Very nice," Tank muttered aloud.

That night, Wombly and Ashe decided against leaving for Harold's Hill, mainly due to the soreness in their limbs. They could barely walk and the only thing that had enough hold on them to force them to their weary feet was the allure of food. That night they ate well, better than any remembered ever eating before, and when they stumbled into their room they were full of good food and drink that was strong enough to make them forget their pain.

As soon as they were on their bunk, they were asleep.

The next morning Wombly, Tank and Ashe found themselves standing before Aubrey instead of Bear. She'd walked in shouting and slamming hollow metal on hollow metal like Bear but this time instead of having to continue on for many moments they'd been up in a flash. They had, apparently, learned to be ready in just one night. She was pleased by that assessment.

They were walking into the 'court yard' and found themselves standing with the same six as before. Aubrey was yelling at them, less loudly but somehow just as fiercely as Bear, and before any of them could complain they were working again, carrying the giant mound to the new location one pile of stone at a time.

They did this all that morning and by the end Tank, Wombly and Ashe were introduced to another member of the other six. Benny and another man named Mave stood by each other at their mid-day break. Mave was the tallest of the group, standing at just under six feet tall, and his head was fully shaved bald. He was lean but not skinny with some muscle. Somehow his dark skin seemed to grow darker even as they worked and soon his arms and shoulders bulged almost as large as Tank's.

They found that the distance, a full fifty yards further than before, made the trips that much harder than the previous hundred yard walk. Tank learned to hold the stones with his thick shirt which allowed him to carry more stones at a time. Wombly at one point almost started a rudimentary assembly line but she saw Aubrey looking over dangerously and dismissed that notion immediately.

Soon all Mave and Benny copied Tank with his shirt motion. Soon after that all the rest of the group, Wombly and Ashe included, also worked that way.

Mave was walking towards them, perhaps four hours past midday, when Mave grinned and gave a harsh chuckle, "Careful my friends, she may be taking away our shirts for using them," all eight gave a collective laugh and though Aubrey didn't hear the joke she knew it was likely at her expense.

"Stop moving the pile!" She shouted and they all walked up to stand before her.

"We got another group to finish that," they watched as another group of eight rushed forward and began to move the stones. Several of them slipped initially and none of the group of eight, who had bruised knees, could help but give a sympathetic chuckle.

"Instead, I want to bring you to my favorite part of the court yard," her grin was so devious that none of the group wanted to follow her. But they had to.

She led them to a side room filled with that hung between seven and nine feet off the ground. Hoops, in pairs, also hung between seven and nine feet off the ground. All were attached to the roof. She motioned for them all to step up to a bar that they could jump to then ordered them to do so.

"Jump!" She shouted and each one jumped up and grabbed the bar. Their grip was unusually stronger and they felt stronger, despite their fatigue, even as they accepted what was coming.

"Up!" She shouted and each one tried to pull themselves up into a pull up position, their fingers pointed away from them in a chin-up lift. Ashe, the other girl, whose name they didn't know, Mave, a man whose name they didn't know and Benny pulled themselves into the position. The last man, who they'd learned was named Arnold, Wombly and Tank couldn't quite lift themselves to that position.

As they struggled to Aubrey stepped forward and said, "See, that's a problem. If you plan to scale the walls of Keell you'd better be able to lift yourself. Down!" Those that struggled to get up felt their arms go limp but kept their grip strong. The rest of the group also let their arms go slack.

"Up!" They all went up, the three struggling, then, "Down!" They all went down.

"Up!" "Down!" "Up!" "Down!" "Up!" "Down!"... the words became etched in their mind and soon none of the group quite made it up.

"What, are you getting tired?" She asked them. None responded but before she could say, "Up!" One more time Mave let go of his bar. He landed on the ground and Aubrey stepped forward.

"You're too tired to pull yourself up?" She asked and Mave nodded.

"Good," she said, "Follow me, all of you!" They all did. She led them into a room full of wooden poles which represented weapons, some in the form of flails, hammers, swords and shields.

"Grab your favorites," Tank grabbed a hammer, flail and shield, which he strapped to his arm. Tank then hung the hammer to his hip. Ashe took two that matched her katanas in weight and shape and Wombly asked about a cross bow.

"We don't use those right now," she said and Wombly nodded and grabbed a short pole, which matched a short sword in size.

"Now go back to the room!" Aubrey said after they'd gotten their poles and equipment to hold the mock-weapons. Mave held a broad-sword like pole while Benny held a short sword and a dirk. Arnold grabbed a spear and a short sword. The girl grabbed half a dozen daggers, all of which she had sheathed on her hip, and a single long sword-pole. The last man, who they didn't know the name of, grabbed a mace-pole despite the fact he was thin and not overly muscular.

They all had their weapons sheathed and stood before their poles again. Aubrey, who they'd learned to call Commander Aubrey, summoned eight men dressed in all in all black.

"When you can't lift yourself up any more you'd better get your weapons ready because when you can't climb to run away anymore you must turn to fight!" Commander Aubrey shouted and all eight yelled, "Yes Commander Aubrey!"

"Jump!" They did.

"Up!" They rose, some struggling.

"Down!" Their arms went limp.

It followed that same cadence for several "Up!" and "Down!"s then finally Tank, Wombly and Arnold couldn't do it anymore. They fell to the ground and the men in black rushed forward, their poles at the ready. Tank barely got his shield up in time to block one strike but didn't get his hand down to his flail or hammer fast enough to continue his defense. He took four hard hits to his body, two on his left side being blocked by the shield, the other two nearly cracking his ribs. He fell to the floor, gasping for

air.

Wombly, next to Tank, took a strike to the chest and felt herself hit the ground, landing heavily beside him. Arnold some-how managed to both block and counter his opponent but that was the end of his luck or skill. He felt the pole slam into his chest and thigh and found himself on the ground.

The entire time Commander Aubrey continued, "Up!" "Down!" "Up!" "Down!"

Benny, the man with the mace, and Mave found themselves on the ground. Benny and the mace wielding man found themselves on the ground quickly but Mave not only blocked, moving his broadsword-pole masterfully, but countered and held the advantage until a second man in black struck at him.

The girl and Ashe dropped last and though they were able to lift themselves they were the lightest of the group and found that their speed was stolen by the chin ups. They, too, were forced to the ground.

"A hundred and forty two," Commander Aubrey said calmly as each of the eight stood up. She looked to Ashe and the girl, "Ashe, Beth, you two did a hundred and forty two. Mave, Benny, Tommy, you all did a hundred and fifteen. Wombly, Tank and Arnold, you all did seventy one half chin ups.

"Thus, to be fair, Wombly, Tank and Arnold must do one hundred and forty two push ups, Mave Benny and Tommy must do a hundred and fifteen and Ashe and Beth must do seventy one," both Ashe and Beth looked relieved while the first group, Wombly, Arnold but not Tank, groaned aloud.

"You know what?" Commander Aubrey asked after they groaned, "Double that number. If you plan to be a Nose Breaker you have to be a tough son of a bitch or a silent pain feeler!" Each all went to the ground, none willing to argue or make a noise, and began to do push ups.

They finished all their work, some training with their pole-arms, more pull up drills and more push ups, at three hours until midnight.

"You all have the rest of the night to yourselves," Commander Aubrey said, "Now go do whatever it is you do."

"Yes Commander Aubrey!" the eight shouted and left.

Tommy and Beth sat together as they ate later than night. Tank, Ashe and Wombly sat across from them. It was a four sided table so Benny and Mave sat next to each other while Arnold sat on his own across from Benny and Mave.

Beth and Ashe looked as though they could have been sisters. The main difference was that Ashe was a little more muscular and Beth was a little more flexible looking. Beth's long blonde hair reached down to the middle of her back and her light blue eyes matched her light skin. She was a little shorter than Wombly and Tank.

Tommy had dark skin but it wasn't as dark as Mave's skin. He was thin and looked more like a messenger than a fighter. He seemed as though he could run for hours and though he wasn't incredibly skinny they would all be surprised if he could lift more than Benny, who was far from thick. Tommy's jet black hair reached his shoulders and a small mustache, jet black, grew just above his lip. His dark eyes matched his hair.

Arnold was thicker, much like Tank, but where Tank was thick in the waist Arnold was thin. And where Tank had giant traps, the muscles on his shoulders, Arnold had giant arms to make Tank and Mave look small. And Arnold's lower body was hardly as thick as either Mave or Tank, who really had the large lower body. He was just an inch or so under six feet tall and his skin was only slightly lighter than Tommy's.

"Your name is what?" Mave asked Ashe and she repeated her name for what might have been the tenth time. "Ashe, huh?" Mave asked, "I'm thinking that is a very strange name..." Ashe rolled her eyes but smiled as she did so. Mave winked and grinned.

"Well, today was fun, eh?" Tommy asked and the group shared a collective groan-chuckle, which none of them actually knew was possible.

"Yeh," Beth said, "Real fun, real fun." They sat in silence for a few moments.

"We all must be thinking we made a mistake in joining this," Mave said and they all raised a glass of ale or wine, though with shaky arms, in a toast. It was around half an hour of talking before they all retired to their bunk-rooms.

"We should go to Harold's Hill," Wombly said when they got to their own bunk-room.

"You two can," Tank said as he climbed slowly to his bunk.

"Tank," Ashe said, "please, you gotta come with us. We're so tired... we'd get robbed for sure." Tank looked at her for a few moments before grunting and beginning his climb down. Wombly smiled at Ashe, who felt very clever at that moment.

They were leaving within a few minutes and they knew that they had about an hour and a half before they had to be back. Their walk was as fast as they could get themselves to move and they tried hard to keep from looking too vulnerable. Tank had his heavy hammer on his hip and thought that look formidable enough.

When they got to Harold's Hill they saw that Esmeralda was about to close the door, which meant that rooms were all taken for the night. Drinks and a chair at a table were most likely available though. Wombly and Ashe stepped up to the door and walked in but Tank hesitated, looking at the inn, at the obviously newer wood and the new hinges, which he'd made.

He thought of what had happened and almost turned to leave. Almost. A hand slapped him on the back and his annoyance at being touched their almost caused him to punch Deabla in the face. Only the young man's reflexes allowed him to avoid the powerful punch.

"Sorry," Tank apologized.

"It is okay, my friend," Deabla said and Tank realized that he'd left the noble part out on purpose. He silently thanked Deabla for that.

"Here, come in, I'll buy you a drink," Deabla said as if Tank really had a choice. Of course he did, but not if he wanted to keep his friendships going. Thus, he followed Deabla in, this time hesitating for only a moment.

As soon as he was inside he saw Wombly and Ashe sitting on the bar stools with their drinks in front of them. The food at the Nose Breakers was far better but that was it. Harold's Hill had wonderful drinks and they knew it.

"Tank!" Alron yelled as he rushed forward and hugged Tank's side. Tank awkwardly patted his head, silently grimacing with the movement, and looked up to see both Esmeralda and Maria staring at him. Maria turned and walked up the stairs to their... her... room. Tank saw this and it took everything he had not to simply fall over or, once he was still standing, to turn and leave right then.

Instead, he painted on a smile and embraced Esmeralda, who walked forward to embrace him. She was warm and smelled good and suddenly Tank was very sleepy.

"I think I should head back soon," he said with something a slur, as if he was drunk. Deabla sat that stress was somewhat relieved from his shoulders and knew the source of his sudden tiredness. He was home, or so his body thought, and he seemed to be sleepy for it.

"Not too soon, I hope," Esmeralda said warmly as she walked around the bar.

"Me too," Ashe and Wombly both said and Tank shrugged.

"We have an hour, don't we?" He asked.

"Yeah," Wombly agreed.

"Well, let's stay for a while then," Tank said.

They talked for several minutes, Tank feeling more and more tired but refusing to stumble up to his old room. Esmeralda seemed more like her father in her mannerisms, somehow managing to keep a conversation going no matter what so long as it was appropriate. It was a great skill for a bartender, for it kept the drink flowing as the drinker stayed awake and interacting, but it also allowed for a bartender to judge whether drinks should continue to flow.

Finally, at about an hour and a half til midnight, Tank and his friends left. Deabla sat with

Esmeralda behind the bar, both deep in thought.

"I like him," Esmeralda said somewhat distantly.

"I know," Deabla said equally distantly. Esmeralda looked at him for a few moments, studying the little guy, then shrugged, looking back forward.

Wombly was rewarded as she lay, waiting for Tank's arm to fall once again. He was asleep no earlier this night, as if the sleepiness had worn off as soon as he was allowed to sleep. She heard his restless shifting and could feel his emotional turmoil even from there. She'd been waiting to study the scar even more and maybe two hours after midnight his arm fell to the side of his bunk again.

"Suicide?" She asked herself as she looked at the cut.

"No..." she thought to herself. He was smart, he knew how to kill himself or another if he wanted to. She studied it for a few moments, thinking of his relationship with Maria and his feelings for her for a few moments, then of what she really knew about him. She realized how little that really was.

With that thought in spot her heavy lids fell closed and she was gone in her dreams, much like Tank was.

A younger Tank sat outside a young Maria's window.

"You awake?" Tank asked after Maria's eyes had closed and he heard her breathing rhythmically, a sound he'd grown to cherish. He felt honored that she'd been able to fall asleep in his presence. She must really trust him, he'd thought at that time. It wouldn't be until later that it'd occur to him that it might just be because she didn't really care about him.

But now, he was just left with contentedness.

"I think I love you, Maria," he said aloud to her sleeping breath, "I think I love you."

## **Chapter Eight:**

For the first week they worked purely on strength training, mostly body weight, and individual sword play. Every night they walked to their bunk-room completely exhausted then the friends would walk to Harold's Hill. Then, when they got back, Wombly would wait for Tank to finally fall asleep and she'd watch his arm, wondering how it all had happened.

The eight were all becoming fast friends.

But now it was day eight of Nose Breaker training and something different happened. Soon as they were awakened they were brought to the pole-arm room and armed and armored up, then brought to a new room instead of the Court Yard. In this room they saw dozens of warriors, all wearing pure black.

"What is this place?" Tank asked as they stepped into the new room. Neither of his friends had an answer for him.

"Get into a defensive formation!" Bear shouted at the eight friends when the other five, Tommy, Benny and their friends, walked into the room. The group of eight all ran forward, getting into some sort of weird circle formation.

Wombly, Tank and Ashe stood facing the outside, all together, while Tommy, Mave and Beth all stood by each other. Arnold and Benny stood side by side. There were small gaps in their defensive circle and Bear howled with laughter.

"Get 'em boys!" Bear shouted and in charged a dozen black clad men. Each one held wooden pole arms, a varied assortment of swords, shields, spears, maces and hammers.

Of the group Tommy, Mave and Beth did the worst. Beth jumped forward and Mave, swinging wide with his broad sword, accidentally slamming the wooden blade against her back. She fell to the ground and Mave grimaced in regret as he saw her laying, moaning and barely moving. Tommy held up his mace defensively but seemed as if he only knew how to use the weapon offensively.

Benny blocked several attacks immediately, his sword and dirk a flash, but he didn't have the weight to hold the line while Arnold lunged with his spear, connecting solidly with a man in black's chest. The man was laid out fully and collapsed, eyes upward as he moaned in agony. One of his ribs was broken and the wind was knocked from his lungs.

But as Benny was forced backward Arnold was forced to lunge with his spear more and more. Pretty soon, a black-clad warrior knocked the spear from his hands and Arnold was forced to pull out his long sword. But his skill with that weapon was next to none.

"I can't defend!" Benny shouted and Arnold knew it was true. Benny could only attack or run, maybe defending in a one on one. He didn't have the strength or weight to hold his ground against large or numerous opponents. Pretty soon, Benny and Arnold were covered in welts and beaten down to the ground, where they lay, much like the man with broken ribs.

But while the others were breaking down Wombly, Ashe and Tank somehow held. Wombly was a lesser warrior and all three knew it. She stood in the middle as the line around them collapsed. Tank's flail spun on its end and two men fell to it, the heavy ball on the end slamming into their body. And as he attacked he managed to defend as well, his shield taking several hits.

And while Tank worked to defend and destroy all in front of him Ashe's wooden-blades whirled, too quickly for any enemies to get in close. And while she was defending at such speed she wasn't able to counter against that many foes. Thus, Wombly came into play. Whenever an obvious opening made an appearance her short sword truck.

The three held for nearly five minutes before Bear, howling with laughter, watched as Mave was forced into their group. They accepted him and rather than a two sided defense it became a three sided defense. Wombly still in the middle, they managed to fend the black-clad warriors, now over a dozen of them joined in the fight.

Benny and Arnold tried to make their way over to the defense but couldn't get in the defense. All the while Beth lay on the ground, drifting in and out of consciousness.

"Alright, stop!" Bear shouted as a dozen men came down upon the four at once.

"You three!" He said loudly as he approached Wombly, Tank and Ashe, "Well done! And good job to you, my young ebon friend!" He said to Mave, who stood straight, four inches below eye to eye with the 'bear of a man'.

"You did well, half of the group, you did well!" Bear howled, "The rest of you..." he looked to Beth, who seemed almost somewhat recovered. He motioned to a pair of black-clad warrior. They rushed off and returned with a giant bucket of cold water. As they got back, they threw it onto Beth, who jumped up and cried out, fully awake now.

"You eight aren't part of our military... but that's why we need you. You eight have to learn how to fight together and you learn to fight with each other, as a single unit. You have three weeks left to get your asses into fighting shape and learn to get into defensive formations and offensive formations. Each one of you was chosen as soon as you walked into here," Bear said.

"How were we chosen?" Wombly asked, more than a little interested.

Bear chuckled and in walked an older woman. Her stark white hair reached down to her lower back, which contrasted with her dark, dark skin, somehow darker than Mave's. They all looked at her for a few moments until she looked at them. As soon as she made eye contact with her, her eyes seemed to glow in contrast with her dark skin, the member of eight broke eye contact.

"I chose you," the woman said, "I chose you because we need something to defend this city and to stop something that is going on within Keell. There is an evil there that even our strongest magicians and wizards cannot define. We have sent in our best magical assassins and not one of them managed to succeed. And only a single one has ever returned.

"His name is Navok and he is a battle mage. He is one of our most powerful wizards and he has never been defeated before. He will be your ninth member and he will help you to get to Keell," the woman explained.

"Are we going to meet him?" Wombly asked.

"No, not until you all are ready enough for a real fight. He is currently leading the trench digging outside the city and we're going to keep him there as protection for our soldiers. We prepare for a long war and unless you all can get in there and stop them, then it will be a bloody struggle for many years. Our Golden Hornets are reknown for their defensive abilities. We have devoted more gold to the defense of our city than any other matter, even food and drink. No matter how hard they come we will stop them.

"But hey are an aggressive city and have expanded much in their years. Dozens of forts that were once part of other nations are now theirs. We have suspected they would try this for many years but never have we had the resources to get in and see what leads them... Inside the city there is a group called the Black Hoods and there leader is... Well, Navok is the only one who knows what he is and he won't tell us until we are ready to strike. We plan for that to be in the next three weeks."

They all sat in silence, suddenly aware that they'd stepped up for something beyond what they'd expected. Tank had expected to go up against the leader of the Black Hoods but now that the leader was considered inhuman... he didn't know.

At that moment Tank suddenly foundhimself lost in thought. Why was he even here? He began to wonder when suddenly he saw the woman staring at him. Her eyes seemed to narrow somewhat and he realized that she must be able to read his mind, or at least get a general understanding of how he felt. She smiled at him as he came to that realization and it was a comforting expression, one that filled him with reassurances. Then he heard it.

*You have done the best you could up until this point. Do not feel bad and do not stray from the path you think righteous and you will be a good leader for your friends. They will all need you as much as you need them, it is not a one way path, and you will find that so long as you don't do anything for the wrong reasons you'll live a happy life.*

She smiled at him again and he nodded in return, truly feeling better for her reassurances. She nodded and Wombly, who'd seen Tank drift off, noticed the exchange also. She, too, recieved a mental message with similar advice, only instead of her leading she was given a feeling that she would be up to the responsibilities given to her if she just did what she thought was right.

She, too, looked at the woman in thanks. Pretty soon, all eight noticed that the others were silent and thanking the woman. Ashe looked at her friends and immediately they understood that all of them had recieved messages. None could deny that she'd made them feel better. Then, before they could say anything, she turned and left.

They sat in silence for many minutes before finally Mave spoke.

"Well it is looking like we have a mission, is it not?" Mave said and everyone nodded in agreement.

"We're not teaching you to fight in a big bloody battle!" Bear shouted over the fighting, "We're teaching you to get into your formations so that you don't get into these giant battles. You get avoid those battles and you get into Keell, you find that guy and you signal to us, then you kill that sonbitch!"

The eight were circled in close to each other, the larger and more skilled warriors on the outside, the smaller and less skilled warriors on the inside. Mave and Tank were on opposite sides, Ashe and Arnold on their sides. Tommy and Beth played more aggressive behind the more skilled warriors while Wombly and Benny helped mainly whenever their 'big four' got forced to step back.

But Bear wasn't happy. They'd been practicing moving as a group in the subterranean tunnels beneath Sprinkleberry, Benny and Ashe moving forward as scouts, when the Nose Breaker's black-clad warriors rushed out of the side tunnels. Their objective was about eight blocks, about fifty feet, from them and they still had the same eight doors to go through.

Wombly's ability to pick locks was more useful than any of the group had expected but even with that skill they had to pause for at least a minute before every door. As she did that they moved into

a fair defensive formation around her, trying to keep their stronger fighters in the front. They all knew that they weren't numerous enough to win any big fights, thus they tried to get themselves into better positions to flee from, as Commander Aubrey had shown them.

As Wombly finished one of the locks, about two dozen of the black-clad warriors rushed in with their wooden weapons. It'd taken the group of eight all of ten seconds to get into a defensive formation. Bear, who came down with the black-clad warriors, had originally congratulated them. But now, as the battle went on for more and more time, they found themselves being yelled at by the giant of a man for not getting away.

"We march towards the objective now!" Ashe shouted but she wasn't quite loud enough to be heard over the dull thuds and grunts of the fighters. She got Tank's attention, which cost him a nasty hit on the ribs, but he got her message.

"Get your hides over to the objective!" He yelled and everyone heard. Wombly nodded, lifting one of her black spheres and launching it in the direction that they meant to go in. The sphere exploded and several of their enemies who'd been standing over there suddenly found themselves on the ground, coughing for breath.

The group, seeing the opening, turned and began to make their way to the objective. The black-clad men moved in pursuit of the group. One of them almost broke the line but Tank, spinning his flail with skill beyond anything he'd had before this week, interrupted his march. They'd all improved in their handling of their weapons, especially when combined with each other, and as one of Beth's flying daggers struck the man in the chest, knocking him backward a step, but as soon as the man gained his balance Tank's spinning flail slammed into his face, knocking him to the ground.

The aggressive move cost Tank and he took another hit, this time to the shoulder, and as soon as the man who struck him stepped backwards the man received a spinning flail to the left shoulder, which snapped the bone beneath. The man fell back and soon the group of eight defended the door, aside from Wombly, who worked to pick it.

Each member was hit several times and they had to back up, closer and closer to the door, but even as they worked to hold their ground more and more men rushed in. They heard Bear laughing in the background as soon as the door was opened and Wombly gasped. They looked back and saw about a dozen black-clad men.

"A trap," Tank sighed.

"Yep," said one of the black-clad men on the other side, "Now we're going to show you what to do if this happens." And then they began to learn how to fight, the same as always.

Deabla watched as a man approached Maria. She was in a bad state, he knew, and he saw that the man began to console her. He was a larger man, no thicker than Tank but at least half a foot taller than him, and a good ten inches taller than Maria. Even still, he was attracted to her, Deabla could see as obvious and by the way he moved in close he knew what the man wanted.

He watched suspiciously for several minutes, watched as the man got closer and closer, began to touch her and watched as she initially flinched but didn't pull away. He watched and he didn't like what he saw.

He watched and tried to read Maria but... all he saw was pain. Just pain... and desperation.

Maria didn't know why she let the man in close. She didn't know why she hadn't rebuffed him like she had others before. Why didn't she shove this guy's ego to the floor and ground it to dust? She was beginning to ask herself all these questions when one in particular shot out in her mind. Why didn't she treat this brute the same way she had Tank, neither of which were smooth talkers by any means?

But as soon as Tank entered her mind she remembered everything that had happened all at once. She'd known about it before but had managed to block out the memories for a time. Suddenly she saw Chance again. Suddenly she felt the way he touched her, the way he gripped her arm...

And suddenly she was this man's, this brute's. She was alone and gone.

"Let's go up stairs," she heard herself say and she couldn't understand why she said it. The man grinned and began to lead her up the stairs when Deabla strode forward.

"Sorry, but you can't do that," the small man said, "She's with someone else."

"Little bud, you wanna move out th' way," the large man said to Deabla, "An' she asked me up, I ain't going in on some 'ther's man, else she'd be say'in no to me. But 'stead she's asking me, so she must not 'nother's woman."

"She's taken," Deabla said again, this time more firmly. The man pushed through Deabla, who tried, in vain, to keep the two back. Maria seemed to need the man's support, as she leaned on him, which only reinforced the man's belief that she wanted him. Deabla came at him again, this time harder, but instead of simply pushing the man punched out, knocking Deabla onto his butt.

Deabla gave a half smile as he flew to the ground, knowing what was to come next, but when he hit the ground the smile disappeared.

Esmeralda lifted her crossbow towards the man as soon as the punch was thrown and the man lifted his arms up, which let Maria fall to the ground next to Deabla.

"Get out," the innkeeper ordered, "Now." The man nodded and turned to leave, fleeing out the building.

Maria slowly got up, her body still as weak as her mind seemed to be, and looked to Esmeralda for a few moments.

"Hun, you can't do that," Esmeralda said to Maria, "You have to take care of yourself... I don't know why you'd go with that... that brute, but you know it wouldn't be healthy for you. We all know you are going through hard times but... you're... not the only one..." the innkeeper felt the tears rolling down her face and saw that Maria, too, had salty droplets making their way down her pleasantly round cheeks.

"Good job Deabla... I didn't notice until..." Esmeralda began when suddenly she noticed he wasn't moving, "Deabla?" Maria looked down at him and suddenly both Esmeralda and Maria shared a panicked expression.

"Deabla!" Maria cried out as she got down to her knees next to him and suddenly she noticed he was breathing... then turning over... then laughing?

"You felt something again," he said between small laughs and Maria's eyes narrowed into slits of anger. Esmeralda, who hadn't been the cause of his 'injury', couldn't deny a small smile. Deabla then made eye contact with her again and he realized that he may have gone too far.

"You..." Maria began then sputtered for a moment, "You... you... you!" Her arm flashed across and Esmeralda wondered if the loud and painful looking slap might knock the young man out. Instead, Maria turned and left while Deabla suppressed a small smile.

"She needed to feel again... how else will she and Tank get back together?" He asked the innkeeper as he got up, a hand up rubbing his cheek as he considered the pain.

Esmeralda forced a weak smile as she considered the outcome he worked towards. She didn't know how she felt about him but whenever he was around she felt her heart beat fast and her cheeks blush. She wondered for a few moments if he felt anything back. She didn't hold the thought as a few people got in front of her, all wanting a drink.

The rest of the night she was busy. At some point the next morning Deabla took over and she went up to her room. As she passed Maria's door she heard the young woman crying in her room. Using her key, she silently opened the door and crept in. She saw Maria sitting against the wall, eyes closed, and hugging her knees.

"Maria..." she almost said. But she knew that the young woman would hardly appreciate such a lack of privacy. Then again, she'd never thought Maria would be brought to a point like this. Should she talk to the young woman? She considered the question for several moments but she was interrupted by Deabla asking for help below.

She turned and quietly relocked Maria's door. She then walked down to see Deabla struggling to make a certain drink. She smiled as he spilled some of the contents then walked over, no desire to go to sleep anymore.

"Who is he?" Deabla asked the next day, at around midday, as he walked down into the inn. He referred to a rather tall and powerful looking man in front of Esmeralda, who eyed him curiously and doubtfully.

"I am called Denerick," the large man said in a deep voice, "And I come searching for work."

"Work?" The small man asked, looking at the large man.

"He wants to be our..." Esmeralda began, but she hesitated, looking for a proper word, "Hired muscle."

"I will protect you and your servers with the same passion I would myself and my children, had I any," Denerick said. He had a strange accent, which Deabla assumed was from the far east, and knew that he was likely from the mountain cities to Sprinkleberry's east. The natives often came in from the mountains when their clans were destroyed or if they were outcast but occasionally a young male would leave just because they didn't feel comfortable in their land. Sometimes they came to trade.

To the north was a similar society that lived in the giant mountains that were perhaps a hundred miles away from Keell, which was slightly more north than Sprinkleberry.

"You're from the mountains, aren't you?" Deabla asked and for a split second it seemed as if Denerick was no longer with them, as if he was in another time. Then, with a single blink, his eyes watched Deabla again.

"I was of the mountain tribe Canib," Denerick said softly, "but I am no longer of them, nor am I pledged to them." His dark skin only made his eyes, dark brown even where the sclera (the white part) of the eye, with a black pupil, seem only more intense and dark. "I am here to pledge my allegiance to you or any other inn or merchant that will take me. I will not be a mercenary, as your people call it, but I will pledge myself to the owners of an honorable company."

"Honorable company?" Snorted a man from behind. Denerick's scimitar, a curved blade with an undeniably sharp edge, was out of its sheath on his hip and to the man's throat immediately. His arms seemed to bulge with muscle as his eyes, filled with passion at that moment, and the man who'd snorted regretted his words immediately.

"My apologies... my apologies..." the man began when suddenly one of his friends jumped up from behind. The man who'd snorted grinned as his friend slammed into Denerick's back, expecting the two to go down in a heap. Rather, the smaller man lay on the floor at Denerick's feet while the giant dark-skinned man's scimitar still hovered at the smaller man's throat.

"Walk away," Denerick said in a low, angry voice, "Walk away." The two men walked off, the one that Denerick had thrown to the ground still dizzy while the other helped him to walk.

"Hedami, I'd bet," Deabla whispered to Esmeralda. He referred to a branch of particularly tough mountain dwellers.

"Well," Esmeralda said after a few moments, "You're hired... but I can't pay you much-"

"I require no money. Just food and a place to sleep," the giant man said. Esmeralda nodded and the man walked over to sit in the corner.

"Where are you going?" Esmeralda asked and the man grinned, "I start now." He dropped his pack to the floor in the corner of the inn and it landed heavily on the floor. The thud was loud enough that both Deabla and Esmeralda knew that it was more than they could lift.

"Are you not running out of rooms to rent out?" Deabla asked and Esmeralda laughed.

"With Maria helping with the tables and Denerick protecting us we might not need to rent any out. Especially when fights start. Father used to say that if people knew a big fight would occur then they'll show up just to see some fool fly through the door," Esmeralda said. "More people here means more drinks sold."

"Fair enough," Deabla said after a little thought.

## Chapter Nine:

"I do agree," Tommy said as they sat around a round table, dealing cards. They, the group of eight, had been playing for almost half an hour when talk of who was the best fighter came up, "Mave or Tank are the best." Ashe looked over, one eye brow raised, and she laughed sarcastically.

"I am thinking that I am not," Mave said to the group, "Beth is having much skill with her knife throwing. We only would be killing her if we could get in close. Either she or Tank fight the best of us all."

Ashe again scoffed but didn't speak. Tank sat silent, looking at his cards, eyeing the other seven.

"Yeh," Beth said, "I do think that you'd find me a hard catch." She grinned and Tommy nodded.

"She would be a hard one to catch," the man said with a nod of his head. He then played three cards, all of the same number and everyone at the table groaned, aside from Ashe.

"Ha," she said as she placed another three cards of higher value. Tommy frowned.

"That was a good play, it was," Tommy said and Ashe nodded.

"So we agree Beth is the best?" Mave asked.

"I don't," Arnold replied, "Only one man here scares me more than the rest and that is Tank."

"I, too, am agreeing," Mave said and once again Ashe scoffed.

"I can take him," she claimed. Arnold and Tommy both snorted. "What?" She asked.

"He's too strong for you," Mave said, "I believe you would beat him with an arrow from a dozen yards away but I do not think you could beat him in a one on one." Benny, who'd been quiet, watched as they all made their judgments.

"I already have," Ashe said and every person at the table made an, 'oooooh,' noise. Wombly gave a small smile and nodded at Tank, who just closed his eyes, obviously not wanting this to happen.

"This is true?" Tommy asked and when Tank didn't deny it they all began to make loud noises, drawing attention from the other tables, where black-clad warriors ate. Some of the noises were taunts while others were simply the group being obnoxious.

Finally, they quieted, "We should see if that's still the case," Benny said, silently rooting for Ashe, and Tank groaned.

"Come on!" the group, aside from Wombly and Ashe, chanted. Ashe simply stared at the potential challenger and Tank, finally sighing, stood up. He pulled his wooden flail and shield into a ready position and nodded to Ashe, who, with a fancy and spinning of her wooden blades, stood also. She smiled and taunted, "I'll go easy on you this time."

Tank sighed and readied himself both mentally and physically for the oncoming trial. He knew she'd be aggressive this time and stepped forward, his flail already spinning. His shield was in a bad position.

Ashe sprinted forward, lunging with her left kantana while her right came in from the side. Tank shifted to his right, blocking her left kantana and avoiding her right kantana. His flail came in hard and Ashe barely ducked the heavy wooden ball. Then she charged forward, trying to jab into him again but his shield punched forward, taking her in the face.

Tank felt something familiar about this as she rolled back onto her feet and instead of pursuing, as his instincts told him, he backed off. She charged forward again, one kantana striking downward while the other stayed back defensively. Tank stepped back again and just as Ashe seemed content to accept the gained ground he charged forward, butting her again with his shield.

This time, his flail came in too fast. He knew that if it hit it could do some serious damage to her, several black-clad warriors would agree to that, so he lowered the strike and the chain wrapped around her leg. He jerked her up but as he did so he felt the kantana in his side.

Both were down and defeated and the six friends all clapped.

"Well done," Tommy said.

"Thanks..." Tank and Ashe both said reluctantly. Tank hadn't wanted the fight but had wanted to win either way.

The days passed by for Tank, Wombly and Ashe. Soon after Ashe and Tank's duel Commander Aubrey and Bear began to train the group in archery. Wombly was quite adept at any type of archery, whether with the long bow, short bow or crossbow. After a week she'd gained skill even in the throwing of darts and the use of a sling.

Tank proved a poor distance attack in all ways aside from one type of weapon: the javeline. He could launch the javeline over a hundred and sixty feet and at a hundred he could throw with accuracy enough to hit a man in the chest. Ashe, like Beth, could launch daggers with in a stream with accuracy beyond even the most skilled black-clad warriors.

The rest of the five, aside from Beth, showed little skill with their long-distance weapons.

The entire time they spent no small amount of time learning a signal-based language and each one could use it enough to understand each other in battle and before battle without saying a word, so long as they could see each other.

And while the eight got stronger and faster Deabla, Esmeralda, Maria and Denerick all seemed to grow more profitable. Denerick was only forced to throw someone out once in the first two days, but after people began talking more and more rowdy customers showed up, some to prove their toughness, others simply to see if someone would be brave enough to challenge the giant mountain warrior. After several drinks the number of people willing to face up with Denerick grew substantially.

The last week was uncomfortable for everyone. Wombly and Ashe went to Harold's Hill every-night but Tank always shrugged, never following and always staying at the Nose Breaker's bunk room, alone. Wombly, as they stepped out, looked back every time. She refused to accept that he was beyond recovery, which Ashe seemed to have, but she couldn't see him reacting well to her trying to force him.

Thus, everytime she and Ashe left she asked Tank quietly if he'd like to come along. When he refused, generally with a grunt or a polite no, she would simply nod and hide the sadness in her eyes. For some reason she couldn't quite understand he seemed damaged somewhere that she couldn't see. Suddenly she wished Deabla was there, for he seemed to be able to fix problems like this. She was a genius and all agreed with that but sometimes she had a hard time reading people.

On the fifth day of the week, two days until they left for Keell, she walked up to Tank after their training. He leaned over a table that he sat at, a drink of hard liquor in hand, and stared into the liquid. As she got closer he looked up and seemed somewhat off-put when she sat at the table also.

"Tank, can we talk?" Wombly asked and Tank grunted in approval. She knew he was already somewhat drunk, as alcohol or pain were the only things time he ever grunted instead of talked, and she knew that that in itself was a problem. He never drank himself to drunkenness before this week... something had changed.

"I think you should come with Ashe and I to Harold's Hill tonight," Wombly said and Tank took another drink before looking up at her. They made eye contact for a few moments before Tank looked away, which puzzled Wombly more than a little. She studied him for a few moments before speaking again.

"Hey, look at me," she said and when he didn't immediately do so she reached out and gently put pressure on his chin to look up. After just a moment of resistance he followed her desire and their eyes met again.

"What's the matter?" Wombly asked, as she had almost every night before, and suddenly Tank's eyes were red and rimmed with tears, which was almost exactly the opposite of what Wombly came to expect from the thick and power-ful young man. Suddenly where there had been a wall of stoicism she saw a well of emotion that was all but pouring over. Where there had previously been a, "Nothing," there was now a block of emotion, a whisper that died in his throat before he could speak.

"What's the matter?" She repeated and Tank began to speak when suddenly, rather than talk, he turned. His words, like before, died in his throat before he'd even formed them. With strength beyond anything most of them had witnessed, even if their practice-battles with heavier weapons, he drove the palm of his hand into the wall, creating a slap that had the black-clad warriors looking over from across the room.

Wombly stared at him, stunned. His left hand, the one that he'd slammed into the wall, lowered down to his side and she saw blood where there'd been skin. He turned and where there'd been tears there was only rage and hatred but when they made eye contact she understood, somehow, that it wasn't directed towards her.

He stormed past her and had she not been so stunned she would have followed him. Rather, she sat for several moments, deep in thought. It was around three hours til midnight when Ashe finally came from the bathrooms. She obviously had gone to their bunkroom for she wore fully washed clothes and the look on her face showed obvious confusion.

"What happened to Tank?" she asked Wombly, who sat in silence for a few moments, looking from the blood on the wall, from his palm, to the cup that he'd been drinking from.

"I wish I knew," the inventor muttered to herself as she stood up. Ashe seemed content to forget the incident but the rest of the night the encounter bothered her. She didn't know why but it seemed as if Tank was crossing a line he couldn't come back from... and she didn't like where it might lead.

Medea looked around the city curiously. Standing just short of average height, perhaps five feet four inches, she attracted no attention, especially in the dark. Her skin, dark enough to show her non-human lineage, was hidden at night but in the day time it'd be obvious that she wasn't a full blooded human.

Rather, as the Noptarian, a race of subterranean peoples, studied her surroundings the few people walking the streets passed her without second thought. And if one singled her out, whether as a human woman or a Noptarian, the dagger that was on her hip would find their throats before they could call out.

She was somewhat worried that her eyes, a hypnotizing shade of red, would give her away but she decided to worry about that when it came up. She didn't mind killing, especially humans, especially humans from this city, and if it came to that she wouldn't think twice. But as she considered the large group of soldiers marching down the city, all dressed in the garb of guards but hardly wielding weapons for non-lethal combat, she considered that it might be more wise to use the gifts of her ancestry rather than the brutal art of stopping hearts.

"Interesting," she mumbled to herself, "he wasn't lying." She then turned and walked back to one of five secret entrances from the city-level of Keell to her own home, a place of a thousand strong and hardy peoples known as Noptarians. The race was known for their city, Nopteria, and though the people of Keell were hardly aware of its existence, some thinking it was simply a myth while others believed that it was just a place to train soldiers for the Keell crown, they were racist against the genuinely black-skinned race.

More than a few Noptarians had been killed by the guards recently and Medea had decided to find out all that had happened. After just a few days of asking a few inconspicuous questions and showing up at a few events, in a few areas, that she could only show up inconspicuously. Either she wore the dark colored, black hooded cloak that she currently donned or she would find herself in some holding cell for the Keell wizards to interrogate, magically and physically, humanely and... another way.

As she walked down the street, turning into an alley, she considered the message she'd received from Sprinkleberry and all that she'd found out. A mage known as Navok had contacted her through means non-carnal and had requested that she scout around and relay the information to him. She had cautiously followed through, relaying just enough information to learn what the wizard wanted and soon after the information was given she received a large sack of gold, more than a year's wages for

most middle-class merchants.

After she'd received the gold she'd completed the report. Navok thanked her but there was no more gold forthcoming, which disappointed her somewhat. But she knew that she'd already received more than the normal amount for information-gatherers. The young Noptarian gripped her knife, ready for one of the guards to make a move as they passed by the alleyway she'd walked into but a move was not made.

As she considered the fact that the number of guards that patrolled the roads at night had tripled she wondered if maybe the next offer she'd received was worth it. Even at that moment she wondered if the Black Hoods had really taken over, as her prying into the subject had led her to believe. The offer, due in two days, was that she help a group of top-notch warriors into Keell and to smuggle them into the palace that Keell's king lived in.

Once there, she didn't know what they'd do but she had a fairly good guess. As she considered the ruthless killing she smiled, realizing that as long as her home, Nopteria, wasn't directly effected she didn't really care. In fact, she felt more than a little excitement at the thought of a battle 'upstairs'.

In the far east of the city, the closest part of it to Sprinkleberry, at the base of an old, abandoned warehouse she entered Nopteria through one of the five or six secret entrances to seek her superiors in order to find out whether the deal was worth it or not.

The night passed slowly for Wombly. She, Ashe and Deabla all sat at the bar, Esmeralda behind it serving others who sat at the table. They met Denerick and Ashe seemed ready to challenge him from the first time she met him. Maria walked down once during their first hour back. Both Deabla and Wombly watched as she seemed to search for something then as she turned to leave, heading back upstairs.

It was two hours until midnight when several men walked in, all of them wearing pure black. Both Ashe and Wombly recognized some of the men from the Nose Breakers. They eyed Wombly and Ashe for a moment before nodding them over. Warily they walked over to the black-clad warriors.

"What is it?" Ashe asked when they got to the men, who all stood proudly. One of the black clad warriors that they recognized as named Jeffy nodded to the other men, who all walked throughout the inn, sitting at various spots.

"We are assigned to this inn, as it is the home of you, Ashe and Tank for protection when you leave. The Nose Breakers take care of their own and you have become one of us. Tonight you are due back at midnight, an hour later than usual, and tomorrow you will have the day to yourselves, in order to enjoy what might be the last peaceful day of your lives."

The way Jeffy spoke reminded Wombly of some sort of scroll, as if he was speaking from memory alone, like a golum or some other artificial, non-organic creation. Then Jeffy sighed and both young women could see some emotion in his eyes, as if he was trying to apologize without apologizing in a vocal manner. Or maybe he just felt bad for them. Neither could tell but only thing occurred to Wombly at that moment.

Tomorrow may be the last day Tank and Maria could be around each other. She cared deeply for both and knew that if they were just together it might make both happy. Or if it didn't, they would at least know that it wasn't meant to be and both move on.

Of course Wombly knew that was the picture perfect outcome but she had to hope that such a thing existed and, for herself as much as the other two, she wanted to see if it could work.

"Well," Ashe said as they walked back to their own table, "We have an extra hour to ourselves."

Jeffy and his four companions all sat in the inn, buying a drink just often enough to remain inconspicuous but not enough to get intoxicated. Esmeralda, after half an hour passed, noticed them but didn't question them, as they spent money in her bar. Denerick, after a little, also recognized the not-so-concealed weapons at their hips and knew immediately that these were trained killers.

"They are on our side?" He asked Wombly and Ashe. They nodded and assured him they were.

The entire time Deabla sat with his two friends, truly savoring the time with them. He knew they'd find a way to come back and to fix this situation. They'd find a way to help everyone and to make everything better.

Wombly and Ashe were his two best friends, with Tank in close fourth and Esmeralda and Maria behind him. And while he couldn't deny a certain level of brotherhood with Alron, he was too young. But still, they were his family. And he knew that Ashe and Wombly took family very seriously. They would fix everything while he kept things working.

He had to believe that these two, capable and hardy young women could find an answer where he, for all his intuition and ability to predict, couldn't.

Ashe and Wombly left a suspicious Denerick, who they didn't trust enough to tell immediately, while Esmeralda and Deabla made peace with them. The barkeeper attempted to give them half-off on their drinks but the Nose Breakers refused, Jeffy insisting that because their friends risked so much for the city the Nose Breakers would always pay full price. Harold's Hill would be taken care of, they'd said, and even if the inn came on hard times it would be given some money to keep afloat.

"In all honesty," Jeffy said to Esmeralda, "They're going on a mission that'd make my trousers brown and yellow. The captains say survival likelihood is very low. I'd nto be telling you this except that I think you should know. This is the least we should do, 'cause if they fail, money and gold won't mean a damn thing to anyone of us."

Maria, who'd been coming down the stairs, heard it also. She walked out to see Esmeralda and Deabla sitting stunned.

"But... Wombly said that it was just a simple mission... that they'd be back," Esmeralda said haltingly, still trying to digest the information.

"She says dis for de same reason a man says it to his wife. Dey don't want you to worry for dem because it will help no one for you to worry for dem," Denerick said as he walked forward, out of the corner. Jeffy, who'd never seen Denerick at his full height, seemed to grow a little smaller. The scimitar at Denerick's side caught Jeffy's eye for several moments.

"He is my hired help," Esmeralda said and Jeffy's eyes narrowed.

"It is illegal to pay someone simply for violence," the Nose Breaker said but if he planned to do anything about it he didn't make any move towards those ends.

"I am not here for violence," Denerick said and Jeffy looked back down at his scimitar.

"He's here for public relations," Deabla chipped in and Esmeralda giggled. Denerick looked at Deabla for a few moments then looked to Jeffy and nodded. Deabla himself suppressed a laugh and Jeffy just grinned.

"I imagine he gets what he wants quite often," Jeffy said and brought a hand up to his brown beard. It was obvious that the beard had been trimmed once but it had grown a bit out of control just recently. His head was balding a little but he didn't seem to mind it. He laughed a bit, bought an ale, then turned and walked back to his seat next to one of the other Nose Breakers. He was older than the rest but still young enough to remain a 'fun young man'. His 30th year had been nice enough to the fit man.

"They lied to us," Esmeralda said and Deabla shrugged.

"Who can blame them," Maria said from behind, "They barely want to be there. They're only there because of Tank and he's only there because he's, well, Tank."

"And us worrying doesn't change anything," Esmeralda said with a sigh.

Deabla studied Maria for a moment and wondered if she'd forgiven herself. He wondered for a moment if she had already and realized that it was highly likely that she had before. But something had jerked her back, as if by magic. He wondered if the assassin, if Chance, had done anything beyond the physical world to her.

He was shaken from his reverie by Alron.

"Tank would have left either way," Alron said and all three young adults, and Denerick, looked curiously at the young child. "He is a knight! A monster comes to the city and the knights go out to slay it. They're all knights... and we couldn't have stopped them from leaving if we tried."

Deabla, Denerick, Esmeralda and Maria stared at the young boy, dumbfounded. Finally, Alron sighed, turned and walked away.

"Tank would like being called a knight," Maria said, "and he'd never let anyone forget that they called him that..." she smiled and laughed a little. Both Deabla and Esmeralda looked at her strangely for a few moments.

"What do you mean?" Esmeralda asked.

Maria looked at her for a few moments, "What do you mean what do I mean?"

"I don't know... he's always so intense and focused, I honestly couldn't imagine him having much fun with anything like that," Esmeralda said, "For all the time I've known him he's either been deep in thought, working, sleeping or eating or some combination of the two..."

"Oh," Maria said and she paused for a moment, thinking.

"He hasn't always been like that, has he?" Deabla asked. Denerick, who'd never actually met Tank but heard things regarding his reputation, listened intently.

"When we were in Keell he was a sensitive, sweet, happy-go-lucky guy most of the time, with a streak of darkness in him, but not enough to change how anyone felt about him. He thought a lot, more than any of us, but it never kept him from being friendly. He had lots of friends, or at least everyone knew him and owed him something.

"I remember he used to smile a lot, telling jokes or giving out compliments left and right... it was so hard to be unhappy around him. But... then when we had to leave the city... when *I* had to leave the city... he changed. It was like suddenly he had to become this hardened criminal or something, like he was just doing it to protect me," Maria stopped for a few moments.

"He did dis for you... only for you?" Denerick asked. He didn't know the whole story, and this was the most he'd heard about it at once, but he'd been under the impression that the two had fled because both needed to. In all honesty, they all had thought that they'd both been forced to flee. The fact that Maria had been the only one who needed to flee both answered and produced questions about the relationship between Tank and Maria.

"He did this for me," Maria answered.

"Why did he leave?" Denerick asked. He'd heard this part of the story but Denerick found suddenly that he could relate somewhat to this young man, who's life seemed to be the same as his, just a chapter or two behind.

"I told him that I didn't want to be with him, that there was nothing between us," Maria seemed to grow weak at just the telling of it and her eyes were filled with tears. Deabla watched as Maria began to shrink emotionally and it was as if she was broken down by magic.

"Maria," Esmeralda said, hugging her friend. Maria, not sure why she was so upset but very aware of it, tried to shake the sudden shame she felt but it clung to her, like a disease. Even as she tried to get a hold of herself she felt herself slipping into darkness.

Chance sat and felt his ring pulsing. He smiled to himself, knowing its insidious magic was at work. He felt the agony that she felt, an emotional turmoil enough to smash down any effort that she might put into any action. Though Tank wasn't dead Chance felt some level of grim joy. He knew that Maria was special to Tank and the thought of her being driven into the ground by the magic-inspired misery that filled her.

And even if he managed to counter the magic the current level of misery would almost certainly taint their love, make it so that no matter how hard Maria and Tank tried it wouldn't work for her. There was misery in her soul now and it was mentally attached to his presence. Whether magical or memory-inspired she would feel uncomfortable with him.

Chance grinned and knew that there was almost no way for the magic to be detected at all.

First, one would have to know that her emotion wasn't inspired by her own developing mind, which would be a long stretch, but then also one would have to know that a spell based on emotion. No one but the most intuitive could even hope to find her problem.

Yes, Chance thought to himself as he laid back in a hamoc, watching as soldiers passed by in war stances, wedges and other formations. Keell was going to war against Sprinkleberry and though Chance didn't know why he knew that the Black Hoods would soon be living like kings in both Keell and her sister city, Sprinkleberry.

## Chapter Ten:

"We're leaving, Tank," Wombly said and Tank nodded absently towards her. Ashe stood by the door out of their bunk room while Wombly stood between the two. Ashe seemed annoyed by Wombly's continual attempts on getting Tank to leave.

Ashe had long ago accepted that Tank was as stubborn as the metal that he, as a blacksmith, worked with. Wombly stared at Tank for a few moments then spoke.

"You have to come with us," she said and Tank grunted and didn't make a move. "Tank, look at me." The blacksmith looked up, "This is our last day. We will have to be back here in less than three hours. You have to come with us."

Tank stared at her for a few moments but didn't respond.

"Tank, we're your family. We care about you, all of us. Esmeralda, Maria, Deabla, Ashe and I, we all care about you. They just want to see you before you leave," Wombly said and Tank just stared and still no response was forthcoming.

What seemed like many minutes to Wombly and Tank, and much longer to a genuinely annoyed Ashe, passed before Tank finally said, "I can't."

"Can't?" Ashe asked, frustrated from behind, "Oh, well you know what I can't do anymore? I can't put up with your acting like a child all the time. We all get hurt. We all heal. Just accept it and move on. We're going to fight a battle for these people so you might as well come with us to enjoy the night."

Tank stared at her for a few moments, deep in thought, then brought a hand up to his beard.

"Should I shave?" He asked and Wombly laughed aloud.

"What, so you needed to be bullied into coming?" She asked and Tank shrugged.

"So do I?"

"Yes," Ashe said, "Now hurry up or we're leaving you." Tank climbed to his feet and walked off to find a mirror. Even as he did so, as Wombly and Ashe moved to sit by the door, Tank scowled.

The group strode up towards Harold's Hill and for several moments they stood, savoring the sight. All three knew it wasn't unlikely that this was the last time they would see the inn and each one accepted that the odds of their survival were low. But they all knew that whatever it was that was in charge of the Black Hoods, and, ultimately, Keell, was a danger that threatened all around them.

And while none of them had any family aside from themselves they all knew that there were things about this city that they cared about. Or at least Ashe and Wombly did, for they were risking their life for more than just Tank. Tank himself knew his motivation. Wombly and Ashe started forward and Tank hesitated for a moment, unsure of himself suddenly.

But the hesitation was only long enough for Wombly and Ashe to get a step or two ahead of the blacksmith and neither noticed. They stepped through the door, which brought out a small cheer, from mainly Esmeralda and a few of the more drunk customers.

When Tank strode through the door Esmeralda stopped cheering though the drinks, oblivious to the strain of the group, continued with their drunken revelry. They even took the chance to order more

drinks in celebration of Ashe and Wombly's expected return and another round after Tank's unexpected arrival.

Tank, hiding a scowl, walked up to the inn beside Wombly and Ashe. Wombly was aware of every detail as Tank interacted with Esmeralda, who stared at him. Then he gave a weak smile and Esmeralda, who was only across the bar from the blacksmith, slapped him in the face. Tank took it then spoke quietly, the word obviously not meaning anything, just an acceptance of what happened.

"Yeah," he said and Esmeralda smiled and reached across the bar. Tank didn't flinch but rather remained stiff, expecting another slap, but instead she pulled him to hug him. She smiled at him and said, "I'm glad you came before you left."

Tank just shrugged, "How could I not?"

"The same way you didn't for the last two weeks," Maria said from the stairs. She looked at him and saw as Tank visibly flinched, unwilling to make eye contact with her. When he finally looked up she was just a few steps from him. Before he could speak, she stepped forward and everyone watching expected Tank's head to fly from his shoulders.

But instead of slapping him, Maria embraced him, taking comfort in the strength and warmth of his arms and torso. She stepped back from him for a few moments then said, "You've grown," she said and Tank expected her to remark about his stomach or his muscles but then he realized that she wasn't as tall compared to him as before.

Neither was Wombly. Tank shrugged, realizing that instead of five feet six inches he was now around five feet nine inches. While that wasn't quite average height it wasn't as short as he'd been when they'd last seen each other, about a month before.

"You grew three inches in a month and didn't notice," Esmeralda said skeptically and Tank shrugged.

"Classic Tank," Maria said and Tank blushed somewhat.

"He is like a little boy!" Jeffy said from the side and when Tank scowled at him, his thick brow furrowing, Jeffy shrugged and made an apologetic signal in the Nose Breaker hand-signal language.

"So dis it de great Tank?" Denerick said as he stood. The giant of a man looked down at Tank, who stood almost a foot shorter than Denerick, but there was respect in the mountain man's gaze rather than the contempt most champions of an inn would feel towards previous champions.

"Aye," Tank responded.

"You are notorious for your strength," Denerick said and though the word 'notorious' generally had a negative meaning Denerick had concept of that. Tank eyed him for a moment before shrugging, unwilling to commit or deny the claim.

"Is dere any merit to dose claims?" Denerick asked and Tank shrugged again.

"Oh come on, Tank!" Wombly said, "Show him what you got!" Tank looked at her, his eyes narrowed and his face a mask of death. "Fine," he muttered, "What do you want to do?"

"In my homeland dere is a battle of strength using all parts of the body," Denerick explained, "We call it Grapple of de Titans. We stand a foot and a half from each other," he stepped forward, that way the two looked into each other's eyes. Denerick had to look downwards and Tank had to look up.

"Grab my hands," Denerick said as he raised his hands, palms facing Tank. Tank did so and the Denerick eyed him for a moment, "You will try to force me backwards just as I try to force you to back up. De first to step four steps backwards from this point loses. Do not lose your grasp of td oder's hands, else it is forfeit by de one who breaks."

Denerick eyed Tank for a moment, then looked to the side at Esmeralda, "Count down from de number five. When she says de number one, we will begin."

Esmeralda began to count down and most of the bar looked over in interest, ranging from mild to extreme, some of them even moving closer in their chairs. With war hanging over the city's head any distraction was appreciated. The people who moved the closest to the middle of the bar were the Nose Breakers. Jeffy had heard much about Tank's strength and had seen Denerick's ability with his own eyes

and was genuinely interested in this battle of strength.

She reached one and suddenly where there'd been two men standing there was no an immense amount of pressure. Their arms, chorded and powerful, tensed up and their shoulders bulged. The two sat in a death lock for several moments, both staring the other in the eyes. Both moved to step forward but neither could budge the other.

Of all who watched only Jeffy, his Nose Breakers, Ashe and Wombly really understood the kind of power being transferred. The two struggled and matched each other's strength. Denerick managed to lean forward, which forced Tank to take a step back, then, as Denerick pressed forward even further, Tank was forced a second step back.

Tank was large but Denerick was larger. Where Tank was thick and powerful Denerick was giant and strong. The two struggled. Tank trembled and seemed about to break before Denerick's great strength.

Then, before Denerick could overwhelm Tank, he widened his stance, pressed forward and raised his elbows. Tank growled, stepping forward and Denerick gave up two steps backwards. He tried to save his momentum, or at least halt Tank's, but instead his feet slipped. A third step and Denerick was off balance.

Denerick caught himself but was still forced to step backwards, a fourth time. But because Tank had been forced back two steps initially, Denerick was only two steps from their starting point. Even though he'd gained his own balance Tank still had his momentum and the mountain man couldn't halt Tank. The stockier young man was inside of Denerick's strength zone and Tank knew it.

Denerick was forced back the last step and found himself in defeat. But as he looked down at Tank he knew why he'd lost. Tank's body seemed to expand. His arms and shoulders, legs and chest all bulged. As he looked up at Denerick Tank seemed to shrink down to his normal size, which was still far larger than most people.

"Impressive," Maria said from behind.

"Yes," Esmeralda agreed. Beside them, Wombly studied Tank. The stocky warrior's eyes were downcast, something few people seemed to take in account as rounds of drinks were being bought by the drunks of the inn. The Nose Breakers, Jeffy included, all stared at Tank like Wombly did though.

An intensity that Maria, who now noticed also, had only seen that kind of intensity once.

Even as they watched they saw it dissipate, as he calmed himself. Denerick had been watching also and as he stared at the stocky young man he saw an inner darkness, a shadow inside the blacksmith-gone-warrior.

"I... have to leave," Tank said and Maria stared at him for a few moments. No one stepped in his way and no one knew why he'd reacted this way, aside from Deabla, who stared at his friend with pure eyes. Not even Tank knew why he was angry... he just was.

Maria then rushed forward, grabbing his hand as she did so. When he turned to her, she smiled to him and said, "Come back." Tank looked at her, making eye contact, then nodded. One of the drunks yelled that he should kiss her and the look that Tank gave that drunk was nothing short of death.

The drunk, and his buddies, looked away and shifted his weight.

Tank looked back at Maria, straight in the eye, and nodded again. He then turned and left, leaving a confused Wombly, a seemingly indifferent Ashe, a concerned Deabla and a conflicted Maria in the room.

"I think he will come back, I think you all will," Esmeralda said to her friends.

Looking at Denerick, who bulged with muscle and strength, radiating power and ability, they all wondered at what it took for one to overwhelm a powerhouse such as the mountain man.

"If anyone can get us back," Wombly said, "it'll be him."

"Hey," Esmeralda said before Wombly could leave, "Take care of him." She smiled and Wombly nodded.

They returned that night to find Tank sitting in silence, staring at the city. It was raining and torches on the inside were illuminating the drops of water just before they fell off the building. He'd watched this as a child, thinking of how like life this was.

A single moment of brightness in the rain drops life, where it didn't matter whether the rain drop had hit hundreds of others, whether it'd avoided the other drops the entire time or if it had been in darkness or in light. None of that matter. There, in that moment, nothing else mattered.

He wondered if there was a moment like that in life. He hoped so... because he was tired of thinking. He didn't know how hard it could get but he knew that already he'd been forced into positions that he never would have been able to manage in his younger years. He looked down to his hands for a few moments, looking at the blood that only he could see.

"The world is a dark place," he sighed, then looked up at the droplets of water as they fell down, off the roof and to the ground. He saw that one bright spot, the moment of light in the droplets dark life, dark existence in a dark world.

Wombly and Ashe returned and it was time for them to sleep. Before they went to their room, they heard of a meeting, one that they must be at. Wombly and Ashe met up with Tank first then the three left as a group, finding the main conference room after only a little wondering about. They were generally familiar with their surroundings but it still wasn't their home. They'd been there only a month and while they felt comfortable it wasn't as homely as Harold's Hill.

Inside the room they found Bear and Commander Aubrey stood in the room, observing the five already there. Bear gave a giant grin while Commander Aubrey shrugged. They stood there for several minutes when Robert and the woman with stark white hair. She stared at them and nodded.

As they stood before the woman with stark white hair, she looked each in the eye for several moments, each one staring back fearlessly and she knew her work here was nearly done. They were all but ready for the mission and though she knew the last part was the hardest, she felt some pride... and pity.

While not all of the eight had been broken when they came, some had and though they were still damaged they had a sense of purpose. She was determined to heal them here, or at least put them on the path that way when the time came they could do what they needed to.

"You all have come far," she said the night before they would leave. It was two hours until midnight and they would leave four hours before midday. She knew they could function on less sleep than they would get.

"But you all have much further to go... you will all be put into dangerous positions and put in terribly difficult situations. There will be sacrifices and there will be pain... but you all must know two things. If the Keell is victorious then whatever is in charge of the Black Hoods will likely have gained enough power to realize his goals, which we cannot allow. All your loved ones and all those who are innocent are dependent on you eight.

"Thus, I will give each of you something that few humans will ever achieve. I will show you your weakness and I will show you the way out. I cannot simply show you but I can lead you along the way, as a mother leads her daughter to the market, I can tell you what you must get, but not how to.

"For you to make the right decisions, before and after this mission, you must have clarity. I am about to cast a spell that will force your minds, at the point you're most ready, to see what it must deal with, to give you an acceptance of yourself... but unfortunately, I know that you're all here for a dark reason, no matter how good your intentions.

"Mave, you murdered six men and were forced into the prisons. Before you got here, you were given the option to die a quick death at the noose or to join in a special program. We have conditioned you for many years and you have become a great warrior, man and maybe one day father and husband."

Mave looked up to her and nodded, knowing that her story was fully true. He smiled and she returned the smile.

"Arnold, you were led here after your family was massacred. You came here in desperation and now you are strong and stand with resolve. You are powerful and sure, even if you lack in some areas, which I will not speak of here. You have risen above your family's former ties and will never again be known as the son of a dirtied merchant."

The proud warrior nodded, knowing that in the last year he'd become family with the friends he'd made, a family that was built on honesty and not the shady business that his father had mixed his family up with. Mave clapped him on the back and Arnold suppressed tears for a moment.

"Beth, you came after your sister, the only living relative in your family," the woman spoke with true sadness and they all knew her to be genuine. Beth, looking in her eyes, knew that the woman truly cared for her, "You came here alone and scared, unable to decide whether your life was worth it. So you joined the Nose Breakers, a place for people like you. But now you walk with a new family, one earned by time together, hard work and friendship that had endured for over a year now."

Several tears rolled down Beth's cheeks and she nodded, smiling to the woman, who smiled back.

"Tommy and Benny... you two came together, friends for years on the streets and with no intention other than avoiding seedy work. You went clean and because of this you have been here, with no fear of a dagger in the back, for three years. You two were the first to join this family and you two have helped the others to adjust."

Both friends nodded silently, neither overly keen to show their emotions.

The woman turned to the three friends, Tank, Wombly and Ashe, "You three came together. I sensed great unrest in all of you, a sense of loneliness and I knew you were all lost. Tank, you will have to accept yourself and what those around you think of you, accept that it doesn't matter, accept how others should treat you and know when to be your own man.

"Ashe, you must accept what you are also, accept who you are, accept what has led to the creation of yourself and accept what you've done and why. You aren't evil. You're a young woman, lost and confused, but you have great friends to help you back onto the path you desire to be on. You more than most deserve peace at heart and one day, when you are ready, you will realize it.

"Wombly... you are an amazing friend, an amazing person and an amazing leader when you must be. You try to help others... but your problem isn't your relationship with others and their thoughts about you. You must accept your past, accept what you've become and realize that even if others are more damaged than you are that you, too, need help. You have great friends who will help you however they can. You must use this to help yourself, for you help them."

She began to cast a spell and soon, after several moments, they were all beginning to feel light-headed. The woman's arms spun slowly in circles, magical energy building up behind her. Her voice, soft at first, grew dark and deep for a moment, as the entire room darkened and the air began to crackle.

Then dark bolts of yellow energy shot into each of their chests. They all staggered backwards, fearing attack and already had their weapons out but felt no effect.

"What?" Tank asked as soon as he felt his chest go light.

"The spell will lead you to the time that made you who you are today, the time that led you down this path. Once you understand that you will understand yourself better. Then, I hope and pray, you will find your peace," the woman said, "The spell will enact when you are most ready to see what happen to you... when your mind is strong enough to withstand the emotional trauma this will almost definitely cause.

"But after the spell, you will be ready to do right, even at great cost. It is a better life, I assure you, for those who live with this life style are always happy and successful. Their children are better off and their spirits move on with great happiness," the woman smiled.

"Please, go to bed and sleep well. Know that tomorrow you begin the end to a mission for all that you hold dear."

Tank turned to leave but the woman stopped him.

"Please come here," she said to him. She looked to Ashe and Wombly, "Please go and wait for him later." They nodded and turned to leave.

"Tank, I know of your bloodline," she said, "I see your father in you, as much as I saw your grandfather in your father. There is a force that your grandfather destroyed long ago... before this land was a desert.

She sighed, "Alright. Once this land was once a fertile place, one where grasslands and forests grew. There was an ocean-like body of water to the south. The body of water connected to the giant ocean far to the east... and on the body of water's coast was a giant city, Hawken. The city was a magical place, it was the capital of what we can only call the Kingdom. Keell, Sprinkleberry and a few other cities who fell apart used to all be one nation. And to the south, on the coast, stood Hawken.

"It was the most powerful of the cities and because it was on the ocean it had a fleet that was unmatched. Sprinkleberry and Keell both had fair sized rivers that led to the ocean. Far to the south we believe another city stood, an independent nation so far away that we couldn't find it. We believe that it was a refuge for pirates that would raid our fleets and trade ships. Things were relatively peaceful.

"But, just over a hundred years ago, your grandfather, Amos, led a fleet attack against the strongest pirate in the land. He managed to kill most of the enemy fleet but a mad priest opened a portal, a rift, to another realm. It let in a creature, a demon. Amos led his fleet and managed to destroy many of the demon's minions, which it summoned as it went along.

"Your grandfather's ship managed to survive a terrible spell from the demon. He and his crew moved in on the last pirate ship, the one that the mad priest was on. The demon had taken over the priest's body. It took every man's life to get your grandfather into the demon's personal room... they dueled and Amos wounded the demon physically, breaking its host. It tried to take over Amos's body but he kept it out.

"The demon knew it was doomed unless it could find another vessel, another host, but Amos was too stubborn for it take over. So, in its host's last moments it cast a spell that unleashed all of its power..." The woman with stark white hair seemed sad for a moment.

"Before your grandfather died, he roared something in the demon's face. We know not what it was, "Tank had been about to ask, "but we do believe that if you find yourself in a terrifying situation you should call out whatever you feel in your soul." She looked down, as if thinking of Amos's death was all but too much for her.

She looked up and Tank could see a sadness in her eyes that inspired a sense of wrongness in his very heart, "The ocean was swallowed up and a wave of fire, beyond anything any of us had ever seen, reached out and destroyed Hawken. It damaged both Keell and Sprinkleberry... many of the other cities were completely destroyed. The grasslands and trees, the forests and animals, all died. And the power mutated many of the animals, turning them into the boozers we see today.

"The demon, though, somehow survived. We don't know how, but we think it is in control of Keell... He might recognize you as Amos. You certainly look like him," tears filled the woman's eyes.

"It could throw him off. No matter what, you have to destroy this demon. I know that this means leaving behind those that you hold dear," Tank's jaw tightened as he thought about his friends and his current relationship with them, "but this could be their only chance."

Tank silently caught up to Wombly and Ashe. They quickly got to their room.

"Are you okay?" Wombly asked Tank and he laughed aloud. "What?" Wombly complained.

"Didn't you hear what she said?" Tank asked, "You have to care for yourself."

"I can't just... stop caring about you. What kind of person would I be if I didn't care about my friends, if I didn't do everything I could for you all. I will die one day, I could leave you all before you leave me, and I want to do everything I can to leave my mark on this realm and your lives... I want to make sure you all are better for me... because.. I could... die..." Wombly began to waver as she stood and immediately Tank rushed forward, catching her before she fell to the ground.

He saw that her eyes closed, one half open for a moment, and that her breathing was regular.  
"The spell?" Ashe asked and Tank shrugged.  
"I hope. Get a doctor..."

A child of no more than eight years old sat with her mother. The two smiled at one another, the daughter holding her mother's arm while the mother held the daughter close to her body. The embrace, so filled with love, moved Wombly, who watched in as the scene, a faded memory she knew, continued.

The mother sang softly and Wombly felt her chest tighten with emotion. But she didn't cry, but smiled instead. She recognized her own mother as she sang and remembered the voice. She could remember the warm feeling her mother's singing ignited in her as a child and suddenly she missed her childhood very much. Then, as she remembered the memory and what it entailed, her small smile disappeared.

Her father burst into the room and looked at his beloved daughter. He walked forward and lifted his daughter into the air, who laughed and smiled with unbridled joy at seeing her 'da', and then pulled her in close. He held her for several moments, as if savoring the feeling of her body against his, then he sat her down.

The daughter, a younger Wombly, looked up at her father with some confusion but didn't protest as her father hugged her mother instead. The two embraced for several moments, holding the hug for longer than was normal, but young Wombly didn't understand what it might mean.

Then her father looked to Wombly.

"I am sorry," was all he said. As he left the small room that was their home he approached the older Wombly, who stood as a ghost might in the room, completely invisible and unnoticed. She saw her father's dark brown eyes and knew she was his legacy in that way. Her eyes widened and she spread her arms, expecting to hug him, but as he got close he simply passed through her as he might through a thick fog.

Wombly stood alone, suddenly, as her mother hugged her daughter again, savoring the feeling, and followed.

"I am sorry, my love, my dear daughter. I cannot stay... you will be endangered... this is for your own good, I swear... but we must leave... we must leave..." the mother began to cry and Wombly felt her own eyes fill with salty tears as she saw her younger version, the daughter, begin to cry.

"Ma?" the daughter asked and Wombly's mom hugged her once again, quietly singing the words to Wombly's favorite lullaby.

"Some priests will be here to take care of you," Wombly's mother said as she silently stroked her daughter's brown hair. Her song had, after a minute of singing, put her daughter to sleep. But somehow Wombly still remembered and as she watched her own mother, crying as she did so, lean over, kiss her on the cheek and leave, Wombly remembered vividly the feeling of betrayal.

She remembered that as the priests came in to bring her to their temple, to take care of her, a much younger Wombly promised to never hurt someone in that way. Even after she ran away from the temple, rebelling from their corrupt politics. Anyone she cared for would know she promised herself. And though Wombly hadn't remembered the promise in years it was one she'd kept, ignoring her own pains the entire time.

Wombly's eyes opened and she was in the room again. Ashe was just moments from leaving and Tank leaned over her, concern obvious in her eyes.

"Wombly?" She heard him ask and as she heard her name the memories flooded back to her.

Painfully, she suppressed tears at first, then, the woman with stark-white hair's words came back and she let them out, first the tears flowing then she began to weep, letting out the pain and disappointment of years all in one moment. Tank hugged her, then Ashe joined in, and the three sat in silence for many moments.

"You have to take care of yourself!" Tank harrassed and Wombly promised she would. Ashe, who was equally upset with whatever had just happened, made her promise again, just to 'cement the notion'. Wombly, smiling, nodded and promised again.

Then Wombly, knowing it to be important they slept, thanked them and kissed each on the cheek, promising herself to keep her promise and to take better care of herself. She climbed into bed and soon after she saw that Tank was still awake. She was about to ask why when his arm hung over the side.

She studied it for several moments then found her own eyes closed. Soon, she was lost in dreams of her family before, of her mother singing and her father spinning around with her in the air, both laughing and smiling as they did so.

Ashe, Tank and Wombly walked outside of the city for the first time in a month. They were in a group of eight, all horseback. Tommy, Benny, Mave, Beth and Arnold all sat on their horses, far less comfortably than Tank and Wombly did. Ashe, for all her grace, was far from comfortable on her steed.

They were all stunned by the work that had been accomplished in less than a month. Dozens of trenches were dug and as far as they could see defensive barriers, spikes and pikes, trenches and other constructs were built. Even as they watched work was being done. And in the distance they could see some smoke.

"No one knew this was happenning on the inside," Benny observed.

"Because they couldn't handle what is really going on," a voice said from behind and all eight looked back to see a new figure atop a dark steed, a white line, even thinner lines branching off of the main line like lightning. The man had dark eyes and dark skin, matching Mave in his skin tone.

He was thin and older, his beard and hair whitened. Veins spread across his arms, which were uncovered by the robe that he wore. It was like a normal wizard's robe but with the sleeves cut off. He wore a hood over his head, which somehow managed to block the sunlight from hitting his arms as well as his head.

"You are Navok?" Tank asked and the man, Navok, nodded.

"You... styled your robe, huh?" Beth asked with a somewhat mocking tone and Navok grinned.

"Sleeves get in the way of casting," he said, "That's why I survived. That and I know a few tricks."

"So you're the wizard who got in and out of Keell?" Tank asked and Navok nodded his head the negative. Before any of the eight could voice their confusion he answered, "I'm not a wizard, man."

"Then how did you sneak up on us?" Ashe asked and Navok smiled.

"Like this," he snapped his fingers and suddenly he was gone in a puff of smoke. Tank looked behind him, where he saw Navok standing.

"If you're not a wizard, then what are you?" Wombly asked.

"I'm just a trickster," Navok grinned, "Now, are we going to go save the world?"

Ashe and Wombly looked at Tank, who stared at Navok for a few moments. Then he shrugged.

"Alright."

## Part Two: In Battle We Find Ourselves

### Chapter Eleven:

Tuff sat in silence, looking to his two fellow soldiers for some reassurance. Neither returned the look, for they had their own doubts. Tuff had just been moved to this group, the forward trenches, and while he was a well trained and well rounded soldier he was hardly able to mask his emotions. If what the commanders and seargents said was true then this was going to be the biggest battle of his entire life.

As he pondered that he heard drums in the distance and knew that the enemy army had been sighted. He was in left position of the trenches, which were a couple of miles long. There was half a mile of trench to his left and about two to his right. A total of three hundred soldiers, all trained to fight but inexperienced when it came to this type of warfare, covered the left position, while four hundred were in the middle and another three hundred on the outside.

This was their first battle with the enemy, with the soldiers of Keell and they were determined to force them to fight for every inch of ground, every step of the way. Every hundred or so feet there were escape trenches, which the soldiers would filter down when the drums stopped playing a slow beat to a highly irregular beat. Also, trumpets would sound out and a large flare would be shot into the air.

It was a nice thought to Tuff in that moment for the flare, after being in the air for about thirty seconds, would then become a hundred fireballs that would come down upon the abandoned trenches, hopefully just as the enemy soldiers got into it.

Tuff was about to get up to look at the approaching army, for he could hear the neighing of the horses from, no doubt, their calvary, when a scout flew over the side of the trench and landed lightly next to him. Both soldiers, the names of which he didn't know, were up and ready to fight but the man quickly identified himself as one of the forward scouts of Sprinkleberry.

"I'm Jev," the scout said, "and we're going to be able to hold for maybe two days before their siege engines get here and rain hellfire on us. There's no way we're going to be able to hold any ground when those wizard powered machines get here."

"Right, Jev, I'm Tuff," Tuff said, "And how many soldiers did it look like they had?"

Jev shrugged, then nodded to the two other soldiers, who introduced themselves. The older one, who had a bit of grey in his beard, was Marko and his young friend called himself Glen.

"I saw at least a thousand approaching this side, but I think they have at least three more segments that size behind. I think they're going to try to put their grunts in here and slam them down our throats before they bring in their real soldiers. I saw at least two hundred calvary and it looks like they might be trying to go around us with a segment to flank us," Jev explained.

"They won't be able to," Marko said, "We have pathfinders and a couple of our most powerful wizards over there. I heard in on some of their major planning. They're going to try and harrass those forces til they break. And if they don't break, then the pathfinders are going to get the magicians and the magicians are going to rain hell down on them."

"Doesn't the other side have magicians?" Tuff asked and the others shrugged.

"I heard there are some sort of explosives in the sand, scattered around. If you step on them they explode and kill you. I heard there are blades in it so that it injures the people around you-" Glen had been speaking but he was cut off by the sound of explosions, followed by men's screams, off to their left, several miles away.

"I guess you were right," Tuff said and Jev nodded.

"They won't flank us easy," Marko said and the group took some stock in that. Their relief was short-lived though, for in the distance they heard the enemies calling card, a low horn made of thick bark. As soon as the low horns, which could easily be heard by the four soldiers in this small part of the trench, began the enemy began to howl in their charge.

The soldiers heard more than saw arrows fly over in the dark sky, for it was night, and knew that their archers, position literally twenty feet and two tons of dirt and stone barrier behind them, had released a volley. The sounds of men screaming in pain filled their ears as more soldiers rushed into their part of the trench, ready to defend.

Tuff strapped on his shield and unsheathed his sword, nervously shifting in his leather boots. His armor, metal, shook as he did and Marko joked at his youth for a moment. As the enemy army got closer to the trenches, they could only tell because of the sound of their feet beating on the ground, the light laughter wrought of desperation and nerves died away.

Then, as another volley of arrows flew by, a body fell into the trench from a dead men. In the

trench, which was ten feet wide, men of Sprinkleberry stood in a line, each one ready to kill. Marko and Glen both held spears, much like half the soldiers did, in order to kill men as they jumped down.

Glen's spear shot forward as the man fell forward but it was obvious he was already dead, for the look in his eyes and the arrow in his throat both proved he was dead. Glen tried to disengage his spear but the body was stuck on it and Glen was forced to drop the unusually long spear.

Literally seconds after the first man jumped over a dozen more did, each one howling in pre-battle fury or screaming in dread at their first taste of battle.

The first soldier Tuff met rushed forward, his sword out wide and wearing no armor. Tuff almost felt guilty so quickly did he kill the man, not even thinking about it, but he had no time to think, for as soon as the man was killed another was there to take his place. They fought for minutes, then hours. Still the men charged forward, filling the trenches with their bodies.

The soldiers knew when their archers released a volley of arrows for it lessened the press of enemy soldiers. As the trench filled the soldiers backed up and soon their backs were against the wall.

Tuff had received two knicks on the forearm where enemies had gotten their blades up and were ready for his attacks, allowing them to counter his strike. As soon as they had no more room to move in they were backing into the escape trenches, going back twenty feet to the archers. The archers, as they filtered in, began to move another twenty feet back. Behind them they heard the giant explosion as the flare that went overhead exploded into the fireballs. Not many men screamed out in terror and Tuff could only hope that was because it had killed them immediately.

Marko and Glen stacked their shields in the emergency trench, which allowed only two people to run side by side with each other. The shields were large and thick and Glen lifted it with a valiant struggle. As soon as the shields were in place Glen and Marko put their shoulders against the shields, holding it while one of the archers who'd not left ran forward.

The archer tossed two bottles of thick liquid with wrags that were flaming.

From the other side of the shields they heard men crying in agony as the night was lit by the bottle-inspired flames. This gained the soldiers, who were exhausted after the hour or so of fighting, a few moments of rest.

The night was long and for much of it Tuff found himself happy for Jev, Marko and Glen's presence. He didn't know them well and hadn't worked with them but the three were friendly and somehow allowed for a cohesion of fighting styles. The four held valiantly and didn't allow the second trench to be taken nearly as quickly, holding for around two hours.

Then more soldiers, from Sprinkleberry, filtered in and replaced Tuff and his friends. Soon they were running through the emergency trenches until, a mile later, they came upon the camp.

In the distance they could both hear and see the signs of battle. Explosions marked areas of main combat, where the wizards were taking interest, and the sound of steel clashing with steel, steel clashing with flesh and boots stomping the ground all were enhanced by the screams of men as they were cut down by enemies.

It was late in the night when they finally managed to fall into a light sleep and even then they could hear the sounds of war. Several of the soldiers, for all their bravery and their trash-talking cried in their beds as they remembered the specifics of the battle.

Silently Tuff hoped the war would end soon, for he couldn't imagine what would happen if he had to fight like this for more than a few days... even a week seemed a long time in his mind at that moment and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't hold in the tears as he looked down at the blood on his hands.

"Please... someone cut off its head," he heard Marko say from behind because when he looked back he saw Glen covering a serious wound on his ribs. As he considered what had happened and what Marko meant he nodded, agreeing, and whispered to himself:

"Please, indeed."

Perhaps thirty miles south of them, a group of nine members marched with that very mission in mind. Tank, who walked in the front of the actual group walking together. Two of the members, Beth and Ashe, were scouting ahead, almost completely invisible in the eyes of the group.

Behind Tank walked Wombly, perhaps both Tank and Ashe's closest friend, and beside Wombly walked with Navok, the wizard of the group, who had just joined a few days before. In the back of the group walked the last four members: Arnold, Benny, Tommy and Mave.

They had started with horses but Navok had sent the horses back, claiming they'd get them into trouble.

The nine walked with purpose, not fast enough to tire them too much but enough to keep their bodies moving at a decent pace. Navok grinned, as usual, while Wombly spoke about one of her many inventions. The sword on her hip was a slider, which allowed for the blade to extend but remain strong.

Navok, who was very interested in all things creative, had taken much interest in her inventions, to Wombly's ultimate satisfaction. He'd even given her a salve that would allow the blades to slide more quickly and smoothly. She had thanked him and promised gold but Navok had laughed and assured her that her gold belonged in her pockets or invested in her experiments.

"Maybe you could even invent something to keep the sun off our skin," the trickster said with a grin. No one had any response so they continued to just talk about what she'd already built and maybe a few ideas for actual contraptions.

"You know," Navok said as they stepped forward, with strong and monotonous steps, "You are smart and capable... here," the wizard pulled a small idol, with no particular shape, "Use this, I beg you, when you deem us in a... desperate situation. And I fear we will be in many desperate positions."

Wombly took the idol and looked down at it in fascination.

"I know magic isn't your forte.. but it's name is Vombatidae," Navok said, "Call upon him in a time of need. He is a great companion... use him well." Wombly thanked him and looked at it with the same fascination as before. She was tempted to call upon it just then.

The entire time, while they walked, Tank was deep in thought. He couldn't see Ashe but knew she was out there. He wondered at her ability to hide and knew it was the result of hours upon hours of practice. He knew that though she had lived in the city most of her life, or that's what he'd been led to believe, hiding was hiding and there was a certain experience that one needed to get good at it. She'd gained that experience, he knew, and it was beyond him by far.

Tank looked back and saw that Wombly and Navok deep in their conversation. The two were of like hearts, both curious and happy to be with another smart mind. And in conversations that would hurt others heads they found fascination.

He smiled as he considered his luck in making friends like her and considered the situation he'd put them in. They were only here because of him. He'd led them here, into this position and into this terrible hell-like world. He knew that as they stepped closer to Keell they stepped closer to death in the form of a city killing ground.

They walked for the rest of the day and soon it was night. The previous night they hadn't done nearly as much walking as they had this day and it was late in the night when they stopped. Wombly looked up at the largest of the moons, called Magna just as it passed the smallest of the moons, Parva. The middle moon, Mediis, wouldn't come up for at least an hour.

The group sat around, all relaxed, for Navok had set up magical wards to alarm them if enemies came down upon them. Plus, more than a few of the wards would react in a violent fashion to any unbidden to the camp.

But as Wombly sat, deep in thought, she realized that she heard a sound in the distance. As she looked around, as she tried to figure out what it was. The other eight all awakened as well and it was Mave who identified the sound.

"War," he said. Soon it was loud enough for them to hear explosions. Some of the explosions were large enough so that they could see them even in the distance.

"This is bad, very, very bad," Wombly quietly mumbled and behind her Navok sighed also.

"No," the trickster said, "this is just the beginning... the Black Hoods are going to make this the worst war either city has ever seen if we can't stop it."

Tuff looked to Marko and noted that the older and larger man, Marko was easily three inches taller than the average sized Tuff, was stemming a long cut on his forearm. They'd held the shield for the entire night and the attackers hadn't been able to get past the fire, which had lasted long into the night.

By the time it had cooled off the enemy soldiers had fled into other sections of the trench. The soldiers all thanked whatever gods might be listening to the desperate prayers of hopeless men.

"We held one day," Jev said with a sigh of something kin to relief. The soldiers had gotten a small amount of sleep, two hours before and after midnight, before they were told to return to the front. They'd done so and Jev, who was the smallest of the group but by far the quickest, went with them even though none of them knew exactly who he was or where he was from.

Glen, a younger and somewhat smaller version of Marko, stood behind them. It was the lull of the battle and the soldiers accepted water from younger soldiers, who were acting as messengers and supply movers. All four soldiers, quickly becoming friends, were happy to hear that the catapults were still moving at full blast.

"That'd be a hard job," Jev muttered and when his three friends looked over he explained, "The loading of those catapults all day and night. They've been working nonstop since the start of the battle. We're not very big," before Marko could object, "or at least no where near the biggest, and they need people to lift the heavy rocks and control the horses that carry them.

"It's not like ours in the sense of the danger but they have their own risks. Soldiers sneak by and slaughter them in their sleep, or try, because trust me the big guys have something to say about people trying to slit their throats, or the catapults snap. Very dangerous and nasty work. Plus, they work on the other war engines. Hell Seigers will spit fire for days and the odds of one exploding aren't too low."

"So I guess what you're saying is we all need to be thankful for each other?" Marko asked, the older man feeling somewhat bitter about being given the front line duty. Jev shrugged.

"I'd just like to point out that Tuff and I wouldn't be able to lift a stone that size more than once or twice an hour, much less every ten minutes," Jev replied and Marko shrugged. Tuff gave a small laugh at the fact that he'd been dragged into the argument, and insulted nonetheless, but it died in his throat as they heard the sound of men running, the dull thud of boots pounding on sand, in the distance.

Tuff lifted his shield and felt it as his arms protested at the work but as soon as he saw the first enemy adrenaline silenced the protest and exhaustion fled his body.

They defended for three days and all the while the catapults launched heavy rocks toward the enemy. During some parts of the day, while Tuff and the others rested, they couldn't help but think of those continually lifting the stones into the catapults. But for most of the days, their minds were pre-occupied by the constant threat of an enemies sword point stabbing them.

They gave up only two trenches during that time, but in the distance they heard a low rumbling, a rumbling that scared them more than a little.

"What is it?" Tuff asked as the flow of enemy soldiers ran out. Jev looked up, his eyes narrowed as he mentally calculated the odds of them needing to run. Suddenly, the rumbling intensified and Jev's eyes widened.

"Come with me," Jev ordered and before Tuff could argue he grabbed his arm, "Now." Marko and Glen saw them and Tuff nodded them along. The soldiers, knowing that he was a serious soldier and not the type to do anything for no reason, nodded and followed them. It was just a few moments

before the rumbling became a roar and soldiers on the other side of the trenches were cheering.

"Every one!" Jev shouted.

Tuff realized why Jev had grabbed them, though how he knew what was coming was beyond the young soldier, as piles of rock and flame slammed into the ground, spreading death and flame as the flaming stones hit collided with the area around the men who hadn't been warned in time.

"Fall back!" They heard the order and Jev was at the front of the emergency trench when they finally got out of range of the war machines.

Jev led them up past several more trenches, each one filled with archers, soldiers or wounded. After about a mile of sprinting, Jev managing to get past the officers by simply looking at them, they found themselves in front of a large tent-pavilion. Outside it stood four guards, each one wearing the gold and black armor of imperial guards, the Golden Hornets.

One stepped in front of Jev. Jev regarded the man for a second then the guard's eyes widened.

"Oh, yes m'lord," the guard said as he shuffled aside. Marko raised an eye brow towards Tuff. The entire time Glen, still nursing the wound to his ribs, seemed fairly oblivious to the implications of Jev's interactions.

They followed Jev inside to see three men standing around a table with a giant map on it, many drawings of the battle fields covering it. Tuff recognized some of the trenches and the lost ones as well as the areas that had been burned and fired, he also saw some red blotches on the maps, mainly in the trench area. He realized those were where most of the fighting had occurred. He also recognized that he had been in one of the larger blotches.

"Prince Jev," said the middlemost man. Tuff recognized that the man wore the garb of a general, then, when Marko chuckled, he realized that Jev was the prince of Sprinkleberry. The general was named Suko and he was an ambitious warlord. Jev looked at the man and knew that the general was more than happy that Jev had brought soldiers with him. Jev saw in the general's eyes that where the prince saw companions the general saw officers.

"Gods," Glen said from the side and Tuff thought, for a moment, that it was about Jev's true identity. That notion was swept away as Glen fell to the side, blood leaking out his side.

"Get a priest in here, now!" Jev shouted and in ran two men, both of them wearing the robes of a priest of Civitas. They began to chant over Glen's unconscious body.

"We're in trouble," the general said, "Their damned General Sevrin has been hitting us exactly where we least expect." Jev nodded and looked to the other soldiers, who had just been in the exact battles that the general spoke of, then motioned for Tuff and Marko to leave with Glen as the priests carried him away.

"So you're the prince?" Marko asked Jev a little while later. Jev shrugged.

"No," he said, "just a prince. There are three of us, remember?"

"Never really paid attention to the royal family," Marko replied and Jev smiled.

"So why are we here?" Glen asked from the side. He'd been healed almost all the way and now he was sitting in a small bunker that had been built to the side of the pavilion. Several other soldiers were in the bunker and each one seemed to be wounded but quick on the heal.

"Those Hellfire war machines are going to beat us back every step of the way if we don't stop them," Jev said. Marko raised an eye brow.

"We?" He asked.

"Yeah, I'm not going to leave a job this important to a bunch of commoners," Jev winked at the three while Tuff laughed aloud. "Anyway, we've got a group and we're going to sneak behind enemy lines. Their calvary has been pushing us backwards steadily and if we don't hold the middle then our horse-boys will be flanked.

"We can't afford to lose the middle anyhow, as that's how they'll get to Sprinkleberry fastest..."

and that's something none of us want," Jev said and Marko nodded. All three soldiers agreed wholeheartedly. Sprinkleberry was their home. They wouldn't lose that willingly.

"So what're we going to do?" Tuff asked.

"Us and a few other groups are going in there once it gets dark. They have guards around the war machines but they're run by magicians. Much like our strong men, their magicians get tired after running the machines after a while," Jev said, "So, if we take out the guards..."

"We get right at the magicians," Glen finished for him.

"Two birds with one stone," Marko grinned.

"Only if we can also destroy the engines," Tuff sighed after a moment of silence.

"What?" Jev asked.

"It'll only work if we destroy the machines as well," Tuff said, "They don't seem to care about the lives of their men so a few dead wizards won't mess with them too much."

"Wizards aren't as common as some people believe," Jev stated but Tuff shrugged, "Neither are warriors with the guts that theirs have shown. Most of our guys will defend with the same conviction but they are attacking with no regard for themselves..."

"He's right," Marko said, "I've fought against plenty of enemies and never have they been this... reckless."

Jev eyed them for a few moments.

"You're right," he said. The prince nodded for a few moments, then he stood.

"The four of us," Jev said with a gleam in his eye, "We're going to take down their Hellfire engines."

"They're half a mile behind enemy lines and heavily guarded," Marko said and Tuff agreed with words of his own.

"I know," Jev said, "But that's the good part."

"Why?" Glen asked.

Jev grinned and shrugged.

"Because I don't care."

## Chapter Twelve

"I don't think you understand," Tank said quietly after he'd been 'shh'd his first time talking. The others listened intently on other areas, as they were currently hiding from another group of Keell horsemen. Pretty soon the patrol was moved on.

"What?" Wombly asked, finally comfortable.

"They aren't searching for travelers on foot, they're looking for an enemy cavalry attack," Tank replied.

"So what?" Wombly asked.

"Yeah, you want to just walk out there and not hide whenever they're coming this way?" Ashe asked, her voice more of a hiss at that moment and Mave chuckled.

"We do have a wizard here," Tank said as he looked for Navok at that moment. But he, like the others who were now looking for the wizard, couldn't find the unusual man.

"Uhhhh where'd he go?" Arnold asked and Benny slapped him upside the head.

"If we knew we wouldn't be looking, would we?" Benny asked with a grin and Arnold gave a mock scowl.

"So what do we do now-" Wombly began when suddenly they heard the patrol from Keell riding in their direction. Immediately the group got in a battle formation but instead of beginning to fight the group the horsemen rode around them. Tank and the others followed the path of the horse men and saw a large group of horsemen from Sprinkleberry, each one wearing the gold and black garb of the

elite guards from Keell's sister city, the Golden Hornets.

"No way..." Tank said as, when the Hornets and horsemen from Keell collided, a large explosion of flame and darkness shot out from the first Golden Hornet. The Keell horsemen all screamed out in pain as they tried to get away from the flame but it seemed to follow them. The men burned to death as the group of eight watched in terror and Navok came striding out from behind them.

"What the hell?" Tank asked as he felt Navok touch him from behind. The former blacksmith punched forward in reaction and Navok barely dodged the strike. Tank glared at the small man for a few moments then shrugged.

"Sorry," Tank mumbled.

"That was you?" Wombly asked and Navok sighed.

"Yes," he said.

"There wasn't a more... humane way to do that?" Wombly asked, her voice wimmed with anger.

"No," Navok said, "I use the tricks I had at my disposal... I had no other way to kill that many men."

"You had to kill them?" Wombly asked. She looked at her friends to see if she'd anyone would lend support but there was none forthcoming. Navok seemed truly pained and nodded.

"They are trying to destroy Sprinkleberry," he said, "We cannot allow them within the city, no matter what. You have friends in the army, don't you? Every man here we don't kill might kill a friend of yours or mine. I think that is a worthy reason to end their lives, don't you?" Navok asked. Wombly thought of Martin and knew that he was right in a certain way.

She wanted to argue that he should have just hurt the men in a way that they couldn't continue the war but she knew that he probably didn't have a spell to injure them enough to stop them from fighting but not leave them to the sun and desert.

"Let us move on," Navok said with a sigh. Wombly nodded and the group continued, all trying to ignore the memory of the screams, all knowing that it was about to get far, far worse.

Medea narrowed her dark red eyes as she watched the guards of Keell marching outward.

"They're sending their own guards to war... not just soldiers, anymore," she thought aloud. She turned then began a loping run to the entrance to the undercity below Keell. Once in the warehouse at the far eastern side of Keell, she said a keyphrase and where there had been a floor there was now a hole.

Then she began her decent into Nopteria the Undercity, her home.

As Medea, a Nopterian, the closest race to human that isn't human, made her way into her city another figure, purely human, watched. Chance, a spellsword assassin, quickly followed behind her. He worked for the Blackhoods, the main guild of thieves, assassins and other never-do-wells, and the guild had been receiving trouble from the Nopterians below the city.

The Blackhoods controlled the city, Chance knew, and that scared the dwellers below the ground though why the subterranean race would care about the disposition of government above them was far beyond Chance, who rarely dealt with anything beyond death and murder. But for some reason they did care and he'd left it up to the thinkers of the guild to decide what the group was to do. Instead, he'd just focus on not dying on whatever mission it was that they sent him on.

Thus the assassin, wide eyed as he walked down into a city far larger than anyone on the surface had previous suspected, felt immediately regret that he hadn't thought about the mission and better prepared his provisions. The ever-present weapons on his belt, Fury-flicker the dirk and Duskspawn the sword, did bring him some comfort but as he considered the narrow tunnels that he followed Medea through he regretted the bow on his back and wished instead for a crossbow.

Plus, he wondered if he could find his way out of the city after he'd found out what exactly they were up to. Then he considered that very mission and wondered how he'd be able to figure out what

they were up to. This girl seemed like a scout or an assassin, much like him, and her skills in combat, something he'd seen many times before while watching her, lent themselves to the identity of skilled assassin. But he found that the time periods between her reports were irregular, and often only after she needed to resupply or get healed, and that led him to believe that she wasn't exactly obedient, something his masters would never allow happen.

It'd been several minutes of travel through the underground city (alleyways and small streets that marked the city of Nopteria) when suddenly, in the darkness that she traveled through so easily, he lost her. He wondered at it for a few moments, hoping against hope that he'd find her again. He was about to give up and turn away when he felt a blade against his back.

"You move loudly," he heard Medea's voice in his ear.

"You certainly don't," he replied and Medea gave a somewhat harsh laugh.

"Years of travel down here and not being an idiot," she said and Chance felt betrayed by the easy travel atop the earth. He could follow anyone above the ground and below, or so he'd thought, but this girl, at most his age but probably younger, had not only led him into an easy trap but had eluded him, gone around him and snuck up behind him.

"Why are you following me?" Medea asked and Chance gave a light chuckle.

"Thought you weren't an idiot?" He asked and then felt her dagger dig a little deeper into his back and the blade all but broke his skin.

"I was told to watch you and I have been," Chance said hastily and Medea laughed.

"Yeah, for like four days," she said and Chance scowled. He'd been following her for exactly that many days.

"What gave me away?" He asked and Medea smiled, "You followed me to this place three days ago and you followed me into a small bakery. That makes it kinda hard to notice. I wasn't sure if you were trying to kill me or kiss me."

She sighed, "But men are never romantic." She then drove the dagger a little further into the spell-sword's back and Chance felt blood flowing down his back.

"I didn't do anything," Chance argued and Medea laughed again.

"That is the problem," she said. He felt the pressure on his back lighten and knew that she was trying to find a new spot to threaten him with. He also knew that this was his only chance to escape.

He kicked backwards, taking her in the thigh and jumped forward, slashing across with Furyflicker. The dirk intercepted Medea's own dagger and it was all Chance could do to jump back further when Medea's blade slashed across in line with his waist. Chance was on his heels and knew that he was doomed unless he could regain his balance.

"Enough with the foreplay, huh?" Medea asked and she jumped forward, slashing aggressively with both blades. Chance blocked both, Furyflicker skillfully blocking Medea's sword while his sword, Duskspawn, tried to block her sword and countered, forcing the Nopterian to jump backwards.

She grinned and attacked viciously again but this time Chance was ready and his blades moved to intercept. But Medea didn't plan on continuing her aggressive movement and instead she jumped backwards again. Chance hadn't anticipated that and instead of meeting the resistance he'd expected and getting knocked backwards he found himself falling forward, barely catching himself before he fell to the ground.

Immediately after he caught himself he was on his toes and Medea, realizing that she had the advantage, launched herself forward. Both warriors' blades were a blur as they attacked, both pushing themselves as Medea attacked. Anyone in the distance could hear the two grunts of the warriors as their blades collided with each other.

The Nopterian, an all but elite warrior, jumped backwards and stared at Chance for a few moments.

"You're not bad for a human, you know," she said and Chance didn't respond, simply staring at her, waiting for her to make a move. The Nopterian and Spellsword just made eye contact and silently

Chance admired the nonhuman.

"Why have you been spying on the palace?" He asked and Medea laughed.

"Why do you think?"

"Because of the power shift?" Chance said silently, too silently, he thought, for Medea to hear, but she was a Nopterian and what humans considered silent was blunderingly loud to the subteranean race, or at least in the caves.

"Actually, that may have had something to do with it," Medea said and Chance raised an eyebrow at her, wondering if she was responding to his whisper. The longer he considered it the more sure he was that she was indeed responding to his quiet speech.

"And yes," Medea said, "I heard you. Humans are loud," she grinned. Chance was about to respond when suddenly he realized that she had shifted. His eye caught a flicker of light, a reflection, and instinctually shifted Duskspawn to the left, towards his body.

The sound of metal colliding with metal was his reward and he realized he'd blocked a well thrown dagger. He was about to charge forward, to attack the hopefully stunned Medea, when he felt something hit him in the back. He began to turn around, to look at it, when suddenly his fingers were cold.

He knew he'd dropped his blades more by the sound of metal hitting rock than the feeling of the hilts slipping from his now numb fingers and rather than feeling his head slam into the rock as he fell he just saw the ground coming up at him.

Then all he saw, and felt, was blackness.

Medea looked at the dart sticking out his back and grinned.

"Well done Keledro," she said to another Nopterian who had just dropped out of the shadows to her left. Keledro was many inches taller than Medea and his shoulders were far broader than hers. He would have been thick and muscular among even humans, who were far larger than all but the largest of Nopterians.

The thicker Nopterian also had dark red eyes, though his were a shade lighter than Medea's dark orbs and his hair wasn't as dark as hers either. Medea grinned as Keledro bowed before her.

"Stand, Keledro," she said and the larger male obeyed. Medea was of a relatively royal family and was from the upperclass of Nopteria, which was mainly socialist except for certain bloodlines that had formed the city or saved it from peril at some point or another. Medea's father, now deceased, had been an especially good field commander in a time of chaos before the area around Sprinkleberry and Keell was a desert.

She didn't really know the story, as she had been born when he was nearly a hundred and sixty years old. Most Nopterians lived to about a hundred and forty years. The fact that he had sired her was impressive enough but it hadn't been easy on the twenty one year old Medea, who had to live in the shadow of a dead father.

Keledro had been a young soldier for her father and had been her age when he had first served under her father. After Medea's father, who'd saved Keledro's life a number of times, had died twenty years ago Keledro had dedicated himself to her life.

"You were gone too long," Keledro scolded and Medea scowled.

"I was busy," she said and Keledro laughed, "With what?" When Medea didn't answer immediately Keledro laughed again.

"Always busy with unnamable tasks. You weren't busy-"

"You aren't the boss of me!" Medea yelled and Keledro silenced. He nodded, "I am not your boss. I am your servant." He bowed and touched his hands to their opposite shoulders, the sign of submission between the Nopterians.

"Let's go back," Medea said and Keledro nodded, "Yes milady."

Tuff sat deep in thought.

"General Sevrin has been hitting exactly where it hurts," Jev said, "and we haven't been able to stop their advance, especially since they began with the damned Hellfire engines."

"Which is why you brought us here, right?" Marko asked and Jev nodded.

"Great," Glen said, "Now instead of dying in the trenches we get to die on a suicide mission."

Jev looked at Glen for a few moments then shrugged, a grin on his face, "I honestly don't see your problem." The four sat in silence for a few moments then Marko slapped Glen up the back of his head.

"You just spoke like a man to the prince," the older man said and Jev smiled.

"A prince," the prince reminded and Marko shrugged.

They sat in silence again, all four deep in thought, trying to be light-hearted about something that could very easily be the end of them all.

"So the four of us are going on a stealth mission into the enemy lines," Glen sighed aloud and the prince coughed in his hand and grinned at him. "What?" Glen groaned.

"We're not going in alone," Jev said and both Marko and Tuff raised an eye brow.

"The Nose Breakers are going with us while we sneak in," Jev said.

"The Nose Breakers?" Marko groaned, "Those crazy sons of wenches don't know a thing about stealth."

"No, but they know how to make people who also don't know anything about stealth damn near invisible," Jev replied and Marko was forced to agree even if he didn't like it.

"You haven't said anything this entire conversation," Jev said, looking to Tuff. The young man looked at him for a few moments.

"You're the prince," he said, "I'm gonna do whatever it is you tell me. I'm just trying to get a feel as to whether I'll have to pull your arse out of the fire." Jev grinned.

"Can't think of anyone I'd rather think about that," the prince said.

Marko burst into laughter when Glen muttered, "Bet you love him thinking about your arse."

Jev rolled his eyes while Tuff looked at them, "He is our prince..."

"Okay, Tuff, get over that," Jev said, "When we go in there your word will be just as important as mine, probably more at some points. If I give you an order you follow it unless you know it's bad. I promise you, you'll know everything I know once we get into there so you'll know why I make my decisions. I am currently ordering you to make sure that if you see something you tell us."

Tuff nodded then sighed, leaning backwards.

"When do we leave?"

"Tomorrow morning," Jev said.

"When do the Nose Breakers go in?" Tuff asked.

"Sometime tonight," Jev answered and his three companions all had to agree that the Nose Breakers were insane.

Tuff looked over at Glen and Marko as the two slept, Marko on a cot, Glen on the ground. Tuff was on his own cot. Jev wasn't in their small tent as he was royalty. The prince had shrugged as guards insisted he followed them out of the tent and, Tuff figured, to a more comfortable and better guarded tent.

"You awake?" Tuff asked and Glen rolled over.

"Yep."

"Nervous?"

"Yep."

Tuff sighed. "You ready?"

"As ever," Glen sighed, "You know, Marko has been in plenty of battles but... A few days ago was my first. I don't think I can sleep." Tuff smiled at that. He probably could have slept had he tried

but he though he'd heard the uneven breaths of a man on the edge of panic.

He knew that feeling, he'd felt it since this entire war had started, and knew that it sucked. He sighed as he considered his body, more sore than anything he'd ever felt before, then chuckled. He may have been more sore than anything he'd ever felt before but he was still feeling way better now than he had in the minutes between battles and towards the end of his shift on duty.

They'd fought hard for hours upon hours and slept little and yet now, just a day later, he was feeling like a million dollars. It genuinely worried him to think that this might be how the next weeks or months, years even if things didn't change, went. He sighed again.

"Get some sleep," Tuff said to Glen, who was his age but younger in so many ways. Tuff had trained for war but it seemed that while Glen was a good fighter he hadn't been prepared for war, which wasn't a sprint like most battles. No, war wasn't even a mile or a jog... it was a marathon and each side was just waiting for the other to make a mistake. They weren't going to take any giant risks with a large number of soldiers, just use small groups to try and find chinks in the enemy's armor.

Chance opened his eyes and knew immediately he wasn't blind but rather that it was just dark. Had he been blind, he wouldn't have been able to see the meager light under his eyelids.

"I'm awake," he said after a few minutes. The entire time he'd been trying to find a way to break out of his prison but he was stuck to a chair, bound by some weird goo-liquid. As he tried to pull away from the chair the liquid would give a little but beyond a few inches it didn't move at all. Chance, for a moment, wondered how such a substance was made but he stopped thinking about that once he realized that he could hear things in the distance.

After a few minutes of listening he saw a light in the distance. He tried to figure out what it was when suddenly the light was gone and behind him he could feel the heat of flame. Plus, the area in front of him was illuminated so he knew a torch was behind him. He considered the magic that would be required for that for a few moments then dismissed it, deciding that wasn't his problem at that exact moment.

"You tried to kill a member of the upperclass of Nopteria," a voice said from behind and Chance didn't bother respond.

"You also drew a blade upon an upperclassman of Nopteria," the voice continued. It paused as if waiting for Chance to respond then continued, "Both are punishable by death. We of Nopteria will only trade for two things: Weapons and information. Your weapons are magical and are worth one of those crimes."

"Those are mine!" Chance blurted and suddenly a figure was in front of him. Chance couldn't identify the features of the figure before its fist came across and punched Chance in the face. The Spell-sword couldn't ignore the stinging pain of the powerful strike and bit his lip to keep from crying out.

"They may be the only thing keeping you alive unless you can give us information that we deem worth your life two times," the voice said as, before Chance could look back at it, the figure vanished.

"What kind of information?" Chance asked.

"Secret trade routes and plans of the leadership cast above are usually given," the voice replied and Chance couldn't help but wonder how often, 'usually,' was.

Chance scoured his mind for facts that anyone would be able to tell the Nopterians, that way if the Blackhoods found out that he had told them anything at all he wouldn't be killed on the spot, but that they might not know.

"Uh... the Blackhoods have taken over the government," Chance said and the voice laughed aloud. There was no mirth in that laugh and Chance felt his hair stand on edge.

"Even a fool watching from a telescope would know that," the voice said and Chance struggled for more information that wouldn't get him into too much trouble.

"The war is going well," he supplied and the voice laughed again. Suddenly there was a knife in his back and he cried out as it dug in but not far enough to do much aside from break skin. He also felt

something bite at his toes.

"The leader of the Blackhoods isn't human!" He screamed and the dagger disappeared.

"Not human?" the voice asked and Chance, so desperate not to die, answered immediately.

"No one knows what he actually is but we think he isn't from this world," the Spellword spat and the voice was silent.

"You have two chances to earn your blades back," the voice said, "Else we will release you on the street."

"The Blackhoods know about Nopteria," Chance said and knew the words to be a lie but knew that if they didn't believe that already it would be appreciated.

Suddenly the darkness around him disappeared and he was in a small dungeon. Around him glowed torches. In front of him stood Keledro, who he didn't know but recognized the general size of the unusually large Nopterian. Behind him stood an older Nopterian.

To his side stood Medea.

"They know of us?" She asked and Chance nodded. She glared at him and immediately she recognized the lie for what it was but knew that the response of the rest of Nopteria would be to her advantage. She wanted to help Sprinkleberry for two reasons: The Keellians couldn't force the undercity to retreat unless they used their entire army to do it and if Sprinkleberry owed them favors they would never have the chance to put their entire army down into Nopteria.

Also, Nopteria was beginning to grow somewhat crowded. It could take years but Medea would lead a group to Sprinkleberry to form a new city. Then she would match her father in legendary deeds and that she wanted more than anything else.

"So they know about us," she said to the older Nopterian, a councilor of Nopteria, who had a large influence over the city's actions.

"We should build defenses," Keledro said though he, too, saw through the lie for what it was. He also saw Medea's lie for what it was and realized that she had a plan of some sort.

"I do believe we will," the Nopterian said as he turned and walked away from Chance, who had just then realized that nothing held him to the chair. He was about to stand when Keledro turned and punched him in the face, sending the Spell-sword to the ground, unconscious.

## Chapter Thirteen:

Maria looked to Esmeralda as more people were brought in. All were wounded soldiers from the war and she knew that if any of their friends were wounded they would be brought to this inn. The innkeeper, Esmeralda, had insured that any soldiers on special missions that were wounded were put in her inn for healing.

Most were missing a hand or a limb or had crushed bones, the type of wounds that didn't make a man impossible to move, and that would heal fast enough to get the men back out into the battles or to the building crew or, if the wound was bad enough, back home.

"Was this really a good idea?" Maria asked and Esmeralda sighed.

"I don't know," she said, "I... I just wanted to make sure that if they were wounded we could take care of them."

"You also wanted to know if they were wounded or were killed," Jeffy said from the side, "But there are better ways to do this..."

"Like?" Maria asked. Jeffy had been helping during the last week, as soldiers were brought into the inn, but he always had a sarcastic response or a smirk at one of their remarks and it was getting on Maria's nerves.

"Magical ways," Jeffy said and Maria raised an eyebrow, "I know a priest that can help you."

"Go get him then," Esmeralda responded and Jeffy turned and began to walk to the door. Maria

grinned at Esmeralda, who knew that the Nose Breaker had taken a liking for her, who grinned back.

"Men are so easy," Esmeralda said and both girls looked off to the side where Denerick stood, watching the two. The inn was still had a bar and men were sitting on the stools in front of the bar, thus Denerick was closer to the bar rather than by the corners of the room. Where there had been tables for people to sit at there was now a large number of cots for wounded men, between which priests walked, healing the soldiers as best they could.

"Dat dey are," Denerick said and Maria just laughed.

Jeffy returned several minutes later with a man in tow, "For a ten gold a person, he'll make it so you can check on their health once a day," the Nose Breaker explained and the man nodded. Esmeralda, who didn't have money problems at that time, nodded and handed the man thirty pieces of gold.

"Have you any of their items?" the priest asked and Maria ran up to their room and came back holding a pair of Tank's old tools. The priest asked a bowl and Esmeralda handed one to him. The man chanted over the bowl then, after several moments, dropped small flecks of magical 'dust' down on the bowl.

As soon as the dust hit the bowl it began to glow gold for a moment then stopped. Inside the bowl an image formed. It was Tank walking through the desert. They could only see his face, which was locked in a scowl, something both Maria and Esmeralda had come to expect. Around him was only greyness.

Esmeralda grabbed one of Wombly's crossbows and the priest chanted, touching the crossbow like he had Tank's tools, then dropped similar flecks of the 'dust' upon a second bowl, which Esmeralda had supplied. The bowl glowed and in the image they saw Wombly walking, her eyes cast downward. She seemed deep in thought, much like they'd expect, but it wasn't the normal creative thought that she usually had. It was more of a stern, pensive expression.

Maria looked around, wondering if they could find something of Ashe's.

Finally, Maria sighed, then looked around, "Deabla!" She shouted. Almost as if out of nowhere Deabla appeared and he looked at her in confusion.

"Do you have anything of Ashe's?" Maria asked and Deabla pulled a cloth from his pocket. The priest snatched it, at which point Deabla scowled and tried to grab the towel but it was out of his reach. The priest chanted and dropped the flecks on another bowl.

They looked in it and saw sand...

"What's that mean?" Wombly asked.

"It means she's probably covered in dirt..." the Priest said, "this will let you see them as long as they are still alive. Just fill it with water and say the person's name three times in a row. Then ask to see them." The priest then turned and left. Jeffy stared at them for a few moments, then shrugged and went back to work.

Tuff heard the fighting ahead. They'd traveled forward quickly and found that the Sprinkleberry army had been forced back several more trenches. That wasn't what had held his attention initially, for while that was important it was seemingly unimportant when compared to the giant gap in attacking forces.

The Nose Breakers had not only pushed forward through a defensive position and cleared it out, right up the middle, they had pushed forward into the enemy's territory. Jev looked to his companions, now friends, and knew that they would be dependable. He could tell Glen hadn't slept well, if at all, but that didn't matter.

Glen was sharp and ready and that was what was important.

They charged forward, ready to take down any resistance they met until they came upon the front, and only, line of Nose Breakers, which really wasn't a line at all. Rather, it was a giant melee, a skirmish that forced oncoming enemies to split up if they wanted to take on the Nose Breakers. In the midst of it all they could see a giant of a man slapping men aside with what seemed his bare hands.

But instead of that, Bear, the giant of a man, a leader of the Nose Breakers, had claws shaped like that of the animal that he was named after and his arms were covered with armor that resembled shields, which allowed him to block oncoming attacks or bash out with the shields as a weapon. On his hip hung a giant mace, which the giant of a man could grab at any moment.

Beside Bear fought Commander Aubrey, who whipped her blade around with skill that overwhelmed almost any enemy that came up against her. Any enemy that she didn't kill in the first seconds was hit either by Bear or a third man, Seargent Robert. The three fought skillfully and their soldiers around them nearly matched their skill but couldn't quite match any of their three qualities: Bear's strength, Aubrey's speed and Robert's cunning. They all three held the same rank, but Bear didn't like to be called any type of rank and Aubrey and Robert liked the sound of their 'ranks'.

Jev looked to his three allies, who watched the trio of Nose Breaker leaders in awe, then silently motioned them over. In front of them the Nose Breaker's fought in the middle of an enemy camp. Tents were splayed around and soldiers rushed in like ants. Bodies, eight enemies for every Nose Breaker, lay around the battle and Jev knew that they'd likely been fighting for hours. The bodies behind them lay as proof for that thought.

There was chaos, pure and simply, around the Nose Breakers and the four men knew they could slip past unnoticed easily. Thus, they veered to the right and soon they were silently sneaking past Keell soldiers as they ran to fight and kill the Nose Breakers that had attacked.

As soon as Jev was pass the enemy and in a fairly safe area, hidden in a secret bunker that Sprinkleberry had built years before in case a war just like this happened, he lifted a small whistle to his lips and blew into it. Tuff heard nothing but didn't deny the effects as instead of the clash of metal they heard the yelling of men as they pursued a fleeing enemy in the distance.

As soon as Jev got to the ground of the bunker, beneath the ground, he brought a hand up and brushed it through his semi-long blond hair.

"Long day, huh?" Jev said and Tuff shrugged, "We go up tonight," the prince said and the other four men nodded and sat in the cramped space, waiting. For the next hour Tuff studied his companions.

Marko was a little taller than six feet, thick of chest and waist and solidly built. He was an older guy but was still strong somehow. He had a beard across his face, brown with a bit of grey in it, that matched the medium length hair on his head. His eyes were dark brown. He had the look of a man that was once very good looking who hadn't quite held up over the years but was still not bad looking.

Glen looked somewhat like Marko except that he was of a far lighter build. He was relatively skinny and stood at a couple inches below six feet. He had brown hair that was cut short and his face was bare without any facial hair, making his dark green eyes seem somewhat unusual on his face. He wasn't exactly a looker but didn't look bad.

Jev was four inches below six feet, about Tuff's height, and very thin. He was lean and muscular but far from large. Had it been left to a dictionary to find a word that described his body it would be lithe. His hair was blonde and semi-long, reaching below his ears but not much further. His face was bare also and his eyes were a light blue, the color of the sky on a clear day. Tuff thought that it would be very easy for the prince to bed a woman and that was without the rank of Prince. He was a good looking man and Tuff knew that the prince had likely used it to his advantage several times.

Tuff then considered his own looks. He was of thick build, about the same height as Jev. He had dark brown hair that was cut short and a beard just below his chin. He had green eyes, which was unusual for Sprinkleberry, but had never really had a girl he was closed to. He wasn't sure if he was good looking or not... then shrugged.

He looked to Marko for a moment and saw that the man's crotch had produced a 'tent' and as he chuckled Glen and Jev, who were both drifting in and out of sleep, noticed also.

"Bet he's having a good dream," Glen said with a grin and the three shared a laugh. They all turned over and were trying to sleep.

Jev was the first one awake that night and he awakened his companions. The four got up out of the bunker and snuck around, looking for the Hellfire Siege Engines. It was about an hour of sneaking around, crouched and pausing every couple of minutes, for them to find the main host of the war machines.

"See the wizards?" Tuff said from behind Jev, who seemed intent on the war machines. He looked over to a bunch of tents. Several wizards were currently sending fire on through the machines, which launched it far into the night at the Sprinkleberry trench lines.

"Take out the tents first?" Marko asked and Jev nodded. Glen and Marko began to make their way over, Tuff and Jev close behind. They stalked forward, quietly, and found a single man in the first tent. He was sleeping on a poor cot and his robes, though before the war they were likely very nice, were in tatters and though he was a young man he covered in scars and seemed to be nursing several wounds.

Jev looked to Marko and nodded and the older man quietly moved forward. Jev and the two others watched to make sure they didn't get found out while Marko cut the wizard's throat. Behind him, Glen heard the gurgling sound of a man choking on his own blood and almost lost his stomach. Instead, the young man nodded and remembered that that wizard had been casting fire spells into the Hellfire war machines and that burning to death was likely far worse than choking to death.

And if not, Glen decided grimly at that moment, it was what the wizard deserved.

They moved out of that tent, each crouched as they moved to a new tent. They found three wizards and one was awake. Before that wizard could cry out Jev raised his crossbow and put a bolt through the man's eye. The wizard made the noise of a dying man and awakened one of his companions but that wizard had no time to make such noises. Marko and Tuff ended his life while Jev gutted the other man, ending his life all but painlessly.

Tuff sighed as he looked at the man he'd just choked to death, which the quietest way to kill the wizard without letting him cast, and realized that something in his life had changed.

They were two feet from another tent, there were only four left, when suddenly a wizard at the Hellfire war machines turned and began to head back to his tent, the one with a single dead wizard.

"Take care of him," Jev ordered Glen, who nodded and unsheathed his blade as he stalked over to the wizard's tent. He got in before the wizard did and when the flap opened Glen's blade struck, a jab rather than a cut and the wizard, a man a few years younger than Glen was, tried to cry out. But the man found he couldn't, as the point of his blade was deep in the wizard's throat.

"I'm sorry," Glen whispered as he caught the wizard and lowered him to the ground softly. The soldier felt guilt as the man, probably a brother and definitely a son, looked at him with vacant eyes, the eyes possessed only by a dead man.

Glen looked up and realized he was falling behind his other three allies and noticed that the wizards at the engines, in the midst of casting their spells, were growing annoyed. He recognized it was likely because they were expecting to be replaced by better rested.

He watched as one stood up and knew he had to act. The man was about to head to a tent where there seemed to be a struggle. Glen lifted his throwing dagger then launched it, not caring about where it hit, when he saw the wizard casting towards the tent where a struggle had ensued.

His knife struck the man in the shoulder and Glen, not pausing to see the damage done, rushed forward, swiping across with his sword. The wizard managed to jump back but was taken by surprise and couldn't recover. Glen killed the man with a brutal chop then turned to see four other wizards staring at him.

"Damn," Glen muttered as he charged forward, knowing he was in trouble. He heard a scream behind him and knew that the last tent, most likely full, had put up a struggle and managed to fight off the shock caused by assassins. Glen was two steps from the closest wizard when the furthest wizard finished his casting and the soldier felt as if he'd slammed into a brick wall.

He was knocked the ground but managed to 'bounce' up to his feet almost immediately. He was

about to charge when suddenly his gut exploded with pain. He looked down to see an arrow stuck in his stomach. It had a green arrow on it and he knew that it was a magical arrow for that was the only way he could explain the poison it pumped into him.

"Oh," he looked up as a second wizard hit him with a flame arrow, this one hitting him in the chest and causing his chest to explode out his back. Glen was dead before he hit the ground.

"Glen!" Marko screamed from the other side of the camp immediately after Jev killed the last of the wizards. Tuff whispered harshly for Marko to shut up when he saw Glen's body. Then Tuff's eyes narrowed and he growled.

Tuff and Marko charged forward side by side and found that the wizards couldn't concentrate due to a steady stream of arrows flying their way. Tuff was perhaps ten feet from the closest wizard when they, and the wizards, were suddenly covered in a green goo.

From the side a man walked in, wearing armor that shined with just the light of the large moon, Magna, and medium moon, Mediis. He had a well trimmed beard, which was light blonde, like the rest of his hair. The man's eyes were light brown. He was a of medium build and the sword on his hip was more functional than ceremonial.

"M'lord," the wizards all tried to bow but the goo kept them from doing such. The figure nodded to them as he lowered the wand that the goo had come from and hung it on his hip, next to his sword. His skin was as dark as his eyes and his build was similar to Tuff but he was an older fellow who had lost much of his body's ability with age but retained a certain toughness that could only be gained by living a long life of hardships and challenges.

"You killed my magic-makers," the man said with a strong accent that marked him as someone from the South.

"Oh damn," Tuff heard Jev mutter from the side and both Sprinkleberry soldier looked to their prince for a few moments.

"It is not often that I meet one of similar rank to myself," the man said as he looked to Jev and Tuff heard the prince curse even more, "Greetings, Prince Jevediah of Sprinkleberry, I am General and Commander Sevrin of Keell." The man grinned and Jev looked to his companions, to Glen's dead body and couldn't help but wonder if Glen had been lucky to die before being captured.

Tuff and Marko looked to Jev but he had nothing for them. He knew they needed something so he stretched his brain for answers, then sighed.

"Damn."

Chance's eyes opened and he looked around for a few moments. Then he realized he was in a warehouse... on the surface. He looked to his hips and saw that his blades were sheathed there. He tried to think of what had happened and what the last thing he remembered was but...

"Oh no," the Spell-sword said as he remembered what he'd said to the Nopterians. He looked around for a few moments then found himself in a defensive position, waiting to be attacked. There was nothing, though, and the Spell-sword knew that he was likely not being watched but he knew that no matter how skilled the warrior a single slip would end the warrior's life.

He sighed after a few minutes of waiting then slowly made his way out of the warehouse. He was outside the city, he knew, for all around him was desert. He looked around and realized that he had no idea where he was. He was about to call out magically when he heard a familiar, though far from comforting, sound.

The low buzzing wouldn't have worried him on most occasions but war made boozers hungry. They often attacked smaller groups that moved away from the main mass of the army and he realized that he currently was not in the main mass of an army. He looked around and saw a disturbing number of the insect-like demons.

"One, two, three... four, five, six, seven..." he counted, "thirteen, fourteen, fifteen..." he sighed as he finished at twenty four. No single warrior could handle more than three or four boozers and that

took a bit of luck.

As Chance considered his last couple of days he realized that luck wasn't high on his list. So, instead of trying to teleport out of there or distract the boozers with an illusion he cast a spell upon himself.

The Spell-sword lifted off the ground and looked at the two dozen boozers as they charged towards him, their wings, four feet long each, buzzing. He turned and began to fly in the opposite direction. Boozers weren't sprinters when it came to flying, they were long distance fliers. They hunted for hours, days even, and ate once a week usually.

The demons worked to catch up but Chance's spell gave him speed. He moved quickly and saw smoke in the distance. He grinned and knew that that meant people. As he got closer he considered what that smoke implied: War.

Then he considered what was behind him, an unheard of size flock of boozers and decided that he would be better off fighting humans. It was perhaps an hour of flying when he felt his spell of flying beginning to wear off. The smoke was perhaps half an hour of flying away and the boozers were a minute at most behind.

Desperately, he began to cast again and knew that it had to be perfect. He chanted and ran at the same time. The low buzzing of boozers grew louder and louder and by the time he finished the words he could feel the wind from the boozers' wings.

He was barely flying when he felt one of their probiscus, or mouths, on his back. He knew that boozers had three of their sucking mouths each and that the probiscus had killing acid that would paralyse first, kill later.

He flew desperately for an hour, barely ahead of the boozers the entire time, and found himself only a mile or so from the war when the boozers backed off a little. He wondered why they were just veering off when he noticed that what had been a mildly loud low buzzing became incredibly loud.

He looked back and saw where twenty four boozers had been there were now closer to a hundred. In front of him he saw hundreds of soldiers, from both Keell and Sprinkleberry, fighting in trenches and above ground. He watched as the men, hundreds of them, turned from each other and looked at the giant host of boozers heading their way.

Bear looked up from the man he'd just thrown to ground to see approximately a hundred boozers heading their way. Beside him Sergeant Robert gasped and Commander Aubrey sword. Bear grinned at his allies then nodded.

"Looks like we're not fighting Keellians for a while," the giant man. Then he looked at the Keell soldier next to him. He bellowed a booming laughter then grabbed the man, who screamed. A boozer was flying furiously down at them when Bear launched the man into the air, straight at the demon. The mosquito-like creature jabbed forward with its probiscus and the three spear-like mouths cut straight through the man.

Bear's laugh ended as the creature literally sucked the man dry. The giant of a man looked at his allies for a few moments then back up at the creatures.

"It's been a while," the Nose Breaker admitted then Commander Aubrey shrugged.

"They die all the same," she said as she lifted a heavy crossbow. Bear grinned as she pulled the trigger a few moments later then followed the crossbow bolt as it cut through the boozers' chest, tearing the creature in half. The boozers fell to the ground but their victory was momentary.

Three boozers saw what had just happened.

"These aren't normal boozers," Sergeant Robert said as these ones came, "They're bigger..."

"And can suck a man dry in seconds," Bear finished. He lifted his giant mace and as one of the giant boozers came he slammed the giant weapon down, crushing the boozers' head. One of the creature's cry ended but two of its legs shot forward and punched Bear in the chest. The giant man flew five feet down, into the ground.

Bear landed heavily and couldn't roll into a crouched position. The other two boozers rolled off in his direction and landed in front of the giant man. Bear couldn't get into a position to defend himself and thought himself doomed for sure when a bolt flew past his head and slammed into one of the larger boozers' head.

The creature stepped backwards, not dead, stunning the creature instead, and Sergeant Robert rushed forward, his hand-and-a-half sword striking out viciously. The boozers lost an arm and cried out in an alien voice as it beat its wings, pulling itself into the air for a moment. Bear was up by this time and so when the creature charged towards Sergeant Robert it wasn't the thin man's last moments but instead the boozers'.

Bear's mace cracked down hard on its head and the creature fell to the ground, dead.

They looked at the last of the three boozers and realized that Commander Aubrey had put three bolts into its chest. The creature wasn't dead.

"What in the hells are these?" Sergeant Robert asked when he noticed that the fighting throughout the battle field had shifted from human versus human to human versus boozers. They were about to claim that the battle would be won for the two-legged side easily but another cloud of boozers was in the distance.

"What in the hells are they doing here?" Commander Aubrey gasped, "... In such numbers..."

"They've always avoided wars..." Sergeant Robert said and Bear nodded.

"I think the world has changed again," the big man said and his two friends nodded.

"Jenwald!" Sergeant Robert yelled and a Nose Breaker rushed forward. He was of medium build and of average height. His hair was jet black and his eyes dark also. He had dark skin and he was a messenger for the Nose Breakers more than anything. In reality, he was as good a fighter as any, he was just a fast man, as fast as any messenger of Sprinkleberry.

"Get to General Suko and tell him what is happening out here. I don't think our biggest problem is Keell right now, get his forces into the trenches again and get our wizards defending us from the sky. Let their warriors fight these demons, not us," Commander Aubrey ordered and Jenwald nodded. The man turned and sprinted away.

Chance was dodging the boozers when suddenly he was engulfed in darkness. He felt uneasy for several minutes as he sat in a dark room. Then the room lit up and he realized he was in the palace. He looked around for a few minutes, trying to figure who had brought him here, then watched as a man, his head covered by a dark, black hood, came into the room.

"Dear, young Chance," the man said and Chance felt terror beyond anything he'd ever felt before. "You... you..." Chance sputtered.

"Shhhh, shhhhhh. My young assassin," the man said, "you have done well."

"Are you him?" Chance asked.

"I am," the man answered and Chance, at that moment, knew true horror.

"I am the leader of the Black Hoods," the man said. Chance nodded to the man. The Black Hood wore all black, gloves and boots and everything else.

"And you performed admirably," the Black Hood said. Chance nodded but he had no idea what the man was referring to. "You brought the boozers here. I have been filling them with power, have been adding to their forces, making them multiply and making them stronger. And you brought them to the war."

"But our soldiers..." Chance said and the Black Hood laughed aloud. Chance shuddered as the laugh seemed to flow down his spine in the form of a cold twingling, one that stung him with cold and burned him at the same time.

"I couldn't care less about them," the man said then shook his head, "No. That's not true... I care for them more than anything." Chance watched the man, so filled with power that Chance could hardly understand what the Black Hood might be capable of, so filled with power that Chance couldn't hope to

comprehend why he was so afraid at that moment.

"They are feeding me power," the Black Hood said and Chance nodded dumbly again.

"With every death out there," the man said, "I grow even more powerful. With every soul that is lost from its body is mine..." a pair of red eyes lit up inside the black hood that caused Chance's to widen.

"W-what are you?" Chance asked and the Black Hood grinned and Chance saw the teeth...

"I am called Azeroth, the Prince of Chaos where I am from... Go out and live your last weeks in joy," Azeroth, the Black Hood said, "You made this possible and I will give you a reward for that."

"A reward?"

Chance woke up a little later on a sidewalk in the street.

## Chapter Fourteen

Medea looked to the only male she respected in the city. She grinned as she saw his eyes moving up and down her body and knew that no small amount of her influence over him came from her some-what curvy and very tight body. She was lithe and had gained his attention years before, at about the time when she'd just come of age to have children, something that men noticed quite quickly.

The Nopterian, Torvald Andras Guillory, was a liege of Nopteria and held considerable sway over the politics of the subteranean city. And with the control of that politics he'd gained a considerable amount of control over the actions of the city, both mercantile and military matters.

And the military matters of Nopteria was what Medea spoke of now. As Medea walked up to Torvald, Keledro in tow, she saw the one reason why his power over Nopteria was so unusual: He was not Nopterian.

He was half human, that much was known, but the second race in his gene-pool was unknown around the city. He barely had a nose, the holes of which were small slits rather than the rounded holes that Nopterians had and his eyes were yellow-orange, and that combined with his round cheeks gave his entire face a pig-like look. His eyes, yellow where the whites of his eyes should have been and orange where his iris's and pupils was, still moved up and down her body as she got closer.

Keledro cleared his throat when Torvald's hands, gloved, remained behind his back clenching a walking stick tha the always kept with him, his eyes still observing and analyzing Medea's well shown off body.

Torvald smiled and had the sense of blush, his light gray skin reddening ever so slightly.

"Milady, it is a pleasure to see you again," Torvald said and he took Medea's hand to kiss it. The female Nopterian allowed it and simply watched his lips, far from attractive, touched her hand. She ignored the feeling of wetness that came with those lips and smiled to him. Torvald's eyes lingered on her for a few moments before he turned away.

"I fear it is beyond my ego to assume that you came to me for a simple social visit, especially with your... servant in tow," Torvald said and he said the word 'servant' with some anger. Even when alone with her his odds of a romantic date with Medea were slim to none, with the former soldier in attendance he was more likely to receive a beating than to even hug the attractive Nopterian girl.

"Unfortunately, no," Keledro said, staring at Torvald as he did so. Medea, and Torvald's servants as well, could feel the tension in the room build for a few moments before Medea smiled and spoke.

"We wish it were possible but these are troubling times, I fear, and there is little time for any such pleasantries, especially with my work in the city above," Medea said and Torvald looked away from Keledro and the former soldier's unspoken challenge to Medea and her, in his eyes, irresistible beauty.

"Pray tell why you have come, then?" Torvald said.

"I wish a team to go up with me," Medea said. Torvald eyed her for a moment, then motioned to Keledro.

"He is quite the fighter, or so I heard he was," the Leige, Torvald, said.

"I require a group large enough to escort nine warriors into the Black Hoods' newest gain in hide-outs," Medea explained. She spoke of the palace.

"That'd require at least two more to join you," Torvald calculated aloud and Medea nodded.

"We would hope for maybe twice or thrice that number," Medea said and Torvald sighed aloud.

"Getting permission for a mission upstairs takes some major juice in politics, especially since you'll be going up there specifically to pick a fight," the Leige said, "I fear that unless Councilor," the title of Leige and Councilor were equal aside from that Leige's were elected by the people for military matters and Councilors for economic and lawful matters, "Lilon agrees with me I won't be able to get you more than two to follow."

"Two would suffice," Keledro said, "but four would be ideal."

"A platoon would be ideal," Medea muttered, "A platoon with a trio of magicians."

"Our magicians are in short supply," Torvald said with a sigh, "They are being used to keep our trade routes up." Nopterians could fight and use powerful magic but their most powerful aspect was magicians, who didn't use magic in the manner of a wizard or the sword and shield like a warrior would.

Instead, Magicians used mental games, half science half smooth-talk, sleight of hand, clever plans and incredible guessing ability at what their enemies do before they do it. They could also use unusual weapons, things like playing cards and hand-cuffs, with deadly efficiency or to simply render an enemy immobile.

The very best part of Nopteria's Magicians is that instead of using their plans as they would a fishing pole, allowing very little bend and relying on the solidity of the material, they use their plans as they would a net, allowing it to catch things to use. They were the ultimate improvisors and if cornered could, as often as not, hypnotize or use their mentalist 'science' or 'abilities', depending on who one asked, to escape.

"I may know one person who can help you," Torvald said, "He refuses to work on the trade routes and has grown quite bored... but he isn't exactly..."

"Good at his art?" Keledro said and Torvald shook his head vehemently.

"Oh no, he's very good," the Leige said, then began trying to explain his problem again. He was coming up short or just didn't want to say what it really was, neither Nopterian could tell.

"He's just..."

"Dumb?" Medea suggested.

"Oh no, he's sharper than your blades," Torvald replied, then shrugged, "Or at least he usually is..."

"Well, what's wrong with him?" Keledro asked.

"He may or may not be insane," Torvald said and Medea laughed.

"Sounds perfect for what we're doing." Medea smiled and knew that within the a day or two they would be ready to accept and accomplish the Sprinkleberry wizard's wishes.

Jev awakened. He was tied down in a tent. Beside him was Tuff. Blood caked the soldier's mouth, as if he'd been beaten savagely. Marko had a bandaged shoulder that was still bloody. Glen... wasn't there.

Jev remembered the fight, Marko and Tuff rushing forward. Marko had been hit with an arrow and Tuff's weapon stolen by magical means. Jev, though, had been fully caught in the goo and unable to assist his friends in fight... or, in reality, getting beaten. Instead, as General Sevrin called for Tuff and Marko not to be killed, Jev was hit from behind and knocked unconscious.

Now they were here, in a dark tent and tied to each other. Tuff was beginning to resurface but Marko was deep in sleep, or whatever it was the sleep caused by wounds was called. Jev called to Tuff two or three times before the tough soldier opened his eyes and looked at the prince.

"Are you alright?" Tuff asked Jev and the prince thought it genuinely funny that Tuff, who had lost some teeth in the last fight, was asking about the relatively untouched Jev's health.

"I'm fine, are you well?"

Tuff seemed to consider the question then shrugged.

"Nope," Tuff grinned and two of his bottom teeth were missing. They were about to figure out a plan when the tent flap opened and General Sevrin walked in. Neither Tuff nor Jev could see, though, for the light that flooded in the room was too much for their eyes to adapt to immediately.

"You're wondering why I kept you alive," the voice was thick with a southern accent. No response was forthcoming and the General smiled, "Or you're wondering how you're going to get out of this predicament."

"Sounds more like it," Tuff muttered and the General nodded.

"I need you to carry a message to your general," General Sevrin said and Jev looked up at him.

"I feel that this war is no longer for a productive reason. See, at first we were taking you so that we could build a larger city between your home and ours. This would only work if we had control over both cities, whether politically or military-based. We tried to reason with your people but they wouldn't accept the control of another city.

"So I was deployed with my two brother-generals to take your city. Our leaders have dark magic, which I expected them to fuel our progress with. And that was the promise of the Black Hoods, who took over. They explained that they saw a future that only they could fuel... we had to follow their reasoning either way, though, for they have magic that is... beyond anything I had ever seen.

"So, they sent us out and put our soldiers in the trenches. We couldn't handle the initial casualty-rate that was happening under their control and I begged to be put in control again. The Black Hood leader agreed that we weren't killing enough of your men... which scared me more than a little. If our goal was to build a city, both sides feeling heavy casualties couldn't be good. Nonetheless, he let me have control."

"Which was when the war got harder," Jev said, "That was when we had to retreat constantly, when your war machines got involved."

General Sevrin looked at him for a few moments then nodded.

"We expected him to fuel our campaign with their dark magic but instead I think they are using our campaign to fuel their dark magic. I have found several Black Hoods lingering in places where there was exceptional bloodshed," the General said.

"So what do you want with us?" Jev asked.

"I need you to communicate to your general that we, the Keellians, have been tricked and are switching sides. Tell them that we will turn our soldiers towards Keell in order to topple the Black Hood control. We will not pillage Keell but we will break her walls and topple the false government that has taken control," the General said and he looked away from them, "I think that some major mistakes were made. I fear it may be too late."

Jev nodded, "I will carry your message, though I don't know how well it will be received."

"You don't know what's going on out there now, huh?" the General said more than asked and he motioned for Jev to be untied. A man walked in and cut the ropes that held Jev down. Tuff, also, was released.

Jev and Tuff both walked out and saw a dark cloud over the armies.

"Are those..." Tuff flabbergasted.

"Boozers," General Sevrin said, "Thousands of them."

"They are... attacking the armies?" Jev asked and General Sevrin nodded.

"But... that's unheard of," Jev said and the General nodded again, "This is, I fear, the first part of the bad things to come. I believe that the leader of the Black Hoods has gotten stronger with every man who has died... and close to a thousand people have died at this point.

"And every second you don't relay my message to your general is more deaths. I will call my

soldiers back and explain to the leader of the Black Hoods why it is a smart move..." General Sevrin said and Jev nodded.

"Glen?" Jev asked.

The General's expression hardened and Jev, Tuff and Marko knew what that meant. As Tuff looked he saw Marko pale but there was no emotion on his face. All Jev could do was nod. They turned to the battlefield where hundreds of boozers wreaked havoc, both killing men and dying recklessly.

Tank looked up back desperately. Behind him ran Navok and Mave, the giant warrior working to fight off the boozers that followed them while Navok threw some weird seed at the creatures that caused them to veer off and slam into the ground, either unconscious or dead. Immediately in front of him ran Wombly, Arnold and Benny. In front of them ran Ashe, Beth and Tommy.

"We're going to get away!" He heard Arnold shout with glee as they saw the castle walls of Keell getting larger and larger in the distance. Tank guessed they were about two miles off and knew that after the Nose Breaker training they'd gotten they would be able to hold up the pace, it was just the thought that one slip would leave someone completely vulnerable and they'd come across a group of Keellian calvary that the boozers had attacked.

The horsemen, ill equipped to fight flying targets, were forced to flee after half their number was sucked dry by the boozers in a matter of moments. Tank knew the only reason this hadn't happened initially was Wombly's quick action with her crossbows and Navok's 'tricks' as he called them.

"We can make it!" he heard Arnold shout again. Tank was about to believe him as the boozers backed off from behind them. Perhaps the city had been shooting the boozers down when they got in range, Tank mused for a moment. They ran on for another half a mile, not slowing a bit.

Then the low buzzing returned, even more intense... in front of them. At least two dozen of the boozers were flying at them *from* the city. At this point they were about three quarters of a mile from the city.

"What in the hells?" Wombly muttered from beside Tank, she'd slowed down quicker than Tank had, and Tank had to agree. These boozers were bigger than any he'd ever seen before. Navok rushed forward and launched his seed at the lead boozer, which was about thirty feet from them, but if the giant creature even noticed it didn't give any indication.

"Run!" Navok shouted and every one reacted immediately. Arnold and Benny split off from the group to the south while Tank, Wombly, Navok and Ashe split to the north. Mave, Beth and Tommy split back towards the east, towards Sprinkleberry.

"Movement is life!" Navok yelled to everyone.

Arnold and Benny had made a mistake. The younger of the two, Benny, was a little quicker and his wiry frame allowed for him to dodge easily. Arnold, though thin, was thicker than Benny and not nearly as quick as the smaller Nose Breaker. He jabbed his spear into one of the boozers as it got closer and the creature screamed an inhuman, otherworldly wail that raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

But as he savored that victory, the boozer falling to the ground dead, and removed his spear from the creature's corpse, another came at him. He desperately lunged towards that one but it was too close and he was forced to unsheath his short sword. He had made a mistake.

He wasn't running and many of the boozers saw a meal simply standing still and as they were cowardly and lazy by nature, the 'sitting duck' meal was more appealing than the either other runners.

Benny looked back as Arnold cut one of the boozers lead probiscus off then get stabbed in the back by a trio of the spear-like mouths, all from one boozer. Arnold cried out for one moment and Benny saw his second closest friend, aside from Tommy, get sucked dry by a giant mosquito-like demon.

"Arnold!" Tommy shouted from the east of the group and many of the boozers turned on him, Beth and Mave. They flew towards them but all three of the warriors were fast and made up most of the distance to where Benny had been standing before the boozers got to them. As soon as the first boozer

got to them it was dead, Mave's giant broad sword cut it nearly in half. He only kept his head because Beth launched one of her seemingly endless supply of daggers and hit a boozer in the neck.

The creature wasn't dead but it was hurt. Mave continued his sprint as Beth released her throw and the group of three was still moving. Tommy sped up to catch up to Benny, who was shorter and couldn't stride nearly as well as Tommy could, then slowed down just a bit.

"We need to get to the city," Tommy said and he looked over to see the other group of four, Tank, Ashe, Wombly and Navok, sprinting towards the city also. Navok turned, for less boozers were after them, and threw something in their direction just as Mave and Beth caught up to the Tommy and Benny.

The four sprinted then felt themselves lifted from their feet as a giant gust of wind pushed them forward. They found themselves only fifty feet behind Navok and his three companions rather than the two hundred yards that they were before.

Ashe reached the city wall first, easily five seconds before Wombly and Tank got there, then Navok got there.

"What now?" Tank asked as he pounded on a small door in the wall, trying to get it to open. Navok shrugged and looked back at the twenty or so boozers flying their way.

Medea, Heledro and three others rushed forward from the undercity. They left the warehouse and rushed to the western part of the city as quickly as they could, running across several groups of the remaining guards in the city. Groups of twenty or so humans looked at cloak figures, wearing the dark purple that marked them as Nopterians, all armed to the teeth.

They took up chase and soon the five Nopterians had around sixty guards chasing them. Half of the guards were Black Hoods in disguise, serving as the eyes and ears of the city for Azeroth, the leader of the Black Hoods.

Medea cut into an alley that led to another street, two of her kin right behind her, when guards sprung out from behind. Keledro was about to engage from behind when Medea shouted for him to just get to the wall. Keledro grunted and ground his teeth for a moment but nodded, taking the orders as only a disciplined soldier would.

Keledro and the Nopterian behind him, a magician called Rolvward, rushed off, outspeeding the guards.

Keledro and Rolvward ran into another group of guards and found themselves being chased by nearly fifty men on their own. Rolvward grinned as they ran under a small bridge, he stopped, forcing Keledro to look back and stop also, tossed a smoke-bomb type of contraction back then tied a small, all but invisible string between the two bases of the bridge.

"Come, let us fly," Rolvward said and Keledro turned. They both ran for a few seconds before the guards rushed through the smoke and tripped over the invisible string. So many of them ran into it that their weight broke the base of the small bridge and it came down atop them.

About twenty guards escaped that trap and continued their chase. As Keledro and the magician ran Rolvward left small tricks every couple hundred feet, leaving behind dozens of small blades on the ground for guards to step on, two more trick wire and a dozen or so bribed people to tell the guards that the two had rushed off another way.

The two Nopterians got to the wall that they'd been assigned to before the other three and immediately they heard the door being pounded on. Rolvward set a small trap and opened the door. In rushed Tank, Wombly, Ashe and Navok. The wizard was the only one who didn't trip on Rolvward's small trip wire. The other three bounced to their feet again, rushing away from the door.

Above them they heard the twang of bow fire and knew that the guards on the wall of Keell were firing upon the boozers, keeping them from entering the city.

A yell in the distance, followed by two or three dozen responses from guards, acquired their

attention and Keledro said, "We must run!"

"Our friends are still out there!" Tank argued and Keledro nodded his head the negative.

Rolvward looked out there and saw four figures rushing in their direction, all of them being forced to dodge and head in different directions instead of a straight run.

"We have to run," Rolvward said, "We have another group of three that will be here to get them. There are guards following close behind us." Tank wanted to argue but he saw the guards come into sight, perhaps two hundred yards away from then, and was forced to agree finally. The two Nopterians, three Nose Breakers and wizard all rushed off, into the city.

Medea looked back and saw close to sixty guards chasing after her. She and her two companions easily kept ahead of them but somehow the guards knew exactly what turns to make to keep just behind the fleeing Nopterians. She wished she had some time to put thought into a solution for the problem but she hardly had time to pick her path.

She rounded a corner, right at the wall surrounding Keell, just in time to see four humans rush through a thick doorway that had been opened for outsiders to come in. The door could be concealed quite cleverly but Medea had bribed enough officers on the wall for the door to be unlocked and in plain sight for the week.

It had dug into her personal money more than a little but the pay for the smuggling and the possible outcome if she didn't do it was more than worth the gold she'd paid out. She saw the humans, and they saw her, and before they could ask a question she said, "Navok paid us, we'll get you there, follow us!"

Neither Benny, Beth, Tommy or Mave had the confidence to doubt her and all agreed to follow. Soon, the seven were rushing throughout the city, avoiding guards.

Keledro got his followers to a secure store house that the Nopterians owned. He locked the door and hoped that Rolvward's bribes would prove effective. The six sat in silence for many minutes before finally Keledro relaxed as much as he could.

"Who are you?" Keledro asked Tank and the two made eye contact for a few moments.

"I am called Tank," Tank said.

"I'm Wombly," Wombly said and both Ashe and Navok gave similar answers.

"I am the one who paid for your services," Navok said and Keledro nodded, "Have you further need of them?" the Nopterian asked.

"Well, I only see four where there were nine," Navok replied, "I do believe that our four friends were about to enter when we were pulled away." Keledro eyed Navok for a few moments.

"You are a wizard?" Rolvward asked and Navok nodded the negative, "Oh? I thought so, you have the look of one."

"I just know a few tricks... you are a magician, are you not?" Navok said and Rolvward grinned.

"Perceptive," the magician answered. Navok met the Nopterian's grin and matched it.

"Well, I'm glad we're all making friends here, but I was under the impression we were here to kill someone," Ashe spat harshly. Both Rolvward and Navok looked at her with some resentment but neither voiced their dissatisfaction.

"She is correct," Keledro agreed, "We are waiting here for tonight. Then we must regroup with your other members and my mistress."

They sat in silence for a few moments then Wombly began to cry. Tank looked to her in shock then walked over and wrapped an arm around her. She held him while Ashe asked what was wrong in a less harsh voice than before.

"What is the matter?" Ashe asked and Wombly looked at her, eyes filled with tears.

"Arnold... he died," Wombly said softly, "We didn't stop... we didn't bury him... we didn't do anything."

"We did what we could," Ashe said quietly as she considered Wombly's predicament.

"Are... are you not unhappy?" Wombly asked and she looked Ashe in the eyes, "Are you not... upset about this?"

"I... I feel unhappy," Ashe said evenly and Wombly shook her head for a moment.

"How?" She asked, "He was our friend and... he's dead. Just gone... and you're not unhappy. You won't shed a tear..." Ashe stared at Wombly for a few moments, wondering just how it had been turned on her.

"I do feel bad," Ashe replied, "but we can't afford to be weakened by our emotions..."

"What kind of life can we live where we don't take time to bury our dead friends?" Wombly asked.

"The kind that saves thousands of lives," Navok said from behind and Tank stood, agreeing with Navok but not willing to speak out against his friend as the wizard had done. Wombly looked at Navok for a few moments then nodded, standing silently. She apologized to Ashe, who nodded, then they all looked to Navok.

"What should we do?" Tank asked and Navok seemed deep in thought for a few moments. He looked to Rolward, then grinned.

"We make a lot of chaos," the wizard said. He looked to Ashe, "You'll be very important."

Ashe grinned, "I can do chaos." Wombly looked to her friend and her brown eyes were filled with sadness.

The next morning, Medea watched as somewhere between forty and eight guards rushed and surrounded a building that was seemingly empty. She looked to her two Nopterian companions, both holding their weapons at the ready. Mave and Benny stood behind them while Tommy and Beth watched their backs.

"What's going on?" Mave asked and Medea scowled at the loud human.

"They seem to have found something," Medea said as she watched the guards creeping into the building. They filtered in, all of them moving slowly so that the metal on their predominantly leather armor didn't clink together. At the very end only three remained outdoors and Medea watched as three figures, all dressed in black, quickly rushed forward and either stabbed, choked out or break the neck of the guards outside.

"Who are these people?" She wondered as they immediately set about tying off small and all but invisible strings in the doorways.

Tank and Wombly sat in the middle of the building, both of them ready to fight. Tank's flail was ready to spin and his hammer hung loose on his hip. Wombly, standing next to him, had two of her self-made crossbows loaded and cocked on her hip and one in her hands. She had a single blade, her devilishly crafted slider-blades.

The guards moved into the room, several lifting lesser, crank-based crossbows towards the pair while others lowered their polearms, swords and raised their shields to block any retreat or attack by Tank and Wombly. Wombly lowered her crossbow as the guards yelled for them to drop their weapons. As she did so she reached into her pocket and wrapped her fingers around four of her spheres, two in each hand.

"Lift your hands and drop your weapons!" a guard yelled and Wombly complied while Tank stared at the man, his blue eyes seeming black in the dim light. In Wombly's hands, which were raised up, she held four spheres.

"What's that in your hand?" A guard asked while another yelled, "Drop it!"

Wombly complied.

"Close your eyes and hold your breath," Wombly said to Tank as the spheres left her fingers. Both sucked in as much air as they could. Tank followed Wombly's instructions and while he felt the

puff of gas and heard the men gagging around him, he remained almost unaffected.

As the cloud of gas thinned, to the point that the guards were still completely blinded but that Tank and Wombly could see, mainly because their eyes hadn't been flashed by the spheres as they hit the ground.

Tank's flail was spinning and Wombly rushed out of the room after dropping a few more spheres on the ground hoping that the guards would step on them. As she did so, Tank slammed his flail into the guards legs and knees, sending them to the ground, screaming in pain. He had downed about ten guards when one of them recovered enough to lift and aim his crossbow. Several of the guards were killed by Tank in his battle-fury.

The guard pulled the trigger and Tank watched as the bolt flew past him, four inches from his left shoulder, and into another guard's chest. The man's armor stopped it from killing him but he still jerked backwards, launched into the air by the strength of the bolt.

Tank grabbed a dropped crossbow and, with the training of the Nose Breakers, leveled it and pulled the trigger, taking the foolish guard down by the knee. He saw that more guards were recovering and knew it was time for him to flee. He rushed down the same hallway that Wombly had. It was a few seconds before he got to the hallway that they'd prepared.

He saw Wombly standing at the end of it, her crossbow leveled towards him. He shouted her name and she lowered it for a second then, as guards began to filter in from behind him, she lifted it again.

Tank heard more than saw the crossbow bolt fly past his thighs to hit a guard behind him in the knee, for the bolt whistled and the man behind him screamed out about his knee. Wombly grabbed one of her other crossbows and pulled its trigger also. She grabbed her last crossbow and unloaded its bolt into another behind Tank.

Tank slowed for a moment as he reached the barely visible strings tied across the support beams at shin-height then jumped over the first and second one. The third one, which he knew was sharp, took him a moment to find then he jumped that one too.

The warrior looked back as guards tripped on the first one, a couple jumping over it, then they tripped over the second while others jumped over it. The third line, which was tied to the beams at ankle height, was even less visible than those before it. The first guard to sprint forward towards Tank and Wombly, who had both turned and began shooting crossbows at the thighs of guards, cried out as the sharp string cut through his leather-armored boots and into his skin.

Several other guards were cut but the rest began to jump over that line. Wombly tossed several more of her spheres and the guards were stunned again. Tank downed one, snapping his knee, then both ran off into the city, leaving behind the guards on their false raid.

Medea watched as the two sprinted off, a grin creasing her face, "I like them."

"I am thinking you don't know that they are our friends and they are very good at... doing that stuff," Mave said and Medea nodded.

"I figured as much. They are a good lot for taking down a government," Medea agreed. Medea turned and motioned to her two companions, who both rushed away upon the signal. Mave was about to ask what any of this meant when Medea said, "We must be leaving. Keledro and Rolward are with them and if they had anything to do with this... then we don't want to be here."

Mave and Benny followed Medea as she retrieved their two other friends as they left.

Chance lay on a bed in the middle of an inn room. He was about to fall asleep, mainly due to the amount of alcohol he'd consumed, when he was awakened. Next to him, a prostitute that he'd paid for didn't stir a bit as a dark cloud formed over them. The Spell-sword considered the fact that not a single one of his magic wards had gone off. This wasn't humanly magic, he determined, for his head would be ringing if it was related to a human.

"Tank is in the city," Azeroth, the leader of the Black Hoods, said in a deep and terrifying voice that shook Chance's sensibilities, "Find him and kill him and I will put you somewhere safe. Fail me and I will destroy him myself, find you and torture you until you are on the edge of death," Chance was already committed to following through with Azeroth's orders, "then I will revive you to full health, let you go and stalk you. I will find you when you finally find a life worth living and I will then destroy it and torture you again.

"This is the most important thing in your life. And there is no hiding, for I can be anywhere. The woman next to you is an easy mind to possess, I assure you, as are most of your pathetic little friends. Succeed and you will be safe. Fail and you'll die, one way or another. The other, I assure you, will be among my most proud projects and top priority."

The cloud was gone and Chance, drenched in sweat, sat in terror for a few moments. The woman next to him stirred a little but showed little attention to the Spell-sword until he got up. Just as she was about to ask him what was wrong, Chance turned on her, Furyflicker in hand.

"He might see through your eyes," was all he said before he slit her throat.

## Chapter Fifteen

Tuff, Jev and Marko moved slowly as they walked through the trenches where, just a day before, men had killed each other in such large numbers that the body count would be unknown for weeks. Bodies littered the floor and in several places there were piles taller than Marko.

"We've gotten lucky so far," Jev said as they moved forward, trying not to draw attention to themselves, "There are still hundreds of boozers out here. If we run into one of those dirty, damned abominations we had better silence it before it can alert all of its buddies. It'd take a stroke of luck better than any we've had all damn week for us to kill that one so be ready to do something different if we do end up running into one of them.

"But make sure to pray to whatever god or goddess that might be listening that they don't find us," the prince finished talking and it seemed a cruel joke to the three soldiers that, as if on cue, a low buzzing sound filled the air around them.

"We're dead!" Marko whispered harshly and Jev gave him a dark look, "Don't you give up on me," the prince said somewhat loudly and Marko scowled.

"No, pretend we're dead you idiot!" Marko growled and his two companions shrugged, thinking they had no better idea, then threw themselves to the ground. The boozers, half a dozen, landed and began to pick at bodies around them. One of them stood over Marko for a moment but the older warrior kept his calm and just barely shifted in order to keep out of the creature's immediate sight.

The boozier picked up another body and held it aloft as it drained the blood from the corpse, right above Marko's head. The soldier looked to his prince and companion as blood dropped down on his head and knew immediately that if he didn't hold himself together they would all be killed. He just breathed in and held his breath for as long as he could. Then the boozier, as suddenly and seemingly randomly as it came, flew off, its five kin following it away.

They lay on the ground for a few moments, all stunned by how close to death they had come and how they'd avoided it by simply laying still and doing nothing, then all climbed to their feet and continued on.

It was perhaps an hour later when they heard more low buzzing. They were in the middle of a group of structures built by General Suko of Sprinkleberry. Jev knew they had to be close to

"Pretend we're dead?" Tuff asked and Marko was about to nod when a boozier landed in front of them, staring at them.

"I don't think so," Marko said dryly. Tuff pulled out his sword and lifted his shield right before he charged the creature. Marko came in behind him, his broad sword in both hands, while Jev lifted a bow. The prince released two arrows into the boozier right before Tuff got to it.

Tuff slashed down with his blade, cutting through one of the boozers' forearms then barely blocked a strike from one of the creature's probiscus at the same time. He was forced backward and barely noticed that the boozers had screamed in pain... but the rest of the boozers in the area, close to a dozen, heard it.

Marko, looking around at the wooden structures that remained, couldn't help but wonder where the soldiers were for a moment. Then he put the thoughts out of his mind and yelled, "Get into cover!"

Both Jev and Tuff followed his instructions and soon all three warriors were breaking for a wooden building, all ignoring the tents because they seemed weak at that moment. Jev barely got inside a small shack while Marko and Tuff both got into bunkers for soldiers to sleep in. They looked over at the prince and Jev could see the worry in their eyes even from the fifty foot distance between the shack and the bunker that both soldiers stood in.

One boozers slammed into the shack and Jev shook as much as the shack did, for it barely held up as the boozers struggled to break free of the wood that had stabbed into its body. Jev looked back at it then growled. He turned towards the two soldiers then burst into action, exploding into a sprint in their direction.

He was about halfway across the distance when a boozers landed between them. Jev, knowing it to be his only chance, charged the creature. He lashed out with his long, thin blade and cut it but it was hardly a match for the slightly thick husk that surrounded boozers like an exoskeleton. Jev then dove forward and through the creature's legs. He almost made it to the bunker when another boozers landed.

"Damn it!" Marko growled then he charged forward, Tuff a step behind him. The older warrior jumped into the boozers that was now between Jev and the bunker. Marko's hips snapped down right before he hit the boozers and his arms, which were trailed by his broadsword, followed. Marko's blade dug deep into the creature's back and the boozers screamed in terror.

A third one landed and Jev was forced back towards his shack as the boozers were landing now. He was about to turn and run when another boozers landed between him and the shack. He was about to be killed when an opening showed itself in the form of Tuff jumping atop a boozers. The creature wailed as Tuff's sword dug into its back and Jev rushed forward. He stabbed the boozers that Tuff rode in the chest as he ran and the creature died quickly.

Tuff got off of it but knew it was a hopeless battle. About a dozen boozers buzzed around them and with all the noise they'd made more were surely on the way. They fought hard, even managing to kill another two, before finally they were cornered.

"Well," Jev said, "I couldn't have asked for two better soldiers, and friends, to have fought with me."

"Yeah, you could have," Marko chuckled.

"Then we wouldn't be here," Tuff agreed and the three men shared what they thought was their last laugh. Two boozers rushed in and Marko's broadsword, heavy in his exhausted arms, cut straight through all three of a boozers' probiscus. It cried out and two of its kin began to devour it while the others still focused on the three humans.

Then a low horn blew and the sound of heavy footsteps filled the air. The boozers turned just in time to see a charge of two dozen calvary men, the first twelve heavy lancers atop the largest horses that were functional at Sprinkleberry and the second twelve were crossbowmen or scouts, six of each.

The lancers charged and were in so quickly that the boozers didn't really have time to react. Jev watched as their lances dug into the sides of the boozers, killing four of them on impact and wounding another. The last few boozers that could fly tried but were brought down by bolts from the crossbowmen.

The scouts rushed in and set fire to the boozers as quickly as possible, soaking them in oil then putting torches to them. A twenty sixth man rode in atop a black as night horse and looked down at the three soldiers.

"You are lucky," the man said, his accent thick like a desert man's from the far east, where he

slurred some of his words, drunk or not, and occasionally rolled one of his "r"s in the middle of his sentences. The rider wore light clothes and was dressed somewhat like a scout, with a black hood that covered all of his face aside from his eyes but his had a golden stripe down the middle, the mark that gave him his station as head of the calvary of Sprinkleberry, horsemaster and scout master.

His skin was very dark, like most of those who came from the desert to the east, and that made his eyes and teeth seem unusually white in comparison. His body was lithe and he was powerful, tone with muscle yet not buff. He looked like he could fight at one moment and run, jump or climb over any terrain at the next.

"Nigel," Jev said politely and when the rider looked at Jev closer his eyes widened.

"M'lord," the rider, Nigel De'zezani, said more politely. Jev smiled and Nigel took off his hood. "We were informed that the boozers were circling on an area. We assumed it was an attack from Keell, not you, so we came prepared for battle," he wasn't lying. Every warrior on horseback was armed to the teeth, most of them wearing as many weapons as they did armor. The horses themselves were armored also, though in a light and cool, as in temperature, way.

"And not so much for a pleasant ride back," Jev finished for the Horsemaster.

"We didn't know if there would be a ride back," Nigel replied and Jev was forced to agree with his logic.

"Well, there is one now," Jev said and Nigel looked around for a few moments.

"We must move quickly then. As we go, I will tell you what has happened here for the last few days. The front of the war must be sealed off for a few days, as the boozers took many of our men's lives. We find ourselves eight hundred soldiers short of where we were just a day ago and seventeen hundred from the day before.

"Those boozers hit hard," Nigel said, "And fast. They came in like a shadow and stayed like a storm, cutting off all our routes of escape with raw power and number. I had two hundred and twenty men on horseback on this side of the war just two days ago. I now have just under a hundred. These demons can suck a horse dry in ten seconds and a man in half that time.

"We can only hope that they hit Keell as hard, hopefully harder, than they did us," Jev was amused by the way Nigel spoke, his accent being fairly rare in the west part of the Nameless desert.

"Tell me about it as we ride..." Jev said and Nigel nodded in agreement.

Bear looked over at Commander Aubrey and silently thanked the woman. A dead boozzer that was behind him, two arrows sticking out of its head, was the reason for Bear's gratitude. Commander Aubrey nodded then hung her bow over her shoulder as she unsheathed her sword. The two looked around for a moment, counting the twenty two remaining Nose Breakers that worked with the, when Seargant Robert moved into the area, another dozen warriors with him.

"They've laid eggs," Seargant Robert said and both Bear and Commander Aubrey moaned. "I lie not, hundreds of them. And there has to be at least two hundred boozers protecting their little nest."

"Well..." Bear began, about to say something about how their strength, skill and speed would help them in their mission and how their ability to fight would prove the best, as he always did, but the man was left without a word of enthusiasm at the thought of a thousand boozers breeding and multiplying.

"We'll have to ride in there and kill them then," Commander Aubrey said and Seargant Robert seemed to take amusement at the clear understatement of difficulty in which she spoke of their next, and likely last, mission.

He looked around them, at structures that were going to be defensive walls, barricades or more bunkers for soldiers that weren't at the battlefield. Most of these bunkers had been abandoned and the soldiers that were in them were either dead, m.i.a., or had been ordered to retreat to better built stand-points. General Suko had taken the Nose Breakers' advice and retreated quickly.

The Nose Breakers looked back and saw one of the major forts that had been built for the war

and knew that the soldiers within were lifting bows to fire at boozers as they came and went, moving between the areas of dense human population like a mosquito would from human to human.

"If we could get in fast we might be able to destroy a good number of them, or maybe even lay a few traps to explode in a little but... there's no way we could get out again and destroy a bunch of the eggs," Seargant Robert said and Bear nodded.

The large man sat in deep thought before saying, "We'd have to pick at that point and even if we did get in it'd be a trick bringing in anything that'll create a big enough boom. You know as well as I do that boozers smell explosive powder from a mile away."

"We could use alcohol?" a Nose Breaker from the crowd said and all three leaders scoffed.

"I don't think we could move that much alcohol," Robert said and Commander Aubrey laughed.

"Especially if we have Bear around, he'll drink it all before we're halfway there," she said.

"But seriously," Bear said, "We could use liquid... a wagon of flame oil would do it. Or at least it would kill a lot of them of them. " His friends went into deep thought for a few moments then nodded in agreement, though they were resigned to agree to a plan that Bear had come up with.

"I guess we have to go see if General Suko's got anything more important for us to do," Bear said and the others nodded. They were about twenty miles from the main fort-area of Sprinkleberry. They began their return to General Suko's main camp.

"Plus, we need explosives," Commander Aubrey said.

A total of forty two Nose Breakers, led by Bear and his two friends, moved along the trenches in hopes of staying out of the boozers' sight. Each warrior had tied clothe around the metal sections of their armor in order to keep them from making too much noise. But not a single warrior had his or her sword loose in their sheaths. A couple even had their bows in hand.

Bear watched as one of their forward scouts rushed in their directions, moving quietly but quickly. As soon as the scout reached him, Bear nodded for the woman to speak her piece.

"There's a group of eleven boozers about half an hour up this path. Junip was with me but she chose to stay back. She's to signal us if they begin heading in our direction," the scout-woman said. Bear nodded.

"How are your stores?" he asked and the woman shrugged.

"Got enough to get there if we arrive tomorrow," the scout answered.

"We should be there by then," Commander Aubrey said from behind Bear and the giant of a man dismissed the scout, who turned and ran forward again.

"Should we try to go around?" Bear asked his two friends after he explained what he'd been told by the scout.

"They'll smell us if nothing else, we have to take them out," Commander Aubrey said. Seargant Robert thought about it for a few moments then agreed, "We won't be able to sneak around them."

The boozers were relatively calm as they sat in a small area, feeding on their own dead. Bear, beside his two friends, watched as they did such. A shack was destroyed and across the way was a damaged bunker.

"There was a battle here," Seargant Robert said quietly. Both Bear and Commander Aubrey agreed.

"Those look like the work of Hornet-Lancers," their female friend said and both men agreed.

"Am I the only one who is disturbed by the way they follow their dead bodies?" Robert asked and Bear nodded, "That'll make it hard to get away unnoticed after a battle."

"I think they smell their kins' flesh," Aubrey agreed, "They burned the bodies afterwards... to insure they're dead?"

"Looks like it," Bear said.

"Which means that when those explosions go off they'll all come flying towards us," Aubrey

said and her voice was filled with something kin to despair.

"Well, we can't let them breed here. A thousand will become ten in a year and that a hundred in another," Seargant Robert sighed as they looked down on about a dozen boozers as they fed.

"Not a single man died, either," Bear said, "these guys were good."

"Lancers are good," Aubrey said and smiled at her friends as she said, "But our Nose Breakers are better."

The three leaders looked back at their soldiers, the two scouts returned to the main host, and immediately set up battle plans.

The first volley of arrows, shot from a bow, came from Commander Aubrey and half a dozen Nose Breakers that stood behind her. The second volley, which immediately followed the first, were crossbow bolts with Seargant Roberts. A third volley, from Commander Aubrey, followed the second one immediately, were lit on fire.

The three volleys cut into the boozers in a matter of seconds and the creatures, too wounded and stunned to take flight, were just beginning to cry out when Bear and the rest of the Nose Breakers, around thirty warriors, rushed in towards the wounded demons. Bear, holding his mace high over his head, smashed down on one of their heads. It exploded and covered the giant man with its blood.

As the men rushed in, they held predominantly spears. The long polearms were the most efficient weapons for killing boozers and the reason they were the ideal weapons was because they kept the beasts far from the mens' bodies and were very mobile. And even though spears were relatively rare in the desert climate the Nose Breakers were allowed access to all weapon caches aside from those that were used by the engineers to build their war machines.

The boozers were killed efficiently in just a few minutes.

"That went well," Bear said when his two companions got to the ground. The Nose Breakers were in the mood for celebration because they hadn't lost a single soldier but they were quiet. Any large amount of noise would attract undue attention.

Commander Aubrey looked down at the tracks and sighed.

"These were Hornet-Lancers," she confirmed and both Bear and Robert nodded.

"Let's follow them, then," Seargant Robert said and his companions agreed. The Nose Brearers continued on and pretty soon their scouts, Junip and Celeste, the woman who had reported to the three the day before, were moving ahead again.

Bear and the others knew that it might lead to more fights with boozers, especially if the Hornet-Lancers ran into their own enemies because the corpses would attract more of the demons, but they also knew that the horsemen were the most efficient travelers in the land and that if they meant to go back to the fort they would do it in an efficient manner.

It was maybe an hour of walking when they found the first boozers corpses.

Jev looked behind him as they rode hard. Behind them flew closer to a score of boozers. The Hornet-Lancers had been prepared to fight anything that was between them and their goal, Base Camp, but there were only twenty eight riders (Marko, Jev and Tuff now rode three of the lancers' back up horses) and humans could rarely take the demons on one on one.

Even the legendary Hornet-Lancers, who could travel for hours at a time at high speed and could fight in giant wars as heavy calvary, messengers or supply guards, couldn't take a boozers one against one.

Several of the Hornet-Lancers, the horse archers, shot back at the boozers as they followed but most of the time they were watching in front of them to make sure they didn't run into the remains of Sprinkleberry-built wooden structures as they rode through what looked like an apocalyptic scene from the scariest of movies. Where buildings like supply stations, bunkers, towers and barricades had stood there was only the remnants from battles with boozers and bodies of men and women who had yet to be

sucked dry by the mosquito-like demons.

Tuff was hardly a good rider and had to stay between two of the Hornet-Lancers as they drove their steeds to their limits of speed. It was all he could do not to fall off, much less command his horse to go in one direction or another. But the Hornet-Lancers were trained to do rescue missions as well as aggressive and information missions and knew well how to lead bad riders out of rough situations.

They'd been running for maybe half an hour when a few of the boozers finally grew tired of the chase and flew off, looking for easier pickings. The Horse Master saw that only a dozen of the demon creatures remained so Nigel ordered his Hornet-Lancers to split off into two groups, aside from Jev, Tuff and Marko and two others, who rode forward still. Eight of the boozers followed Nigel's group, three followed the second group of boozers while one followed Jev and the four others.

As soon as Nigel and the others found a suitable place to stand off, a relatively clear field with no remains of the soldiers' activity, he turned and his bow *twanged* as he released an arrow straight into one of the boozers' face. The creature screamed but didn't seem all that effected by the attack.

The lancers rode in circles and figure eights and the boozers were unable to get to them because of the way each lancer covered the others, keeping their weapons aimed high and not allowing their companions to get attacked from behind.

Eventually one of the boozers got too low and one of the lancers slammed it with his thick lance and the creature was wounded. It tried to get high again but two arrows slammed into it and the ten lancers made short work of it.

At the sight of blood the boozers seemed to lose control of themselves and they flew downward towards the lancers in battle frenzy. Nigel and his soldiers had seen this plenty of times and had come to expect their sudden and ferocious charge. The boozers' bloodlust often led to their victory if their prey wasn't prepared for the seemingly unpredictable change of tactics but the Hornet-Lancers weren't so legendary because of just their skills. They learned quickly and mastered fighting tactics quickly.

Thus half the boozers were killed almost immediately and all but one died before it could get to a man. Nigel could only grit his teeth and stab a boozers' side with his own lance as it sucked one of his soldiers, a young woman, dry. She fell from her horse and the Hornet-Lancers lost another of their rank.

The last boozers was killed quickly, one of his toughest lancers punching with his lance so hard that it split the creature's chest, and they rode to find that the other group had lost two men in the combat.

"We had eighty at the beginning of this," said a dark skinned woman. She was thick and powerfully built. She wasn't pretty but was attractive in a solid way. Her hair was cut short and slightly darker than her skin. Her eyes, dark brown, were filled with intelligence and had the age of a woman far older than her twenty six years.

"Trina," Nigel said warmly to the woman. He then sighed, "We all knew that we'd lose men in this."

"We didn't know we'd be losing them to demons and giant flies," she responded and Nigel was forced to concur.

"Should we get to the Prince and his soldiers?" Trina asked and Nigel nodded. Trina was his second in command and an amazing rider to top that. The only reason Nigel ranked higher than Trina was because he was older, thirty years old, and he was a better ground fighter. But he knew that Trina was deadly with the bow strapped across her back.

The group, once twenty six riders, now twenty three, rode to catch up to the prince and his four companions.

"No!" Tuff growled as his horse was taken out from under him. The boozers had been about to stab him when he shifted forward. The boozers, instead of stabbing him, got his horse in its back and the creature quickly sucked the whiney horse dry. The soldier slammed into the ground and the two

lancers that had been next to him slowed and turned on the boozer to try and keep it from the grounded warrior.

But Tuff turned and ran at the demon. His sword in one hand and shield in the other, he slashed across his body as soon as the boozer was close enough and he cut one of its probisci off. Two of the demon's forearms shot forward and Tuff parried one with his blade and accepted the other with his shield.

The boozer charged forward again, more aggressively this time, when Tuff jumped to the side and slashed down with his blade again. It cut through the boozer's two remaining probisci and the creature wailed in agony. Tuff lashed out with his blade and the creature lay on the ground, dead.

"Let's go tell the damned general," the soldier grumbled and his companions nodded.

## Chapter Sixteen:

Deabla, Maria, Esmeralda and Denerick sat in at the bar. Jeffy sat at the far end of the room, in the corner. Wounded soldiers were still in the room but they were mostly asleep. Denerick was staring at a mirror that Esmeralda had just bought a few days before.

Deabla, who had an uncanny ability to guess when things were going to happen, had offered insisted that a wizard and a priestess take up home at their inn.

The wizard, Copla, was short and stout, with a bald head and a round belly. He was in his mid-thirties and was possessed of a baby face. He seemed to be the unconfident kind, with his big belly, round and fat cheeks, flabby arms and legs, but a smile was never far from his face. Deabla had said that he was possessed of a sense of loyalty that would be helpful. No one had argued.

The priestess, Lidia, was about the same age as Esmeralda and seemed hardly experienced in the world. No one knew the young teenager's story and none had asked but over the last few weeks she had made herself very helpful and had even used her magic to their advantage. Deabla hadn't explained why he'd asked her but once again, no one asked. Plus, she was nice even if she wasn't all that good looking with her stringy blonde hair and crooked smile and wide set pair of brown eyes. Maria was watching Denerick and smiled.

Both Copla and Lidia also sat at the bar, silently sipping on their drinks. They watched as Maria stared at Denerick, who stared at the mirror.

"I thought it'd be a girl that stared at herself all day in the mirror," Maria laughed and Esmeralda joined in. Jeffy, bored, came over. Denerick didn't respond and every fell into an awkward quiet. The city was in a dark mood as many of the city's husbands, wives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters were out on the battlefield.

"I was just dinking," Denerick said softly and Esmeralda smiled, "Careful, that's dangerous." Denerick didn't smile. He was quiet for a few moments, then spoke, "In my tribe, we had few mirrors because dey were dought to be cursed objects.

"In ancient times mirrors, in our world, were considered to be portals to oder worlds. I have heard dat if you walked at one at de right time you would just walk drough it, straight into anoder world. But usually if you walk up to one, de reflection is there. We have dought dis was our reflections who were saving us from entering a bad world.

"Like, on de oder side of de mirrior you would only find pain and loss, suffering and grief. I remember my mom said that when bad men come into dis world it is from oder worlds, that evil is not born on this world. Dat only bad people come from oder realities.

"I don't know if it is true, but I like de dought dat my reflection keeps me from going into somewhere bad. It is like having a little guardian who is looking out for me. Dis is a very good thought to me, I think," Denerick said, staring at the mirror still.

"The other world is full of pain and suffering?" Copla asked and Denerick shrugged, "Only if you cannot get to it. One side it worse dan de other, or so that is my understanding. I don't dink your

reflection will let you go anywhere where it is bad. Dey want you to be happy even if dey cannot."

Copla sighed for a few moments, looking at himself and thinking about his past.

"I think must be on the wrong side of the mirror then," the stocky wizard muttered and Denerick studied him for a few moments, nothing to say.

"Maybe you're the reflection," Jeffy said with a shrug and Copla looked at him for a few moments then shrugged, bringing his drink up to his mouth for a moment. He sipped at it then put it down.

"I hope the other one is having a better time than I am," the wizard said then he turned, his shoulders slumped in self-made defeat, and began to stand up. He was short to the point that his feet were far off the ground when he saw in the bar stools and as he jumped down he twisted his ankle, which caused him to shift his weight too far and fall forward, his face first.

The stocky wizard lifted himself off the ground, fighting back tears as he got off the ground, something that he'd done hundreds upon hundreds of times in his life. But before, it was usually after a larger man or a larger kid(in his childhood) pushed him down and beat him up.

The wizard rushed up to his room.

"Sheesh," Jeffy said dryly and he got bad looks from everyone, aside from Maria who had a hard time relating to the round and bald man, at the table. A sickened man coughed and Lidia stood to go and tend to him. She chanted for many minutes and finally his cough subsided. He was sick until she finished her spell and even then he was still weak, but he fell into sleep again.

Right before he did so he thanked her and she shrugged and walked over again.

"This is a grim time," Esmeralda sighed and no one disagreed.

"At least the war is out there and not here," Maria said but no one took comfort in that.

"Should we check to see if they're... still okay now?" Deabla asked. Esmeralda nodded and they moved over to a group of three bowls.

They filled Wombly's bowl first. Esmeralda said, "Wombly, Wombly, Wombly... may I see Wombly?" As she had done almost every day since they got the bowls. The image in the water, once their reflection, became a picture of Wombly. She had sweat moving down her face in beads of sweat and it was obvious they were running. She turned and shouted something and Deabla read her lips.

"She yelled for Tank and Ashe to move," he said. They watched for a few more seconds until finally the spell expired. They moved on to Ashe's, Deabla saying, "Ashe, Ashe, Ashe... Can I see Ashe?" after they filled it with water.

The image in her bowl shifted as well and it showed her with both blades in hand. She was ducking beneath an invisible sword then she jabbed with her own dagger. They saw a thick red liquid spread out all over her arm and Esmeralda accidentally screamed for a second. The image fade as it showed Ashe jump into the air for a moment. She was mid jump when it was finally just their reflection again.

They filled Tank's bowl then Maria said, "Tank, Tank, Tank... Let me see Tank." The image in the bowl shifted to show Tank, a grimace on his face, as he slammed in flail into something.

"They must be in a fight," Esmeralda said. They watched his eyes widen for a second then, all in terror, they watched as he lurched forward. Then, out of nowhere, an arrow shaft appeared in his chest.

"Tank!" Maria screamed as he fell backwards, growling, but as she saw him struggling to get back up the bowl faded.

"Tank! Tank!" Maria yelled and Denerick grabbed her, trying to calm her down as she moved around, agitated. Everyone in the room was somber as they considered that they might have seen his last moments right then.

"I'm sure he's fine," Esmeralda said quietly, "Wombly and Ashe were with him."

"I... I... I..." Maria began but she couldn't say anything. Denerick looked to her for a few moments then let her go. She seemed to shrink at that moment and suddenly she was filled with a deep sadness.

"I should have been with him when he was here," she said softly, "but... but now he's probably dead and..." she looked defeated. Looking down at the ground she slowly walked over to her room.

That night, Esmeralda went up to her room while Deabla watched the front. Very few people were coming in and Deabla seemed eager to go to sleep. He'd been working for long hours so Denerick offered to watch the front.

"Thank you very much," Deabla said with a smile and Denerick shrugged.

"Do not worry about it. Dere is no one in here," the mountain warrior said and Deabla nodded. He walked upstairs and stood outside

Ashe screamed out for Tank as the arrow slammed into him. They'd been working to create as much chaos in the city so that when they rushed into the palace most of the guards would be spread out instead of at the palace doors. But now they were caught in a small alley with about a dozen guards behind them and half a dozen on the other side of it.

The three were working together while other groups of the remaining eight worked to injure guards and create chaos throughout the rest of the city. Stuck in this alley, the three had beaten most of the close-combat guards but a few had been archers and now they were paying the price for ignoring the archers mostly.

Wombly lifted her bow and shot the man who had shot Tank in the throat. The man gurgled as he fell down to the ground, dying. Tank was in front of a guard who's weapon was a heavy mace. The guard lifted the weapon over his head and swung down hard and Tank barely got his hands up in time to grab the top of the weapon's pole.

With strength beyond most humans Tank stopped the weapon mid-swing and held it there. The guard, frustrated that Tank was still alive, tried to overpower Tank. The wounded Nose Breaker was beginning to lose that battle of strength, too, but suddenly the guard's eyes widened. He looked down at his chest where a dagger point stuck through and the man dropped his weapon.

Ashe stood behind him. The three archers that stood behind her lifted their bows and two released shots that were accurate. Tank grabbed her and moved between her and the archers. One of the arrows that had been accurate where she previously stood rushed by him but the other hit him right in the back of his right shoulder. Ashe, eyes wide, screamed, "Why did you do that?"

"You're my friend," Tank shrugged. Wombly shot a second guard in the knee and the man hit the ground, writhing in pain. Ashe launched a dagger and took a guard in the chest. Wombly took out the last with a shoulder shot.

"Alright," Ashe said after she retrieved her daggers. She helped Tank to his feet and let him put some of his weight on her. They walked through the city, Tank losing more than a little blood. Wombly led them the entire way there. She eventually got them to a safe room that Medea had arranged for them.

"Well," Tank said as Wombly began to look at the arrows still in his body, "Alright then."

She grabbed the arrow shaft stuck in the back of his shoulder, "This is going to hurt."

"I'm pretty sure I can handle it. I've been in quite a few fi-iiiights!" He growled as she pulled it out. "Damn! Gods damn it!" He yelled as the agony rolled through his body.

"There's another," Ashe said and Tank moaned, "Oh no..."

Ashe grabbed it, "Alright, on three, okay?"

"Okay," Tank replied.

Ashe held it for a few moments, then began, "Alright. You ready for me to start," Tank nodded, "Okay. Let's do this. One." She ripped the arrow out and Tank yelled loudly, cursing with as much vigor as anyone had ever done so before and he even made up a few new ones. Ashe and Wombly couldn't help but crack grins. Wombly even laughed at it.

Tank scowled at her then she said, "Let's clean them and bandage them." Tank grunted and she

went to work.

"Do you hear thunder in the distance?" Ashe asked.

Azeroth felt each death and knew that his power was growing with every soul cast out from its body. He grinned and felt himself swelling up as he felt them still flowing into him. The demon raised his hands up towards the sky. He stood upon the roof of the palace of Keell, standing at his full twelve feet tall, his giant arms reaching down to his knees. The humanoid, dark red-skinned, had spikes on most of his joints and horns growing out of his head.

His mouth was full of sharp teeth that could tear through several plates of metal armor like a hungry man through the crust of burnt bread and his tongue, if he willed it to, could reach six feet out of his mouth with sharp barbs that were covered in poison.

His forearms ended in hands with four fingers and a thumb with a spike that reached out of the heel of his hand if he willed it to. His fingers ended with four inch long claws that could shear through like metal armor like a hot knife through butter.

As the demon raised his hands to the sky he compelled his demon-kin, the boozers, to attack from all corners of the desert. He felt thousands and knew that they were headed his way. They didn't know why, they just knew that they had to come. Azeroth grinned, knowing that these boozers would simply fight and destroy and consume and wreak havoc and that he, all the while, would simply grow stronger and stronger.

He grinned and black storm clouds filled the air and they began to simply hail, sending lightning and ice everywhere. He felt people being killed by the ice and the lightning and grinned to himself, knowing that he would soon be strong enough to reach out to other cities in this world, on the other side and thousands of miles of away, nations and kingdoms. He wanted to consume Felldon and other cities, who's names he didn't know.

But he saw two here, Sprinkleberry and Keell, and he would now destroy them.

Maria looked outside one of the front windows of Harold's Hill. She looked back at Esmeralda, Deabla and Denerick and knew that something was amiss. Deabla sat upstairs. Maria felt immense relief. They'd checked on Tank, Wombly and Ashe and found them alive, if not overly healthy.

"What is it?" Esmeralda asked and Maria sighed. Deabla, too, sat at a window but it was at the top of a building. Denerick seemed on edge too, as if his warrior's instinct was on edge. Esmeralda and Maria weren't sure what it was about but both were made uneasy by their friends' distress.

Copla sat across from Esmeralda, a mug of ale in front of him, staring at the bar as random drops of sweat rolled down his shiny forehead. He seemed nervous, which was normal. Lidia stood over one of the injured men, casting a minor spell of healing. The man thanked her in a whisper, as loud as he could at that time, after she finished, for the spell numbed the pain as well as got rid of a giant bruise around his ribs.

She smiled down at him and the man fell asleep for the first time in a few days, relieved of pain.

She walked over and sat in front of Esmeralda, who said, "That was very nice of you." Lidia looked at her curiously and Esmeralda motioned towards the man on the bed.

"Oh," Lidia said then shrugged, "I don't think he'll survive the night. His ribs are broken and he is suffering internal bleeding." Esmeralda was off-put by her indifference about the man's oncoming death and couldn't help but wonder at what kind of life Lidia had lived before this.

"I just think he'd like to sleep a little before his heart gives out," the young girl said. Esmeralda just nodded, unable to think of anything to say at that moment.

"So when do you think Deabla will come down?" Maria was about to ask when suddenly the young man came rushing down. He was highly agitated.

"Start boarding up the windows," he said calmly but the panic in his voice was obvious to anyone listening. Esmeralda was about to ask why when he said, "Now!" Then a low buzzing sound filled

the air.

"What is that?" Maria asked as Denerick, Deabla, Jeffy and Esmeralda set about locking the place down. Lidia and Copla, neither in a mood for the carnal version of preparing the inn, began to chant. Neither were overly powerful but both knew how to get by and wards and other magical means of defense.

Pretty soon they heard cries of battle and people slamming into the door of the inn. The first few Esmeralda let in but after a score or so of people were inn she shut the door and locked it. When people began to beat on it, trying to get inside, Denerick added his bulk and strength to the support of the door.

Many of the people were desperate to get in and those already inside the inn were trying to see outside to see what was causing the panic. It was maybe a minute of looking when suddenly they saw a giant winged creature land. Denerick and Copla were the only two who recognized the boozers for what it was.

But both were at a loss when they thought of the creatures' size. They were huge. The creatures were descending upon men, women and children and sticking their probisci into them. It took the giant demons' about five seconds to suck them dry, leaving little skin where there had been a human just moments before.

The people inside Harold's Hill looked on with terror. Copla looked around for a few moments then began to cast spells quickly. He finished and suddenly around them a dark blue orb appeared. The portly mage began to sweat as boozers started crashing into buildings, searching for the people inside as said people began to scream and cry out in terror.

"Everyone needs to be quiet," Denerick said and Esmeralda nodded. She lifted a crossbow and leveled it towards the crowd.

"Everyone!" She yelled loudly, more so than anyone would have expected from a girl her size, and people looked to her. "We must be quiet and they'll leave us alone for a time. There are many, many people out there making noise. If we don't, they'll be busy with those people for long enough that we can make a plan."

Copla groaned for a moment and seemed on the verge of collapse and as his power failed they heard boozers slamming into the roof.

"Someone... a noise... somewhere else..." Copla moaned then suddenly the pressure stopped and the wizard stood straighter than before, even if that was hunched over still. He let the shield linger for a few moments then, when he was satisfied the boozers had stopped trying to get in, allowed it to fade fully.

They looked outside for what had distracted them and saw two score Sprinkleberry guards, the Golden Hornets, as they moved through the city fighting boozers around every corner. The officer of the group, a man wearing a gold-plumed helmet, pointed towards a group of boozers that were moving in on civilians.

The twenty five guards rushed forward, swords, spears and shields at the ready, while ten archers shot. Five sword-wielding guards remained back to protect the archers while they shot at the demons in the sky. Pretty soon the guards seemed to have the situation in hand and people began coming out.

"Everyone, we have set up a defensive position at the palace, we are ordered to escort those who want to go there. We strongly recommend you come with us to a more secure area!" The officer began to shout and people inside buildings began to come. A few of the people inside Harold's Hill began to head there when they noticed that Esmeralda and the others hadn't moved.

"Aren't you coming?" Asked a blonde haired and bearded man of a muscular build.

"No," Esmeralda said, "this is my inn. I know it better than any kingdom palace and I doubt they'll be able to hold off those... things if we're all in one place."

"You'll be killed out here," the man said and Esmeralda shrugged.

"You're insane!" Another said and she shrugged again.

"I don't see any of my friends leaving," Esmeralda said, "And I think it's a bad idea to all box up in one area, so I'm not leading them all there." The man stared at her for a few moments then began to leave. The majority of the people in Harold's Hill followed but half a dozen remained, not including the Nose Breakers with Jeffy.

"You're all going to die, you know that, right?" the man asked and said at the same time and the six people refused to make eye contact with him. They seemed to take strength in Esmeralda's sureness in her course, or at least sureness in the folly of the man's course.

"You're all idiots," the man said, turning away. He didn't know why it bugged him so much that they stayed out but it did. As he walked out he saw them beginning to board up their windows, doors and other weak points in the inn walls.

Esmeralda watched as close to a hundred people walked into the streets. Beside her Denerick sighed with dissatisfaction as some cheered. Then the low buzzing returned and their cheers died down.

"Look away," Denerick ordered. Esmeralda hesitated and Denerick said, "Look away!" louder. She looked away and immediately she was thankful that the mountain man had told her to. For as the screams of terror and anguish filled her ears she knew that had she seen them being ripped apart it may have been too much for her.

She saw that Alron, her little brother, was watching, his eyes wide with terror.

"Alron," she said loudly but he didn't seem to hear her as he saw the slaughter that even in the form of noise was already almost too much for her to handle. She could only imagine what this type of carnage would do to a young boy's mind. She saw as he shuddered then fell backwards, to the ground.

Esmeralda grabbed him and held him close to her as she looked outside to see the last of the people as they were killed. It wasn't long before the fighting stopped.

Very quickly the street was empty of life, the boozers moving to other parts of the city as they looked for more people to consume. There was no blood, just skin and clothes. She sighed as she saw the guards' armor and weapons laying on the ground.

"Be very quiet and we eat on rations for now on," Denerick said quietly, looking at everyone, a total of twelve people, in the room, "Our only chance is if dey don't find us. We stay silent, keep our heads cool and den we pray to whatever gods will listen dat dey do not find us."

## **Chapter Seventeen:**

Chance found himself in the eastern section of the city again, in the assassin's quarter. He looked up at a small house with many colors, ranging from the brightest of reds and greens to the most dull and somber blues and browns. The building had certain beauty to it. Over the door a giant sign hung. He didn't bother to read the sign; he knew what it said.

He didn't pause at the door. Rather, he chanted quickly and a ball of fire appeared in front of him. Chance, through bloodshot eyes, saw the ball slam into the door and explode through it. From inside, three older men looked over. Chance was already chanting, though, and his conjuration, a small pea of fire, flew towards the ground between the men.

Chance had already cast a spell of defense from fire minutes before his attack so the flames that exploded out from the pea's impact had only enough effect to force him to close his eyes for a moment. Where the three men, all Spellsingers, had been only a pile of ash remained. From further inside the room spellsingers began to react to his attack.

But Chance, driven to madness by his desperation and fear of Azeroth, hardly noticed their attacks. He was a terrifying sight as his bloodshot eyes, alight with terror and insanity, quickly scanned the area in front of him and his lips, on a face contorted in a mask of primal terror, efficiently said words of power.

One of the spellsingers, a young woman, launched an attack towards him but Chance knew that the spellsinger attack was highly inaccurate and not only said a spell of quick teleportation but also got

off an offensive spell.

A golden ball of energy slammed into the spellsinger's chest and she fell backwards, writhing in agony on the ground as the ball's energy drilled through her skin and ribs. She died, gurgling, as her lungs filled with her own blood. Above her another spellsinger, this one male, cried out in anger and released his own song of power.

Chance had a spell of defense resurrected already and, without worrying about the offensive song, he cast his own spell. A pair of maroon arrows appeared in front of him and both shot forward. The male spellsinger was about to release a second aggressive song when he realized he had no breath. He looked down and saw two holes where the maroon arrows had shot straight through his body.

"Oh," he said as he fell forward, dead. Chance marched forward, determined to destroy any of his 'pathetic friends' as Azeroth had called them. He'd been driven to madness by his own thoughts the night before. He couldn't handle the reality that another being held that much control over him.

Thus, he'd opted to destroy any pair of eyes that the demon prince might see him through. And the spellsingers were a group that he'd conversed with often. In the past he'd even felt fond of the odd group of warriors.

But now there was no such thing as fondness in him. Now there was just terror... fear.

And as he slaughter spellsinger after spellsinger each one saw that madness, the desperation that fueled his strongest magical assault ever. He had killed close to two dozen semi-elite spellsingers when he finally came upon a powerful one.

"You!" an older woman half-whispered-half-choked when she saw the form of Chance. She breathed in before Chance could make a move then, before a moment had passed, released a blast of song based energy so powerful that it not only destroyed the wooden front of their home but disintegrated the hard timber. A few regular people walking by outside were hit by the spell. Their corpses were being looted by young children.

She looked at the ground where the spellsword had been and felt some pride in her power. The young assassin had stood no chance against an elite spellsinger like herself. She was about to turn and confirm to Figaro Low that the threat had been killed when suddenly a blade erupted from her chest.

She looked down at the blade, a long-sword of metal darker than night, and felt as some poison or another spread through her body.

"H-how?" She managed to sputter before she fell to the ground. Chance looked down at her then at the pile where a foolish young man had been cloaked in his illusion.

He turned and made his way into the basement of the Spellsingers' retreat. He found a trio. One was a young boy, perhaps eight years old, another a young girl around his age and the third was the very leader of the spellsingers, Figaro Low.

"What happened to you?" Figaro asked when the spellsword entered. The assassin shrugged.

"I got a taste of the real world," Chance said then stalked forward. Both Figaro and the young woman sucked in air and both released blasts in the form of spellsong energy. Chance stood behind a magical barrier, shielded fully.

"That's cute," the assassin said and Figaro's face reddened.

"Impudent lout!" He growled then sucked in as much air as his lungs could hold. Chance teleported but Figaro followed. Chance was to Figaro's left, the side that the young woman stood on, and so enraged was the spellsinger that he didn't notice that the young woman had sucked in and sang out her attack before he had... she had stepped forward.

He released his energy and suddenly the young woman cried out. The spell literally tore her apart. Where she had been a bloody pile remained. Chance grinned at Figaro.

"Cute," he reiterated and Figaro sucked in again. Chance stood, grinning at Figaro, but the older spellsinger knew he could blast through Chance's last shield on this attack. He opened his mouth and let the energy flow from him, allowing it to slam into the barrier and to initially rebound off of it. The barrier, after just a second of pressure, faded from view and Chance was blasted away.

Figaro looked at the remains of the young woman, then at Chance's, and blew a sigh of regret. He turned to the boy, who stood speechless, where he found Chance standing.

"Cute," was all the spellsword said before his hand flashed forward, too fast to be possible, and the spellsword's dirk cut deep into the spellsinger's left chest... right through his lung. Figaro fell to the side, dead.

Chance turned and looked at the young boy, who still stood without a word to say. The spellsword, for a moment, considered running the child through. Then he remembered himself, somewhat.

"You ever kill anyone?" Chance asked.

"I'm only going to kill one person," the boy, the son of Figaro Low, said. Chance raised an eyebrow and the boy elaborated, "I'm going to kill you."

"Remember this... I didn't kill you. But if you think that's the way to go... Come find me when you're older," Chance said. He was boasting, surely, for he could barely even consider killing the child. But as the spellsword walked away from the building, a pair of cold, innocent-less eyes followed him.

The spellsword stepped out of the house and watched as the only recognizable part of the house burned. He read the sign one last time:

'The softest Soprano with the deepest bass, the darkest Baritone and the lightest Alto, will blare loudly in any warrior's face, and bring down any foe.'

As Chance walked away from the scene of carnage feeling powerful, feeling untouchable, feeling invulnerable. He felt a tap on his shoulder. His sword, Dusk-spawn, flashed out and cut deep into the stomach of an older man, a beggar, but the figure stood upright still. The spellsword looked at the beggar's eyes and suddenly he was vulnerable, for where dark brown orbs should have been only dark spots lay.

"You think they are what I speak of when I say pathetic?" the beggar asked in Azeroth's voice.

"Your entire race is pathetic and beneath me. I can control anyone I want, yourself included. Do not think to remove my eyes for every eye is my eye. You are a tool and you are mine. Do not hope to even think of thinking another way!"

The beggar suddenly fell over and dark brown eyes stared up at him in terror. Chance knew that the man had been possessed by the demon prince. He knew that the man felt terrors beyond what he and his blade could produce. That was why it was an act of mercy when Chance cut through the man's heart.

"Kill Tank and the others he is with!" A voice said harshly from beside him, in an alley, and Chance saw a group of half a dozen beggars. They were both men and women, children and adults.

All their eyes were dark. Then it faded and they all stood stunned and horrified. And Chance, knowing they were tainted and vessel's for Azeroth now, waded in. His blades whirled and bodies dropped to the ground.

General Suko sat for a few moments, digesting Prince Jev's words.

"While that's all fine and good, but we have new problems. Besides, they are more out in the open and are more likely to lose soldiers than we are. As soon as these boozers were brought into the equation they lost," the General said and Jev nodded.

"I agree," the Prince said, "But they were so dedicated before to get in that they'd lose five men to every man we lost. They could still attack us and cost many good men's lives. They will pay for what they did, of that I am sure, but we cannot afford to fight off this many boozers and whatever remains of Keell's army."

Suko was quiet for a few moments, then nodded, "We will be more busy with collecting bodies than fighting anyway.

"Alright, I want you to return there and tell him to head back to Keell. If their leadership is still trying to keep him on the march then we will head there also. We'll take the crown if they can't. I can't

say that one of the cities attacking the other was unexpected. A few decades back the previous kings agreed that if war was started and both cities were weakened they would combine into a single force.

"This will mean that we have to build small castles between the two but I think that this is a case where both cities are weakened. I will have his agreement that Sprinkleberry is the capital and where the true kign will remain. We will have control of both cities but Keell will have representatives in power at our court also.

"This is, I think, the only way we can achieve peace and keep those east of us from trying to pick up the scraps from this battle."

Jev, Tuff, Nigel and Marko listened to the general's words and none argued.

"I need that message to get to them. I don't care how, but it will. We're collecting as many bodies as we can to avoid the boozers getting to them so I don't have many soldiers at your disposal. You'll probably find hundreds in the field between here and Keell... it was a chaotic retreat after the Nose Breakers got their message to me but we have close to two thousand soldiers present. I'd imagine there's probably at least half that number in the trenches."

The general dismissed them and Jev motioned for Nigel to lead them to the Hornet-Lancer's main holding area. The Horse Master nodded and led them there. It was close to an hour of walking through the camp, where the wounded and dead far outnumbered the able bodied, before they found came upon two dozen or so Hornet-Lancers.

"I thought you guys had around a hundred?" Tuff asked as Nigel was greeted by Trina.

"We did," Trina said evenly and Tuff had the decency to blush.

"Sorry ma'am," the soldier said and Trina nodded, "We've all lost people." Marko sighed at this and Tuff patted him on the back. The older soldier nodded to him and Trina gave a small smile.

"But we're still here, and that counts for something," she then turned and moved away, checking on their mounts.

"There's no straight path to them anymore, but we can still get you there in two days of hard travel," Nigel said, "Especially if they've started to retreat at all. But once we're there, we'll likely be stuck. It'll be hard on these horses to travel that far that fast. A couple of them will probably be lame afterwards, too, so this had better be worth the travel."

"You were in there, Nigel, you know what this means," Jev said and Nigel shrugged.

"I heard General Suko say that we didn't need them and you say that we didn't want to fight them. It sounds to me that they've learned their lesson and won't be attacking us. It also sounds like they're going to get ripped to shreds by the boozers, worse than we will," the Horse Master said.

"I don't think we need to do this," Nigel was in the middle of saying when behind them a servant burst into the room, "M'lords, General Suko requests your presence immediately." The servant, a page more accustomed to indoor work based on the way he panted for breath and his ample stomach, was obviously very panicked.

Nigel walked forward immediately and Jev motioned for Tuff and Marko to follow. The four ran through the camp very quickly. What had taken an hour as a walk took only twenty five minutes as they hurried that way. When they got into General Suko's room he was pale and seemed at that moment very tired.

"What is it?" Jev asked.

"Boozers hit Sprinkleberry."

The world seemed to fall apart for Jev and Tuff at that moment. They'd left home to fight a war to protect their home and now it was under attack and they weren't even fighting a war for their home anymore. Instead, they were fighting demons that had only come because of the war. Now instead of being home to protect their family they were out in the wild.

"Is it bad?" Jev asked.

The General looked at the prince for a few moments, "The palace was in ruins before the last few scouts were forced out of the city. We don't know about your family but they were dedicated to the

palace."

The room was silent and Jev seemed a million miles away. His eyes were cast downward and his jaw clenched as he seemed to process the information. Tuff and Marko, knowing that their families were in as much danger as Jev's appeared to be, knew his pain and respected it.

Then Jev's face seemed to steel over and his eyes darkened only slightly, "I'd like to speak to the scout or scouts, if you would?"

General Suko nodded, "I'd say you don't need to ask me anything now." Jev got the message. More likely than not he was the next king of Sprinkleberry. If that were true, he was able to order anyone in the city or anyone in the city's employ to do his bidding.

"Bring the scout or scouts in," Jev said and the General motioned for one of his personal pages to action. The young boy, barely more than twelve years old, rushed out of the General's tent. The boy returned a few minutes later with two men and immediately Jev knew that the palace had, indeed, been destroyed.

"You're both Shadowers," the prince said and the men nodded. Shadowers were from the mountains to the west. They were among the most skilled trackers and scouts in the land. There were about twenty of them in all of Sprinkleberry. They were reputed to be able to follow a man across the desert a week after that man began.

The Shadowers were the best trackers, runners and messengers in the land. And beyond that, they were great fighters. If anyone were to get out of the palace with accurate information and relay it at its exact face value, the Shadowers would be the ones to do it.

"Are we heading back?" Tuff asked and General Suko all but laughed.

"Do we have a choice?" He asked, "Our supplies come from that city. We'd be stranded on our own if we didn't go back."

"What about the message?" Jev asked and General Suko shrugged.

"It is your decision to make, m'lord," the General said. Jev sighed.

"We have to tell General Sevrin," the prince, possibly soon to be king, said. "If we don't, they might not move against the royalty of Keell. We'll be unable to make peace in this area. And even if we somehow managed to keep Sprinkleberry from collapsing the leadership of Keell could then turn on us. General Sevrin may feel strongly about his actions but he isn't stupid. If we don't act quick, those that lead Keell will turn his soldiers back on us.

"If we can't balance retaking Keell from the demons and keeping Keell from turning on us again, then we'll be left prisoners in our own city..."

"That's if they can rally again," one of the shadowers said and everyone agreed.

Jev was silent for a few moments, then began his orders:

"Either way we'd like to save as many lives as possible now. I'll lead a group back to the Keellian camp." General Suko started to argue but Jev cut him off, "After that, I think I'll be coming back to Sprinkleberry. Tuff and Marko will take command," the Prince was in the middle of saying when suddenly another servant burst into the tent, "The Nose Breakers are back."

"There, now you have a group who can go back to send your message," General Suko started to argue but Jev nodded his head, "General Sevrin needs my word. He is only willing to do it if a prince of Sprinkleberry give his word."

Bear, Commander Aubrey and Sergeant Roberts stepped walked into the tent. Bear looked at the grim expressions on every person's face in the tent and the giant of a man gave a small laugh, "I take it that bed in breakfast isn't on the menu these days?" He asked.

"We may have nothing on the menu soon if we don't get back to Sprinkleberry soon," Suko replied and immediately Bear's grin was gone.

"What happened?"

"Boozers hit Sprinkleberry. The palace is fallen and we're without a supply chain," the general sighed, "But we have some good news. Keellian soldiers and generals are done with this war. They're

turning back on their masters. The war is done... we just have to deal with the aftereffects."

"So what's the plan?" Aubrey asked.

"The Nose Breakers head to Keell and help their armies regain control of their city. The Hornet-Lancers go with General Suko and what's left of the infantry and calvary. I'm going with you, to deliver the message, but you'll have to do the heavy lifting over there. Once that's done, come back to Sprinkleberry and help us to rebuild even bigger than before," Jev, the prince maybe to be king, said.

Tuff sighed from behind the prince to be king.

"Think we'll make it out?" the soldier asked Marko. The older soldiers shrugged, then gave a small laugh.

"Nah."

## Part Three: Enter Chaos

### Chapter Eighteen:

A week passed almost uneventfully and Tank looked to the ground for a few moments, thinking deeply. When the two groups had initially met Mave had sought Ashe out, grinning as he said, "What is your name again?" Ashe, remembering their little game, laughed aloud and gave him a hug.

"When do we make our move on the palace?" He asked and Medea looked to him. She and the rest of her group had met up with Keledro and his group and the two had finally combined. She didn't really know the answer but decided that saying that couldn't help.

"We're still figuring out all we can about the Black Hoods," the Nopterian replied.

"Huh... well, I need some air," Tank said. He stood and stretched with a groan, still sore from the arrow wounds, but moved with the same strength as always. Wombly and Ashe looked at him and immediately Wombly felt worried. Ashe, though, watched him leave with mild amusement, as if she saw something no one else did.

The stocky warrior left the room and walked through an alleyway and found himself in the street. He still had his weapons on his hip, his shield strapped across his back and his armor on but it was hidden beneath a humble robe that didn't restrict his movement at all. He looked up at the sky and couldn't help but feel some uneasiness. Storm clouds were overhead and what had usually been a just over hundred degree day was now at most ninety degrees.

He sighed as he moved onto a main street and found a food merchant. He ordered some and moved along. He didn't notice a sneaky figure, Ashe, moving in behind him as she moved over the roofs. She was following on Wombly's request. The less sneaky, more obvious young woman moved in from even further behind.

Tank was away from the basecamp for perhaps half an hour when Ashe began to think that Wombly's anxiety was ill founded. She was about to say as much to Wombly, who was maybe a minute and forty seconds behind Ashe, when she noticed another figure trailing Tank. She'd been leaving signs behind her for Wombly to follow and knew that the faster Tank and Ashe traveled the further Wombly would fall behind.

Wombly may have been a genius but tracking was not her forte.

Tank thought deeply as he walked. His mind was a thousand miles away, with Maria and Esmeralda, with Jeffy and Deabla. He wondered if they were safe. He knew that the boozers were hitting any areas with large populations and Sprinkleberry was among the two largest populations cities within a couple hundred mile radius.

The distance between Sprinkleberry and Keell may have been about 68 miles and the two cities may have been at way but information travels fast and Tank had learned that the city was under some

sort of attack. He'd heard that in the street that morning and immediately he'd felt an immense amount of guilt.

"We shouldn't even be here," Tank muttered as he stalked forward. Merchants and other civilians moved out of his way whenever they saw him coming. Tank was a tough looking figure, both armed and armored and heavily built with more than a little muscle. His face was locked in a scowl and his shoulders were tensed... he was somewhat hunched over, in a predator's position.

For some reason beyond him people thought that walking straight up with chest puffed out and on the heels of their feet made them a predator. That was, in his eyes, truly flawed logic. He'd walked that way before and it made him easy to knock over. It put him in a bad position for reaction and action. No one could move in a quick and powerful fashion when they stood on their heels.

It was when he was slightly hunched over, his shoulders forward and on the balls of his feet that he was a predator. It was when his body was in an aggressive mode. It was then that he was ready to fight. No one, in any sport or fight, has ever won by standing straight up.

Thus, that was the very reason he wasn't killed immediately.

The blade slashed hard at him and Tank managed to get his forearm up in time to slap it away, at the cost of a nick on his arm. Immediately he knew that the blade that had cut at him was magical, for the cut began to sting more than normal and he could feel a burning sensation flowing through his arm, through the blood in his veins.

Tank jumped back, though, and Fureflicker flashed past his face, barely an inch in front of his nose. Tank looked over to see Chance, bloodshot eyed and with skin so pale he almost seemed a ghost, lash out again.

Tank managed to get his hammer out of its loop and brought it up to parry while his other hand reached for his flail. The stocky warrior knew he was lucky to have gotten his second weapon out of its strap for his other hand was too numb to hold the hammer anymore. It fell to the ground and only his skill with the flail saved him, for as Chance jumped forward and slashed viciously with both blades his flail slapped across, slamming into Chance's forearm.

The spellword jumped back, growling in pain, and barely held onto his sword, Duskspawn.

"You are a fool!" Chance spat, "I'd have killed you quickly and mercilessly had you let my blade through. Now I'm going to torture you with magic and remind you why Maria can't bring herself to love an ugly, fat, stupid son of a bitch orphan like you!"

The rage that filled Tank at that moment overcame the numbness of his hand and he grabbed his hammer. He lifted it over his head, letting his flail fall to the ground, and launched it at Chance.

The spellword grinned as the hammer slammed into his chest. Tank watched in disbelief as the heavy weapon hit Chance like he was a brick wall. Then Chance began to chant again. Tank stood like a deer in headlights, stunned.

Then Chance was coughing. He was surrounded by fog. His spell, Stoneflesh, might have made his skin as hard as rock but it didn't protect his lungs and eyes as they stung. He did, though, get his spell off.

Tank felt three balls of magical energy slam into his chest. That was when he knew that the poison was getting into the rest of his body, for the balls of energy burned at him but he didn't feel anything more than a dull sensation of contact. The balls faded and Tank felt himself fall to the ground, unconscious.

Ashe flew in, Wombly lifting a crossbow, and struck at the still coughing Chance four times. All four hits landed and his spell was running out of contact-strength. The spell could endure a specific amount of pressure then it faded. Each strike was enough to damage the spell a lot and Chance knew that if he didn't start blocking hits he'd be left vulnerable again.

His blades whirled and he blocked Ashe's attacks. He was beginning to even out the fight again, for he and Ashe seemed to be an even match of skill, when Wombly's crossbow bolt flew in and dully

thudded against his chest. It hurt more than a little and Chance knew he could take maybe one more of those flying bolts.

Thus he began to chant as he defended himself. Ashe held the advantage and pressed it as much as she could but Chance was a skilled swordsman and he managed to block every attack she used. If her blade went high his blade matched it, if hers went low his was low. She lunged with her attacks but everytime he was already jumping back.

She had to wonder if he was seeing a few moments into the future when she noticed his eyes were grey instead of their usual brown.

"Damn," she muttered. She jumped backwards and Chance rushed forward. He tried to slash at her but Ashe was quick and was fueled by skill wrought of years on the street. She had worked on her ability with her blades every second that Chance had and even when he'd been working on magic she'd been working with her weapons.

The experience made it so that Chance's skill with his magical energy only balanced out a one versus one fight against the skilled Ashe. But it wasn't one versus one. Tank, who wobbled as he stood next to Wombly, couldn't do much but he was standing next to Wombly, who had her crossbow raised.

Chance could see the future moments before it happened but that did him little. He didn't have the skill to outfight both Wombly and Ashe even if he knew their moves before they did. He wouldn't be able to cast a strong spell because he couldn't catch his breath enough to whisper the words of power.

He scowled, then jumped back again. Ashe, who was on the defensive, nearly fell to her butt as she over-compensated for Chance's attacks that didn't come. The Spellsword stared at Ashe for a few moments then growled. He suddenly felt a heavy thud on his chest and saw the crossbow bolt hit the ground at their feet.

"Damn," Chance spat, then looked down at his blade. He grinned and looked up to Tank, who continued to fight for his balance. He chanted for half a moment then was invisible. He turned and ran in the opposite direction.

"What?" Wombly asked at the same time Ashe asked, "What the hell?"

"What was that?" Ashe asked as she turned to Tank. She was about to start to scold him when he toppled over to the side. He lay on the ground, very pale and shaking. His eyes were closed but his mouth lay open.

"Oh no," Wombly said softly. Immediately the two girls rushed towards him, trying to lift him off the ground. They struggled to get him off the ground but once they got him onto their shoulders it was somewhat easier. It was still hard for them to hold him but they couldn't simply stop carrying him. It was about an hour of fast walking before they got to the safe house.

Ashe kicked open the door and immediately found a blade at her throat.

"Put it down, Beth," Ashe muttered, annoyed and in a hurry, and Beth apologized. The two of them carried Tank's limp, cold body into the room and immediately Medea cursed aloud. Navok stared at them for a few moments then cast two small spells. One lifted Tank off their shoulders and moved him to a small bed. The second produced water and splashed Tank in the face, then moved into him, hydrating him.

"What happened?" Keledro asked. Wombly began to explain frantically, mixing words together on accident as she tried to spit out as much information as she could in a short amount of time. Keledro stared at her, frankly amazed at her ability to change two or even three words into a single word. Then, when Wombly stopped talking, he turned to Ashe.

"What happened?"

"He was attacked by an assassin that ran into us when we were in Sprinkleberry," Ashe said.

"The same one who went and killed Harold Hill!" Wombly spat out quickly. Ashe looked at her, a little annoyed but unwilling to say anything. She knew that Wombly wasn't used to fighting and killing. For all the training that they'd received she was still new to this level of killing and combat.

"Was he cut?" Navok began to ask when suddenly Rolvward grabbed Tank's now warm and sweaty forearm. A small cut trickled blood down his forearm. The cut was discolored and the blood had some puss coming out with it.

"Magical blade," Rolvward said, then he pulled a small cloth from his pocket, "It isn't magic but it'll disinfect anything," the magician said. He dipped the cloth into a small jar that he'd also produced then he poked the wound with the cloth. Immediately Tank's eyes burst open and he began to scream aloud, in agony.

"What the hell is that stuff?" Ashe asked as Wombly rushed forward, unsure of what to do but unable to not do anything.

"Oil of Oregano. The stuff'll cure anything, but it stings like your mother's worst slap," quickly he pulled the rag off of Tank's arm and the warrior screamed for a moment long. The magician sighed, "We're going to have to stop the poison, even if that means cutting it off..."

"That's not an option," Mave said from the side, "I know him and I'm thinking that he'd rather be killed than give up his arm and usefulness."

"Does he have any loved ones?" Rolvward asked Wombly, who wondered if Maria really loved him at that moment.

"That doesn't matter either way, because we're not going to let it get that far," Ashe said firmly. She looked to Beth, who stood behind her, then to Navok.

"You've seen what the blade can do, and even have some of its poison, can you track him?" She asked. Navok was genuinely happy that he could, for while he knew himself to be far beyond her in skill he knew she'd run him through before letting her friend die.

"I can," the wizard said, "But you'll have to move quickly, as I can only locate him for a few moments... It will take me a considerable amount of time to find the right spell and I'll need more than a couple drops of the poison-"

"You'll have no problem getting that," Rolvward said as he pointed to a few small bulges that had formed on Tank's arm. "My guess," the magician said quietly, "Is that this will kill him sometime tomorrow."

Navok nodded grimly then set to the task of popping one of the bulges on Tank's arm. The screams were long, for Rolvward had to apply the rag with oil of oregano multiple times to keep it from spreading from his arm.

Ashe and Wombly could only sit by, completely helpless.

Maria sat deep in concentration. Copla sat across from her, his bald head sweaty as he, too, sat in deep concentration. The second day they'd been trapped in Harold's Hill Maria had requested her teach her some magic to help the group. Copla had been doubtful, seeing as how it'd take most wizards weeks to learn their first spell, but Maria, through sheer determination, had mastered the defensive shield spell and a spell of cloaking.

There were about a dozen and a half people inside the inn. It was getting desperate and the only reason they'd survived, according to Denerick, was because of Lidia, Copla and Maria's efforts. The boozers seemed to be busy with the fighting in the distance and that boded well for the people within the inn.

But the reason it was so desperate was because Harold's Hill was an inn, not a storehouse. Feeding eighteen people took a lot. The four Nose Breakers, seven civilians, Jeffy, Deabla, Esmeralda, Denerick, Copla, Lidia and Maria all ate as little as possible but the inn had only so much food stored. And alcohol only took a halfway filled stomach and, after a while, emptied it.

"We have to go get food," Jeffy said. Two of the civilians, tough men that had likely been thugs, nodded in agreement. The Nose Breakers also agreed with their captain. Denerick stared at him for a few moments.

"You realize dat going out dere will end wid one of us dead?" the mountain man asked and Jeffy

nodded.

"But staying in here will lead us all to death," Jeffy replied and Denerick was forced to agree.

"Two groups at once?" a Nose Breaker from the side asked and Denerick shrugged, "Dat seems smart to me."

"Alright, I three of my boys... Taggard, you go with Denerick and the two thugs... I mean civilians," Jeffy said. The two men, most likely thugs, grinned and winked at Jeffy, "We're all on th' same side now, ain't we?"

Jeffy looked at the man who'd spoken with some distaste but nodded, "Unfortunately."

"If we have to scramble this way can you cloak us all?" Jeffy asked Copla and Maria. Maria looked to Copla and the wizard shrugged, "Maybe."

"Maybe?" asked a Nose Breaker to the side with heavy sarcasm but Jeffy silenced him with a look.

"Try your hardest," Jeffy said and Copla nodded. He was already sweating.

"Put up de cloak for us while we leave, den take it down and stay quiet," Denerick said, "When we get back, we will whistle dree tunes, two low then one high." He quietly wondered why he'd said 'when' instead of 'if' then, as he looked at the four of the remaining civilians, all children with fear in their eyes, he knew why.

Nobody need pessisism right now.

Jeffy and his three boys had been out for perhaps a quarter hour when they ran into the first boozer. They waited for it leave, for it was in the middle of a large building that had been torn apart. The creature was sucking the last halfway full corpse dry. It looked around for several minutes after it finished the body, leaving just skin, bones and clothes, then flew off.

"This was an old warehouse for vegetables," Jeffy whispered to his men. They nodded and began to quietly look for boxes of food. Jeffy saw that one of his men found a box almost completely full. It had meat in it. He wasn't sure if that'd be good but didn't argue with him. The two others found food that didn't need to be cooked and found a basket of bread. They were about to leave when six men walked in from the other side of the building.

"That stuff," the biggest of the men said, looking at Jeffy, "That's gonna be our stuff."

"After what?" Jeffy asked. Both were whispering, as they didn't want to bring the demons down upon them, but when one of the men drew his sword Jeffy looked to his three. He seemed like he was about to lay his food down when he yelled, as loud as he possibly could, "RUN!"

A low buzzing sound filled the area around them as Jeffy and his three soldiers turned and ran. The other six men immediately began to follow them, their weapons bared and their hands not encumbered by heavy wooden crates. Jeffy was the second to last man int he running and one of them cried out in pain.

"No!" Jeffy turned and yelled as a dagger flew into the man's back. He fell to the ground, dropping the meat, and Jeffy was about to turn when he nodded, shouting, "No! Run! Run! Run! Run before they get here!"

The men, in their greed and stupidity, thought he referred to them. Instead right before they got to the Nose Breaker, who'd pulled the throwing dagger out of his back and prepared to die fighting, a giant boozer flew down upon them. Jeffy, who was across the street, looked at his Nose Breaker as he stabbed a second boozer in the eye with pride and sadness.

"Go to your god, young one," Jeffy said as he turned to run away, to Harold's Hill. He could only feel pride in his man as he heard the screams of the other men, who were, in his mind, looters who had taken advantage of the chaos to steal as much of the resources as they could.

Denerick watched as the two thugs quietly moved a heavy piece of wood from a doorway into a large storehouse. It was a lot like the one Jeffy and his boys had found but it wasn't broken. In fact, it

seemed to be untouched. A building by its side entrance had collapsed and now they were moving the barriers.

Beside him stood Taggard, who was watching for boozers. The two thugs ran into a specifically heavy wooden beam so Denerick, ignoring them, grabbed it, with a jerk snapped it in half.

"Way t' go!" One of the men said a little too loudly for the comfort of the others and his friend slapped him across the head.

"Shut yer trap!" The other croaked, "By the way, me name's Galen," he said, extending a hand to Denerick, "And this here's Phillip." The other, still mad about getting slapped, nodded to Denerick.

"Shall we move den?" the mountain man said and Galen nodded. Phillip, though, was still angry and he turned to one of the largest pieces of wood. He grabbed it and began pulling. Denerick knew it was too heavy for him but was content to let him struggle.. until it fell.

The wooden beam, far larger than the one Denerick had lifted, was several hundred pounds heavy and when he budged it it fell to the ground, breaking several smaller wooden beams on its way down. But, even worse, when it hit the ground it was over Phillip's leg.

The thug screamed out and Denerick knew that he should have helped out the man. But it was too late.

"I can't move, I can't move!" Phillip screamed in agony and Denerick harshly whispered, "Shut up!" Phillip was about to yell some response when suddenly he was gurgling on his own blood. Galen's dirk had slit his throat and Denerick, who'd planned on knocking the man out, stared at him in shock.

"What?" Galen asked as Phillip died, "He needed to shut up." Denerick glared at him while Taggard, who'd turned just in time to see Galen slash Phillip's throat, unsheathed his own blade. The soldier marched forward and Galen squared up when the low buzzing came.

Denerick shushed them, then, "Get into de warehouse." The two looked at the door, which was clear, and immediately charged towards it.

They got inside just as the low buzzing intensified. It was moments before the boozers landed and began to feed. There were five or six of them and they began to fight over Phillip's body. Galen, rather than stare at the creatures, went and began to grab supplies. He found a wooden crate then began to fill it. Denerick and Taggard followed his example.

He came across several bottles of very expensive wine then grinned to himself, "I could sell this for a lot after all this." He grabbed one then another. He filled his crate with almost a dozen of the heavy bottles. They met at the front of the warehouse, where the boozers had left in frustration after killing and draining one of their own.

Denerick raised an eye brow to Galen when he noticed the wine, who shrugged, "I can sell this stuff later."

"That's someone's property," Taggard argued and Galen gave a small laugh.

"Yeah, an' no one's gonna know it's me," the thug replied. Taggard seemed about to respond when Galen continued, "Plus this guy's definitely dead." Taggard was about to argue when Denerick cut them off.

"We don't have time for dis," the mountain man said, "Let us be going."

"This is wrong," Taggard had to say before they stepped out the door. Once they were on the street, though, everything was deadly quiet.

It was maybe an hour walk from Harold's Hill. Before, when they were jogging, it'd taken them less than half that time. Now, with the supplies in hand, it would take them perhaps forty five minutes.

They were maybe ten minutes from the inn when Galen stopped them.

"Let's rest for'a minute," he said. Denerick saw that the heavy contents of his crate were wearing on him and knew that while both he and Taggard were still okay, he should let the thug rest if he really needed it. They were in alleyways anyway. They were in too tight quarters for the boozers to catch them.

Several moments of silence passed as Galen opened a bottle of wine and took a swig of it.

When he was done he placed it on a waist height post next to him. He placed the rest of his crate on another post about that height. Denerick warned him against that but Galen shrugged with a joking reply.

"Y'know," Galen said, "We don't to bring this back... we could go off on our own.."

Denerick was on his feet. His scimitar was at Galen's throat. The thug sat in shock.

"Never say dat again," the man said. He looked to Taggard, "I should kill you right now. I should slit your damn droat!" Galen began to sputter responses when Denerick turned away, removing his blade from the thug's throat.

"He's not worth it anyway," Taggard said and Galen, feeling anger at the Nose Breaker for no known reason, stood up and pulled out his dagger. As he did so his elbow hit the bottle of wine. It began to fall to the ground when he threw his dagger to the ground and jumped for it. He caught the bottle of wine but was off balance so he leaned to another post for support... but that post was the one his crate was on.

A single bottle of wine crashing on the ground might not have caught the attention of a boozer or two but a dozen of bottles was almost too much for one to ignore. The fragile glass hit the ground and shattered.

"We must leave!" Denerick said and Galen nodded. He turned and reached to grab his dagger. It was on the other side of the glass so he jumped over it. A boozer, accompanied by their low buzzing sound, seemed to appear out of nowhere behind him. He dove away but landed on the shattered glass of the wine.

The howled in agony. Denerick and Taggard had begun to run already. Both knew that he'd most likely have betrayed them later but neither wanted to hear him die so terribly. They got to the inn just a few minutes later, several days of food in tow. Jeffy and his two companions showed up minutes later.

"We lost three today," Copla said after all the supplies had been counted and stories traded.

No one said anything.

Then, in a small voice Lidea half-joked, half-said:

"Three less to feed."

## **Chapter Nineteen:**

It was morning of the day after Tank had fallen when Chance felt the magical probing. He'd placed multiple wards of protection, both against physical and magical attacks but mostly against scying. He didn't want to be found by anyone, for anyone looking for him at that moment would more than likely be trying to kill him.

He was awakened by the sense then looked to the young woman, maybe five years his senior, laying next to him. She was still alive, breathing softly as she lay under the covers, and he meant to amend that problem soon.

She, like everyone else in the city, could be the eyes of Azeroth but at that moment realized his fears went deeper than that. Would the demon prince really be going as far as to actually scry on him?

He was about to cut the young woman's throat after five or ten minutes of deep thought when suddenly two figures burst through the window. Beth and Ashe looked at the fully armed and armored Chance, who had gotten dressed through that time, then tried to step forward. A barrier between the two young women and Chance stopped them and Ashe grit her teeth in frustration.

Chance turned and opened the door to leave when suddenly he had a crossbow leveled in front of his face.

"One word, one movement, one anything, and I swear to whatever gods might be listening that I'll end your days right now," Wombly promised. Chance looked into her eyes and wasn't sure if he saw weakness or just resentment towards killing but at that moment, with a dreaded Sprinkleberrian cross-bow leveled towards his face, he didn't feel like finding out.

"I take it your friend is sick?" Chance asked and Wombly nodded, furrowing her brow as she glared at him, "Killing me won't save him. I can lift the poison, though." He tried his best to sound completely truthful for while he was actually telling them the truth, he could will the sword to dissolve the poison and remove it from Tank's body, he had no intention of doing any such thing.

Rather, he planned to make the poison go dormant for a small while then, when he was far, far away let it grow powerful again. He'd worked on a spell to lengthen his swords reach if the poison was already in the victims body, for the last time he and Tank had fought he'd knicked Tank but been force to flee out of the weapon's range. He had no desire of letting Tank live.

He felt a small punch on his back and knew the barrier behind him had dropped.

"You can't run, you know?" Beth asked and Chance looked to her in confusion.

"I know your type," the knife thrower said with a shrug, "I've dealt with my fair share of thugs and liars and you're both. But I found a way to make lying not in your best interest. See, I can find you now. This blade here, it helps me find whoever I cut last." Chance felt his blood moving down his back, "And I got no problem with letting two cities burn to get back at one filthy son of a whore like you."

Chance gulped and didn't doubt the blade. It looked magical to him at that moment.

"Alright," he said, "I'll make the poison go away."

"Forever?" Ashe asked and Beth looked down to the dagger in her hand. She'd picked her fanciest blade, one with a red gem, of what type she didn't know or care to find out, in its hilt. It wasn't magical, as far as she was concerned, but she knew that this one feared magic a lot. From what she'd heart he was a spell flinging fighter. They were never too smart at fighting either.

"Forever," Chance said, defeated. He closed his eyes for a moment and seemed deep in thought. Then, when the deed was done, he looked up, his eyes filled with anger.

"Go," Wombly said, "Get out of here and if we ever meet again you'd better hope you see me first, because if I do, I'll put a bolt right through your eye." She said that with so much conviction that Beth and Ashe stared at her in shock for several moments. Then they nodded.

"Alright," Chance said. She moved out of the way, then left.

Tank's eyes opened. He was still sick and it'd take the poison a few days to wear off but the sword had stopped fueling the poison and Rolvward's oil of oregano mixed with Navok's magical healing had helped him to recover more quickly than usual.

"How could you find him?" Wombly asked and Navok looked at her, puzzled. "How did you find Chance?"

Navok smiled, "Ah... well, everything, magical and not, is connected. Meaning that there is a line between everything. Now, most of the time we don't see the lines, magically or physically, but if two things are bound together especially well, like the poison in Tank's body and Chance's sword, you can follow that line.

"Some of the most powerful or most desperate wizards can even send energy through these lines. I can scry through them very easily, but had I tried to hit him with a spell from this distance, my only chance would be to create a line between myself and him. And even if I could make a line that was strong enough for magic to follow or flow through it would lose most of its power by the time it got to him, especially if he was further than a couple hundred yards away."

Wombly seemed to be deep in thought when Tank chuckled.

"What is it?" Ashe asked and Tank shrugged slowly, grimacing as he did it.

"I always thought that we'd be killed the first time we ran into magic. Everyone says its so strong. I guess it's not as deadly as we thought," he said.

"Magic is unpredictable," Navok said, "Sometimes a single wizard can change the way an entire war goes. Other times it won't be strong enough to unhinge a door. Only creatures like sprites and fairies have predictable magic and that's because they use it to survive."

"So you might not be able to kill me with a spell tomorrow?" Ashe asked and Navok grinned.

"No, I could wipe this city out if I really wanted to no matter what day it is... I suppose that once you get to a certain point your knowledge and skill coalesce into ability," Navok said, "Or maybe I just haven't had a bad day in a long time."

"Let's hope you're just that strong," Benny said and both Navok and Tank snorted at that. It rang wrong in both their heads. Navok looked at Tank curiously for a moment then decided that the young warrior was perhaps a little wiser than he seemed.

"Well, how long until I'm good to go?" Tank asked.

"Try and stand up," Rolvward said and Tank complied. He put his hands down on the ground next to his bottom and lifted himself so that he was in the air. It was harder than he'd expected. Then he shifted so that his legs were hanging over the side of his little cot. He shifted forward and didn't feel his feet touch the ground... but he saw the floor coming up at his face nonetheless.

Tank lay on the ground, "My feet are numb," he said then tried to move any of his legs, "My legs are numb," he corrected. Rolvward was laughing now.

"A couple days. Most of the poison moved to your extremities and we've kept your arm fairly clean with this stuff," Rolvward lifted his seemingly unexhaustable supply of oil of eregano.

"What about my other arm?" Tank asked and Navok shrugged, "I guess you got lucky."

Jev looked around him. They were just inside the front gates of Sprinkleberry. The ground around them was littered with human and boozier bodies. Close to a thousand arrows had been used this day and it was only midday. The prince noticed that many of the archers were nearly out of arrows and suddenly he was feeling very tired.

"How are we on stores?" he asked and General Suko began, "We have maybe three days of food and maybe four or five battles like that left in arrows. We're almost completely out of spears and without the Hornet-Lancers or Nose Breakers we're without any special units. The Shadowers are our only none infantry soldiers left and we have maybe six of them left."

Four more of the legendary trackers had found their way back to the remaining force of their fallen city.

The General continued while Jev simply looked around. The city was destroyed, that much was obvious, but he wondered at how many people had survived. He looked up and saw the remains of the palace. The main dome was broken. It was shattered.

"Let's move forward into the city," Jev said and General motioned his forward scouts to move.

Tuff and Marko worked forward. They were serving as scouts in Jev's army because of their experience with the flying demons. Behind them several more soldiers moved, though they couldn't keep up with the prince's friends.

They'd found large groups of boozers and marked the area around the flying demons several times and now they were in between a couple of those groups.

"How many do you think there are?" Tuff asked and Marko shrugged.

"I don't know."

Both sighed and continued moving. It'd been five days of hard travel. They'd rested outside the city for half a day and spent the next day and a half fighting off boozers. No one felt comfortable. And to make things harder both Jev and the General were in a hurry to get to the palace. But that would be a solid mile of running or fighting.

The city of Sprinkleberry was very spread out. It had an outer wall, which they'd gotten inside the day before, and perhaps a quarter mile away was a second wall, this one just as big as the outer wall. Once inside the second wall there would be half a mile to one more big wall, this one smaller than the other walls, then the main palace another quarter mile or so.

At the pace with which they were traveling it would take them three or four days to get to the palace. And they'd gotten the impression that wasn't fast enough.

They were both about to stop for a water break when suddenly low buzzing filled the air around them.

"Damn," Marko whispered harshly and Tuff nodded. Both unsheathed their blade and Tuff lifted his shield into a ready position. Then the soldiers behind them picked up on the sound. Tuff and Marko were comfortable that the soldiers would be quiet until one of them cried out in pain.

Tuff looked back to see an arrow sticking out of the soldier's chest. A second arrow flew in and the man was silenced.

"It's an ambush!" Marko growled and the soldiers rushed forward to Tuff and Marko. The two soldiers looked around but couldn't find their enemies. The rest of the soldiers, six in total, almost made it to Marko and Tuff but a host of boozers, nine of the damned beasts, descended on them. Marko and Tuff watched as they were drained of all their bodily fluids.

"Damn," Marko whispered again. The boozers looked around but Marko and Tuff knew their way around boozers and how to stay silent. Tuff had a rough idea of where the ambushers had been hiding. He grabbed a half shattered bottle of alcohol and launched it in their direction. The boozers, hearing the sound, flew over in that direction.

One of the ambushers shot at the creatures as they flew towards them and the fight was on. Meanwhile, Tuff pulled out a flask that the main arms-givers had given them. Marko was already using his tender box to produce a spark. Marko produced a small fire then applied it the flask.

Immediately once it was alight with fire Tuff launched it high into the air. The flask was perhaps fifty feet into the air when it exploded. Tuff and Marko knew that they were most likely in the middle of a large number of boozers and their guess was correct. Hundreds of the creatures flew into the sky and found themselves where the flask had exploded.

Deabla, back in Harold's Hill, looked up for a few moments then at Denerick for a moment. Esmeralda sat across the bar. She looked to the young man curiously.

"Listen closely," was all Deabla said.

Jev heard the explosion from Tuff's flask and looked to General Suko, who was signaling to the archers already.

Hundreds of arrows and crossbow bolts flew into the sky. The boozers screamed in agony.

Denerick looked up as the boozers screamed.

"The army must have returned when they heard," Jeffy said with a grin, "We're saved."

"You dink so?" Denerick asked. Jeffy nodded.

"I don't dink dey will make much of a difference for us. Dey will kill most of our enemies but dey will not provide better protection dan we can. If we join de main mass we invite de boozers to all swoop down on all of us at once," the mountain man sat in silence for a few moments, "We saw what happened before. De soldiers were inside de mountain already and dey couldn't stop de main host.

"De best we can do is slowly take dem down over time now."

Copla nodded in agreement and Lidia also agreed.

"He hasn't guessed wrong once," Esmeralda said and Maria agreed.

"He seems to know what's going to happen before it happens," Copla said when looking at Deabla, "What do you think?"

"I think..." Deabla looked down to the ground for a few moments. "I think we should stay here and let them kill all the boozers while we hide."

Jeffy shrugged, "Alright."

"Oh damn it all to the hells!" Marko grunted as only half of the boozers fell to the ground. The rest, surrounded by blood, went into a frenzy.

"We did it now!" Tuff grunted. Both he and Marko turned and sprinted towards the building that the ambushers had been inside. They got inside and found half a dozen men, all wide eyed and pale with terror.

"We have to stay quiet and hope that they don't find us," Marko said, "That's our only chance-"

He was interrupted by a boozier slamming into the top of the building. The entire structure shuddered as the boozers, in their blind blood rush flew at anything that made any noise. The roof was quickly tore away and the eight men inside looked up, dumbfounded.

Marko grabbed Tuff and pulled him to the side, towards a door. Tuff nodded and began to run as fast as he could. He had maybe ten feet to accelerate but with certain death behind him he didn't waste a step.

His shoulder lowered, he burst through the door. Marko, a step behind him, got out of the room right before the front wall was completely destroyed. The men behind them didn't stand a chance as a dozen blood-thirsty boozers swarmed the building.

But Marko and Tuff weren't safe yet. In fact, they'd really moved further into boozier and thug territory.

They sprinted for perhaps fifty yards down an alleyway before they got to a deadend. There was a door to their left so Tank lowered his shoulder and plowed through the door. He had his weapons at the ready and only his shield saved him from a leveling blow from a heavy hammer. A man backed up, a young woman behind him, and surrendered immediately when Marko came through the door with his broad-sword at the ready.

"We're just trying to survive!" The man said as the woman whispered, "Please don't hurt us!" with much urgency.

Tuff looked at the two, "Do you have anyone else with you?"

"Eight adults and four children," the man said.

"Get them and follow us if any of you want to live," Marko said loudly. The low buzzing was already surrounding them. An entire city's worth of boozers had been stirred up. There was no safe place within a mile of the outer walls.

The people got together quickly, "Is there a basement?" Tuff asked but Marko silenced him.

"They have to run, the boozers will tear this place apart-" Marko began but the structure shook as if on cue. A boozier was in the alleyway behind him and it tore through the door. One of its probiscus grabbed the man with the hammer and the young woman screamed out as he was drained to nothingness right in front of her.

"No!" she moaned loudly but Tuff grabbed her, "We have to run!" he shouted. Every agreed and Marko led the way. Tuff carried the woman who'd just watched her older brother die. She was almost limp in his arms as she cried.

There were many minutes of terror, an adult, at one point, tripped and fell. Tuff knew he was dead before he even turned around, for boozers hounded them every step of the way. Another adult died when the roof collapsed on top of him. A boozier cut Tuff off at that moment but it couldn't get to him, for he cut at its probiscus, severing it. The creature backed off, screaming in pain, and Tuff got away.

Then they found a somewhat safe place to hold up for a few moments. It was a thick guards room, a place where guards held their weapons.

"How many people made it?" Marko asked and Tuff shrugged. He counted.

"Three adults, four children," Tuff said with a sigh. Marko looked to the woman in Tuff's then nodded to him in the negative. Tuff responded with a curious look then looked at her. She was dead, a probiscus jammed into her chest.

"Damn," Tuff sighed. The boozers were still pursuing them but they didn't follow the nine remaining people. They sat in silence for several moments, then Tuff looked at the eldest of the group, a shaken middle aged woman.

"What's your name?" Tuff asked.

"Tamara," the woman replied.

"These are your children?" he asked and the woman gave a defeated shrug, "No... they are orphans who didn't have a family. So my family and I brought them in... Oh... they're... they're dead!" She cried out.

Tuff looked at the other two adults then at the four children. Each stared at him with wide eyes, too stunned to make noise. One of the adults was an older man, most likely Tamara's husband, and the other was a young girl, maybe fifteen years old. She wasn't an adult but she also wasn't a child so Tuff decided to call her an adult.

"You three are family?" Marko asked.

"My husband, Tano," Tamara said, pointing to the man then, "My youngest daughter of blood Suzuka." Outside boozers began to act up again and both soldiers knew that the family was dead if the boozers found them again.

"Stay here," Marko said to Tamara. She nodded.

"We'll be back," Tuff said. The two soldiers turned and left, trying to get back to Jev and the General, hoping that they weren't dead.

"Who threw that flare?" General Suko growled as he took a shot with his crossbow. His aim was true and a boozier flew to the ground, wounded. Of the hundreds of boozers that had flown into the air maybe a third had been killed in the initial volley of bow fire. A second, less organized volley had taken out another two or three dozen.

That left about three hundred boozers to wreak havoc on the soldiers around. Maybe a hundred had turned in the other direction to kill soldiers and other people towards the middle of the city. Now there was a giant skirmish, men fighting boozers in pure chaos. General Suko and Jev could see where soldiers that had been in the same unit were fighting together because defensive squares, diamonds and crescents had been formed.

There was even a group that had managed to produce a turtle-formation spear-shield phalanx.

Jev's blade was out but it wasn't overly effective against the giant boozers. He sighed as he saw one of the shadowers, called Riorden, standing to the side with a long bow in hand. He killed a boozier with every two arrows.

"Riorden," Jev said and the Shadower looked over. Jev motioned to follow and he walked over to General Suko, "Let us create a group of soldiers. I have to unite the soldiers somehow."

General Suko nodded, then began ordering the soldiers around him into offensive formations. They were highly mobile in their turtle-like formations, with swordsmen and pikemen on the outsides and mixed in with the archers that stood in the middle of their circular formations. Once everyone was in position General Suko ordered them forward.

It took many minutes for them to organize everyone but once they did the boozers were either killed or chased off.

After the battle Jev, who'd been involved with the fighting when he could, looked to General Suko and Riorden, "We need to get to the palace."

General Suko agreed. Riorden was silent.

## **Chapter Twenty:**

Azeroth grinned. He stood over a scyng pool and looked at 68 miles of battlefield between Keell and Sprinkleberry. Bodies, both human and demon, littered the ground. Sand covered decaying bodies. Azeroth felt every soul as they flowed towards him. He also saw the Keellian soldiers turning back towards him and most of the Sprinkleberian soldiers turning back towards their own city.

He realized he could only play human soldiers on each other for so long. Now he had to put up a new enemy for them to fight, a new force to turn back on them. He grinned and began to chant. He'd

lost most of his power before but he knew a few less powerful, relatively, spells that would do what he was looking to do.

The room darkened and a portal opened. A single creature came through and Azeroth grinned.

"My minion," the demon prince said to the creature of darkness, a specter of the most obsidian-midnight, black color. It replied in a voice that only a demon could comprehend or even hear. A human couldn't even begin to process the sound the creature made.

Azeroth spoke, "Raise the dead as your minions. Raise them and turn them on their human brethren. Raise them and turn them on the soldiers and people. Raise every corpse you can find and kill everything you can!"

The creature, a wraith, turned and flew out the window. It was a dark night... and it was only going to get darker.

Tank was beginning to feel better when news of the siege reached them. Keellian soldiers aided by a few Sprinkleberians had turned back on the city and were fighting to get in. They were fighting something but no one really knew what. There was a rumor that the dead were beginning to rise and that was why the Keellians weren't able to get into the city but no one was sure what to believe.

Navok stormed into the door, into the dimly lit room and seemed less comfortable in the room than he had been in the darkness behind him. The wizard turned back and looked outside. He sighed then shrugged.

"We need to attack soon," he said with a sigh, "The dead are coming back."

"That's a bad thing?" Beth asked.

"It is when all they're doing is trying to kill the living," Navok replied. He mumbled more but no one understood what he said.

"Damn the undead!" Mave said from the side, "Undead are an abomination and all they deserve is damnation." Navok glared at Mave for a few moments then, when he saw that Tank was looking at him, just nodded.

"When do we make our move?" Tank asked.

"Well, the demon obviously called another creature into the world to raise this... undead army for him. This means he's most likely going to be a little weaker for a couple of days..." Navok looked at Tank, "How d'you feel?"

Tank stretched for a few moments then nodded, "Good enough to fight."

"Then we go tomorrow night," Navok said. The room was silent for many minutes. Finally, Ashe spoke.

"Yeah, let's attack a demon at night. That'll be fun." Navok just shrugged.

Bear and General Sevrin stood side by side. It was dark but the night was young. No one noticed the dark form flying from Azeroth's castle and no one noticed the soft moans behind them.

"My boys are leading the castle-wall climb," Bear said and the General nodded in agreement.

"Send them now?" Sergeant Robert asked from behind them and General Sevrin turned to say yes when suddenly he noticed a giant force behind them.

"What in the hells?" He asked as Bear and Robert turned around. Both men gasped.

"Where did they come from?" Sevrin asked.

"Sprinkleberry?" Bear suggested but Robert nodded his head the negative, "No way... They're not marching in columns or even moving in any type of formation. And look at their eyes..." Almost every head had a pair of glowing orange lights where their eyes should have been.

"What the hell's going on?" Sevrin asked.

Both Bear and Robert looked at each other for a moment then called out, at once, "Commander Aubrey!"

The three Nose Breakers, with their warriors in tow, arrived at the back of the camp in time to see the second force get within bow range. It was dark but something about this forces' eyes, glowing orange, lit up the ground around them. It made it easier to see their numbers.

"What do we do?" a Keellian field commander named Alvin asked. He was sent to the back with the three Nose Breakers. He'd shifted a good two hundred soldiers with him.

"Do you still have a calvary?" Bear asked and the field commander gave a rueful grin.

"We used to have four hundred heavy calvary units," Alvin said, "but your Hornet-Lancers and Nose Breakers did a number on them... we have maybe thirty five men left."

"Aye, I remember that battle," Bear said and Alvin shrugged, "Mistakes were made."

"Men's lives were lost," Commander Aubrey responded harshly. The four people stood awkwardly for a few moments then Robert spoke, "Send them forward and see if they're friendly or not... if they aren't, we'll send the Hornet-Lancers and Nose Breakers on them." Alvin turned and ordered a group of horse-scouts forward.

"Sir," a voice said from behind. All four leaders turned and saw a smallish man standing there. He had a small eye glass, which allowed him to see far distances, in his hand and the build of a climber.

"I watch from the tower. I saw something and reported to General Sevrin. I told me to come here and report to you instead," the man said. They stood in silence for a few moments.

"Alright," Bear said after the pause, "What is it?"

"I've seen this to be true... and so have a couple of other tower watchers... but we all have reported the number of figures in that mass at at least a thousand... and it looks like there are more of them further off..." the man seemed to grow smaller as he gave the devastating news to the four leaders.

"So you're saying that a force of multiple thousands appeared behind us?" Robert asked and the man nodded weakly. Robert turned, frustrated, then looked as the horsemen rode forward. He watched as the thirty or so calvary slowed and began to yell out to the approaching army.

Then, as Robert, Bear, Alvin and Aubrey watched, several of the host began to sprint forward. One of the horsemen waved off one of those men. Then the men with orange eyes jumped forward and onto the horseman. The man was dragged to the ground, as well as the horse.

"What is happening out there?" Bear asked but no one had a response. The rest of the horsemen turned and began to ride back.

"What is going on?" Robert asked when the first horseman got to them.

"They ate him!" The man said, "They grabbed him and held him down and ate them! The horse too! I... I..." the man's eyes were wide. "They were so strong..."

A second man returned and said, "I can't even describe... They didn't even use weapons..."

"They are hostiles," a third rider said and Bear turned and began to bellow, "Get Damned Soldiers Down Here Now! I Need Siege Engines And The Hornet-Lancers."

Soldiers were marched down. Heavy infantry, with giant shields and heavy maces, spears and hammers, marched forward. They lined up and got ready. The Hornet-Lancers were moving off to flank the enemy host and archers were returning to the back of the camp.

The host was maybe five minutes away when the defenses were fully set.

"Do we have a number?" Aubrey asked Alvin but the younger field commander nodded his head in the negative. She sighed, then looked at the archers.

"Tell them to light their arrows. I want to see what we're dealing with," after giving the order Aubrey turned and looked to the mass heading their way. She left it to Alvin to order the volley and to direct where the bowfire went. She knew that she didn't have much experience in directing bowfire or in actually shooting a bow.

Alvin, though, seemed to be good at directing all types of fighting though she knew that his personal skill with a blade or a bow wouldn't likely match hers. She heard him give the order and saw hundreds of arrows fly into the sky. They landed in the middle of the mass and not a single of the horde shuddered and shied away from the bowfire.

And though nearly every arrow had hit she didn't hear a single cry of pain. All she heard was the constant moaning that the mass produced.

"What are these things?" Bear wondered as she stood next to his two friends, Aubrey on his left, Robert on his right.

In Sprinkleberry the same question was being asked by many people. Jev had moved his army forward into the city as the boozers backed off, most of them dead or too wounded to pick a fight after the main battle caused by Tuff's flare. They were just inside the second wall and had to get inside one more wall.

But there was still trouble moving forward. The boozers also seemed to be bothered as some of the flying demons attacked each other. And even as they marched forward a low moaning filled the air and unarmed men and women, children and elders, were limping, walking, jogging or sometimes even sprinting at the soldiers.

It had been going on for almost the entire night. No one knew what was causing the seemingly random attacks but the reports indicated that they were attacking without weapons or armor and with no care for their own bodies. Jev wasn't close to most of the fighting but he had seen a pair of random people attacking heavily armed soldiers with just their bare hands.

"What is going on?" Jev wondered aloud while General Suko and Riorden moved the arm forward. It was a slow process because the forward scouts couldn't move more than a street down without running into another group of the attacking civilians.

Tuff and Marko moved forward quietly. Both had their weapons unsheathed. They'd gotten back to Jev just in time to see the first of the random attacks. Neither felt anything but uneasy about the attacks, which was why they'd turned around and began to head back to the warehouse where they'd left the four children and adults.

They moved down an alleyway, both ready to strike out offensively or defensively at any moment. At the end of it they came upon a street and both worked hard to keep from losing control of the food in their belly.

"Gods!" Tuff muttered for in the street hundreds of figures walked, limped and stumbled. Much of the group was broken, some of them previously crushed beneath buildings while others had been sucked dry but they somehow still walked, limped or crawled. At the side of the road multiple corpses crawled out from underneath a broken building.

"Can we sneak around them?" Marko asked Tuff quietly.

"We'll find out soon enough," the younger soldier replied.

They waited for several moments. Then Tuff sighed.

"What is it?" Marko asked.

"We have to warn them that this is coming..."

"What?"

"We have to warn them these... things are coming," Tuff said and Marko groaned, "Not another flare?" Tuff nodded the positive and Marko pulled out his tinder box. He began to strike, trying to spark and make a small fire. Tuff pulled out his second, and last, flask. Marko lit it and Tuff launched it into the air.

Both men were rushing away as soon as the flask left Tuff's hand. Many of the corpses, undead men and woman, children and elders, turned and saw the living beings. Several of the less destroyed bodies could, for some unknown reason, sprint and they did so. They chased the two soldiers while the rest simply shuffled, walked or limped from behind. Most of the crawlers were crushed by the feet of their undead companions so there weren't many of the leg-less zombies.

Tuff found a small alleyway with a pair of boozers inside. Both boozers were heavily wounded and he immediately knew that they, too, were undead. They turned lazily and looked in the living men's

direction. They walked forward slowly at first but they grew faster with every step.

"Duck when they get here," Tuff said and Marko grunted. They, too, began to run at the half-rotten boozers. It wasn't long before they were just a few feet in front of the soldiers and both threw themselves backwards. Behind them zombies rushed forward, the sprinters a dozen feet behind at the most.

The two men slid underneath the undead boozers and the rotten demons slammed into the zombies that were running in the opposite direction. Tuff and Marko got to their feet as quickly as they could and rushed away, letting the undead boozers and undead humans sort themselves out.

They seemed to be past the main host of undead creatures and actually saw a trio of men fleeing from another small horde of the creatures. None of the zombies saw Tuff or Marko so the two men were left unbothered. They continued for many minutes until finally they got to the building that they'd left the family in.

Immediately both felt worried, for a large number of the undead were standing outside the door, pounding on it, trying to get into the building.

"How many d'you think there are?" Marko muttered and Tuff counted thirty one.

"Too many," the younger man grumbled in response. Marko gave a helpless chuckle.

"Think we'll get them out?"

"Think we'll have to," Tuff began to walk forward before he finished the sentence, "Get them armed and get them some help."

"What do you mean?" Marko began to ask when Tuff yelled out. Many of the zombies looked over and a sprinter ran at him. Tuff cut off the creature's head with a two move attack, bashing it with his shield then slashing across with his blade viciously.

"That seems to work!" Tuff yelled loudly. The rest of the zombies, able to move at most at a slow jog, turned to chase after Tuff, who ran in the opposite direction. Marko watched, in half doubt, half admiration, then killed a pair of zombies that had been too slow to follow the running soldier.

Denerick had the door shut but the undead hurled themselves at it. He knew it wouldn't hold for much longer and he looked to Maria and Copla for help. Both were casting their spells. Maria only knew how to reinforce the door with a shield but Copla actually cast an offensive spell. He spent many moments deep in concentration then struck the zombies outside with a bolt of energy.

"We need everyone to be ready to move if this door goes down!" Denerick said. Suddenly, he saw Maria's shield falter. The door shuddered and Denerick felt it beginning to crack. Jeffy, Taggard and the other two Nose Breakers stood at the ready. They defended the small windows, keeping them from being breached.

Denerick looked back and saw Maria standing, staring off into space. Her eyes watered.

"What?" He asked.

Chance sat on the back of a horse as it walked through the desert. He smiled at it and realized that it had no name. He looked back and saw clouds over Keell. It was raining.

"Damn I'm glad to be out of the rain," he muttered. He looked down at his ring and smiled to himself. He may have failed to kill Tank but he was going to torture Maria for years. The ring was still attuned to her and he could still bring pain and grief into her life. He currently twisted the gem on it, letting it release its magical energies.

He smiled to himself again, "I hope you're in danger."

Maria found herself in deep sadness. She couldn't help but remember what had happened to her, what Chance had done and what she had done. She remembered tricking Tank into coming with her, into this danger. She remembered every time she'd fallen asleep on him, every single time she'd been mean to him, to anyone.

She found herself engulfed in her failures and flaws. She saw everything that she'd ever done wrong in one moment. She heard everyone calling for her, begging her to continue her spells, but she couldn't. And that hurt her also. She knew she was failing them and realized in that terrible moment that all she'd ever done in her life was fail.

It was all a sick joke... She was about to end it, to call off the spell and even try to let the zombies in when she noticed a small string, seemingly made of magic, attached to her. She, so very attuned with magic at that moment, could feel every magical vibration in the area. And this small string, a band of energy stretching for miles, was attached to her.

"What?" She wondered aloud, no longer in the carnal world. Time slowed and she was suddenly in another realm, one where energies were physical (or at least her mind perceived them to be) and the things that were physical in the carnal world were just echoes, just faint outlines that represented the silhouettes of the physical world.

She still felt the grief but for a single moment she wasn't effected by it. Instead, she was actually angered. In the non-physical world of energies she realized that her own body, from which she was removed, was covered in a great darkness. It seemed to be trying to get into the very core of her body but she somehow held it out. The string was a dark color and it seemed to be the source of the energy.

She didn't understand magic but knew that the string of energy was likely the cause of her unnatural grief. She didn't understand magic so she didn't understand that to force energy down that line was all but committing suicide.

She didn't understand magic.

So she tried.

It took all she had to both keep the darkness from getting into the core of her being, from taking over her physical body, and to begin to store energy for an attack but somehow she found it. She called upon it, storing it and storing it, until she felt like she was going to explode. And even when she could barely control it she built it up.

It felt as if she were blowing up a balloon, filling it with air but keeping it from expanding. She could see that, in the core of her body, a bright light was forming. She figured that was the magical energy, the place where her spells' power originated, but she didn't know for sure. Nor, at that moment, did she really care.

The energy continued to build and she saw it was beginning to leak out of her. She couldn't tell, but inside Copla was staring at her, both seeing and feeling the magical power exploding off of her. He didn't know what to do, or what he really could do, so he turned to continue fighting the zombies off.

Then, with a scream of primal fury that came from her physically and in her non-physical form, she released the energy. She watched as it drained her, stealing all the energy from her body but a little, which left the core of her body dim. Then the energy flowed through the string. She didn't really know what was happening but she realized that the energy would likely hit the other side.

Chance sat on his horse with no name, glad to be out of the rain, for several moments before he realized his ring was getting war, He looked up at the sun, wondering out it had caused the ring to get hot even in the shade, but quickly realized it was still getting warmer. Then hot. Then it was burning him.

He pulled it off and noticed that it was shaking with energy. Confused and a little bit afraid, he launched it into the air above him. The ring, just barely a foot from his hand, exploded. The fire from the blast would have disintegrated him like it did his horse but he was protected magically. He was, though, hairless and naked.

Maria still had energy to release when she came back into the physical world. She turned towards the door, which was splintered down the middle, and saw that Denerick was slashing at the reaching arms. Three severed hands lay on the floor already and the mountain warrior added a fourth to

the pile.

"Back up!" She said in a magically enhanced voice. It was soft yet powerful.

Denerick jumped backwards just in time. The same force that had launched through the ring was released towards the door. It burst through the door, splintering it into a thousand pieces. The zombies on the other side were engulfed with magical flame or simply torn to the pieces.

Everyone but Denerick and Jeffy stared at Maria for several moments. Then Denerick said:

"We have to get out of here!"

Everyone was back in reality.

Denerick turned and rushed out of the door. Jeffy and two of the three Nose Breakers followed immediately behind him. Maria and Copla followed, Esmeralda and Alron between them. The last in the group was the third Nose Breaker, Deabla and the civilians. Everyone not holding a weapon held supplies.

While they made their way down the street Maria realized just how exhausted she was. She didn't know exactly how impressive what she had done was but she did realize that it had drained her. She was just barely running along, none of them were moving all that fast for they moved cautiously, but it was taking all her effort to keep her steps forward instead of falling to the side.

Things were growing blurry but she followed her momentum and let Esmeralda, who held her arm, guide her steps. They were moving forward as quickly as possible without making enough noise to attract attention.

Denerick turned a corner and groaned aloud.

"What is it?" Jeffy asked but Denerick didn't answer.

Tuff was looking backwards at the zombies behind and realized that several had remembered how to run. Those that were further behind seemed to be losing interest in their fast moving prey. He looked forward as he picked up speed and saw a group of a dozen people rushing towards him.

"Ah damn," he muttered to himself.

## **Chapter Twenty One:**

The initial waves had been repulsed easily but Bear could see weakness growing in the man wall. The undead horde seemed endless every zombie that died was replaced by two more zombies. Their reaching hands clawed at the soldiers and their rotted weight forced the human line backwards.

The archers were still hitting the zombie horde with arrows but it seemed to have little effect. The heavy infantry men were killing zombies with arrows in their chest with the same difficulty as the undead that didn't. Reinforcements had been rushed to the front from the otherside of the camp but it made little difference as the dead didn't tire like mortal men did.

The leader of the heavy infantry men, a large man of thick build and in armor that weighed more than two regular soldiers' armor combined, rushed back to Aubrey, "Stop shooting the damned arrows, they're not doing a damned thing!" The big man turned back, his long blonde hair sticking to the side of its head due to the zombie blood that had splattered on to him in the midst of battle, and rushed to battle again.

"Captain Henry is a rather... unusual soldier," Alvin said. Aubrey nodded but had no other response.

As the battle continued, more than a few soldiers lived through the horror of watching his comrade pulled into the crowd then, a few painfully long moments later, the same man whose neck had just been broken climbed up again and attacked the still living men. Many times men were tripped up by the hands of crawlers, which somehow managed to make their way through the feet of the horde.

"Damn it," Aubrey cursed aloud as she watched the Hornet-Lancers fly through the crowd with their lances lowered and horses stomping. She cursed because shortly after the horsemen, in the form of

heavy calvary now, rode down and over the zombies they either got up or continued moving forward as crawlers.

She had to admire the courage of the Hornet-Lancers, though, for they were hitting the horde in some of its thickest locations, breaking up the densest of areas. At that moment she wished that General Sevrin hadn't decided to abandon the siege engines for they could engulf large areas with fire and acid if they were prepared correctly.

She had voiced as much to Robert at one point in the night and he shrugged, "I don't know how many that would kill. It might just make a bunch of crawlers or just waste resources..."

Aubrey muttered in agreement. Alvin walked forward to stand next to them, "Bear joined the heavy Infantrymen." Neither Aubrey nor Robert felt surprised. They knew that Bear was more of a fighter than a strategist though he was good at both.

Both also knew that their preferred weapons wouldn't be as effective against the undead men. Alvin seemed like he was about to say something when suddenly they saw one a man sprinting at them.

"What is it?" Robert asked when the exhausted soldier got to him. He had a bloodshot eye where he'd taken a hard hit to the face. His other eye was swollen nearly shut. That was probably why he'd been chosen to deliver messages.

"They broke through to the South!" the man gasped. Robert immediately started running that direction. Aubrey was about to leave too but Alvin suggested she stay.

"Sebrin might make an appearance down here and if another emergency needs attending you'll be here," Aubrey accepted the logic and watched as one of her best friends rushed off with an officer of the city that had threatened her home to go fight off an undead horde. As she thought about their current position she couldn't help but give a small smile.

"Weird is our forte," she said as she turned to look away.

From behind her General Sevrin spoke, "I got a message inside. The catapults will starting firing on the horde. Scouts have reported several hordes similar to this just a few miles out. We might need to get inside the city before they get here."

Aubrey considered the general's words for a few moments. Suddenly, she looked upwards as catapult fire flew through the air. It was aflame. The flaming pitch mixed with stones of various size slammed into the ground and launched in all directions. The rocks, fire and oil would have killed any man but most of the zombies weren't killed by the rocks breaking their bodies.

A broken chest that punctured internal organs like the heart and lungs might paralyze a man with pain but a zombie doesn't feel its brown-ish blood leaking down its chest or its bones rubbing against each other.

Some were killed, though, and Aubrey figured it didn't hurt anyone to slow down a few undead men.

It was maybe an hour later when Aubrey could see that the northern and southern ends of the defensive line were bent back. To the south she saw Robert's work, a long, intertwined formation that allowed soldiers to stand side by side and cover each others side. To the north she saw Bear and his soldiers standing strong, swinging their weapons furiously.

She watched for a few moments, sending secondary soldiers to replace the tired soldiers in areas where the men were growing weary. She noticed that the majority of the zombies not at the front were moving in towards the center section of the defensive line. Then it happened. The very middle section broke.

General Sevrin, who stood next to her, motioned to the thirty calvary men that were at his disposal forward. The thirty men, all lowering long spears or lances, rode forward. The soldiers who'd been engulfed by the sea of undead were already dead so the calvary had no reservations about lashing out at the zombies.

The calvary slammed into the front of the wave, actually knocking down most of the leading

zombies. This gave both the horsemen and the soldiers on the side time to retreat. The soldiers rushed backwards, just behind the calvary and just ahead of the zombies, trying to reform a giant C-like curve against the wall of Keell.

Archers of Keell shot from the wall into the horde of zombies. Ladders were dropped, for no man on the wall could leave men to that fate, and soldiers, servants and officers climbed them. Thirty ladders let carried sixty men at a time as they climbed the sixty foot tall wall.

The C curve defensive formation that held off the zombies shrunk as more soldiers climbed up the ladders. Bear, Aubrey and Robert stood next to a silent and pale Alvin as the number of defending heavy infantry men dwindled to less than twenty strong men. The leader of the heavy infantry turned to them from his fighting, one of the large men shifting to the side to block it.

"We're not getting up that ladder, so, boys and girls, this is the end of the line! Get your asses up there!" Captain Henry said. Bear had been fighting with them and he put his hand on the captain's back.

"Aye, my friend, we'll give them hell!" Bear said but Aubrey and Robert both began to fight him. Bear was about to argue about it but it was Henry who really stopped the debate.

"You have friends back at your home who need you to be there," Henry said, "This is my home. These are my boys and they're not getting up that damned ladder. Go save my home with your boys."

All but the last ladder had been pulled up by that point. Alvin began up the ladder, Robert and Aubrey right behind him. Bear looked at Henry, a man he might have considered his brother, for the last time. He was the last person to get on the ladder. As soon as he got onto the ladder it began to raise.

The heavy infantry men began fighting to kill the zombies instead of hold them off. It wasn't good for holding off an enemy but in that moment the heavy infantry men weren't defending ground any longer.

It was unusual to see twenty one big men moving as quickly as they were at that moment and to those on the walls it seemed like no number of zombies might overwhelm the well trained warriors. But the crawlers began to take their effect. A heavy foot stepped forward as the man attacked. Then, where there had been nothing, a pair of hands hooked onto the ankle with an iron grip.

The large warrior, suddenly immobile, was quickly overwhelmed. One after another they fell until it was Captain Henry and two other giant men in a triangle. Every zombie that that fell to Henry's war hammer or the men's battle axe and club, and they killed many, was replaced by two more hungry zombies.

And while in the middle of a giant battle most human soldiers would avoid a trio like those three the zombies felt no fear of death, saw no danger of injury. They only saw prey. A sprinter zombie, growing too agitated to stand still, jumped upwards. Henry was its target. He saw the flying creature and masterfully blocked it.

Captain Henry heard the soft crunch of metal crushing skull. As a hand that hadn't been hit by his war hammer reached through and grabbed his forearm he knew he'd made a mistake but he also knew that he'd been left no choice. And in the field outside Keell, where approximately twelve thousand zombies had gathered, the three strong men died surrounded by close to a hundred zombies laying on the ground with crushed skulls.

Copla saw the small horde coming and knew he had to act. His bald head was still sweating but his hands were steadier than ever. He half wondered in the back of his mind if Maria would release another blast of energy. It didn't matter, for he released a spell of moderate power.

A cone of coldness rushed forward, past Tuff as sprinted ahead of the zombies, froze the ground and several zombies, who were stuck in place. Those behind it slipped on the ice and Tuff nodded to Copla.

"It's weird having one of ya'll on our side," Tuff said with a shrug.

"Got a place you're going?" Deabla asked and Tuff nodded, "Only if I can get rid of all these and sneak back in."

"You're a soldier, dough," Denerick said and Tuff shrugged.

"The last I saw a group of over a hundred of these damned cold walkers was between me and our main force, so we're going to hold up somewhere," Tuff answered. No one argued with his logic. They'd barely survived an encounter with a couple dozen of the zombies. They had no desire to run up against a hundred of the unfeeling things.

Tuff, Denerick, Jeffy, his Nose Breakers and Deabla helped to finish off the zombies as they struggled to stand up again then the soldier led them to the house of that Marko and the rest had stored up in. There were many weapons there and everyone began to stock up. They shared the food.

"I think we can sleep," Tuff said and no one argued. Denerick opted to take the first watch. Jeffy agreed to do it with him.

The morning light hadn't yet shined on their safe house when Tank's eyes opened. He looked around and saw that everyone in the room was also still asleep. Keledro was sitting by the door, caught in the half-asleep state that the Nopterians did instead of 'human' sleep. Medea was absent from the room. Neither Navok nor Rolward were in the room either.

Tank stood and looked outside, seeing that it was dawn, then looked at a side door that led to another room, one where most of the plans had been concieved. He walked to it and nearly opened it when he heard voices on the other side. It was the magician and the wizard.

"Greater powers might be involved here," the magician, Rolward, said. Tank could barely hear and wasn't sure if he could hear it correctly. Navok responded and it was too muffled for him to understand but the wizard seemed to be in agreement.

"Should we call in our own greater forces?" Rolward asked.

"That may be wise in the near future but Dean and Maverick have their hands full already. Entropy and Tenebris have been causing a lot of trouble on their world and they're busy enough as it is... They're dealing with the obliterator," as Navok finished Rolward made a noise that gave Tank the impression that the 'obliterator' was something not to be trifled with.

"We should handle this on our own, then," Rolward replied after a while. Tank began to wonder how the two mysterious figures knew each other but didn't have time to dwell on it, for the door knob twisted. Tank rushed over to his bed and acted like he was just getting up and by the time the door opened he was in perfect position to look oblivious.

Tank looked over just in time for Rolward to nod towards him, "Good morning to you." Tank returned the greeting.

"So... we attack tonight?" he asked and Navok nodded.

"Rolward has decided to accompany us," the wizard replied. *'Course he has...* Tank thought to himself. Navok seemed to notice something strange in Tank's expression for the wizard tilted his head to the side. Tank then smiled, "That's good to hear."

"Will Medea and Keledro?" Wombly asked as she awakened. Ashe lay on her bed, quite awake also.

"That has yet to be determined," Rolward said with a shrug, "But we're not going in under-gunned. They'll just be a pouch on the jacket." That was a common expression, for a jacket kept one warm but if it had pouches it was just extra.

The wizard and magicians then bid them farewell and told them to rest up for a long night was ahead of them. The two left the warriors in the room alone.

"Anyone else hear that?" Tank asked.

"I did," both Ashe and Wombly said at the same time. Mave looked over, just then awakening, then shushed them. The three friends nodded then turned to the door, leaving the others to sleep.

"So who in the hells are 'we'?" Ashe asked and Wombly shrugged. They sat at a small table outside an inn. They'd noticed soldiers rushing to the walls but had ignored it, paying attention, instead,

to the riddles of Rolvward and Navok's conversation.

"I can't guess... they even said some weird names and something about other worlds..." Tank said, unable to put any pieces together.

"Entropy?" Wombly said questioningly, "I believe that was one of the names..."

"It was," Tank confirmed and the other two muttered amongst themselves. None of them knew what any of it might mean. They were pondering it when Tank's eyes widened. Wombly and Ashe saw where he was looking, behind them, and followed his gaze. Behind them they saw several men rushing forward, each one wearing the black tunics of the Nose Breakers.

"Huh," was all Ashe could say, all any of them could say.

Tank looked over at the man and recognized him as a man named William.

"William!" Tank said and the man looked over at Tank. As soon as the Nose Breaker saw him he split a broad grin.

"Can't believe a dumb heap of tar like you made it all the way here," William said and Tank replied with a grin. Both Wombly and Ashe sighed, for Tank and William had gotten into a fight on one of the first days. Quickly they'd become friends and had drunk quickly when Tank was in a mood good enough to hang out with someone else.

"Why are you here?" Tank asked, ignoring the friendly insult, "And when did you get here?"

"Huh, you're as dumb as I just said if you don't know..." the Nose Breaker said and Tank cocked his head to the side.

"What happened?" Wombly asked from behind Tank.

"There's about twelve thousand undead soldiers outside," William answered. It was that moment that they noticed a loud, low moan that they'd filtered out before. The soldiers suddenly made sense.

"Undead?" asked Ashe at the same time Wombly asked, "Another army?"

"Yeah, undead," the Nose Breaker said.

"As in zombies?" Ashe asked.

"Yes."

"Cut off the head?" Tank wondered aloud.

"Or bash in the skull," William replied and Tank grinned. But for William, who'd had a night of hell in the battlefield outside Keell, there was no smile. "We're heading to the barracks to get the rest of the soldiers to the wall. The zombies have started to scale the wall. We're not sure how they know how to climb each other up there but we're going to have to start killing them.

"You came here on a mission, didn't you?" William asked and Tank nodded. "Complete that mission quick. We can't hurt the zombies too badly from a distance without an accurate bow shot. The walls are being defended but barely and there are more hordes out there. Seems like every father, son, mother and daughter that died in the last fifty years is getting up to fight again."

"How long can we hold?" Tank asked and William shrugged.

"Maybe a week if nothing shows up inside the city walls. I'm pretty sure there's going to be a lot of bodies digging themselves out of the ground below us," a Nose Breaker behind William said they had to move and William nodded.

"I'd try to finish what you were doing by nightfall. My guess is that whatever's been happening is about to get a lot worse," William said. He smiled and grabbed Tank's shoulders, "Work fast, I know you and your two friends can do this... but if you don't, be ready for a night not unlike the nightmares of children.

"Especially on a day like this, with the dead walking, things are bound to only get worse. And I'd bet as many shiny pieces of gold I could get my hands on that tonight'll be living hell."

## **Chapter Twenty Two:**

William was right and things got worse quickly. Azeroth, seeing the humans band together even

more, decided to cast another spell. This one wasn't easy and would last for days. The clouds, already dark and forboding, began to drop rain intensely. Then the lightning came. Storms weren't unusual in the cities.

But usually the lightning in storms didn't hit the ground. That was the main difference, for the first lightning strike, at midday, hit a tall building. It burst into flame. The fire wasn't effected by the rain, which made it hard for the fighters on the wall to defend it to shoot their arrows accurately, and spread quickly.

People were able to calm the fires, if not completely put them out, but more lightning hit. Pretty soon the clouds above Keell were as much billowing smoke as much as condensed water. The lightning not only struck buildings but also people. Then the corpses would get back up and turn on the stunned people around it.

By one in the afternoon the city was in chaos.

Tank, Navok and the others were rushing to the main palace. They ran past many cases of the zombies attacking innocents, as the undead corpse of fathers or mothers turned on their children and spouses or as fathers were forced to put down their sometimes writhing but always biting children.

More than once they heard screams from inside a house or in a store. The zombies quickly multiplied and more than once Navok was forced to cast a spell on the zombies behind them or Rolvward placed a trip wire, some sort of explosive or other similar tricks to slow down or kill the undead creatures.

And the more zombies that they came across the more often they saw soldiers locked in formations just outside buildings or squads marching forward, trying to put down the undead creatures.

It took over an hour of navigating to find the entrance to the palace. When they did they saw dozens of undead beating on the front of the door.

"I will destroy them," Navok said grimly then began to cast a spell. A dark pea of blood red energy formed in his hands and for a moment the man's eyes glowed red. He closed his mouth as he finished the spell then the pea flew forward. It was maybe ten feet from the zombie in the back when it slammed into an invisible barrier.

Navok's eyes widened for a moment and Rolvward seemed disturbed by that also. Tank, with Mave and Benny right behind him, didn't seem to mind. Beth and Tommy moved in behind them. Keledro and Medea were absent but said they'd make an appearance. Ashe snuck off to the side and Wombly lifted her crossbows.

Tank rushed in and, leading with his flail, smashed the head of one zombie while his other hand, holding a hammer, slammed a zombie in the chest. The creature fell backwards but began to get up almost immediately. Tank was more than a little disturbed by the lack of effectiveness in his second attack but, with a slam from his spinning flail, he finished the job quickly.

More zombies turned on him and, all moaning as they did so. Mave beheaded one with his broadsword and slashed at another. His blade cut straight through its chest, breaking the spine as it cut almost all the way through the undead creature's torso. One of the creatures got behind him and bit into his left shoulder as he tried to pull his sword from another zombie's body.

The giant warrior howled and pulled his sword from the zombie, leaving it in two pieces on the ground. He slashed back with his blade, beheading the zombie that had bit him. It'd fallen backwards when he'd jerked around. He turned and cut another zombie's arm off then lashed out at a fourth.

Beth and Ashe worked together. Neither of their styles worked especially well against unfeeling, unthinking, unbleeding zombies but together they could cut zombies enough to render them all but immobile. They defended Navok, who was struggling with his magic, and Rolvward, who wasn't all that effective in this type of combat.

The two rushed around the pair, magician and wizard, and their blades whirled. Rolvward and

Navok's feet were bloody as they stomped in the heads of the immobile zombies.

Tommy looked backwards and his eyes widened in fear. He looked at Wombly, who was shooting at zombies, killing most in one shot, then at the zombies that were coming from behind her. He realized that the moaning of the undead that they were already fighting were attracting more to the area.

He rushed forward, shouting, "Wombly! Behind you! Move!" Wombly looked backwards then rushed forward. The closest zombie had been just a few feet behind her. She'd been so concentrated on her aim that she hadn't heard their moaning, which sounded just like those in front of her, and their slow but heavy steps.

Tommy rushed forward, not knowing anything else to do. Wombly still thought it looked funny to see a small man like Tommy waving around his semi-heavy mace but at that moment she didn't think anything was amusing. The warrior slammed his mace into one zombie's head, crushing the rotted forehead for the creature had been buried weeks before, then slammed another in the face.

But his momentum faded quickly. A zombie grabbed his arm but a crossbow bolt whizzed past his head and slammed into the creature's face. It fell backwards, fully dead. But that only delayed the inevitable. A crawler, on the ground in front of Tommy, grabbed ahold of his calf. It bit into his ankle and he fell backwards accidentally.

Wombly screamed as the zombies fell upon him, tearing through his armor. Tommy's screams were quickly cut off, for a zombie bit his neck.

A pile of bodies, at least a dozen and a half, lay around Mave. He was distracted by Wombly and Tommy's screaming when a hand grabbed his ankle. He looked down to see the torso of the zombie he'd cut in half biting into his leg. Mave cried out in pain then bashed the zombie's head in with his unbitten foot.

He then looked up to see Wombly rushing their way. She'd tossed one of her orbs at the pile over Tommy hoping it'd slow the zombies or stop them from killing the already dead man but instead it just shrouded their vision.

Tank and the others had finished all their zombies and rallied at the front of the giant doors. They began to pound on it, begging the people to let them in for a giant group of zombies, no less than a hundred of the creatures, were closing in on them. It was too late to run for all the major streets were covered in zombies.

"Let us in!" the group repeated multiple times. The closest of the zombie hordes, a jogger, was ten feet from Wombly when the door opened. She was about to down it with a crossbow bolt when an arrow sped out and slammed into the creature's face. She grabbed it, saw it wasn't broken, then brought it in with her.

A group of servants, all terrified, slammed the door shut after they were in the room. One older man, the one with the bow, had kept them calm and collected.

"Thanks for letting us in," Tank said and the man just nodded.

"Why did you come here?" the man asked.

"We're looking for the leader of the Black Hoods," Wombly answered and suddenly the man was frozen. His eyes were blackened and he grinned evilly at them. The man laughed aloud as the rest of the servants were no longer terrified. Instead, they had black eyes and stood confidently, leering at the companions. Then all spoke at once.

"He found you."

Bear and Commander Aubrey were happy that Nigel and his Hornet-Lancers were there. They'd been forced to abandon their horses but every Hornet-Lancer was an effective fighter on the ground as well. William had returned just before all hell had broken loose and the remaining twenty or so Nose

Breakers were combined with the remaining Hornet-Lancers.

Trina, the Hornet-Lancer, had her blade drawn. She looked outside the window of the large building that they'd taken refuge in. Outside the moaning was almost too much for some of the newer soldiers. Together the two units from Sprinkleberry were fifty or so warriors.

The wall was undefended now and fairly soon the zombies would outnumber the humans.

"I think we have a huge problem," Bear said after about an hour of holding the doors shut. Outside they still heard the sounds of battle and the screams of dying men and women. No one in the room could image Bear was joking at that moment but even still Nigel cracked a small grin.

"How do you figure?" Robert asked from the other side of the room where more of the creatures were pressing themselves against the wall. They'd already come up with a clever plan to climb on top of the structure once the zombies began to break in but it was going to be a while, they all knew, before they'd be ready to give up the security of the walls around them.

"Well, we're going to be outnumbered very quickly. And even if we aren't outnumbered, hell, even if we have a higher population than they do, not everyone in this city's a warrior. We're going to find ourselves in a fight completely surrounded by hungry and blood thirsty zombies with amateurs at our sides and back being the only thing between us," Bear said.

"Well, what d'you suggest?" Aubrey asked from the roof sarcastically. Maybe eight warriors were already up there, mainly Nose Breakers who were better climbers and runners, keeping the nearly randomly zombies that stumbled upon the roofs from grouping up above them.

"We need to lead them somewhere where their numbers mean nothing," Bear said and Nigel laughed aloud. "What?" the giant of a man asked.

"If it were that simple, would we not have done it already?" the dark skinned man asked and said at once and Bear shrugged.

"Didn't think anyone had the idea yet," he replied.

"I did but I don't know where we'd find a place like that," Robert said.

"Maybe the palace?" a Hornet-Lancer suggested as he looked away from his defense point, a currently empty window, and Nigel seemed pleased that one of his soldiers had felt confident enough to speak up around people with higher ranks.

"Maybe, but only if we could get them to come in the right way and only if it isn't completely overrun already," Robert said and Aubrey, who was on the roof, let out a warning.

"Sprinters!" She said and everyone lifted their crossbows or bows. Sprinters were a threat especially when they got close because they moved almost supernaturally fast. It was safer and often more effective to take them down at a distance, or so the group had learned.

One of the Nose Breakers saw a sprinter from the roof and took his shot. The bolt flew forward and slammed into the things eye, flying out the back of its head. The creature hit the ground hard and its brains lay splattered on the ground beneath its head. Several more shots were taken and all but one killed the sprinters before they got close. The last one got to the window but was taken down by a jab from a spear from one of the Nose Breakers.

It wasn't long before the press of the zombies was too much and one of the windows was expanded by the weight of the undead. An organized retreat was issued and, within two minutes of the first crack in the wall, everyone was up on the roof.

"Think these will work?" Asked a Hornet-Lancer as she lifted a flaming bottle of alcohol, a molotov.

"You made these?" Aubrey asked and the man nodded.

"There were dozens of these bottles and I had plenty of material to make the rags with and I wasn't guarding a window," the soldier said. She smiled when Aubrey affirmed her. The molotovs were lit then launched into the crowd. Most of the flaming zombies would burn until they were nothing but bone, which meant the brain was burnt, so it seemed a good idea to the men and women on the roof.

"Well, let's see if this leads anywhere productive," Robert said and everyone agreed and they

were moving quickly. The lightning, still slamming into the ground, took out more zombies than people but it was still a danger. Thus, as soon as they found a way down, they took it and were running in the streets again.

The zombie horde seemed left behind.

They were rushed down a street when they saw the palace, a giant structure with a gold-colored dome that had several towers surrounding it. They saw just as the large doors shut and Bear swore.

"Those are ours!" He said with a grin.

"What do you mean?" Trina asked and Bear realized that the front door had upwards of two hundred zombies outside of it. The zombies were pounding on the door, trying to break through them.

"That was the group we trained to come in here and get business done!" Bear said and Aubrey gave out of cry of happiness for a few moments.

"They'll finish this then," she said, "We just have to hold the zombies off for them."

"There's no one on those towers," Nigel suggested.

"And we have bows and crossbows," Robert said. Bear nodded. They quickly climbed into the towers and began to attract the zombies' attention. They knew that the creatures would eventually break the doors, for part of the thick wood was already being bit through, and that every second they spent out here gave those inside more time to take down whatever it was that was causing all this to happen.

Quickly the towers were filled, two Nose Breakers with shields at the bottom of the stairs that led to the bottom with men with spears behind them.

The zombies came on quickly and the bow men and crossbow men were working hard to make every shot count, for the men at the bottom of the stairs were strong but there were hundreds of zombies in the city. And with every moan one zombie made another zombie replied.

Tank dodged a strike and felt glad he had for the scrawny fifteen year old boy's fist slammed into a ten inch thick stone column. The stone around the fist cracked. When the man pulled his fist back it left blood on the cracked stone, for the strike had broken the skin on his fist.

The stocky warrior then dove forward, under another strike from the boy, and took an opening in the boys defense, which was next to none. His flail was spinning as soon as he get his arm moving and the second his body was in position he maneuvered the flail in such a way that he could, hips leading upper body, slam the heavy ball on the end into the possessed child's face.

The ball hit it and the boy winced, his head snapping violently to the side, and Tank knew that the boys neck had broken by the sound of bone snapping. He was shocked that the boy hadn't fallen over and was even more shocked when the boy looked back at him.

"That hurt," the inhuman voice said, still grinning. Tank kicked at the kid and hit him square in the chest. Tank felt like he'd kicked a brick wall and though the boy was forced backwards a step Tank was still off balance. Then the boy launched himself at the stocky warrior. Tank's hammer slammed into the boys chin, breaking his jaw and snapping the fifteen year old's head upward, but still the child came on.

Tank wasn't the only one having trouble. The boy was of similar build to the other four servants aside from the eldest, who was moderately thick with muscle.

Ashe dodged strikes from one of the older children, who moved with speed beyond most people's ability, while Wombly hesitated then launched a crossbow bolt that imbedded itself into the child's chest. If the bolt, which went almost all the way through the eighteen year old's chest, had any effect it wasn't shown on the young man's face or in a change in his behavior.

Ashe ducked one wild haymaker from the young man then struck out with her dagger. Her dagger point slid through his ribs but once again there seemed to be no effect. She was beginning to get worried when Wombly, who hadn't taken a shot for several seconds longer than it took her to reload, put a bolt into the young man's eye.

While it hadn't killed him it left him half blind and now Ashe's jumps and ducks weren't as

frantic. She just had to stay on his left side, the bloodied eye, and his swings would never be in line to connect with her. Ashe knew, also, that if she could get behind him she could do some serious damage, not the type that kills but rather the type that slows.

She moved to the right, at which point the young man lashed out at her, but instead dodged to the left. She 'juke' left her in his blind spot. Instead of taking the advantage right there she sped forward and got behind him. Instead of taking a killing shot, like her dagger sliding between his ribs into his heart, she slashed across with her dagger. The sharp edge cut into his hamstring then cut it in two.

The young man roared in anger but fell to the side, unable to pursue the agile assassin as she slashed his other hamstring. Wombly finished the job by putting a bolt into the young man's other eye.

The two smiled at each other. Then they looked around. Quickly they assessed that not everyone was having the same success they were in leaving a blinded, immobile demon-possessed eighteen year old young man laying on the ground.

Wombly lifted her crossbow and looked across the room. She pulled the trigger and her bolt whizzed across the room. Beth dodged a strike from a teenage girl with black eyes just as Wombly's bolt flew in, taking the girl in the throat. Wombly cursed that she'd missed. Ashe rushed forward towards the teenage girl.

Half a dozen of Beth's daggers were already dug into the teenager's chest and stomach but none of them had slowed her down. Wombly's bolt, however, forced the teenager back a step. She turned and looked at Wombly, who paled a little, and was about to step forward when Ashe slashed her hamstring.

The teenager growled and turned around but Wombly's expertly placed bolt slammed into her knee bone from behind. The teenager fell to the ground but could still move herself with her arms. The three women went to work.

Mave's broadsword slashed across and the head fell from one of the demon children. Behind him Benny was making his move on another. He darted forward, his blades, a short sword and a dirk, spinning on the tips of his fingers. He'd seen Ashe and Wombly's tactics and slashed at one of the older child's left ham-string.

Mave saw the opening and quickly, hips leading shoulders, swung his sword across with strength that mocked most men. The servant's head flew and the body fell to the ground. The last figure was the older man, who was clapping.

"Well done," he grinned, "but you haven't seen anything yet."

### **Chapter Twenty Three:**

Jev's forces were moving forward. The undead in the area had been killed and they were taking the opportunity to rush towards the main palace. They were inside the third wall and realized quickly that many of the people in the city were bittersweet about Jev's army showing up.

The soldiers made noise, more so than people who had learned to survive in a zombie and boozier infested city for several days, and that attracted more of the undead. The boozers seemed to be distracted by other boozers. General Suko had observed several times that the aggressive boozers were generally decomposed or rotted in some way. No one liked the thought of undead boozers.

The prince wondered more than once where Marko and Tuff were and if they were well but had little time to ponder things not happening at those exact moments. The army, roughly two thousand soldiers, was constantly under attack in way or another. They were beginning to run out of food and though they were logistical masters they weren't able to replace the supplies used everyday with the store houses of the city.

No one had prepared for a war like this. No one had even thought it was possible to lose a thousand men in one confrontation, much less the base of the city. They had prepared to withstand siege, storing many pieces to machinery, weapons and armor and things of that sort. What they really needed at this time was the supplies that could be grown in the city if there were any farmers who were

brave, or stupid, enough to grow them.

So they raided storehouses as quickly as possible in hopes of stemming the very possible outcome of mutiny or revolt. A military takeover during a risky war wasn't unheard of, especially if the men fighting were starving. But the palace was in sight and within it they could begin to rebuild the many methods of food growing.

Hundreds of gardens, underneath the city, were magically planted, watered, given magically produced sunlight and picked by the hands of a spell. The only problem was that these gardens only worked if the rightful leader or heir to the throne was in place. Otherwise the gardens sat untended and unharvested.

The leadership circle, a row of tents and pavilions that were erected when the force on halt, was not put together yet. The leaders, knowing men needed rest, decided to avoid such a task while they weren't marching. At that particular moment they were marching, Jev, General Suko and many other non-field commanders in the middle so that they could avoid any fighting.

It'd been several minutes of slow travel, the army moving forward only as fast as the scouts could draw out the undead or confirm that there weren't any dangers within. More than once a foolish, if noble-at-heart, small militia tried to repel the prince's forces but it was without any success. The men, who had held off a considerable section of the city, didn't want to give up their rule to anyone.

But the two or three hundred population, only a quarter of which were actually fighters of any skill, of the 'mini-town' was no match for the trained, well armed and armored soldiers. The mini-town had been their last confrontation and once again the undead were playing their part. Thus, as Jev and the others moved forward slowly, the sounds of battle off to the side, some lasting only a few seconds while others lasted many minutes, weren't unusual.

A boozer above them was attacked by two others. Jev could see the rot in the two boozers and knew without doubt that their bodies had died long ago. He also saw a difference in the mannerisms of the undead and living boozers. The undead couldn't turn quickly and usually flew only in a straight line. Once a living boozer dodged they were vulnerable but the weapon of the living boozers were hardly effective.

A dead boozer losing ninety percent of its blood didn't kill it. The loss of body weight actually helped it most of the time. They moved faster when lighter. The prince, seeing that most of the undead were secured or cleared out of the area and that most of the boozers were busy with one another, began to feel somewhat confident that they'd retake the city.

For the first time in many days he felt a little hope.

Tuff and Marko were sitting in the room, listening to the pounding on the door. They'd quickly reinforced it with heavy crates and as many pieces of furniture as they could fit in the area but that did not stop the cracks from forming across the thick, wooden-metal combined door.

No one in the room knew how the dead had found them. All they really knew was that they'd been fairly quiet.

"Maybe they can smell really well," Tamara suggested. Neither Marko nor Tuff had a response, negative or positive, for the middle aged woman. They honestly didn't know. So the room, everyone armed and armored, everyone ready to make their move if they needed to, sat in dark silence for what seemed like hours.

Then one of the kids came running into the room from another side room that had once been part of the main building but had been walled off aside from a small door. The walls were solid brick so the adults had felt comfortable letting the children into it alone.

"There're stairs," the young boy said to Tamara, who just smiled and nodded to the child, trying hard to hide the unignorable fear that coursed through her veins.

"Oh, where do they go?" Tuff asked, trying to pretend like they had nothing better to do than hear about the boy's discovery, as much for himself as for Tamara, who seemed on the verge of tears.

"The roof!" the boy said excitedly and everyone looked at the boy for a few seconds, all sure that the access to the roof could mean something. They just didn't know if it was positive or negative. If there was a way into the building from the roof that could be accessed from anything else they had yet another entrance to guard but if they could get out that way it might be a relief from the pressure of having only one way out.

And that way, unfortunately, was surrounded by the undead.

No one spoke for a few moments as they wondered what that might mean.

"Well," Marko said with a shrug, "I guess I'll check it out." The older man stood up, grabbing his broadsword as he did so, and made his way to the room. The children, all sleepless, some crying, some still playing though they were quiet and somewhat reserved. Those that weren't crying grinned at the adult, for the first time seeing someone who wasn't a child like them.

"Can someone lead me up the stairs?" he asked one of the older children grinned. The boy took Marko's hand to lead him up. The boy's fingers were cold and Marko realized that he must be actually be terrified. He saw a look in the child's eyes that was mirrored in the other children's eyes. They were all terrified.

They didn't know what of, they didn't even know why. All they knew was that the adults were very disturbed and that they'd seen unnatural things in their run and they sensed that it was dangerous. And many of their older relatives were missing. They didn't actually know what it all meant but they did know that if their parents and grandparents were afraid then they should be afraid.

The stairs were hidden but the children, with hours to themselves, had found them. Marko, realizing that the creatures they feared could be just above the doorway, which he saw at the end of the steps, bid the child to go back to his friends. The boy agreed and scampered down the steps.

Marko turned, lifting his broadsword into a ready position, and slowly started up the steps. He could feel the stairs giving beneath him slightly. As he grew closer and closer to the door the light that slipped through its edges grew brighter and clearer to him. He could hear noises on the other side, the moan of the dead, the low buzz that constantly filled the city as they made their flights, which happened more often than ever before. It seemed that their attacks on one another were making them uneasy.

He opened the door and it slid smoothly. It opened inward, which struck him as unusual, but as he stepped through he forgot that fact. He smiled as he saw the roof was clear. It had supplies on it, food and other things of that sort, and he knew immediately that the warehouse had been put here in case the city had fallen.

Meaning it was built for soldiers to come here.

"We're going to be saved," he said aloud, happy to hear the words. Behind him Denerick, Maria and Lidia walked. All three felt restless. Then they heard a scream downstairs. He turned just in time to see the children all being rushed up the stairs by Jeffy and two of the Nose Breakers. Tamara and the other adults, followed, then Tuff came, holding his shield up, while Esmeralda and Copla scrambled to get to safety. Marko saw the undead were right in front of the soldier.

Marko looked around and noticed a thick bow and several large arrows.

"Knockers," he said muttered aloud as he grabbed the weapon. The bow was built to send thick arrows as the same speed as thin arrows. It was built to break down doors and split crowds. He raised the bow then aimed down the pathway. Tamara saw him then shouted for everyone to duck. Fortunately for the children they were short enough that they didn't need to duck. The adults, a single tall child and Tuff, who'd learned to trust Marko, ducked also.

The knocker, with a thick wooden tip that was sharpened but not enough to break healthy skin. But the zombies didn't have healthy skin and the wooden tip dug deep into the zombie's chest. It did, however, hit the undead's spine. The knocker snapped the creature's spine, which caused it to fall over, tripping the zombies immediately behind it.

Tuff turned and fled. Everyone in front of him had gotten out of the way and Tuff was sprinting. Then a board split just as he lifted his weight from it. The soldier realized that the steps, made of older

wood, were breaking. He scampered on up, avoiding falling to his death for, to add to his panic, below the stairs was a clear fall for perhaps thirty feet.

As soon as he got off the wooden steps and onto the stone roof he turned to see a zombie that had barely kept up just behind him. He kicked out at it and realized that it was missing an arm and a large chunk of its shoulder. It'd been light enough not to break the wooden steps as it ran on its toes accidentally.

But now that it flew through the air, for Tuff's foot had slammed, from heel to toe, into the creature's chest, it couldn't distribute its weight and the zombies that scrambled up behind it were hit. Then the stairs collapsed and perhaps three dozen zombies that had been trailing them closely fell to the ground.

They watched for several seconds as more zombies rushed into the room, falling onto each other. Then Tamara said, "If there are enough they'll climb up that way.."

Esmeralda began to look around and saw Deabla looking at several barrels. She opened one of them then grinned.

"Oil," she said. She turned and looked to Copla and Maria, "Think we can burn them?" Copla nodded hesitantly while Maria simply shrugged. Denerick, two Nose Breakers and Jeffy lifted several of the barrels and started to position them to push into the group of zombies, which numbered near a hundred.

"Wait, where's Derrick?" one of the Nose Breakers asked and suddenly the entire roof stopped moving.

Jeffy had been about to push one in when he looked back at the two remaining Nose Breakers.

"Timbo... Sean... where's Derrick?" Jeffy asked. They looked back at the doorway just in time to see an undead Nose Breaker stumble into the room. His armor had been torn at the stomach and his guts hung out. The skin on his face, what was left of it, hung loosely.

"Oh," Timbo, the taller Nose Breaker, said. Jeffy looked at Timbo for several seconds, suddenly worried.

"Damn," Sean sighed. Timbo turned and looked away.

"He... he was my baby brother," Timbo said. Sean was about to grab his arm when suddenly Timbo broke into a sprint towards the side of the building.

"No!" was all Jeffy could do before Timbo dove over the side, yelling out loud and barely understandable words. They, and many zombies around them, heard him slam into the ground. It wasn't long until what might have been a hundred zombies surrounding them became three or four hundred. And among that number was Timbo and Derrick.

No one spoke as Jeffy turned and threw a barrel into the zombie crowd. They were climbing on one another and it was becoming more than a little dangerous to stand at the door way. A reaching hand might wrap around his ankle and lock it with its steel-like grip but as soon as the barrel was in the pile he turned to Copla.

"Light it," the Nose Breaker officer said and Copla stared at him for a few moments. One zombie almost grabbed the side to pull itself up when Jeffy yelled at Copla, scaring the wizard into action. Copla rushed over then began to cast a spell. Deabla moved Denerick into a position so that the giant mountain man stood at Copla's side. Copla released a small burst of fire just as a hand grabbed his ankle.

Had anyone but Denerick been standing next to the wizard he would have died at that moment. But Denerick, with fast reactions and immense strength, grabbed ahold of Copla's arms and pulled him, and a zombie, away from the rest of the zombies.

Tuff put the creature down quickly then tossed it back into the stairway. He saw that Copla's burst of flame had nearly burnt through the wood of the barrel.

"We might want to step back," he said. The group moved backwards then, when the oil caught fire, nearly got knocked from the roof. The barrel exploded but the walls of the building, solid stone,

handled it well. Many of the zombies were now missing limbs and while that didn't kill them it was enough to slow them down.

Fairly soon the oil was burning through them. When the flame seemed about to die down a second barrel was tossed in. The explosion still had little effect on the building but more than a few zombies were burnt to ash.

"That was a good idea," Tuff was about to say when he noticed Deabla standing at the side of the roof, looking over the side. He walked over then noticed that zombies filled the streets around them.

"I think we're trapped," Deabla said. No one had any argument in them.

Tank was forced to duck under a slash from a black tentacle reaching from the older man's back. He saw it slam into a column to his left, shattering it, and knew that had it hit him he would have died.

Several tentacles, all pure black, reached out of the possessed man's back and he saw that everyone else was similarly put on their heels. Ashe was out of the magical limbs' reach and Wombly was trying to shoot from even further away. Mave tried to parry with his blade but the obsidian tentacle wrapped around his blade and tore it from his grasp.

On the other side Benny and Beth dodged and ducked, using their agility ahead of the squid-like appendages. Navok tried to cast spells but still found his magic blocked. An expression of frustration was easy for all to see on the wizard's face.

"You are all fools!" the man howled with glee, "You are doomed!" No one, as they dodged for their lives, could muster any argument. The beast with laughing hard when one of Wombly's bolts flew into his mouth. The bolt tore through the creature's tongue and seemed to have little effect other than the fact that the creature was no longer laughing.

Beth, who was at a perfect angle to see a small bulge on the back of his neck. She thought nothing of it at first but noticed that it shrunk somewhat when the tentacles got larger. She looked to the side and noticed that all of the other bodies, which had been abandoned by their enemy, also had small bulges on the back of their necks.

"I wonder," she thought aloud, then launched a knife at it. The dagger veered bit to the left and struck the creature an inch to the left of the bulge and the creature turned on Beth. It growled and one of its tentacles tore the knife from the back of its neck.

"Aim for the back of its neck! There's a small bulge!" Beth shouted and the creature shot a tentacle her way. She ducked underneath it and felt the wind being knocked aside by the power of the attack. A second one flew in and Beth realized she was in trouble. She jumped aside and lashed out at the tentacle, which missed her by inches. Her blades cut into the tentacle and the creature screamed in agony.

She jumped to the side just as Mave rushed forward, seeing that Beth needed help. He'd gotten his sword back and planned on using it. He brought it over head and while one tentacle shot forward to hit Beth he snapped his hips downward, his arms following close behind, and the blade cut straight through the tentacle.

The end of it hit the ground then simply vanished into air while the other tentacle writhed in agony for several moments. Then it began to grow again.

"Damn," Mave muttered to himself. He was forced to dodge once again.

Beth, though, had been left alone for seconds. She jumped forward, rolling under one tentacle that attacked Ashe, and launched three daggers in rapid succession. None hit but they came close and the possessed man cried out in agony once again. The bulge shrunk more as yet another tentacle grew from his back.

But it was too late.

Beth rushed forward, climbing up the new growing tentacle, and jabbed her sparkling dagger into the bulge. The possessed man turned and glared at Beth for several seconds and the girl grinned. Then the man smiled a terrible smile.

"This isn't even my true form. I can grow a thousand new bodies whenever I like," he said. His eyes began to darken even more than before, more than she'd thought possible, "I don't think you can do the same."

Beth felt like she'd been punched from behind. Her friends gasped but she still grinned at him. "We've killed your servants, we'll kill you."

"There is no 'we' for you anymore," the man disappeared and Beth felt herself hit the ground but for some reason couldn't move her legs. She looked down at her chest and it all made sense. There was a giant hole where her lungs and solarplex had been.

"Oh," she released the last bit of air in her chest then fell to the side. Ashe rushed forward, sliding to her side, then looked into her dead eyes.

"Beth!" Wombly cried out from the side. Mave and Benny looked on sadly from the side. Tank could only groan in sadness. Wombly and Ashe leaned over Beth's dead body for several seconds until, suddenly, several creatures walked in from the side.

"What now?" Tank growled while Mave lifted his sword. They moved into a defensive formation and tried to get into a position that they'd be able to attack as well as defend. Then one of the creature's whirled past and cut deep into Mave's thigh. He cried out in agony.

"Run!" Mave growled as he lifted his blade. The creature's were that of shadow and their actions seemed faster than the blink of an eye. Tank was about to argue with Mave when the dark giant man slashed across. He managed to cut one of the creatures and the shadow gave an otherworldly shriek of pain.

"Get out of here!" Mave yelled out and Tank nodded. Everyone left the room, leaving through giant doors on the otherside of the corridor.

Bear stood at the middle of the stairs of one of the towers. His mace swung across the entrance way, literally tearing the heads off of zombies as they tried to get up the steps. Everytime his mace reached a point where it was no longer hitting a zombie he reversed it with a giant *whoosh!* Followed by the soft crunch of skull bone.

Arrows and bolts rained down into the crowd from both towers. The other tower had two men standing where Bear stood and neither were attacking. They stood with heavy shields. Behind them stood men with long pole arms. The two towers were surrounded by hundreds of the undead menace.

"How long do you think we can hold?" Aubrey asked Robert in between shots. Robert released a bolt from his crossbow, a direct headshot that split a skull, then said, "Longer than it takes them to stop whatever is causing this."

Neither had much hope they'd survive but if they could hold for just long enough then the theory was that whatever had raised all these dead bodies would be dead and the corpses would simply fall to the ground. That was their hope.

They saw a group of soldiers off to the side rush into the fray. They were Keellians, at least forty soldiers. They formed a square, with shields on the outside and archers, polearms and swords striking out. The undead weren't smart enough to press all of their weight into one spot so the men could hold as long as they could keep the shields standing upright.

And because the towers were occupied the press was lessened. Three places for zombies to rush towards was better than one, especially if the number of people went up with the number of entrances.

It didn't take long, though, for the shield men. The Nose Breakers and Hornet-Lancers began to realize that the only reason they still stood was because they had kept their soldiers rotating, keeping tired men from the actual fighting so that they could rest so that men who had been resting could replace them.

After maybe an hour of fighting the square collapsed and the men and women from Sprinkle-berry watched the Keellians as they were engulfed by a wave of zombies. More than forty corpses lay dead at their feet. William, Tank's friend and a Nose Breaker, said as much to Aubrey on his break.

"Then they served a purpose and deserve a happy afterlife," the woman said. She looked over to the other tower and wondered how Nigel and Trina were doing. They were leaders and the three Nose Breakers, best friends for as long as they could remember, refused to be separated at such a desperate time.

But she was worried. They were horsemen, not infantry fighters.

Aubrey's fears were well-founded, for Trina and Nigel had a harder time rotating their soldiers. Fortunately Nose Breakers were a large portion of that tower's population and they had rotated on their own most of the time. The Hornet-Lancers were integrating into the system fairly well but they weren't able to do it quite as well as the Nose Breakers, who'd been trained to handle pretty much any type of fight, especially since they'd fought the vampires.

Trina watched as the square deteriorated and wanted more than anything to rush out and try to save any of the men but she knew that was folly. Nigel, who knew her well, said as much.

"We just need to hold," he said. Everyone was tired but they were keeping themselves to their hard trained discipline. Both Hornet-Lancer leaders had to appreciate the resourcefulness of the Nose Breakers and both vowed to ask Robert, Aubrey and Bear how they'd achieved as much training.

Trina was looking over at the other side when she noticed that some zombies had taken to climbing up the side. Not many could do it but those that could were jumping on soldiers. She watched as Bear stepped back, letting two shield holding soldiers and pole-arm soldiers rushed to take his place, then as the Nose Breakers rotated on their own.

It was impressive to see those resting react so quickly to a zombie climbing past. Then it occurred to Trina that what was happening over there might be happening on their own tower. She looked at the side just in time to see a zombie barely pulling itself over the side railing. She lifted her weapon, a small mace, up and cracked the zombie's head.

She turned, looped her mace on her belt, then lifted her bow. She pulled it straight and took a particularly big zombie's head straight off its body. She turned and looked down to see Nose Breakers killing the zombies as they climbed up.

"Damn they're good," she marveled aloud.

"Yes," Nigel agreed, "They are."

## **Chapter Twenty Four:**

The room was dark. Navok, standing at the front of the group, moved about as if he could see just fine, as if the dim light, and there was a dark shade of red light covering the entire room, was just fine. Tank stood in the back. He looked back every once in a while, trying to find some indication of Mave's fate.

A loud bump, causing the door to shake for a moment, filled the room and Tank slowed.

"We'll find out soon enough," Wombly said as she saw him slowing. Tank looked back at him and she ventured a half-hearted smile. It was all she could muster in that moment. No one had time to think, it seemed, to process the loss of their friends, people they'd spent the last two months with every day and night, every hour.

It seemed to them, at that moment, that they'd lost childhood friends. Benny, who had lost a childhood friend in Arnold, seemed the least shaken by the entire event. His background was unknown, even after all this time, and none of the group spoke to him about it; if he didn't want to talk then they wouldn't force him.

At the sides of the long and tall corridor, which they realized they were in, torches hung in small sconces while giving off weak light. The walls of the corridor, fifty feet in between, held the torches so the light barely reached the very middle. Ashe, at one point in their walk, muttered that the torches were blinding them more than the darkness was.

"If they weren't there our eyes would have adapted by now," the young assassin sighed. No one had any response for that aside from Navok, who gave off a chuckle.

"I'd light the whole corridor," the mage sighed, "if I could."

"What's blocking your magic?" Tank asked and Navok shrugged, "My guess is the creature we go to fight has some sort of amulet or ring that is creating a dark zone for most types of magic. Demons from their plane of existence use and regard magic in different ways than we, on this world, do. They are dependent on magic for life and for that reason they are literally a physical incarnation of magic, or a certain kind of magic.

"Humans take magic that surrounds us and bend it to their will... in simple terms, the magic may or may not be the same but it is definitely used and controlled in different ways."

"Ah," was all anyone had to say. Wombly noted the way Navok said, "Their," instead of, "We," but didn't bring up the subject. She had other more important things on her mind at that moment.

"Well said, wizard," a deep, dark and forboding voice said from the opposite side of the corridor. Suddenly the room lit up, the red light brightening but somehow still remaining dark. The torches, instead of hosting small, weak flames were now burning bright and strong.

"You are obviously well versed in the way of magic, more so than most humans, but you aren't like most humans, are you, human?" the voice asked. The entire group had instinctively crouched into defensive positions but realized that they were out in the open, in perfect position to be destroyed easily by the demon had it willed it so.

For in the light they saw the throne and instantly they wished it was still dark. Azeroth, the Prince of Chaos, a Demon nation of the Fire Realm, stood tall and powerful. His shoulders were as thick as Tank was tall and his arms as thick as Tank's waist. His fingers ended in nails as long as the dirk on Benny's waist. His forearm was as long as Wombly's slider-sword. When the demon stood up he towered over the group.

Navok stared at the demon and the two made eye contact. The demon's face, a man's but with a thick beak like that of a bird where the mouth should have been. His eyes, dark red, burned with the same flame as the dark pits of the Realm of Fire.

"No," Azeroth said as he leered down at the regular sized humanoids, "There is something very different about you. There's a darkness inside you, a red anger, a thirst for blood where there should be a heart." The demon grinned, somehow shifting the bird-like beak, and razor sharp teeth extended from within his mouth. The teeth was almost as sharp as the spikes that raised off the shoulders of his dark red armor. Around his neck hung a dark red amulet. The stone, dark red, seemed to steal the color from all things around it.

"You're not alive anymore," the demon gave a dark laughter, "You're nosferatu, vampire, knights of the undead... there are a thousand names for your kind in all the realms. And," the demon's fiery red orbs narrowed slightly, "In every single realm the Knights, the vampires, the nosferatu barely whisper the name of my race for fear of running into them."

"You're what?" Tank asked but Navok glared at the demon, not breaking eye contact.

"You have disturbed much to gain the attention of our counsels attention for to disturb a world like this. Were Dean and Maverick not busy, they'd have come here and destroyed you with a shrug. Even Entropy or Tenebris, Amos or Bert could have done so. You're not strong enough to take these worlds and my superiors sent me here to warn you away.

"We have no quarrel with your race," Navok said, "But my people will not be taken by fear. You will leave this world or we will destroy you." His eyes suddenly changed color and his appearance changed. His eyes were a dark orange-copper color. He was still dark skinned but his beard was black. In-stead of the bent back of an old man he was young and stood straight. He was no longer wrinkled and his shoulders broadened.

"I will destroy you," Azeroth snarled, suddenly no longer laughing.

"Then more will come!" Navok countered and his voice was filled with something akin to

desperation in his voice.

The vampire turned and looked at Tank, "The amulet around his neck," Navok pointed towards it and Wombly nodded. She lifted her crossbow and took a shot. Her aim was true but the demon gave a half hearted slash across with a long blade, easily as tall as Tank, and the bolt was destroyed by the flaming metal. In Azeroth's other hand was a whip, which was also aflame.

"Looks like this will be hard," Tank deadpanned. He began to jog forward, closing the hundred feet between the demon prince and Wombly, who was reloading her crossbow. He looked to his side and saw that Ashe had similar thoughts since she was moving forward across the distance.

Ashe's blades were out and Tank's flail was spinning. Tank switched his flail from his right hand to his left, keeping the ball rotating on end all the while, and grabbed his hammer with his strong hand. With a spin of his body he snapped his hips around and his hammer followed.

The well crafted hammer spun end over end as it flew through the air. Azeroth, grinning all the while, slashed across his chest with his blade. The attack swatted away Tank's hammer as if it were a fly; the weapon flew to the ground. It was all Tank could do to hide his shock at his powerful attack being blocked so easily. He'd seen his hammer throw destroy wooden and stone doors and walls. But now this demon easily broke the momentum of the weapon.

Ashe raced in from the left, Tank from the right. Tank won their small 'race' and his flail struck hard but the heavy ball on the end of the chain missed Azeroth's blade. The ball, coupled with the chain, wrapped around the fiery sword. Tank jerked backwards, trying to throw off Azeroth's balance but it was to no avail. Tank was a mighty human. Azeroth was mighty also.

But he was a demon.

Azeroth looked directly at Tank for a moment, just a moment, and confusion clouded his face for a moment. Then Ashe struck.

Ashe's tactic didn't rely on strength. She ducked under the whip, which flew over his head, then stabbed out with her right katana, slicing into the demon's lower thigh. Azeroth growled then, his whip disappearing, punched out. Ashe, who'd been slicing with her second katana, stood no chance against the demon's speed.

She was hit directly and flew across the room. Only her experience in fighting and running together helped her, for she hit the ground in a roll. Though most of her momentum had been broken she felt the wind get knocked out of her lungs. She lay on the ground, trying to remember how to move, for several seconds.

During that time Benny made his move. He was attempting to sneak up behind the demon, for while Ashe and Tank had attacked from the front Benny had snuck behind. The small warrior, short sword leading, struck hard. His blade dug into the back of the demon's calf. Azeroth felt the sting but it wasn't near enough to hurt him.

The demon turned and backhanded Benny. The young teen was launched straight into the ground, where he lay in a tangled heap, unconscious.

Tank, recovered, rushed inwards. He managed to get inside Azeroth's reach and, flail spinning, slammed it into the demon's upper thigh. Azeroth growled and looked down at Tank. He tried slapping at the stocky man but Tank was nimble enough to avoid the attack. The demon glared at Tank for a moment as his flail slammed into its thigh again then quickly said three words. The amulet around his chest lost its red color and a giant fist, white and translucent, grabbed Tank around the waist.

Tank groaned aloud, struggling, trying desperately to break its magical grip, but it wasn't carnal, it wasn't alive. His arms and shoulders bulged but couldn't budge the mystic grasp. The fist began to constrict hard and Tank gasped. That was a mistake. His lungs were empty and he felt the life being squeezed out of him. He looked over at Ashe, who was struggling to stand, and felt his eyes beginning to bulge out.

He gasped again but there was no air in his lungs to lose. And squirm he might, all he accomplished was losing what little room he had left and, unfortunately, the strength to fight back. The

seconds, agonizingly slow, stole his will.

Wombly watched in fright for a moment as her hands worked at reloading her crossbow. When it was loaded she lifted her bow, aimed down the sights, and took the shot. Azeroth, who was staring at Tank and in deep thought, didn't see the bolt flying his way.

The bolt dug into the demon's eye and Wombly realized she should have taken a shot for the amulet. But when Azeroth lost his concentration on the spell the fist disappeared and Tank dropped to the ground. The stocky young man hit the ground and gasped for air. His lungs burned and he lay, trying to remember how to control his body, for many seconds.

Ashe was up but still in pain. She rushed forward though she limped every step of the way. She ignored the pain, grunted, then sprinted. As she ran, with every step she felt one of her ribs, broken already, shifting inside her. Tears filled her eyes as she ran and the giant image of Azeroth, fiery and terrible, became blurry.

Wombly raised her second crossbow and pulled the trigger, launching a bolt forward. Azeroth, roaring in pain still, didn't see this bolt coming either. But Wombly's aim was off, by just an inch, and the bolt dug into Azeroth's hide. The demon looked down at it, his eye already healing, then towards Wombly, who held her crossbow awkwardly.

"Oh no," she breathed as Azeroth turned towards her. The demon leered at her, not noticing Ashe, who gritted her teeth as she raised both her blades into an aggressive stance. Then, as Azeroth took his first step forward, she struck.

Tank lay on the ground, struggling to breath. He knew he'd been damaged, at least a few bones in his torso were broken, and he knew he shouldn't get up but he heard Ashe scream, Wombly shout and Navok curse. He heard Benny groaning as he tried to get up, trying to regain consciousness as well as control over his body.

Tank knew he should get up, for moral reasons, but the pain... He put his hands on the floor next to his chest and began to push. A moan escaped his lips and emptied his lungs and Tank realized that he was hurt beyond anything he'd ever felt before. He wasn't just hurt, he mentally corrected himself, he was damaged. Injured. Wounded.

He struggled for several moments then noticed his hammer just outside his reach. He grunted and groaned as he did so but he managed to turn over and get his arm on the weapon. The feeling of the cool metal must have given him strength for Tank, clenching his jaw in anticipation of the oncoming agony, lifted his hips and shoulders off the ground.

He lifted the hammer over his head, growling away the pain all the while, then snapped his head forward, his shoulders, then elbows, then hands following. His fingers, shaking from agony, loosened their grasp around the shaft of the hammer and the weapon flew head over handle towards the demon raging demon.

Through his lips a few words slipped. What they meant Tank had no idea.

Ashe's attack had saved Wombly's life, for a moment at least, but it wasn't enough to hurt Azeroth.

"We're outmatched," Ashe admitted to herself, the first time in her life she'd ever truly accepted defeat. It was hard to deny it in the face of the towering demon. Azeroth's man-bird face stared at her and the two made eye contact.

And in that moment Ashe knew true helplessness.

"What are you?" She gasped and Azeroth began to laugh, a terrible, mocking cackle, when suddenly Tank roared, "Damn you to the hells, false idol!"

The door was broken. Tuff and Marko were fighting at it, keeping the zombies back. Denerick and Jeffy were taking care of zombies climbing over the side of the building. The situation, desperate at

best, was more dismaying than any fight against humans could have been.

The sun was due to rise in less than an hour and it was all they could do to keep moving. Weariness caused by days of desperation, fear and alertness was taking its toll and they could feel their reflexes slowing with every swing.

"We can't hold for long," Tuff said, "Without some sort of break." Copla, the wizard was sweating even more so than usual, looked over. He'd been concentrating, trying desperately to find a spell that would be useful here. He could only kill the zombies at the door and maybe just a few feet back, but nothing more than that.

Lidia, who was quiet, looked up.

"Can you clear the doorway?" She asked. She'd been casting spells of minor healing on the two warriors, and Denerick and Jeffy when possible, but she was exhausted from the number of spells.

"Yes," Copla said, "Can you seal it?"

"For maybe half an hour," Lidia said, "At the very most."

"We'll take what we can get," Tuff said as he crushed the head of one zombie. The wall of zombie bodies in front of them was beginning to hurt them more than aid them. Swinging space was plentiful and the zombies all being forced into an even smaller area was useful but the bodies weren't a solid barrier and occasionally a zombie would push straight through the bodies.

"Okay, five," Copla began to count down, "Four. Three. Two... Move!" Tuff and Marko moved aside and Copla chanted for maybe half a second. Three bolts of lightning shot forward, burning the corpses into ash as they did so, and following the lightning was a black goo that stuck to the zombies in front and the wall around them.

"The goo should give you a minute, before the wood around them breaks," Copla said and Lidia began chanting immediately. One of the walls began to crack and the goo wasn't hold as well. Lidia, closing her eyes and channeling her goddess, Salvatora, didn't notice as the seconds passed. She didn't hear the moans of the dead, the screams of the living in the distance, the sound of wood cracking as bodies relentlessly pushed forward.

The wood snapped and the zombies were moving forward. Tuff began to step forward when suddenly the zombie was walking into an invisible barrier. Lidia, in a yoga-like position on the ground, her feet crossed in front of her and hands on her temples, seemed frozen in time. The only motion in her body was the long and deep breaths that she took.

The zombies were pushing through hard and strong.

Three pairs of eyes widened at once. Azeroth and Navok both in shock and Wombly in remembrance.

"Idol!" She shouted as she pulled a small idol from her cloak, "Uhh... name! Name.... Vombati... no... yeah! Vombatidae!" She shouted. The V was pronounced like a 'W'. Suddenly it took shape and then from it a dark-purple mist formed. It reached forward, taking shape in the form of a giant Wombat.

The wombat weighed at least three hundred pounds and resembled a large bear. It was unnaturally large and unusually muscular and dense. It was as tall as a large horse and the same tail-to-head size as well. The beast, stocky and powerful with a barrel-shaped body, had a short and thick neck, broad and muscular shoulders and eyes that were about as large as Wombly's fist. Its nose, much like a giant rat's, was large and looked powerful in its own way.

The creature had thick legs, each as big as Tank's waist, which all ended with five toes as thick as Tank's wrists. Its toes that ended with claws as long as a dirk and thick as a broad sword. Its fur, dark brown, was ruffled slightly and it looked somewhat confused. Then it looked at Wombly and suddenly both felt a connection.

In a matter of moments they knew each other well.

"Please, I need help," Wombly begged and it struck the wombat of all wombats, called Vombatidae, was struck by the fact that she was pleading and asking rather than ordering. The most

powerful of all wombats, the strongest and most powerful, turned on Azeroth and marked it as a demon of the plane of fire immediately.

Vombatidae was from a plane less physical than this one, known as the astral plane or the sidereal plane, had been around for hundreds of years and learned of the powerful races of the multi-verse long ago. Thus as it turned and advanced on the Prince of Chaos, Vombatidae did know the rank of the deadly demon, it did so with wariness.

Azeroth and Navok, however, were stunned. The hammer Azeroth took on the square of his back didn't have near the effect the simple statement had. The demon turned and glared at Tank, "You!" The beast snarled, "You! You were the one! You are the damned Amos of Hawken! You are the one who learned I was no god!"

"How dare you come back!" Azeroth more spat than asked and the demon brought his blade up to slash down, ready to end Tank's life in mere moments, when suddenly three hundred pounds of muscle and wombat flew into his side. Vombatidae dug his powerful claws into Azeroth's side and the demon roared in agony.

Wombly, following Vombatidae's lead, lifted her crossbow and took a shot. The bolt followed the path of her eye and, as Azeroth turned to respond to Vombatidae's attack, the crossbow bolt flew into the amulet. Suddenly the room shook and the demon stared down at the dark red stone on the chain and his eyes widened.

Panicked, the Prince of Chaos grabbed the chain and launched it as far away as he could. Teen feet from Azeroth and thirty feet high in the air the amulet lost its color. Then, after a half second delay, a wave of blood red energy radiated out from the gem. When the energy slammed into Azeroth the demon growled in pain and felt his power being sucked from him.

But the wave hit Vombatidae as well and the wombat wailed in pain. Wombly felt the mighty wombat's pain profoundly, though not physically she did feel sympathy, and immediately she began to speak words she didn't know to say.

"Go home Vombatidae! Go home!" The wombat turned and looked at Wombly for a moment that seemed like many to both the young woman and the astral beast then began to fade into nothingness. Purple smoke radiated off its body and floated towards the idol in Wombly's pocket.

Azeroth was wounded and the amulet destroyed. Navok, in his younger form, glared at Azeroth with dark orange eyes. The wizard was chanting already now that the amulet, imbued with some sort of anti-magic spell, was destroyed.

The vampire, Navok, finished his spell and an orb of darkness flew towards the demon. Azeroth accepted the spell on the chest, ignoring the burning effects as if they were natural, then responded in kind. Azeroth's spell, a fiery-red pea, flew forward and slammed into the ground behind Navok. The pea expanded on contact and flames burst outwards from the pea. The fire bit at Navok but had little other effects.

Navok, chanting all the while, had finished his spell and a wave of icy blue shot forward. The spell hit Azeroth, who grunted in pain, and immediately the demon's red color was lost. His towering figure was slowed and Azeroth couldn't respond with a spell in time.

Navok's second spell slammed into Azeroth, engulfing him in a weird, green smoke, and suddenly Azeroth was smaller. The demon roared and it wasn't as mighty as before. But where Azeroth had lost physical strength he'd gained in magical strength. Navok knew this and expected the next spell, a giant fist, before it came.

Thus Navok evoked a power known only to some vampires. He'd learned it from one of the greatest vampires of all time and where his form had been there only remained an illusion. His corporeal body had become a dark smoke that floated along the floor. Azeroth's fist closed its fingers around the illusion and Navok appeared to the left. Navok had been chanting that entire time and three spells shot out, each one a spell of healing, which was rare for a wizard, much less a vampire-wizard.

The spells hit Tank, Benny and Ashe.

"You're not as strong as you were physically," Navok began but Azeroth sneered, cutting Navok off, "I have gained magically, you fool!" The demon, standing now at eight feet tall, began to chant and wave his hands as he went through a spell but Navok cut him off with his own spell, a trigger.

"Your amulet wasn't the only artifact from the broken realm," Navok said with more confidence than anyone but Azeroth had known during that battle as he pulled a fist-sized chunk of stone from within his robe.

The stone, dark red in color, seemed to steal the color from around it much like Azeroth's had. Azeroth finished his spell but it had no effect. The demon, realizing that he was now physically weaker because of Navok's spell before, snarled. He realized, also, that his strength had been replaced by skill with magic. But magic was no longer a factor in this battle.

Lidia held the door with her portal but the zombies had filed into the room, fitting as many as possible in the hallway. They walked atop each other and stood so close to each other that they were nearly falling over one another. But the pressure on the walls was too much. The walls began to crack, starting at the goo that'd held the zombies back for several moments.

Outside Deabla, not even looking at the outside, where zombies climbed atop each other to get to the people, grabbed Denerick.

"What is dis?" Denerick asked but Deabla didn't answer, only pointed to the wall. It hadn't broken yet but Denerick realized that Deabla had a skill, a gift. He could see where things of no small importance would happen. Just as Denerick went through this in his mind a hand tore through the wall, breaking the meager strength of the wood.

Several zombies poured through. Denerick charged.

Azeroth's weapons, the whip and sword, were no longer on fire. Navok's rock was larger and its effects more drastic than Azeroth's humble amulet-gem had been.

Tank was standing now, though with only a portion of his usual strength, on one side of Azeroth while Ashe stood on the other. Benny, behind him, lifted his dirk into a throwing position. Ashe began a seemingly blind charge.

Azeroth turned to Ashe, thinking to take her out with a single attack, but Ashe's charge was calm and collected and her blades were in position. She dodged Azeroth's still mighty attack and lashed out with her blade. But Azeroth was still quick and her blade hit nothing but air. From Azeroth's back Tank swung his flail and the demon barely dodged.

Azeroth, Tank and Ashe fought. Azeroth was forced to dodge Tank's attacks while his blade was positioned into defensive parries against Ashe's quick slashes, lunges and swipes. The demon was fast and strong but Tank and Ashe had learned to work together quite well. Benny, standing behind Azeroth, bided his time, waiting for Azeroth to slip.

Tank swung his flail across, the ball at shoulder level, and Azeroth jumped back. Ashe took that opportunity to jump forward before the demon was balanced and she pressed her attack. Azeroth, on his heels, could barely hold his position. When Tank stepped forward, flail spinning, the demon was forced a step back.

Ashe stepped forward then was forced to dodge a sword swipe but Azeroth. The demon took a slam as Tank's flail hit his shoulder for the aggressive action. The demon roared in pain. But Azeroth was far from defeated. He slapped across with his hand, his whip following, and managed to wrap the thong of the whip (the corde) around Tank's left arm.

Azeroth jerked backwards and Tank was pulled forward by the demon's inhuman strength. The demon, grinning, lifted his blade into a killing position and Tank saw his death oncoming...

Then Azeroth jerked backwards again. A crossbow bolt had dug deep into the demon's right side shoulder. Burning red orbs snapped upwards toward Wombly, who was raising her second crossbow to shoot. Azeroth almost bounded forward when suddenly he felt a punch from behind.

The demon tried to ignore the punch but when he felt his blood flowing down his back he looked only to find a dirk sticking right next to his spine. Azeroth was considering the pain he felt when a second crossbow bolt flew into his side.

Azeroth, still not weakened too much to fight, turned to attack when he felt a blade cut his hamstring at the same time as a flail, now held by two hands, slam into his forehead. The demon fell backwards and glared at Tank. Blood poured down the demon's face and blood red orbs were now covered in blood.

Lidia gasped in pain, the barrier fell. The press of the zombies was too much. Copla released a spell of fire into the room, exploding the entire hallway. Many zombies were burned until they couldn't move or killed outright but it wasn't enough. There were too many. They climbed over the sides.

The group had been forced into a corner, Jeffy and Sean, the Nose Breaker, at the side of the building, killing any zombies trying to climb over the side. Denerick, Tuff and Marko stood at the outside. Copla and Lidia stood behind them, offering aid where they could, while Maria, Esmeralda, Deabla and Tamara all stood in the middle, trying to help anyway possible.

Maria saw a zombie pulling at Sean. She gasped as he was pulled from the roof into the mass of zombies below. She heard his screams and felt chills move up her spine. She didn't have time to feel for the press of zombies re-began immediately.

She rushed forward, against Deabla's protests, and kicked out at the creature. It grabbed her leg and pulled, trying to bite her, but Deabla was right behind her. He grabbed her shoulders and pulled back. The zombie lost its grip and fell backwards, taking another down beside it. Maria saw that more were coming, though, and knew she had to do something.

She chanted for a moment and released a spell of fire, one she'd never learned and that had no shape or pattern, just destruction. The flames burst forward, biting at the zombies and burning many to ash immediately.

Maria almost smiled at the success but it'd taken too much energy and she fell backwards, unconscious. Deabla, before she even fell, groaned and caught her. Esmeralda rushed forward and tried to take her place Deabla grabbed her. She protested but Deabla silenced.

"Wait!" He said.

Azeroth stared at Tank as the stocky man stood over him.

"Demon's have a rare gift. We can tell the turning point of our killer's life and tell them something they can't unlearn," Azeroth whispered so just Tank could hear. Tank was lifted his flail overhead, ready to bring it down for the killing blow, when Azeroth said, "Maria was raped. You weren't there to protect her and she'll never forgive you." Tank hesitated and Azeroth grinned.

"If you two are together she will die a terrible death and live a terrible life filled of regret. If you pursue your love for her she will be killed by it and you will have been the cause," Azeroth cackled victoriously, "You really believe you will ever be happy?" Time slowed for Tank and Azeroth in that moment. There was a connection between them.

It was a disturbing connection but one Tank couldn't break.

"You really believe you are what she's looking for? You're trash, the son of a drunk knight who was orphaned at too young an age to learn how to raise a child! You aren't worth the dresses she throws away after balls. She'll find herself a good man, a strong one, a smart one. A man who is everything you aren't!"

Azeroth grinned and his eyes mocked Tank, "You'll never find happiness and when you die, I'll make sure you come to my own level of hel-" Tank was splattered with blood as the demon's head snapped back, a bolt in his eye. The connection was ended and time continued like normal.

Tank, shaken, gasped but had no other response.

Wombly lowered her crossbow.

"Well," Benny said as he retrieved his dirk from the demon's back, "That's that."

The wraith heard its master's fall magically and knew that Azeroth was dead. Immediately it released its hold over the undead of Keell and Sprinkleberry. It was hard for the wraith, a creature of chaos and darkness, to give up somewhere around ten thousand bodies but it knew that the spell-masters of this world would be looking for the controller of the bodies.

It had no intention of dying anytime soon. Thus, its magical grasp faded and it released the bodies to their slumber.

Tank and the others walked to the door. No one spoke, for they were deep in thought. There was little anyone had to say. Tank and Ashe reached the giant door first and opened. A muffled noise lifted their eyes and Tank couldn't suppress a grin.

"You crazy bastard," Tank chortled while Ashe and Wombly just laughed.

Mave limped forward, coated in blood, some of it red like his own but most of it was a black ooze.

"Killed him?" Mave asked and Tank nodded. He looked to Ashe, grinned, "What's your name again?" Ashe gave a small smile back and looked downward.

"I'll be needing a drink," Mave muttered to Tank.

## **Chapter Twenty Five: The End**

The dead had literally fallen to the ground around them. The Nose Breakers and Hornet-Lancers then watched as Tank and his surviving friends emerged from the palace. The Sprinkleberrians had all gathered.

"Do we have any others in the city?" Tank asked and Nigel nodded the head the negative.

"Do we need to leave any?" Nigel asked and Aubrey nodded her head the positive, "We need a few to stay back to keep General, and soon to be Governor I imagine, in check."

"Who?" Bear asked and Aubrey shrugged. They needed to get back to Sprinkleberry, though, and fast. No one knew how their families or friends fared and were determined to find out as soon as possible. Thus, their decision to leave Navok behind was rushed. Navok nodded, back in his older man disguise, and looked at Benny, Tank, Wombly and Ashe to keep their mouths shut.

The message, relayed in his orbs that were now dark brown, was well recieved.

The other members left that night, marching back to Sprinkleberry as quickly as possible.

Jev had regained the palace only to find the dried up corpses of his family and many guards and even more civilians. It was a sad scene. The army immediately began to rebuild. The corpses, moved out of the palace as quickly as possible on Riorden's suggestion, were buried quickly. That was what saved Genral Suko and the rest.

The corpses were outside the burned walls and an army of a thousand stornig held the palace against the undead. Then, one day, they simple stopped coming.

Jev, now King of Sprinkleberry, didn't argue the point and immediately sent men out, trying to collect as many people as possible. Of Sprinkleberry's original ten thousand people only a thousand and a half, a week later, was present.

There were more people in the city, Jev knew, but they wouldn't be able to collect them all.

To his delight Tuff and Marko had shown up with a group of hardy survivors, and in that group two wizards, though one was very novice, and a priest resided. This was of great use.

"We can use them," he had said, "They'll help a lot."

The Hornet-Lancers and Nose Breakers returned several days later. The city was burnt, rolled over, kicked in the gut and broken but its core remained strong and they began to build out again. Jev

was happy to see that Commander Aubrey, Sergeant Robert and Bear had returned. They'd be helpful in the extreme.

It was going to be a long winter, which was heading their way, but Jev knew that with helpful allies they'd find a way.

*Six Months passed.*

Tank sat in a medium sized room, deep in contemplation. He was at a table in the middle, shoulders hunched slightly, staring off into the space in front of him. Around him were two other tables, each with seats enough for several dozen to sit at. At the sides of the room were beds, enough to house the same people who might sit at the tables.

But the room was quiet and people were in their beds. It was night and the inner palace, where they were housed still, was secure.

Tank looked over at the group of beds that had been handed over to him, Ashe, Wombly, Denerick, Maria, Deabla, Arlon, Esmeralda, Copla and Lidia. They were a family now, though Copla and Lidia were still new and awkward, forged by hard time. As Tank smiled to himself, feeling genuine happiness at knowing these people, he couldn't help but think of Maria.

But as she floated into his mind, seducing his mind with but a thought of her image and with the sound of her voice, his smile disappeared and was replaced by an expression that could be called both perplexed and frustrated.

Azeroth's words still followed him. He lost sleep more than a little in thinking about it.

"What is it?" He heard from behind. He turned to see Wombly walking up. She smiled at him and it was warm. Tank admired the way she looked in the dim light. She was beautiful and Tank knew it.

Her big brown eyes, inquisitive and curious, were filled with such knowledge and with a refreshing sense of clarity. Her smile, so very warm and caring, matched her eyes in its clarity and just by looking at her as she smiled he could tell she cared deeply.

"It's nothing," Tank replied and Wombly made direct eye contact with him. Her smile lessened and that saddened Tank more than a little.

"Tank, I've known you for almost a year now," she said, "I know you well enough to know that something is wrong... let me in." She smiled again, "I'm here for you."

Tank smiled back for a moment and Wombly said, "There's the Tank I know," she laughed and they shared a moment of sincere friendship. Then Tank's smile faded. He sat at the table and Wombly sat across from him.

"Azeroth told me-"

"You two talked?"

"Yes."

Wombly seemed to grow unhappy at the mere mention of Azeroth's name and the thought that he and Tank had spoken was more than a little disturbing to her.

"Azeroth told me that he could see my future, or a glimpse of it at least."

"And?"

"He said that if Maria and I got together it wouldn't end well. We'd never be happy... He told me that I wasn't what she could be with," Tank said. He looked downwards, "He said that if she and I were together it'd kill her. I've asked around, asked as many wizards and priests and priestesses as I could find and they have all said that demon's have been known to exhibit that ability.

"I'd ignore it if it wasn't so... likely."

Wombly stared for several moments, then sighed.

"You love her," she said more than asked and Tank had no response for her. "And that's why you can't take the chance of getting her killed." Tank didn't respond, only looked down. His eyes watered slightly and Wombly reached forward and grabbed his shoulder, then his chin and forced him to look

up at her.

"You'll do what's right, and that's something only you know. We're assuming he's right here and it would not be the first time a demon told a lie," she said. Tank didn't look up. "Just... don't jump to any conclusions here. I know you care for her, maybe more than for yourself, but she feels for you. I know she does."

Deabla, sitting on his bed, looked over. He'd heard every word. He stood and walked over. As he did so he looked back at Maria. She'd heard every word, he knew. He looked as Esmeralda. She'd heard also. Sighing, he walked over to Tank and offered his own support.

*Three months passed.*

Tuff and Marko sat in a small house just outside the palace. Jev had set it aside for them. Marko was seeming more and more like an old man everyday. His hair had greyed and he walked a little more slowly. Tuff saw the sadness in Marko's eyes.

"He was like your son," Tuff stated and Marko, a distant look in his eyes, didn't respond. Neither had to specify who 'he' was. Glen had been Marko's companion for a long, long time. Neither man had the will to speak for many minutes.

"War has ever been a mistake," Marko finally said, "And any noble who leads his men into battle for reasons short of threatening the lives of every man, woman and child should know that he is threatening the lives of many for the sake of few."

Tuff had nothing to say in response. Marko had spoken little in the last months and this was the first time Marko had spoken about their combat, or rather, combat in general.

"We went to fight that war because Glen was certain that we were all in danger. I understand that we were," Marko's words were quiet, "I'm certain we will never know peace, at least not in my life time, now that the gangs have risen up." Because Sprinkleberry had been put into such chaos many people had taken their chances and created their own mini-kingdoms.

Now that order had been restored they were no longer able to stand up directly against the army of Sprinkleberry. Thus they had become gangs or guilds, no longer bent on controlling their own tiny worlds as monarchs. But they didn't simply give up. Now they were moving around the city and carving out areas where they had major influence over the actions of people.

Said influence was often enforced by a slit throat or a blade in someone's ribs.

"Was it worth it?" Marko asked, "Did Glen and I offer enough to this world that his death was warranted? That it was worth it?" Tuff had no answer. Marko expected none.

"No," the older man's voice was still barely more than a whisper, "No it wasn't. But he died as a man ought to, in the heat of battle, fighting for something he believed in. I do believe in some higher being or another. And if there is one for justice, then he is up there, looking down on us. And I think he is happy." As if saying that lifted some weight or another off his chest Marko stood.

He looked to Tuff for several moments.

"You know they offered us a position as leaders, right?" Tuff asked.

"There is no place in their army for me," Marko said, "But I do fear that training will be needed and soon. There is darkness on the horizon. I don't know what created the undead and made them come upon us, but I felt a presence when it first came. And I still feel it now.

"It is biding its time," Marko looked at Tuff, "And I believe that we will need our blades before too long. What will your job be?"

"I'm to help train new soldiers," Tuff answered. Marko was silent for many moments before finally speaking.

"Train them as well as you can. For death is coming. And if they aren't as prepared as possible then you are just adding to the ranks of the undead. A darkness is coming. And this struggle has just begun."

"So... what now?" Tank asked. He looked at the new Harold's Hill, rebuilt fully. Esmeralda stared at it and smiled. The city was almost fully retaken. Harold's Hill had been located and guards posted around it while workers rebuilt it.

The city was becoming alive again. The first snows would be coming their way soon, at anytime then, and people were scrambling to get prepared again. Two thousand five hundred people lived in Sprinkleberry. It'd be years before the city had what it was before but it was better than nothing. Keell wasn't any better.

The lightning had done more damage than all the boozers and zombies combined. The undead at Keell had also done just the same damage. Keell was in worse shape, in reality, and trading between the two cities was forced to start.

Also, a strange thing was happening to the south. Rain had been pouring to the south non-stop for what seemed months now. An ocean, it seemed, was rising. Trees and grass were beginning to grow as if by magic. It was strange but no one complained. Crops grew faster and easier than ever before and the sand was no longer coarse and thin.

Much of the water had stuck in the sand and it was becoming soil overnight. Once again it seemed like magic was making an effect. Thousands had died, more than anyone could count, but things had been gained and it seemed, for the first time in what seemed forever to Tank and his friends, things seemed hopeful.

"Now," Esmeralda said, "We make a home." She smiled and hugged Tank, who returned it enthusiastically.

They all began to walk forward but Mave and Benny, who'd stayed with them for the last nine months. Wombly noticed this and stopped. Everyone else looked at her and they all stared at Benny and Mave.

"What is it?" Tank asked and Mave shrugged.

"Arnold had family in Tulan," Mave said. Tulan was a town far to the West, beyond mountains and the edge of the desert, "He spoke of a mother who cared for him but he was cast out in exile for some reason or another. We're going to go tell her of his death."

"Tulan's a long trip," Tank said and Benny just laughed.

"Couple hundred miles shouldn't be too hard, especially if we're not running from zombies or boozers or enemy soldiers the entire time," Benny said and Tank nodded. Mave and Benny said good-bye then turned to leave.

"You can come here," Ashe said, stepping forward towards the two departing figures, "Always. You can always come here." Mave smiled and nodded.

"We thank you," Mave said.

That night they sat in Harold's Hill. Esmeralda behind the bar, Denerick in his corner, Tank, Wombly, Ashe and Deabla at the bar. Maria was carrying drinks out to a pair of men who'd been rebuilding the inn the day before. Alron was tending to Tank's horses, Deina and Leata, who'd been returned as if by magic.

Copla and Lidia were sitting near Denerick, playing some game or another with their magic.

At the side of the bar lay Vombatidae lounged, a bowl of thick soup on the ground in front of him. The giant creature lazily drank the soup though it was more for recreation than anything else. The astral native needed no food or drink but did enjoy the taste and flavor of this realm's food and drink.

Maria got back to the bar and sat at down next to Deabla. She looked over at Tank, who stared down at the bowl in front of him. Deabla saw this and cleared his throat. Tank looked over at Deabla, having grown accustomed to responding to the young man's cues.

Tank and Maria made eye contact when he looked over and Tank looked away as he had done almost everytime before. Maria looked downwards, upset, and Deabla cleared his throat again. Tank looked once again and then smiled at Maria for a moment.

"Can we talk outside?" He asked. Maria nodded. They stood up and departed. Everyone at the table raised eye brows but held their questions back. Once Tank and Maria got outside the door they whispered among themselves.

"So what is it?" Maria asked, "Why can't you look at me anymore?" Tank looked down then up at her. He felt his body tense and stomach turn when he made eye contact her and struck by just how beautiful she was at that moment. He couldn't deny the way she made him feel for his heart beat, sped up at that moment, was indication enough for him.

"Because you're beautiful," he said softly, barely able to force the words passed the lump in his throat. Maria stared at him for several moments.

"What?" She asked, "That doesn't even make sense."

"I can't explain.." Tank began, "It's... too hard."

"Well do it!" Maria shouted, "We came here together because you loved me! I knew you loved me and I used you and it made me feel like a parasite! But you told me I had helped you. Well you helped me! I was hurt and you were there for me... you did everything you could for me and you even saved the world!

"Well... I love you now!" Maria calmed down after shouting at him and Tank stared into her brown eyes. Tears streaked down her cheeks and he wanted nothing more than to gently wipe them away. He almost did.

He almost stepped forward, almost embraced her. He saw so many possibilities and saw exactly what he'd wanted to see for almost ten years of his life right before him. He saw her, vulnerable and open to him, asking for him to be with her, and he couldn't understand why he didn't move forward at that moment.

Then he remembered. He saw Azeroth's eyes, saw his grin, saw everything that made up Azeroth's leer and saw his razor sharp teeth. He saw it all and it terrified him. But that was nothing at all compared to the fear he held that she would be killed early because of him.

His voice was little more than a whisper, "You'll die if we're together." Maria stared at him for several moments, "What?"

"Demons can see the future of the one who kills them. Before he died he said that if I was with you, that if we were together, you would be killed early," Tank's words were soft and gentle. He was being sensitive as he could possibly be.

They stared and blue orbs met brown orbs. Tank fought tears while Maria simply let them roll down her face.

"I won't let you die for me," Tank said, "I won't let you get killed because of me." There was no response.

Tank looked up and to the side to see Ashe staring at them from the roof. She paled slightly then climbed back into the inn. Maria, looking over also, looked forward to see Tank distracted. She stepped forward and before he could react reached forward to grab his shoulders. She pulled him in and their lips touched.

Both lost themselves in the moment.

After many seconds they pulled away from each other and Maria looked up at him, "I don't want to live without you."

"And I don't want to live without you," Tank said softly. "But I don't want you to die for me..."

"There's no life I'd rather live," Maria said and Tank turned, enraged, "I... If you died and I am left here without you..." he kicked the road, suddenly unsure of himself, "I can't let you... if we're together..."

Maria rushed forward and slapped him. He stared at her, "I don't care," she whispered.

Tank's eyes met hers.

"I won't kill you," he said. He turned and walked towards the inn. Maria stared at him through

teared up eyes. She felt a hole in her chest. Tank turned before he got inside, "I will never not be your friend. I will always be there for you. But if the demon tells truth I will not endanger you."

Tank stepped inside just in time to see Esmeralda rush into her position on the bar. Wombly, sitting in her chair, tried to look like she hadn't heard anything. Ashe, staring at Tank, made no attempt to hide the fact that she'd heard. Deabla already knew what would have happened but he hid that well.

"You truly believe the demon?" Esmeralda asked and Tank nodded. Behind him Maria walked in.

Tank looked back and saw that she was stone faced.

"I can defend myself well enough," she said, "But if you truly believe that we can't be... then I will find someone else." Her voice was steady but it was obvious she was pained. Tank, realizing that moment that he'd put his stock in a demon's prophecy on its death-bed, could only wonder if he'd made a terrible mistake.

She walked past him and to their room.

"She'll find someone better anyway," Tank forced himself to say. Deabla, who'd walked up just in time to hear that, patted him on the shoulder.

"I doubt there are any better," was all Deabla said. Tank considered his actions during their war. He'd killed men on accident or on purpose, if he was in a rage, even though they were innocent. He considered everything he'd ever done, up until this moment.

"I... am a monster," Tank said, looking away from his friends.

"I don't think you are!" Esmeralda said but Deabla, who knew something was on the horizon and that they'd need monsters, only sighed.

"This world will need you," Deabla said, "because things are coming. Things that are terrible and dangerous. There is something in the air, something that will keep men up at night, whether that time in the day or that time in their lives, and we will need people like you." He smiled at Tank, who had no smile to return. Deabla finished his little speech.

"Something is coming... and destroying it, saving everyone, will be a monster's job."