

# A Monster's Job: Fire on the Lightning Chain

## Part One: The Fire

### Prologue:

The caravan moved forward steadily but slow. Every couple of seconds the front wagon, which was jam-packed to its fullest holding weight, tilted to the left slightly. The front wheel on that side had been knocked off center many miles before. The other three wagons behind it were similarly packed and had their own malfunctions and each was pulled by a very tired and overworked team of stubborn donkeys.

For the four wagons there were a total of twenty guards. This was a little high but the leader of the caravan was wealthy and had no intentions of losing this load, which would make him even richer. Each guard rode on a horse, a weapon on his hip or strapped to his back and a bow on the side of his horse.

The guards were heavily built but also lithe. They were comfortable with the weapons that they used. Their eyes, all dark colors, had dark paint, darker than their skin, under them. The men, hillmen from the far west, were deadly silent and their eyes scanned the field in front of them. Their focus was sharp as a razor.

The grass around them still made the guards, Hadami mountain men, uncomfortable. The land that they walked upon, now grassy and alive, had been a barren waist land just three years ago. Where there were now bushes and young trees, all growing at unusually fast rates in this environment, there had been dunes of sand or flat rock.

But the world around them, once a terrible desert and now fertile and vital, had changed. And it hadn't helped the men of the mountains. There were three big cities in this desert. Keell and Sprinkleberry had been around for as long as anyone could remember. The two cities were under one rule, the rule of King Jev, the recently orphaned prince of Sprinkleberry.

He'd been the youngest son and the last heir to the throne of Sprinkleberry. Keell, about sixty eight miles to the east of Sprinkleberry, had its own monarch before the war between Sprinkleberry and Keell.

Keell had been taken over by a demon called Azeroth, the Prince of Chaos, and he had led the city on an attack on Sprinkleberry. The aggressive city, Keell, and her armies might have had a chance at taking over the heavily defensive Sprinkleberry if the demon hadn't simply been trying to create as much carnage as possible, for every dead soul fed the demon's power.

And death was all the same to the demon, whether it was a Keellian or a Sprinkleberrian soldier that died. So the Keellians were forced to attack in very aggressive, and often suicidal, manners. After maybe a few weeks of battle the leader of Keellian forces, General Sevrin, turned on Keell and aligned his forces with those of Sprinkleberry to take back his home, which he knew had been taken over by an evil force.

But Azeroth saw this ploy coming and brought down an unprecedented number of boozers, giant demons that had once been mosquitos before infected by magic from a giant battle over the ocean that, a hundred years before, had been eighty miles south of Keell and Sprinkleberry. The boozers had slaughtered many soldiers but eventually they, too, were made almost ineffective against the Keellians.

An attack on Sprinkleberry from hundreds, maybe even thousands, of boozers had turned the Sprinkleberry army around and General Sevrin turned on Keell without the aid of the Sprinkleberrian army, though he was offered the aid of two elite forces from Sprinkleberry: the Nose Breakers, who were renowned for their ability to fight on foot against any type of force, and the Hornet-Lancers, a group of horsemen that could serve as anything heavy infantry soldiers to mobile archers to horseback

messengers.

Azeroth, one more major trick up his sleeve, summoned a wraith to raise the dead to serve his cause. Thus Keell's main army was caught outside the guards and barely made it out with their lives as hordes of undead, all the men and women who had died in the war, turned on their friends and foes from life.

Sprinkleberry, which had been destroyed by the boozers, became a pitched battlefield and those that had survived in the city were the strongest, smartest and luckiest. In many cases they ran into each other and either helped one another or killed one another. The city, thrown in chaos, had to be taken back by force from gangs and 'tiny kingdoms' that had formed in the weeks without the crown.

Azeroth had been slayed by a group of Sprinkleberrians. With the demon's death the undead became dead once again and the boozers left the cities, no longer pulled by a spell into the human cities. The demon, who had 'stolen' the ocean to the south of the cities and life from the forests, grass and rivers around the city, was dead. And with his death life returned to the land, as magically inspired as it'd been stolen years before.

Thus, with new life, more people returned to the area and the grass began growing.

But the third city, Walston, had been founded afterwards. It was about fifty miles to the west of Sprinkleberry, just ten miles past a moderate chain of mountains (called the Lightning Chain because it was hit by lightning so often) that was to Sprinkleberry's west also. It was about fifteen miles north of Sprinkleberry also. Walston wasn't nearly as large as Sprinkleberry or Keell but it was growing quickly and, it seemed, as magically as the green 'stuff' that grew around it.

Thus the rich caravan driver was from Walston and on his way to Sprinkleberry with goods.

But the main problem for the mountain men was that they'd long ago produced terraces upon which they could grow crops extremely well. But with the return of the fertile land the mountains were no longer the main source of food and they weren't as influential as before.

Because of this many men, no longer taking in wealth from their farms, had left the mountains in search of work. The twenty guards around the caravan just happened to be from a reputedly tough clan of mountain men known as Hadami. They were perhaps five miles from Sprinkleberry, in a forest that had grown tall and strong in just three years, when suddenly an arrow flew into the group.

One of the drivers was struck by the arrow, straight in the chest, and died before he fell to the ground beside the wagon. Several more arrows flew in and six Hadami died. One of the other wagon drivers was killed as well. The guards rushed about, unused to fighting in the forest, and tried to find who was shooting at them.

A second volley of seven arrows flew in and four more Hadami fell to the ground. After this volley a dozen men, all well armed and armored, rushed in from the woods. The remaining ten Hadami jumped from their horses with weapons already drawn. A fierce battle commenced and well shot arrows flew into the fray, killing or wounding Hadami. But in that combat to wound with an arrow was to kill.

Four of the bandits died in the struggle but the fierce Hadami were unable to defend effectively against the well coordinated ambush. It was many moments before the last wagon was secured, for a pair of Hadami had been sleeping inside the wagon. But though they fought furiously and fiercely they were killed quickly and mercilessly by the efficient bandits.

From the woods stepped a figure dressed in browns and black. He was of average height with a lithe build, his arms strong and his legs powerful. At his side was a bow made of dark wood. On his back lay a quiver, strapped to him by brown leather. He wore two gloves, one brown and one black. On his head sat a hat of brown.

On his hip lay a sword, long and thin. He brought a thin but strong hand up to stroke his well-trimmed brown beard, which was thin like the rest of his body, as he thought to himself. His eyes, dark brown, were squinted slightly. His hair was tied in a ponytail behind his head and hidden by his hat. It was brown like his beard.

"Mlaster," said a large bandit to the side, who was bald, heavy and quite ugly. Mlaster, the man

with the rapier, the long and thin blade with a skull on its hilt, on his hip and the unmatched gloves, looked over at him.

"We took no prisoners," the big man said.

"This is a good thing, my friend," Mlaster said and the man nodded, "Dear Bullk, please begin unloading these terrible wagons. We will appreciate what they carry but they are in dreadful repair. We shalln't use them."

Bullk, the strong and tall bandit, nodded. He looked at his comrades, who were generally small and sneaky, and grinned. His nose, round and fat, matched his giant cheeks and his thick lips. His eyes, bright blue, were easy to see in his heavy face. His eye brows, the only hair seen on his body, were blonde.

"Get 'em unloaded!" Bullk ordered in a deep and threatening voice and the bandits snapped to. Seven archers rushed out of the woods to comply. Bullk silently patted the heavy axe in his hand, its head splattered with blood and gore from this battle, and pulled a rag from his clothes. Methodically he began to clean the axe, wiping away the crimson liquid as if he were simply polishing his weapon.

Mlaster, who'd walked away and headed towards his horse and their camp, smiled to himself. He might not be the King Jev of Sprinkleberry but even that high and powerful noble would be bowing Mlaster soon. He'd found a secret power in the form of a shadow and he planned on using it. Pulling his hand from his small jacket he grinned once again.

He looked down at a small flask which held the shadow and the bulk of his power. He grinned to himself. He didn't know what it was called or what the limits of its power was but he did know one thing about it.

It had said one word when he'd accidentally trapped it in this magical flask, which he'd thought a fake that some poor merchant had died trying to protect from him.

Wraith.

## Chapter One:

Benny and Mave stepped slowly through the forest. Around them life continued as if there hadn't been a desert only three short years before. It was strange to them, the two had survived in the harsh heat and the harsher dangers of the desert, that now green replaced yellow and brown replaced orange.

Above them white clouds covered the blue and no sand storms threatened. Instead harsh storms of pouring rain, just like before just with more intense winds, and lightning threatened those traveling during the storm season. Life had changed. This, to the two, was obvious.

Benny was short, about five feet four inches, and wiry. He weighed no more than a hundred and thirty pounds but if people knew him they stepped off. He was no easy mark. On his belt hung a dirk and short sword, sheathed but unstrapped. Despite his thin arms and waist he could use the weapons skillfully and any friend of his would agree that the weapons might as well have been extensions of his body.

His dark brown hair reached down far enough to curl only slightly when it reached his ears. His eyes, a dark shade of brown also, looked around suspiciously, something the 'street rat' had learned to do out of necessity at a very young age. His skin was moderately pale but had tanned in the sunlight which, despite the clouds, was still strong and hot.

Next to him walked Mave. Mave was a giant. Dark skinned and heavily muscular, he was exactly what one would describe as a 'mountain man' in this region. But he had been birthed in the city and, out of necessity, learned to survive both within the urban environment and in the harsh desert that had once surrounded the cities Keell, Sprinkleberry and Walston.

Mave was just short of six and a half feet tall. Muscle 'hung' off his giant arms and the rest of his body followed suite. He was a tall, strong and powerful man. Strapped to his back was the broad sword that had gotten Mave through more fights than he could remember. Mave hair was cut to his skin and in the sun light Mave's bald head reflected some light... which was something Benny had made fun of

Mave for many times.

"I'm telling you, she was into me. By the end of that conversation I'd jumped up in her eyes," Benny said and Mave just chuckled, a sound something that few people aside from Benny had ever heard, and, in good humor, responded, "You're right. By the end of the conversation you'd jumped up from pest to unattractive."

Benny gave a half-hearted scowl and complained, "It's not like any other guy had gotten any closer to her than I did."

"You are right," the large man agreed, "No one else got that close because they didn't force themselves on her."

"Hey, you gotta be aggressive," Benny shot back, "Don't ask don't get, right?"

"You sure asked."

"That's right! I definitely asked."

"But you didn't get," Mave smiled and Benny shrugged.

"Well, that's half the battle and I won it," the smaller young man replied. Mave looked over at him for several seconds then just smiled and shook his head.

"At least you asked."

The two's banter allowed them to ignore the unusual conditions around them. They traveled with three others who were equally disturbed by their surroundings. The group of five had become fast friends in a town to the far west called Tulan and decided to travel back to Keell and Sprinkleberry to live with friends of Benny and Mave.

The leader of the group was a strong shouldered man named Giles. Giles was just over six feet tall and had broad shoulders. He had brown hair that was cut short and dark blue eyes. His brow was usually furrowed as he sat deep in thought and more often than not he was. He wore metal armor that, previously, had been a disadvantage in the open sand of the desert but now that the green land had taken over he could wear it while they traveled.

On his back hung a two-bladed battle axe and a black shield with a purple raven built into it.

Benny and Mave moved in the front, with Giles behind them. Behind Giles was a thin young man. On his back he had three quivers and two bows. One was a short bow and the other a long bow. The thin man's name was Silo. He smiled as he skillfully spun an arrow through his fingers. His hair, black, was tied back behind his head and matched his all but black eyes. He stood at maybe five feet eight inches.

Behind Silo walked a woman named Melinda. Melinda had dark green eyes and dark green hair. She looked elven, with her pointy ears and thin but fair features. She stood at maybe five feet. She was the shortest.

The three figures chuckled at Mave and Benny's conversation, having long grown used to antics of Benny.

"How far to go?" Silo eventually turned to Melinda. She smiled then said, "May we stop for a moment?" The group complied.

She sat on the ground, feeling the ground around her. Her green eyes closed and she crossed her legs below her, sitting in a monk-like position. It was several moments before she opened her eyes. In that time nothing seemed to have happened but the area around them had grown unusually quiet... especially since they were in the woods.

"We will be to Walston in four hours at this rate," she confirmed and Silo nodded.

"Sounds right," Giles agreed. Mave and Benny turned. And they were walking again.

During the walk Silo fell behind the group a little to walk next to Melinda.

"So why did you come to this land?" he asked and Melinda looked curiously at him.

"If you don't mind my asking," Silo looked downward a little, his face blushing slightly as he did so, "I was just thinking... I've lived in Tulan my whole life and I'd never seen you before. I was just

curious about why you came here... and why you're here with us now."

Melinda smiled and Silo was lost in it for a moment. He nearly tripped on a tree root but caught himself gracefully and had Melinda been entirely human she'd not have noticed.

"Silo, you are so intuitive," she continued her smile and Silo nodded his thanks, "We are called druids in your tongue. We are beings of nature and follow the green life that spreads its love to this land now. We druids have our own magic that can be reinforced in nature and can reinforce nature... thus the relationship between us and the green life is mutual.

"When the green life came to this land we followed because the mother of all, nature, called on us and made it our duty to spread her love," Melinda looked forward then back at him, "We came to spread and feel love... and I appreciate that you have shared your love with me thus far."

Silo nodded and looked forward then back at her. Their eyes, his near black and her dark green, matched and he felt his stomach constrict slightly. But Melinda didn't seem to notice, or at least she made no indication that she cared if she had, and Silo felt immense happiness.

Then Benny called back, "I see a tower!" and the two jogged to catch up with their companions. The group of five meant to stay in Walston for several days if possible.

That night they sat in a small inn called the Lightning Bolt. The owner, a stocky man named Cadwow, offered them a room for the night if they could hunt. Silo grinned.

"I can," he said. Then he looked at Melinda, who stood next to him, and wondered if killing animals for food was against her druidic ways.

"Humans are part of her creation. So long as all of our prey's body is used then we do not disrespect her children. I have no problem with you hunting so long as you do not kill simply for sport. We are, above all else, animals just like the beast that you will no doubt slay," the druid said and Silo nodded.

"Six point gets you two nights," Cadwow said and Silo nodded to his allies as he left.

Benny and Mave sat in the corner of the room, looking at the drinks in front of them. They were sober and somber and planned to remain that way. The only reason they'd bought anything was because Cadwow insisted that if they didn't he'd have to kick them out. There were only so many seats and the Lightning Bolt was no small inn.

Melinda and Giles were out and about, looking for supplies.

"Remember when Tank punched that guard in the face when he first joined the Nose Breakers?" Benny asked and Mave cracked a grin.

"How about the time that he and Bear arm-wrestled?" Mave responded and the two shared a laugh.

"Bear's face was so red after Tank beat him that they started again," Benny smiled, "Bear won that time but I think it hurt his pride to lose at all."

"Ah the Nose Breakers," Mave said nostalgically, "I can hardly wait to meet up with them again. I'm thinking there's no better group of warriors and friends in the whole world."

"They were great conversationalists," Benny said and Mave smiled.

"Arnold was glad to be there," Benny said and the two lost their grins.

"I'm thinking he was too," Mave said quietly. Arnold had been Benny's best friend and a close friend of Mave's as well. But in one of their missions for the Nose Breakers, a notoriously rough and tumble group of soldiers in Sprinkleberry Arnold had been killed. They hadn't had time to bury him or to even mourn his loss for any amount of time until the mission had been finished.

The mission, killing the demon Azeroth, had taken much from their world and the sorrow had been shouldered and shared by all.

"I am thinking we will be happy to be there again," Mave said softly and Benny nodded in agreement.

"I agree."

Silo sat silently in the woods. His long bow was at the ready, for he needed strength and accuracy here, not the speed that his short bow offered. He had found his deer, a six point buck that strode about proudly.

"Too proudly," Silo mouthed to himself, thinking aloud. Silo admitted that he wasn't the best hunter in the world and that this deer, had it been more cautious, would have slipped right past him. But his eyes were sharp and his aim deadly accurate. This deer, had it been careful, wouldn't have been caught by his sharp eyes. And now, because of that, his deadly accuracy would be put to use.

He lifted his bow, pulling the string taut, then released the shot. The arrow flew forward hard and struck the deer in the eye. The heavy beast fell to the ground, dead. He was on his way to grab the deer when he heard the moan.

"Hmm?" He wondered. He grabbed the deer, hung it over a branch to hide it from others, then climbed a tree to scout out the source of the peculiar noise. It was many minutes of scouting when he noticed several figures stumbling forward slowly, their legs bowed slightly. Their steps were continuous and monotonous, uninterrupted except by the occasional stumble.

The beings seemed normal enough aside from their glowing orange eyes and the low moan that continuously leaked from their mouths. He noticed that they seemed to smell him.

"What are you?" He wondered as he studied their eyes when he noticed that two stood at the base of the tree he was in. They were trying to climb up, moaning the entire time, but seemed unable to grasp the branches with their fingers.

He lowered himself cautiously until he only a few feet above them when he noticed that they were missing skin. An eye brow raised, he studied them for many minutes. The darkness around them had deepened and he wondered at the lack of noise, the lack of insects chirping and of animals rustling.

He looked around and saw many pairs of orange dots in the distance.

"What is going on?" Silo wondered aloud but there would be no answer to his question aside from the low moan of the creatures. After many minutes he decided it was time to leave. The number at the base of his tree had grown to the low twenties and he had no desire to learn their goal.

He bounded from tree to tree like a squirrel. He found the deer and dropped to the ground. The eyes were lost in the woods behind him. No orange could be seen. But there weren't any animal sounds so he was wary as he made his way through the woods towards Walston.

When he got to the outer gate he saw several figures standing at the base of the wooden wall. Guards, at the top, were asking questions and making requests but the figures were banging on the wall but their fists did nothing to the thick wooden logs that made up the gate.

"Ho there!" he shouted from a tree that he'd climbed. The wooden gate was between two 'mini-mountains' that had formed away from the rest of the Lightning Chain. The guards looked upwards and struggled to see him and greeted him in a similar fashion, then asked his intentions.

"I have a deer to exchange with the Lightning Bolt for a night's stay for my friends and I," Silo shouted and the guards nodded in recognition of the inn's name.

"We'd love to let you except that we let one of these-" he pointed to the figures at the gate, "in an hour or so ago and he just attacked us!"

"Do you have a ladder?" Silo asked and one of the guards nodded in response. Silo could barely see the motion in the dark so the guard said, "Yes, we do!"

"They don't seem to be able to climb," Silo said then he pointed at a few of the figures that had turned towards the base of his own tree. They struggled and threw themselves against the tree but still couldn't climb it.

"Your powers of observations are unmatched," one of the guards deadpanned dryly. He turned and called for a ladder. Within minutes one was brought.

"My guess is you can out run them since they only really move at a slow walk, so you can make

the run, I'm sure," the guard said as he lowered the ladder. The figures at the base of the wall ignored the ladder. Silo studied that carefully.

"Alright, well... here goes nothing," Silo jumped from the tree, deer over his shoulder, and landed with a roll. He held onto the deer (he'd cut the animal's antlers off and would carve them into arrows if he could later) as he rushed towards the ladder. The figures with orange eyes stumbled in his direction but he quickly made up the ground between him and the ladder. He was up it before they got to the ladder and the guards pulled it up.

Silo stood on the wall and looked down at the figures. He could see more glowing dots in the distance.

"Any idea what these things are?" He asked and the guard shrugged.

"Not a clue," the man replied. Silo looked out again.

"I have a bad feeling about this."

Giles looked up at the side of the the mountain, Lightning Chain, and saw fires up there. He thought he could hear, ever so faintly, the sounds of battle. He wasn't sure but he decided that if there was a battle it wasn't his problem.

The mountain men, he had heard, had tribal wars with one another quite often. It wasn't his affair which one won so long as he personally wasn't threatened. But as he and Melinda walked through the city both looked up at the mountain often, more disturbed than they let on by the noise. It wasn't long before they walked back to their inn.

Silo was walking towards the inn, the moon high in the sky, when he saw a giant fire break out in the mountain above.

"What is that?" He wondered as he walked. The few people still up looked at it also. Several guards rushed by.

"What is it?" He asked and one turned.

"We are being sent to the wall to reinforce it... I heard a scout team is being sent up," the guard said.

"So this is unusual?" Silo asked but the guards were gone already. Beside him an older man snorted.

"Damn right this is unusual," the man said, "Hillmen don't use fires 'cept to cook and warm by. They don't fight with it..."

"Looks like they're fighting with to me," Silo said more to himself than to the man but the man nodded in agreement.

"Seems to be the case," the man mumbled. He turned to walk away. In the distance Silo saw figures running, his sharp eyes catching the guards moving on the walls. He wondered what was happening. Then he remembered that his friends needed him for their night's stay.

Benny looked down at his die, then up at the people across from him.

"Three threes," he said. Mave and another man at the table just chuckled while the fourth looked annoyed. Benny had spent nearly two minutes deep in thought and to say such a low-risk bet was all but completely ridiculous.

The man across from Benny glared still when Mave, who's turn was next, bet, "Seven threes."

"I call you," the man across from Mave said and all four men showed their die. Benny had six, Mave had seven, the man glaring at Benny had five and the man across from Mave had six.

The game was an interesting one. The goal was to trick each other into calling when it was dumb. Each person had a certain number of dice. Between all of them there was twenty four dice and every time one of them made a bet he guessed at the number of a number (a dice that had that number facing up) between all four men. And if a one was pointed up then it was a 'wild card' and could be

counted as any number.

Thus when Benny said three threes he was saying that between all four men, all twenty four dice, at least three were either a one or a three. It was almost guaranteed that there would be that number. But when Mave said seven threes it up'd the ante and the odds were more against him. The scowling man had called Mave because none of his dice were a one or a three, meaning that there had to be at least seven dice on either a one or a three for Mave to be correct.

They counted and the man scowled. There were four threes and six ones. He rolled one of his dice to Mave for the penalty of guessing wrong was to lose one of his dice.

Mave started this time because he won.

"Four fives," Mave said.

"One six," the scowler said. He looked down at his dice, which were hidden by stone cups, then up at everyone else. The move to go from a certain number of five to any number of sixes was okay only because six was above five. He was stuck with either going to 'five fives' or a higher number of fives or jumping up to any number of sixes.

"Two sixes," the man across from Mave said and Benny chuckled.

"Eight sixes," Benny said and Mave looked up from his die to Benny. The other two men chortled.

"Nine sixes," Mave countered and the scowling man quickly spurted, "I call!"

They showed their die and between them there were seven sixes and four ones. Mave won and the man gritted his teeth. Mave started again. Then won again and again. Several rounds later the man who had scowled had only one dice. Once he ran out of dice he would lose his chance at the money in the middle of the table.

"Twelve sixes," Mave said and the man called it.

They counted. Nine sixes and seven ones.

"Gods be damned, you must be cheating!" The man shouted and Mave. He stood up, flipping the table, and unsheathed his knife, "You haven't lost a single match yet!" Mave was standing. Seeming without a care Mave grabbed the man's wrist and easily break the man's hold.

The man growled in pain then grabbed a second dagger and slashed across at Mave. The big man didn't see it coming at all but, fortunately for him, Benny had. The smaller young man's dirk flashed forward and cut into the man's knuckles.

The man's hand stopped mid-attack. Benny applied more pressure and the man let his hand get pushed further away from Mave's body.

"I could very easily ruin this hand for the rest of your life," Benny said calmly. The man stared at Benny but the pain in his hand was too much for the man to say anything. Benny quickly applied a little more pressure, causing the man to groan, and, still calmly, said, "Do you understand me?"

The man nodded vigorously.

"Now leave," Benny said. The man nodded and, when Benny let him, scurried away.

"Thank you," Mave said and Benny shrugged.

"You've saved my butt too many times for me not to do that," he said with a smile.

"I think you won," the man who'd chuckled at Benny and sat across from Mave said. He moved to walk away also but Benny flipped him a silver coin, "Buy a drink on me, for being a good sport." Benny's charming smile was infectious and the other man nodded in thanks.

They turned to see Cadwow staring at them.

He seemed about to kick them out when Silo walked in, a deer in hand. It was then that they noticed Giles and Melinda sitting the middle of the room, watching them with a look of amusement.

"That was fun," Giles said as they made their way up to their rooms. Cadwow, having not spent a copper for good meat, was very pleased.

## Chapter Two:

Prince Jev sat, deep in thought. He was in his private room, where his books and his bed were, and this was the only time he was ever alone. Then again, he thought to himself as a page walked in inquiring about some need or another, he was never truly alone.

But this artificial isolation, some might have called it a self-made delusion, was comforting and he appreciated the illusion of alone-ness. He considered the large map that was the middle of his room, elevated on a table. It was of the area around Sprinkleberry. It stretched out for a hundred miles in each direction and on it he could see the three main points of concern: Keell, sixty eight or so miles to Sprinkleberry's east, Sprinkleberry herself and Walston, about fifty miles to the west of his city.

All three cities were under his control now. He considered how it'd come to this. Keell and Sprinkleberry had been separate entities before, two cities that had seemed friendly enough with one another and had even banded together in times of war or extreme famine or drought, but because the royal family of Keell had been over thrown by a guild of thieves and assassins called the Black Hoods- who were run by a demon no less- the two cities had gone to war.

And Sprinkleberry had come out the victor. But at a terrible cost, to all. Both cities had been ravaged and had barely limped along the first year. But for some reason, some magical reason, they had not only recovered but jumped ahead of where they'd been before.

Maybe, he dared to think, he'd done a good job as King of what was now called simply The Kingdom. Maybe, three years ago when his entire family had been killed by the boozier and zombie attack, it'd had some good effects. Maybe he was actually cut out for this responsibility.

He didn't really have time to consider it, though, for as always his isolation ended quickly and abruptly. This time it ended with a trio of sharp *raps* on his door. He recognized it before the door, as always, opened. For there was only one person in The Kingdom that he knew had the guts and boldness to open the King's door without being told to.

"Good morning Commander Aubrey," King Jev said and the woman smiled. Jev couldn't help but be touched by the warmth of her smile and, though he would have smiled anyway, was forced to smile back.

Commander Aubrey was a striking figure. Dark red hair, curly at the ends, reached down to the middle of her back. Her bangs were cut and she wore a dark grey headband to keep the hair from reaching down to her bright green eyes. She stood about Jev's height, three or four inches below six feet tall, and weighed maybe a hundred and sixty pounds.

Jev also was a good looking man. Jev's hair, blonde, was cut short. His body wasn't muscular, persay, but rather could be called lithe. He was a lean man, though his three years on the throne had taken some of the tone from his muscles, but even so he was still deadly with the long sword that hung on his belt. Commander Aubrey's bright green eyes matched King Jev's sky-blue eyes and Jev couldn't help but grin again.

"M'lord," Commander Aubrey said with the same amusement that she had since his first day as king. She had known him since he was a young child, for she was about seven years older than he, and had long grown used to picking on him. The only difference between this day and twenty years ago when Jev had been seven was that she now ended most of her mock-insults with a sarcastic, "M'lord."

Jev laughed and she smiled for a moment. But as the seriousness of the situation returned to her her smile weakened.

"What is it?" He asked and Commander Aubrey sighed.

"There are large fires on the Lightning Chain," she said and King Jev looked down at the map. The Lightning Chain was the mountain chain that Walston had been built on. The only reason Walston was built on the other side of the chain was because the forests were on that side and the wood supply had been nice.

But now forests had grown in between. Now there were tall trees everywhere and Walston could have been built anywhere.

"This doesn't bode well, I assume?" Jev asked and Aubrey shook her head.

"Not well at all. They long ago gained a deep respect for fire and it is never used in combat, only to cook food and warm themselves with. But this big a fire has never been seen before," she said.

"What do you suggest?" Jev asked and Aubrey shrugged.

"Scout it?"

"Do your Nose Breakers want the job?" Jev asked and Aubrey smiled again. The Nose Breakers were a specific group of soldiers in Sprinkleberry that had led, head first, the Sprinkleberrian armies into battle for as long as anyone could remember. Commander Aubrey was one of the three main leaders in the faction of warriors who often took missions like this.

"I'd have requested that immediately and with a messenger if that were the case," the woman replied, though, and Jev looked at her with some surprise.

"Is that fear?" He wondered aloud and Commander Aubrey's jaw tightened.

"No," she said, "Only that the Nose Breakers have been working to keep patrols up. These villages that have started in the forests," she seemed uncomfortable with the word forest, "have been asking for support in some... unusual things."

"Demon prince unusual?" Jev asked.

"We are uncertain, but it seems like these are just bandits," Aubrey said and Jev seemed relieved. Ever since he'd been on the throne he'd been waiting, and dreading, the day that the dead walked again or that boozers, a giant demon that resembled a mosquito with three probisci, or mouths, attacked in force again.

"Well, I can spare a few Hornet-Lancers, I think," Jev said and Aubrey nodded.

"I had thought the same."

"Do you think Tuff will go out there as well?" Jev asked and Aubrey gave an almost sarcastic laugh, "He will if you tell him."

"What about Marko?" Jev asked and Commander Aubrey sighed.

"That's another story."

"Will you ask for me?"

"You're asking?"

"You know me."

"I will," Commander Aubrey answered. She smiled and turned to leave. But before she was turned away completely Jev grabbed her hand.

"Whatever happens, be careful," he said and she smiled again.

"You know me."

Tuff and Marko sat on the porch of their small house. Tuff, just back from training new recruits in the royal army, enjoyed the sight of Marko snoring. Tuff was a young man, strong shouldered and with a thick and strong body. He had no facial hair and his dark brown hair was cut short. His eyes, green in color, had a certain light in them that reminded people he was young even when he spoke of battle like a seasoned veteran. Tuff was about four inches below six feet tall.

Marko was older. He stood at six feet tall now but, three years ago, had stood six feet two inches tall. His hair, once dark, was now grey and was still cut short like it had been in his days as a younger and stronger soldier. But even now, at fifty something years old, he held himself with strength when he did decide to hold himself.

Tuff and Marko had met three years before in the war between Keell and Sprinkleberry. Tuff had met Marko when both had been assigned to the front lines. Marko had been with a man who might as well have been his son called Glen. But, tragically, Glen had been killed and since the war finished it seemed like Marko had aged a dozen years.

But despite that loss Tuff and Marko had remained friends and though Marko didn't want to help in the training of new recruits, like Tuff did, he inevitably helped Tuff to break in the newer men.

That day Tuff hadn't needed Marko's help so the older man had done what he always did, sat in a rocking chair on his porch and watched the world. It was about midday when Tuff got back and Tuff, to his amusement, had found Marko deep in sleep.

Now they just sat, Marko dreaming of some long ago time and Tuff looking at the city that had, three years before, been ruined by a war no one thought possible. He was beginning to feel sleepy when he noticed three familiar figures approaching, two on horse back, one walking.

"Oh boy," Tuff said as the Commander Aubrey, Seargant Robert and Bear approached.

Seargant Robert and Bear were the other two captains of the Nose Breakers. Seargant Robert was an older man, like Marko, except that Robert had never been strong or powerful. Rather, Robert had learned to use his speed and cunning in battle. And as the former had faded the latter had grown.

Now Robert, standing at an inch below six feet tall, rode a horse with the grace of a well trained and well learned rider. He had a small mustache, grey like his short hair, that he kept well trimmed. He was slim but not weak. His eyes, despite the fact that he was old, burned with a fire that was young.

The figure that was walking was Bear, who stood at closer to seven feet than six. He weighed more than anyone cared to count and could easily eat twice the amount of food that Tuff, on a bad bet, had eaten until he threw up. Bear's giant stomach was hard, though, and his muscles were powerful and strong. Bear, a giant brown beared cut to the bottom of his chest, had one of his customary broad grins.

"Ho there skinny boy," Bear said when he was close enough for Tuff to hear him. Tuff returned the smile and nodded.

"Bear," Tuff nodded his head as he greeted.

"How are you, friend?" Bear asked and Tuff nodded again, "Great, and you?"

"I'm mighty fine, just better than ever!" Bear's grin was even broader. The three friends, Bear, Commander Aubrey and Robert, greeted and exchanged pleasantries with Tuff then looked at Marko, all of them laughing at the older man's expense, for a couple of minutes.

Then, with less of a smile than before, Robert sighed.

"As much as I wish this was only a social call we have a favor we must ask," Seargant Robert said and Tuff nodded, having suspected as much. "Giant fires have been spotted in the Lightning Chain. We ask that you might go with the Hornet-Lancers and learn what has caused them, if that is possible?"

As Robert finished his sentence he motioned towards Marko, who still slept, mouth open and snoring. Tuff smiled.

"He's still strong as an ox," Tuff said and the others were heartened to hear that, "I'll go but I have to ask why you don't just send Nigel and his riders? They can be trusted, I am sure."

"We need someone who saw the major battles of the Chaos War," Aubrey said. She referred to the war three years before, which had been named for the chaos that had caused it, resulted from it and had been present during the fighting. "Besides Nigel is busy with other things."

"We fear another demon or some other otherworldy being has come," Aubrey said, "Were we not busy with the unusual sightings around here we would charge there ourselves but the villages that are around Sprinkleberry have come to us with worries of dark magic."

Tuff nodded, "I understand. I assume King Jev has requested this?"

"He has," Bear confirmed and Tuff nodded.

"When are we leaving?"

"First light tomorrow," Robert said, "We are thinking of asking Tank and his friends. But they have been... troubled recently. We're not so sure that they'd be inclined to just rush out and defend this world when theirs seems on the brink of imploding." Tuff nodded.

He'd met Tank and Ashe and Wombly and the others who had actually be involved in the slaying of Azeroth the Chaos Prince but wasn't exactly close to them. When they'd first met there had been some drama between Tank and a beautiful girl named Maria, whom Tank had met during the chaos of Sprinkleberry's struggle.

"I will ask if you like," Tuff said and Commander Aubrey shrugged.

"It is your call. This is your mission... Tank and his friends are valuable and powerful so if you can get them to come along then I'd suggest doing it," she said. Tuff nodded.

"Wish me luck," he mumbled.

Esmeralda, an attractive red head who had seen maybe twenty winters, sighed as she watched Tank working. Esmeralda Housekeep owned and ran her father's inn, Harold's Hill. She'd kept the name even after her father, Harold, had died about three years before and now she, with the help of close friends, ran it.

Her little brother, Alron, stood next to Tank as the young man taught the twelve year old boy about being a blacksmith. She saw the results of his work with Tank for just three years ago Alron had been a scrawny little kid. Now, even at such a young age, she saw his body getting stronger and thicker, more suited for the hard labor of the anvil.

She watched as Tank's muscled arm brought the heavy hammer down onto hot metal. He was a powerfully built young man, stocky and strong. More than once he'd been referred to as, 'small as a pig but strong as an ox,' and that fit the stocky young warrior. Tank's dark brown hair reached down to his shoulders, curling at the end, and his eyes, a deep shade of blue, were always filled with either intensity or deep thought. And always with a sense of understanding.

The entire time she watched she wondered what Tank could be thinking. She knew there was tension in him. She could see that easily enough in the tightness of his shoulders; he was a hard worker, she knew, but he only ever spent this much time working instead of training with his flail or talking with his friends when he had something on his mind.

"What is bothering you?" Esmeralda wondered aloud and she heard a small laugh from the side.

"What?" Esmeralda complained to Wombly, who was a few years older than Esmeralda. The young woman looked up from her small instrument, one she'd made herself. It resembled a banjo, with the long thin neck and the round base. Five strings ran up. She played a small, sad sounding tune, but one that Esmeralda, and the rest of their friends, had grown used to. Throughout the song, despite her practice, there were errors. The strings were close together and she found the nimbleness of her fingers lacking. But for the companions the errors made the song all the more personal.

"You can't see it?" Wombly asked. She was maybe five feet seven inches tall, a couple inches taller than Esmeralda, and had an attractive build. She wasn't necessarily curvy or voluptuous but she was solid and thin. Tank and others who had found her attractive had found long ago that her deep and dark brown eyes, so filled with curiosity and intelligence, understanding and empathy, was responsible for a large portion of her attractiveness. Her brown hair, reaching down to the middle of her back, was tied behind her head in a pony tail and, weirdly, two dreads hung at almost the same length as the rest of her hair.

Esmeralda's own light green eyes matched Wombly's dark brown orbs and there was an understanding between the two. Wombly had long ago picked up on Esmeralda's affection for Tank and Esmeralda knew that. Wombly, knowing Tank, hadn't offered any words of encouragement or any kind of discouragement but had offered insight on Tank's complex mind.

"Maria and he have been fighting," Esmeralda said, "But what's new about that?"

"Maria's gotten much better at magic and we all know why Tank won't be with her," Wombly said, referring to the dying words of the demon Azeroth, a prophecy that Maria would die early and painfully if Tank was with her, "So she's worked at her strength in magic... Copla is a fair teacher.

"It's really no surprise that now that she's strong she's going to be doing more or less dangerous stuff to prove herself to him," Wombly said, "Something in her changed after the chaos war." Copla was the wizard that Esmeralda, right before the chaos war reached into Sprinkleberry's actual city walls.

"So he's worried that with Copla's training Maria will go out and get into dangerous situations,"

Esmeralda said and Wombly nodded, "But you know that's not all, right?" Wombly posed the question and Esmeralda gave her a curious look.

"Demon's aren't exactly honest, are they? Well, how fitting wouldn't it be if Tank *not* being with Maria is what gets her killed," Wombly explained and Esmeralda looked back at Tank, "He's trying to weigh the odds of a lie from a demon's lips to destroy his life versus a truth to destroy his life."

"Well... damn," Esmeralda said and Wombly nodded.

"I think he's making a mistake, personally," Ashe said from the other side of the table. She'd sat in silence the entire time but that wasn't unusual for the silent and thoughtful warrior. Ashe was maybe an inch shorter than Wombly but she was a little thinner and a little more muscular. Ashe's eyes, blue as a clear sky, were thin not unattractively so. Her blonde hair reached down to the bottom of her shoulder blades.

As always, Ashe wore her light armor and her twin katannas. Ashe was a warrior, an assassin in past times, but she'd given up that life style. Wombly was more of an inventor and a thinker, the person who designs great weapons to make up for her lack of skill in combat. Ashe often used the weapons that Wombly built.

Not to say that Wombly wasn't a good fighter. No, the entire group was lethal, though Wombly tried to avoid lethal attacks. Wombly, Tank and Ashe had been a trio in fights many times. They often fought back to back to back, weapons up and eyes open, spinning and picking up each other's battles before one could fight an enemy long enough for weariness to take effect in the larger battles.

The three had actually been the fighters to kill Azeroth, with a little help from Benny, who'd also been a Nose Breaker in the chaos war.

They were all still deep in their conversation, Ashe's remark sparking some wondering from Wombly but silence from a now tight-lipped Esmeralda, when Tuff walked in. He strode forward and in the corner a figure looked up.

Denerick, a powerful fighter from the mountains, recognized the strength in Tuff's movements immediately. But the large, dark-skinned mountain warrior recognized Tuff for who he was and greeted Tuff with a wave. Tuff, who stood nearly a foot shorter than the powerfully built Denerick, nodded and smiled in response.

Denerick let his hand drop from the hilt of his scimitar, a long, curved blade from the desert, and sat back in his favored corner, as always.

"How are things?" Tuff asked Esmeralda, who nodded to him and smiled, saying, "I am feeling well, thank you. How are you?"

"Thanks, I'm good," Tuff responded. He looked over and saw Tank skillfully working the metal, Alron applying cooling water or heating whenever it was called for, "He is busy... how long until he is finished, d'you think?"

"Not long. It's been three hours since they went out," Wombly said, "He's dedicated to working and thinking but he knows his limits. He should be back in within the hour." Tuff nodded in thanks then ordered a drink from Esmeralda, who had it supplied before Tuff could sit down. Tuff noticed Nose Breakers in the room, Jeffy, an older man who served as a captain, and a few other newer recruits, sitting among the customers.

"I see that Sprinkleberry still takes care of you," he said and Esmeralda shrugged.

"I don't think we need it but the coin is welcome," she said. Sprinkleberry, in thanks for Tank, Wombly and Ashe helping fight, had sent several Nose Breakers to stay guard in Harold's Hill. Those that were stationed at Harold's Hill were given coin for the day and ordered to spend it as they willed so long as it went to the inn or somewhere that was near the inn.

Tuff nodded. They sat and spoke for many minutes, sharing news of how things were recently and rumors about the fires on the Lightning Chain, before Tank and Alron walked in. Both were utterly exhausted, having spent the last three hours pounding metal into tools and parts to make tools with, and Esmeralda had their food ready in a matter of moments.

Tank was just sitting down when another young man walked up. Deabla, smiling as was often for him, sat at the table. He nodded to Tuff then to Tank. Deabla brought a hand up to his jet black hair, which seemed to always be combed well, combed it back with his hand. The hair didn't respond but he seemed to enjoy the action.

Deabla was a little darker than Tank, looking very tanned, and his eyes were a dark brown like Wombly's only they were filled with even more insight, a deeper understanding of the person he spoke to rather than with intelligence that worked with the physical laws of the world or the way to build certain inventions.

"Hello," Deabla said with a smile and Tank nodded in response. Wombly smiled back. Ashe just tipped her drink. He looked at Tuff, who nodded, then said, "I assume things aren't going well in your military?"

"Aye," Tuff said, "Things aren't. Scouts are going out and I'm to investigate a problem. We're hoping you," he looked to Tank, "and your friends would help."

"I am not in charge of them," Tank said, "They can go or stay as they please." Wombly nodded in appreciation to Tank but Ashe, as was usual, gave no response.

"The fire?" Deabla asked and Tuff stared at him for a moment.

"Uh... yes," Tuff said, "How'd you..."

"Rumors," Deabla answered before Tuff could finish his question.

"Well, yes. The fires in the Lightning Chain. We're going to investigate," Tuff explained.

"Could this be like the Chaos War?" Wombly asked and Tuff shrugged, "We're not sure. That's why we're going to investigate.. You three have the most experience with the leader of the last Chaos War. We're hoping that if you get close to whatever has caused these fires you can figure out if it is the same kind of magic."

None of the three had anything to say in response.

"What fires are we talking about?" Tank asked and Tuff realized that Deabla hadn't shared his revelation with the rest of his companions.

"We have spotted giant fires on the Lightning Chain. The men of the mountain don't use fire as a weapon, due to their respect for the power of nature. No one alive remembers a fire as big as the one that is on the chain right now. It can be seen from both Walston and our side. The smoke, if you look to the west you'll see it, that's in the sky.

"No one knows what caused it. And we haven't seen anyone leave those mountains since it started," Tuff finished and the room was silent. Many of the customers had heard in on the conversation and those who hadn't were quickly informed by those who had. The men of the Chain were a force to be feared. If they'd been destroyed... no one really knew what could do that.

Of all the cultures in the Kingdom the mountain men and their shamans had done the best to repel the boozers and the undead that Azeroth had brought upon the world. Neither of the cities, Keell or Sprinkleberry, had fared nearly as well as the powerful men who had only two or three thousand population.

"When do we leave?" Ashe asked. Wombly and Tank, who'd been less inclined to agree to the mission, sighed, then shrugged, "Give us a time."

"Early tomorrow morning," Tuff answered.

"Well," Wombly muttered, "I'll start packing." Tuff turned and walked out of the room after giving them directions to the meeting place, quite pleased with how it'd turned out. He noticed the inner strain in Tank and realized that had Ashe not stepped up he'd likely be leaving with three less capable and experienced warriors.

It was late at night and Tank's eyes flashed open. He sighed and looked over at Maria, who slept on her bed. He, as usual, slept on the ground. He watched as her chest rose and fell in a soft rhythm, the metronome of her breath. He sighed and tried to ignore the sudden acceleration in his heart's beat.

Her hair, black as night and curled in her sleep, was cut short now but it made no difference; she was still beautiful. And as she lay, her fair face sideways on her pillow, he couldn't help but feel a pull towards her. He'd been in her room for the last three years and he recognized that she was having a bad dream.

He walked out and downstairs to where Esmeralda worked, Denerick in his corner, as usual. A few drunks lay at their tables, asleep. He greeted and she him. They spoke for a short time.

"You love her?" Esmeralda said more than asked but still she allowed it to be a question for Tank's sake.

"Yeah," he blew a long and thoughtful sigh.

"You will always love her?" Once again it was more of a statement than a question. All Tank offered was a shrug.

"Only time will tell."

### Chapter Three:

"We need to leave," Benny heard Giles say to a guard. The guard, a young man, could only protest with a weak, "It's not safe."

"Yes," Silo muttered sarcastically, "because danger is new to us."

"There are hundreds of the... things out there!" the guard said. He motioned to the wall where soldiers stood and watched, some lifting bows and shooting every once in a while, others just watching.

"I'm thinking this is going to get very bad... It's like this at both walls?" Mave asked and the man nodded.

"The last report we got said that hundreds were there too," the man said. Melinda sat on the ground, her legs crossed and her eyes closed. Benny and Silo both stood next to her as she meditated. Giles and Mave argued with the guard.

"So we can't get out at all?" Giles asked.

"We aren't opening the gate with all those things out there," a captain said from above and Mave nodded to him.

"There are hundreds of them," Melinda said softly. Only Silo and Benny heard it.

"I'm thinking that's reasonable," Mave said, "But I'm also thinking we need to be moving on to Sprinkleberry." No one had anything to say and there was silence, save the moan of the creatures and their fists pounding on the wooden walls.

"You're going to Sprinkleberry?" a captain from the guards said from the top of the wall. Giles nodded and the man said, "My name is Captain Marc. I need a message to Sprinkleberry asking for as many soldiers as they can send our way. We've hit a couple of them with half a dozen arrows before they dropped. We don't have enough soldiers to take these things down."

"How will we confirm it?" Giles asked and Captain Marc unstood that Giles had agreed to deliver the message.

"Give them this," Captain Marc said as he tossed a small package to Giles, who caught it easily.

"That doesn't answer one question," Silo said, "How are we getting out?"

"You may call me Melinda the great after this," Melinda said.

Her companions all nodded, Giles gave a small laugh while Benny and Mave just nodded. Silo hid a small grin. The guards, however, looked on sarcastically. Melinda was a druid and, as a warrior of mother nature and her natural ways, had achieved no small amount of magical power.

Melinda's eyes closed and she sat with her legs beneath her once again. She seemed to grow less and less substantial and physical. Then, for a moment, she floated a couple of inches off the ground, dozens of small orbs of light radiated out from beneath her. The orbs, green, dissipated into nothing-

ness when they got more than a foot from her body.

The guards opened the thick gate in front of her and the humanoids began their stumble into the inside of the wall. Men began to rush forward to attack the creatures but Melinda's eyes opened and, in a magically enhanced voice, shouted, "No!" The words, loud and strong, held the men back and though it went against their gut instinct they stopped in their tracks. She rose several feet off the ground now.

Melinda, eyes darker green than usual, lifted her hands up towards the creatures, "They are undead. My powers are beyond theirs." She put her thumbs together and incanted for a moment. Then, before the undead could take a step forward a wave of green energy, bursting forth from her extended index fingers, slammed into them. The creatures, zombies, fell to the ground in pieces or simply burst into a hundred chunks of decayed flesh or bone.

Melinda opened her eyes and fell back to the ground, landing nimbly. The guards and her friends were stunned by the raw power of her spells.

"Druids pack a pretty big punch," Giles said and Captain Marc nodded in agreement. "It just takes them so damned long to build up their attacks."

Silo led. His bow was in hand but he had no arrow in hand. One of his three quivers, each full to their max, was at the ready. Around them they could hear the moans of the zombies, their eyes orange in the distance. It wasn't unoften that he saw the glowing orbs but he had learned that they were slower to respond than he was so he led his companions around the clumsy and distracted undead easily.

They traveled for several hours before they decided to stop for a meal. They'd be at Sprinkle-berry in only a day of travel but even if they got there that night they knew that the guards at Sprinkle-berry might challenge them and wait until morning before they let the companions enter. The days, growing shorter and shorter, weren't long enough for them to make the entire trip in the presence of daylight.

The only one not in their little camp was Benny, who took his turn scouting around their camp. The two were the quickest members of the party and had unmatched endurance, the result of years of hard training. That was why the two smaller warriors worked as scouts and sentries.

Benny was traveling around their camp, moving in a circle with a fifty foot radius, when he heard the low moan growing louder. He looked inwards, towards their camp, to see Melinda sitting in her yoga-like posture, meditating. She was deep in her spell, he could tell, for she floated a couple of inches off the ground.

He was still looking at her, wondering at her druidic powers, when he felt a hand grab his shoulder. He whipped around just before a biting mouth got to him. He dodged back, barely avoiding the zombie's bite, and unsheathed both his blades in a fluid motion.

Benny, in a balanced stance, slashed forward with his blades. His short sword cut into the zombie's shoulder while his dirk jabbed forward into the zombie's chest. The blade slipped in between the undead creature's ribs.

Benny jumped back and took a moment to examine his work. He was more than a little disturbed by the lack of effectiveness of his attacks. The zombie showed no ill-effects from the attacks but he still held heart, for he knew he could turn and outrun the zombie whenever.

And as the zombie stumbled forward he did exactly that.

Benny, after sprinting away from the zombie, got to the camp just in time to see Melinda's eyes pop open.

"It's time to go," she said and Benny nodded in agreement, exclaiming, "We have to get gone!"

Mave was up in a moment, his broad-sword unsheathed, while Giles quickly unhooked his two-bladed battle-axe. By the time Giles had his shield on his left arm, battle-axe in his right, Silo had his bow strung and readied, an arrow ready to be launched.

The undead, dozens of them, all came at once. Benny, slashing with his blades, quickly realized what a disadvantage his small blades offered. He was a warrior trained to cut vital veins and to weaken

his opponent with many small wounds or a single serious gut shot or chest shot.

The undead, rotted zombies, felt no pain and his small attacks had no effect other than to take energy from him and to slow him. Benny, fighting furiously, slashed and dashed with his blades so very quickly that his blades were a blur of death... but death only scared the living.

The undead, in large numbers, descended upon the group and they were forced to back up. Melinda, feeling the zombies, quickly realized they were outmatched.

"We have to run!" She shouted as Silo released three arrows in rapid succession, each shaft's arrowhead digging deep into a zombie's face. Giles, cutting across with his battle-axe, cut deep into one's neck then brought it back expertly to literally lop one zombie's head off.

As Giles did this Mave's broad-sword slashed across, a wide, sweeping arch that cut deep into the bodies of the undead as they rushed in on him. Mave, stronger than most men, knew he had only one option with his blade. The broad-sword, heavy and powerful, was hard to maneuver to hit the undead in the head but if he could cut them into pieces he might stand a chance.

Literally cutting zombies in half, Mave had a circle of death around him. But he quickly found Melinda's assessment to be true. He'd cut down maybe six of the undead easily but he could tell he was beginning to get tired. And there were still many zombies attacking him.

Melinda led, her magical sight giving her the ability to literally feel the undead around her, and the others followed as best they could. Benny and Silo, trying to keep the zombies from trapping them and their companions, rushed in circles and figure-eights with only one intention: keep the zombies from getting into a giant mass.

There were hundreds, they could see now, and they ranged from humans just dead, some were wearing clothes though most weren't, to bodies that had been dead for quite a while. Some zombies had been dead so long that their bones snapped as they stumbled, the brittle bone unable to support the weight put on them everytime the zombies cut after Benny and Silo.

Mave ran in the back, killing any zombies running faster than the rest and trying to keep the faster zombies from catching up to Benny and Silo, who held the most attention. Giles had a similar duty, though he mainly rushed up in front of Melinda and tried to clear a path whenever she pointed in the direction of a couple of zombies.

The group rushed throughout the woods, trying to keep their heads as they fought an enemy that none but Benny and Mave had ever imagined possible. And though Benny and Mave had imagined the zombies they'd never considered them normal and, both agreed in their thoughts, never would.

It was many minutes of running, fighting and dodging and diving before Melinda finally seemed slightly relieved.

"What is it?" Giles asked and she said, "A place we can hide."

"Hide?" Giles asked and Melinda nodded, "They will be doomed if we don't go there anyway."

"What?" Giles began to ask but Melinda silenced him by sprinting off. Mave and Giles struggled to keep the pace for as long as Melinda held it but Benny and Silo, who'd been running all night, kept it easily. She was a fast girl but she was short and her stride was far shorter than both Silo and Benny who were very fast.

They ran for almost an hour and every step Melinda seemed to grow more agitated and more hopeful at the same time. And every step Mave and Giles fell an inch or so further behind. It was hard for them to hold the pace, both of them wearing heavy armor or wielding heavy weapons and they themselves were heavy.

Benny noted a clash in front of them. He heard the shouts of men and women fighting and realized that they, too, were fighting zombies, for he heard the moan of the undead. He took the lead, Silo half a step behind, and came upon a fierce battle.

About two dozen villagers, male and female, fought with crude weapons against the undead,

who outnumbered them two to one. The men and women were fighting just outside the wall, which Benny noticed a giant hole in, and he could see that the heavier men were staying near the hole to defend it.

Putting his head down, Benny and his companions rushed in with their weapons leading.

Silo rushed in from the side while the rest rushed in, with the exception of Melinda, who seemed genuinely exhausted from her spell and the running. She slumped by a tree but whenever a zombie turned on her she quickly dispatched it. A few of the undead lumbered up behind her and she hit them with some spell that lit up the night for a moment.

Most of the villagers were too involved with their battle to notice the attack but Silo noted that several of the zombies were delayed by it. They stalled for a moment and Silo, seeing an opportunity for easy shots, quickly lifted his bow and, with four *twang*'s, released four arrows, flying like hawks on the hunt, into the crowd.

All four were bullseyes. Four zombies dropped to the ground. Silo, feeling confident for the first time that night, launched several more arrows into the crowd as he grinned to himself.

Mave and Giles fought back to back as they waded through the battle. Where they roamed chaos was eliminated and the two skilled warriors turned any close fight between villager and zombie into an easy slaughter: the zombie went down and the man or woman was left stunned.

Mave's broad-sword swept long and powerfully, cutting straight through zombie forearms and any other zombie part that got in front of him, while Giles' double-bladed axe slashed and hacked into zombies, killing them. Anytime a zombie got close he butted it away with his shield. There was no way for the zombies to get close on Mave's side and Giles knocked them to the ground everytime they did on his side.

With the aid of the four warriors, Benny, Mave, Silo and Giles, and the druid, Melinda, the battle was ended quickly.

"We thank you," said a particularly strong looking woman named Heidi. She was plain looking but with a solid build. With blonde hair and blue eyes she wasn't bad unattractive but she had the look of a woman who'd grown up doing only manual labor and without a care for her looks. She stood three inches taller than Silo and maybe an inch or two shorter than Giles.

"We needed th' help," Heide said, "They were fight'in us all night and we were start'in to fear we'd lose our homes."

"We're happy to help," Giles said and Heidi nodded her thanks once again, "I'm guess'in you need somewhere to stay the night?" She asked and Giles almost declined but before he could Melinda stomped on his foot, all hundred and ten pounds of her frame landing on his big toe, and Giles looked to her in shock.

"We'd love to stay," Melinda said. Giles looked at her, an eye brow raised, but didn't dare interrupt the intuitive druid.

Heide smiled, "I'm sure we'll all be happier know'n ya'll 'round."

Maria stormed into Deabla's room. She looked surprised to see Deabla looking at her unsurprised.

"Yes?" Deabla asked and Maria's words stumbled over themselves for a couple of seconds, "You knew... how did... what?"

Finally she stopped and composed herself, "Tank, Wombly and Ashe are going somewhere tomorrow. Where are they going?"

"I'm going also, and we're going to the Lightning Chain to investigate several large fires,"

Deabla answered and Maria scowled, "And Tank didn't tell me." She closed her eyes for several seconds, deep in thought, then opened them again.

"Do you think Jeffy and his patrol will be going out there with them?" Maria asked and Deabla shrugged, "I suppose if you budge him in the right direction he will." Maria nodded in agreement. Jeffy, a friend of Maria, Deabla, Esmeralda and Denerick, was to lead a patrol out to a couple of the small villages around Sprinkleberry.

"Ah," Maria said, "He will want a good reason to follow Tank..."

"Don't look at me for help," Deabla said.

Maria sighed, "I... I need this."

"You do?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because... Because Tank doesn't believe I can defend myself," Maria said, "And... I love him."

"Ah."

"He won't be with me even though he loves me. He needs to know I can defend myself because he won't be with because of that stupid demon!" Maria said loudly, anger evident in her tone, "He is... being very stupid."

"Do you blame him?" Deabla asked honestly.

"Yes!" Maria responded immediately, "Yes, yes I do! He has screwed everything up!" Maria continued talking but Deabla muttered, "Because he cares about you," but Maria, still ranting, didn't hear him.

"It's like he thinks he's better than everyone, that he knows better than everyone else, but he doesn't! He's just human, just a man!"

"So he makes mistakes?" Deabla asked and Maria nodded, "Yes, yes he does. This is all a mistake, a dumb one, all because he's so much better than everyone else, so much smarter." Her words, at the end, dripped with sarcasm.

"He yells rarely but when he does it's terrible. Then he's either enraged or completely happy for the next three days. It's like he's a time bomb because of all this... crap! Because he thinks he's so much better, so much smarter, he thinks he can yell at me and tell me what to do and how to live. He's not, though, he's just a man," Maria scowled.

"It'd be okay if he would stay consistent, either always being an arse hole or always being a sweet and kind guy but he changes every ten damned minutes... he's a jerk and a bully sometimes. But then he's... he's just a nice guy who seems to know everything to do," Maria sighed, "I guess that's why he sometimes thinks he knows better than everyone else."

"But he tries," Deabla sighed, "He tries and he's only doing this because he's afraid and because he's stressed and worried."

Maria looked to the ground, "He's smart but he's so dumb."

Deabla stared into her eyes for several moments and saw that she was truly hurting.

"He loves you... but he won't be the reason you die," Deabla said.

"He won't be the reason I die," Maria said firmly. Deabla looked at her and wondered if he would be what got her killed. He looked at her, so desperate, so determined to prove herself to...

To who? He wondered.

That night they and the two top villagers sit in the middle building. Work was being done on the hole in the wall but the two top members, Heide and Minsc, couldn't help much there. Instead they had decided that trying to integrate the newest five people into the city.

"So what caused that hole anyway?" Giles asked. They were going over the course of the battle and the defenses of the village. "That wall has to be a foot and a half thick and made of solid wood... I haven't seen anything that could do that out there."

"We're not sure," Minsc said. Minsc was about two inches taller than six feet and weighed at least two hundred and thirty pounds. He was muscular and powerful, his jet black hair cut short. He had a trimmed, if not well, beard that matched his hair in color.

"We were try'in to wait 'em out when outta nowhere there was'a loud boom and there was a hole in the wall," Heide said, "No one saw what did it. We just know that them... those dead things started go'in through the damned hole."

"Was there a sense of dread when it happened?" Melinda asked and both Minsc and Heide looked at her curiously. "Did you feel like you were doomed right before the 'boom' happened?"

Both villagers, strong of head and body, thought deeply for a few moments, replaying the battle in their head, "Well... actually, yeah, a lot'a the kids started cry'in right before it happened," Minsc said, "My own wife was watch'in them, try'in to calm 'em, when she saw the things com'in in."

"You didn't feel anything?" Giles asked and Minsc shrugged, "I was busy trying to kill the damn things."

"Ah," Melinda said thoughtfully. Then she say in her yoga-like pose, closing her eyes and meditating again. Both Minsc and Heide stared at her for several moments, Minsc's jaw actually dropping open when she began to float off the ground.

"I think that she wants to be alone now," Silo said and Giles nodded in agreement. Minsc and Heide seemed to agree as they began walking out of the small structure. When they were outside they turned to Giles, Silo, Benny and Mave, who'd followed them, and said, "We can give you rooms with one another or two of you together in the rooms."

"I think we'll want to be together," Giles said and no one argued. All five knew that if Melinda wanted them here then there would be a major disturbance in the nature of things and that usually the source of imbalance was something that killed many people. Generally, in their experience, things that could kill many people were hard to kill so they'd all want to be together in case they ran into it.

"We'll give you the middle building then," Heide said and Minsc nodded in agreement.

"Thank you," Giles said and they turned to walk back into the building.

The companions, Giles, Benny, Mave, Silo and Melinda, all sat at a table in the middle of the middle building. It was the only room that was big enough that that wasn't already in use. They'd been in the village for a day now and Melinda had walked around the village to collect supplies, which were mostly herbs and unusual plants that were buried under the ground. No one knew how or where she found the plants.

"Maybe she grows them out of the ground," Silo mused once and none of his friends had discarded that option. Melinda was a mystery. Her powers, like her initial appearance, remained a mystery to all but herself and her unusual kin. But none of her kin were around to confirm any solid belief about the druidic ways for they, like her, had attached themselves to bands of travelers.

But at that moment the smell of warm stew, which Melinda had made, filled their room. Every person sitting at the table hadn't licked their lips in anticipation of yet another of Melinda's fine meals.

The table they'd eat on had been built the day before. It was plain but strong, with no intricate designs or decorations put into it. In the middle of the table, though, an image of a leaf in front of the moon had been carved into the table. They'd learned this was the symbol those of Frival had taken as their own.

Melinda entered the building with a giant pot in hand. Steam rose quickly off the surface of the stew. Benny couldn't help but wonder how she held onto it even when it was so hot. Silo, while Benny wondered, figured it out. The archer saw a small indication of a magic spell, a small layer of frost on the palms of her hand.

Melinda placed the stew in the middle of the table and looked down at the liquid meal with no small amount of pride.

"Woah," Benny said as he looked at the mixture of green beans, some type of leaf, beef and

pork, "Who puked in our dinner?" He cracked a grin. The entire table had different responses: Mave suppressed a small smile while he closed his eyes and shook his head, Giles let the slightest of grins onto his face but didn't necessarily hide his mirth and Silo gave Benny something that was similar to a glare.

Melinda stared at him for a second.

"Oh no, someone did puke in it," Melinda sighed, "I guess we can't eat it..." she looked mischevously at Benny, who lost his grin. Everyone at the table began to complain and protest when Melinda grabbed the pot. She lifted it and Mave slapped Benny on the back of the head. Silo and Giles were assuring Melinda that it looked fine but Melinda seemed to just stare at Benny, who suddenly remembered how empty his stomach felt.

Melinda was turning away from the table with the pot in hand, a grin on half her face, when Benny finally caved.

"I was joking, I was joking! It looks amazing," he said. Melinda turned and looked at him as if waiting for more. "And..." Benny was at a loss, "And... you look really good." He gave his broadest, all but dumb grin and Melinda laughed.

"Oh what an empty stomach can do to the heart of a man," she joked and Benny shrugged.

"You had me at stew," he said. Melinda grabbed a wooden bowl and filled her bowl with the stew. She smelled it, looking down at it with pride, then lifted the liquid to her lips with a spoon. When the liquid touched her lips and flowed into her mouth her eyes lit up.

The others followed suite and soon they were all eating the meats and vegetables quickly then drank the broth as quickly as possible. The five companions quickly ate and drank every last bite and drop of the stew.

"Ah..." Benny said at the end, loosening the straps of his pants, "*That* was a meal."

"Fit for kings," Silo agreed.

"I am thinking King Jev's cooks could learn a thing or two," Mave concurred.

"Best stew I've ever had," Giles said and the post-meal ritual of congratulating Melinda on her meal was finished.

"D'you think it'd happening again?" Benny asked and Mave shrugged. They lay on the ground outside the building, staring at the starry night.

"It?" Mave asked but the large man knew what Benny was talking about. It just seemed right, at that moment, to ask.

"The Chaos War," Benny said and he heard Mave's sigh.

"I'm thinking we'll find out soon," the large man answered. They sat in silence for many minutes, both of them deep in thought, then Benny closed his eyes for several seconds, opened them and looked at the sky again.

"I wonder if anyone will ever paint this," he said. There was no response from Mave.

"I wonder if the gods really exist." Still no response from Mave. "If they do they can't be perfect. Or I guess if they are perfect then we just can't comprehend it. I hope they're perfect, because if they are then I guess that means that something out there must make sense."

They sat there for many minutes once again.

"I hope a perfect god never comes to our world," Benny continued and Mave looked at him curiously.

"Why?"

"Well, way I see it is even the finest blade will rust if it's left in the rain long enough," Benny said. They sat in many seconds of silence. Mave, deep in thought, couldn't come up with a smart answer so he just shrugged.

"Huh."

Silo and Melinda also sat in the darkness, away from everyone else in the village, staring at the sky.

"I wonder how far it goes," Silo mused, "I bet forever," and Melinda laughed.

"What?" Silo complained, looking over at Melinda.

"I just find that the concept of infinity comes up everytime people stare at the sky," she said, "It is almost as if that's an indication that it's true."

"Mmm," Silo thought aloud and Melinda was silent also. They enjoyed each others company and in that moment, in the dark and away from the world, staring up at an endless sky that was filled with light from stars far away, they could truly appreciate each other.

"Do you ever want to settle down?" Silo asked and Melinda looked over at him with a raised eye brow.

"I mean do you ever want to pick a place to stay for the rest of your life?" Silo clarified and Melinda looked back up at the sky, her eyes far away.

"I dunno," Melinda replied. She was silent and Silo, waiting intensely for an answer, was quiet as well. "I suppose that in nature all things come to a stop eventually. But most things that move stay moving for almost all its existence..."

"Ah," the man said.

"Do you believe in alternate realities?" Melinda asked and Silo looked at her curiously.

"What do you mean?"

"Alternate realities... like other worlds just like ours with us but we made different choices."

*Like kiss each other?* Silo thought to himself but didn't say, "Uh... sure I guess. I don't know."

"Do you believe in infinity?" Melinda asked.

"If you mean something can go on forever... then yeah, I do."

"Then I can prove alternate realities exist."

"Can you?"

"I can."

Silo looked at her, "Enlighten me, please."

"We live on a giant sphere, no?" Melinda asked and Silo shrugged, "That's debatable."

"Fine," Melinda sighed, "We live on a giant object that is floating in our realm. Would you agree with that?"

"Floating?"

"Floating," Melinda confirmed and Silo shrugged, "Sounds as good as anything I can think of."

"Then you'd agree we are tethered to this world, this sphere or object that we live on?" Silo nodded and Melinda continued, "Then would you agree that the same force that keeps us on this world would keep us moving around the sun? And keep the moons moving around us?"

Silo thought for a moment then shrugged, "Yeah, I would. It makes sense."

"So if we're floating around the sun and that," she pointed to the sky, "Goes on forever then wouldn't there be another 'sun' out there somewhere?" Silo nodded so Melinda continued, "Then out there, somewhere, wouldn't there be another 'sun' with 'objects' floating around it?"

"That's unlikely," Silo said and Melinda shook her head, "Not if it goes on forever. Then it's inevitable." Silo shrugged. "Continue?"

"So if there's another 'sun' with another 'object' floating around it and that 'object' would, eventually, have three moons going around it and eventually one of the suns would be circled by one object that would have three moons floating around it and on the object there would be some sort of race. Eventually, if you go far enough, long enough, there would be an object circling a star with a small village on it called Frival where two friends sit next to each other staring at the sky, doing something else."

"Something else?" Silo asked and Melinda shrugged.

"It's an *alternate* reality, remember?" she smiled and Silo responded in kind.

"So by something else... maybe it could mean something closer to each other?" Silo asked and Melinda shrugged.

"It's a possibility," she said.

"So... something like kissing?" Silo suggested and Melinda shrugged again, "It is possible."

"Inevitable, even?" Silo asked and Melinda smiled. Silo was sitting only a foot or so from her, his nose maybe a couple of inches from hers, and their eyes matched each other, Melinda's green eyes and Silo's dark orbs.

"Something..." Silo whispered and he leaned in slightly, his lips pursed slightly.

"Like this?" Melinda asked and she leaned it also. They were half an inch away from each other when Melinda pulled away, to Silo's ultimate frustration.

"Wha?" He asked and Melinda giggled, "But not in this one." She stood up, stretched and flashed a smile at him.

"It was a good thought though," she said, "I'm glad we had this talk. Goodnight, my sweet," she left him and walked to the house. Silo stared at her as she walked away, to the middle of the village, completely mesmerized by her.

Over a mile away Bullk looked to his master nervously. Mlaster, his right hand, wearing in a black glove today, on the hilt of his long-blade, looked at the village called Frival with a deep sense of frustration.

"We lost too many," Mlaster said absently and Bullk nodded his head vigorously and desperately, as if disagreeing with Mlaster meant death. That Bullk, a large and strong man, would be so very afraid of Mlaster meant something to the men around them.

They all sensed it, of course. There was something different about their captain now, something that made the previously threatening and aloof bandit and mercenary captain truly terrifying. Maybe it was that occasionally one of the men would catch a glimpse of blackness where Mlaster's eyes should be or maybe it was the fact that if Mlaster willed it his blade would release magical energy into whatever target it touched.

Mlaster was changing and none of the men liked it. But none were brave enough to walk away.

They were tied to him now and they knew it. Mlaster, now stronger than anything they'd ever seen before, owned them.

"We lost too many," Mlaster repeated. A mean looking bandit was walking behind. Mlaster turned, his eyes darkened to the point of blackness, and punched the man hard, sending the mean man to the ground.

The bandit, called Heath, stared up in terror.

"I didn't do nothing!" Heath said and Mlaster glared down at him.

"How many villagers are in that village?" Mlaster asked, "How many d'you think?"

"Maybe a hundred?" Heath stuttered and Mlaster nodded, "I thought as much. We lost fifty three last night in that failed attack."

"Fifty zombies?" Heath mouthed but didn't dare ask aloud.

"Fifty three zombies," Mlaster corrected though Heath didn't actually say the word, "We need to get as many as we can! How else are we going to build my empire?" Mlaster's voice deepend as he spoke, "How else will we get that many souls? Souls are the key! Souls are where power is held!"

"W-what?" Heath asked but Mlaster was no longer paying attention to him.

"I want to destroy them," Mlaster growled. He turned on the village.

"We attack them at dawn," the wraith-possessed captain declared. No one offered any resistance or argument. No one had the guts to... or the brains to.

## Chapter Four:

Tank, Ashe and Wombly walked forward from the main door of Sprinkleberry. The three were moving quickly that morning for it was chilly, something they were unused to, and they wanted to be warmed. They each had packs for travel, including their weapons, armor and other things of that sort. In Wombly's pack was her instrument, which she'd called her, "Stringy-thingy," with a bright smile.

As they rode, they saw, in front of them, seven figures on horseback. There were six unriden horses. Three of the riderless horses wore saddles. The other three were 'naked'.

The three friends recognized only Tuff. The other riders were Hornet-Lancers who served absent Trina and Nigel, who were the leaders of the elite Hornet-Lancers. Though Nigel was officially the leader of all calvary Trina was close in second command, and was only assigned to the Hornet-Lancers. It wasn't unusual for Nigel to look to Trina for advice and to lead the Hornet-Lancers in his absence.

If the lancers were split up then if Trina was in a different group than Nigel was then she was in charge. But neither were here so Tuff, a trusted warrior, was in charge.

The riders were obviously Hornet-Lancers. Such could be assumed by their dress, the official clothing of the Hornet-Lancer; golden light armor and clothe that was designed to hide in the desert but now in the grasslands it was less functional and more decorative than before. But even still the armor was effective and efficient.

Each man, and one woman, wore a helm and had a lance, a sword, a long bow and a crossbow, one of Wombly's creations, and a shield. Wombly noted that Tuff and the woman seemed to be smiling at one another.

"We leave soon?" Tank asked when they got close enough for Tuff to hear.

"Yes, we leave soon," Tuff answered.

"How long is the ride?" Wombly asked.

"Half a day of hard riding. But we plan to be dere by early tomorrow," the female rider turned and answered. She had a familiar accent, which was like Denerick's, that marked her as a native of the mountains in the far West. Tuff nodded in thanks and Wombly nodded. The three were led to their well-groomed horses. Ashe cringed at hers.

"I hate riding," she said. She looked at her thighs, make a mock apology, then reluctantly climbed atop her horse. Once they were mounted Tuff took the lead. Each horse had supplies for the men but because it wasn't as hot as before they didn't need to bring as much water. And the horses could graze so food wasn't as big a priority also.

They rode for several hours before they stopped.

"Lunch?" Tank asked when he caught up to Tuff, who was serving as the scout, and the scout-master nodded.

"We should be there before the sun reaches the horizon tomorrow," Tuff said, "We're going slow because we want to be careful about this."

Tank nodded in thanks. He turned and rode back to Wombly and Ashe, who were in the back of the group. Ashe's easily visible scowl brought him more than a little amusement but he realized it might be a little insoial to laugh at her plight.

"We're stopping for lunch," he informed his friends and Wombly just smiled, saying, "I'm hungry."

Ashe, on the other hand, made a display to say, "Thank the gods." The Hornet-Lancers, who knew Ashe, all smiled and chuckled amongst themselves. The group made camp quickly.

Maria watched as Jeffy and seven Nose Breakers got onto horses to go out to scout. She smiled as she saw Jeffy barking orders at his men, his voice's strength the result of years of yelling at new

recruits. She looked to her companions, Lidia and Copla, and nodded.

"It's time to go," she said. She turned to begin a slow jog towards them but Copla disagreed.

Copla, a mage of some power, was a short and heavy fellow. He was the result of many years of study within a wizard's tower, where snacks and drinks were aplenty and jogging often frowned upon. He had a balding head, the last remnants of brown hair surrounding the top of his head like a series of small islands in a tan-ocean. His hands, in his pocket at that moment, were always sweaty... in fact, he himself seemed to always be sweaty and sweating. He was a nervous man.

"No no no," he said, "We are not running all the way over there," Lidia scoffed. She was in shape and the distance, no more than a hundred and fifty meters, seemed short to her. "Come here," Copla said and Maria nodded. They got into a small circle and Copla muttered for a couple of seconds.

Concentrating to the point of sweating, which wasn't unusual, Copla finished his spell and with a small *pop* they appeared in front of Jeffy and his men.

"We're coming with you," Maria said to a surprised Jeffy.

"You are, are you?" the Nose Breaker asked and Maria nodded, "You need magical assistance."

"I do?"

"Yes," she said, "Plus I need to get out some. You've said as much!" She smiled her cutest smile and Jeffy sighed.

"Get them horses," he said and Maria laughed, "Thanks!"

Copla, looking at a horse in dread, wondered why he'd ever agreed to this as he struggled to climb onto a horse. One of the Nose Breakers reluctantly climbed off of his own horse and pushed the heavy wizard's butt to help 'boost him up'.

As they rode one of the Nose Breakers, a young and newer recruit, rode up next to Lidia. Lidia wasn't overly attractive but the man knew Maria and that to approach her in a romantic fashion was all but a suicide mission.

Lidia was nice, if not attractive, with her stringy blonde hair and crooked smile, which was usually accompanied by an odd statement or a dark or cryptic observation. She had a pair of wide-set brown eyes that often looked around with either indifference or curiosity.

"Hey," the man said to her. He was good looking and expected Lidia to be an 'easy catch'.

"My name's Jason," he said, "And I have to say that that is a very fine traveling cloak... perchance I can take it off of you," he winked at her and a man riding next to him chuckled. Lidia looked over at him, her dark brown eyes seeming to stare right through him, "I'm sure you would like you. But I fear that dagger sticking out of your armor isn't big enough to fill even half a sheath."

Jason paled a little and his riding companion burst into laughter. Maria looked back, scowling at them, but didn't say anything. Copla, who heard the entire exchange, couldn't help but return Lidia's crooked smile. Lidia urged her horse to speed up for a moment and rode up to ride next to Maria, who asked, "What was that about?"

"Oh nothing. Just nature," was all Lidia replied. Copla, riding behind her, wondered at her response for several minutes before just shrugging and agreeing.

"How long until we get there?" Maria asked and Jeffy answered, "Our first stop, a village called Frival. It's about half a day's ride from the city so we'll be there by nightfall."

"Ah," was all Maria responded with. Her inner thighs chafed from the constant friction with the horse and she grew less and less enthusiastic about her plan as time went on.

Tank watched as the sun receded and darkness, in its ultimate hunger to fill any space that life left abandoned, spread across the land. He saw, in the moments of half-light, half-dark, the truest and most basic form of a demon.

Chaos.

He was deep in thought, his temples pounding as he considered deep ideas, when Wombly said

something. He didn't recognize what she said, only that she said something. She said it again and Tank, still not comprehending that her words had meaning, only stared forward.

"Tank," she said again and Tank, without identity, was still atop the hill. She repeated his name a fourth time and he realized she was calling to him, climbed off the hill and looked to her.

"What is it?" He asked.

"Are you okay?" Wombly asked. Tank contemplated the question for several seconds. A million answers screamed to be said all at once, each with their own intricate meanings and each with equally diverse outcomes, but he ignored the question.

"What was it?" He asked. Wombly's eyes narrowed for a moment and she stared at him. She realized, however, that no answer would be forthcoming.

"Weird things have been sighted in the dark. We're to stay close to the fire," she said. Tank looked over at the camp, easily a hundred feet from him, and realized that he must have walked in his thoughts.

"Alright, I'll be there in a minute," Tank said. Wombly nodded but hesitated before turning to walk away. She walked back to the camp with concern etched on her face. Ashe saw that concern, she knew Wombly well enough to read her like a book, but didn't bother to question it. In her mind if Wombly was worried about it and didn't force her to know it then it was most certainly about something she didn't care about.

Wombly sat next to her, in front of one of the two fires, and sighed. Ashe looked up at Tuff, who sat across from her and rolled her eyes. Wombly, staring at Ashe, sighed again, this time theatrically. Ashe looked downwards, trying hard not to make eye contact with Wombly, who sighed a third time, this time even more exaggerated.

Tuff cracked a small grin and Ashe sighed also, looking up as she rolled her eyes, then looked over at a smiling Wombly.

"What is it?" Ashe asked reluctantly.

"Do you think it's been too long since Vombatidae has been here?"

"I have no opinion about your pet," Ashe said and Wombly gasped.

"Vombatidae is not a pet! He's a friend!" Wombly pulled a small idol from a pouch on her belt and summoned her friend by calling his name.

Black and purple smoke wafted out of the idol, spreading out into the form of a large animal. Vombatidae was an astral wombat, a creature of strength and power but also that was rather cute. The smoke, black on the inside and a dark shade of purple on the outside, was about the height of a large war horse, twenty or so hands, and as broad as a thick bear.

When fully formed Vombatidae weighed at least five hundred pounds and resembled nothing more than a large bear with its unusually muscular build and thick hide. Its barrel-shaped body, covered with brown fur, led to a thick and powerful neck that ended in an almost rat-like nose.

The wombat had thick legs, each as thick as Tank's waist, that ended with five toes, each bigger than Tank's wrist, that ended with claws as long as a dirk and thick as a broad sword. Vombatidae began a slow walk towards Wombly, looking around relaxed with each step, and nuzzled up against her side. Wombly smiled and gave a small laugh, rubbing the wombat's side and ruffling his fur.

"Oh good, he's gotten bigger," Ashe muttered. She ignored the wombat for a few moments then turned and stared at the wombat.

When the wombat looked back Ashe gave him an annoyed look and Vombatidae snorted, actually spraying her with a small amount of spittle, and Ashe scowled. Wombly laughed. Tuff, never fully comfortable around the giant wombat, sat in silence but did crack a smile.

Vombatidae looked over as Tank walked into the light of the fire and shuffled over towards him. Tank let his hand fall on the wombat's powerfully muscled neck. The wombat gave a pleased grunt and the thick warrior couldn't help but smile.

"Vomba is going to be tired if you keep him here too long," Ashe said and Vombatidae looked

over at her with little interest.

"He's got at least a couple of hours here," Wombly responded, "Plus we don't plan to get in any fights, do we?"

"Never know," Ashe replied and Wombly gave a small pouting face. They were about to enter an argument when suddenly, in the distance, they heard a loud *boom*. Tank, who looked the opposite direction of everyone else, was the only one to see the flash of light on the side of the mountain.

"What was that?" Mlaster asked and Bullk looked at him, at a loss.

"I... I dunno," Bullk stuttered. Mlaster closed his eyes.

"Take the village. I must go," he didn't open his eyes and the wraith-possessed human's voice came out as a deep and dark growl. Then, with a burst of darkness that left Bullk laying on the ground, unconscious, Mlaster was gone.

Mlaster, mighty and terrible, looked down at the city of Walston. The peoples within were fighting, it was obvious. He stood in a village that once had held a hundred and fifty people within. None of those people remained alive. He was surrounded by a small army of undead, each one bent over or leaning far to one side or the other.

He looked at those that had created the fire, the explosion, and gave a dark grin. A single man of the mountain had been a priest of no small power. He saw the remains of this village's culture, the poles of wood, intricate designs dug into them, and the decorative idols carved from stone. He saw the blood of those who stood around him.

He saw the corpse of the last man of this part of the Lightning Chain, the last of this small tribe known only as the Severed Limb. Mlaster knew his campaign to take over the Lightning Chain would be long, for it'd taken him nearly a week to destroy this single tribe, the smallest of the tribes. He knew that the others would have noticed the fires and wondered if scouts had been sent yet or not.

But that didn't matter to Mlaster at that moment. His true goal, Walston, was below. He had a small force of his 'newest recruits' and he planned to use them. This tribe, aptly named the Severed Limb, for it'd been cut off from the rest many years before, was his. He had but one more tribe to take before he could truly bring a force down upon Walston.

He looked to the side to see his favorite creation so far, his ghouls.

"They will stand no chance," Mlaster said to himself more than to the mindless ghouls around him. "They will fall and my army will grow." Mlaster, not a man but not yet a thing of shadow, was not yet satisfied. But he was close.

The guards inside Walston fought vigorously. They didn't know what had destroyed part of their outer walls but they realized that it must have had something to do with magic.

But in that moment nothing in their life was unaffected by magic. The beings that they fought, long ago rotted corpses, weren't natural. The guards were holding the wall but the captains and other officers felt nothing but dread. Whatever had caused the explosion was still out there, of that they were sure, and if it decided to come back they couldn't imagine what the spell would do to human flesh.

One brave captain, Captain Marc of Walston, looked to the leading general of Walston, General Atkins, and said, "We can hold this for as long as it is just these... things."

General Atkins, a weathered old man with a white beard and mustache and one milky eye, looked at the soldiers at the gap in the wall and nodded. Then he looked out at the forest, at the thousands of pairs of glowing orange eyes, and grimly mumbled to himself.

"We can only hope there aren't too many of these... things."

## Chapter Five:

The raiders came hard and fast. Benny and Silo, who were awake, yelled out before the first man reached the wall. Mave and Giles were up and getting armed and armored before the first man reached the top of the wall. Silo, upon seeing the first man who did reach the top of the wall, promptly lifted his long bow, an arrow fitted in, and sent him back to the ground on the other side of the fence.

Benny rushed forward as the first couple of bandits hit the ground, rolling into fighting positions. Benny, short sword leading while dirk blocked a wide attack, easily gutted the first bandit. The small man grimaced as he felt his blade dig into flesh, the cold metal easily parting the soft skin, but he didn't have time to dwell on the shame of human death. There was a second man.

Or there was for a second.

Silo's arrow flew past Benny's head and dug deep into the man's throat. The bandit fell to the ground gurgling. The majority of the bandits came on the side that Benny and Silo had been defending so it wasn't unexpected to see a giant hole appear where there had been none before. No one knew what caused it but when it appeared Melinda, in the middle of the village, screamed so loudly that all heard her.

But no one had time to do anything about it.

Minsc and Giles came rushing towards the wall while Benny and Silo worked around the outsides of the skirmish, Silo's bow twanging while Benny's blades worked circles around his foes. None of the approaching bandits rushed at the enemies but they didn't need to.

For the undead came on. Some sprinted, the few that were able enough to do so and, though no one was sure how, that had enough memory of their previous lives, but most walked or stumbled. The hole in the wall, in a matter of seconds, was literally filled with dozens of zombies.

In the middle of the village Melinda screamed in agony, loud enough for all to hear, and it was all Silo could do not to rush back to her. He knew she could take care of herself. He just wished he could help.

Melinda sat deep in concentration, barely in control of her body. She felt herself screaming, her lungs burning, but she was deep inside herself, engulfed in thought and in her magic and meditation.

She felt a presence, something darker than she'd ever felt before, and knew immediately what it was.

"*Preta*," she said and the word alone filled the druid with disgust. She reached out with her mind and suddenly she was in combat with the otherworldly spirit. She met its mind and both creatures shuddered. Melinda, as a druid, naturally despised all things undead but this creature, a Preta, was a blight that she especially hated.

The Preta, a 'hungry ghost', was the remnants of a most selfish and greedy human who died in a terrible manner. She could tell it only had memories to call from, no real control over its current self, and realized that she wasn't fighting a true leader of the undead. Though this Preta led the undead they currently fought it had another master.

"Who is it?" She asked aloud, then reconsidered her question, "What is it?"

The Preta and she locked in mental combat, trying hard to destroy the beast, and suddenly she was lost in its memories.

Mave and Giles had no time to regret their decision to fight into the middle of the crowd. They had no time to do much aside from swing and lash out with their weapons, striking at the undead and bandits around them.

There were so many. They knew the villagers were in skirmishes around the village because they could hear grunts and shouts in the distance and realized there would be no more help. The four men, Silo, Benny, Mave and Giles, were on their own.

After just a few moments of fighting back to back Mave and Giles realized they were giving the undead too big a target, that because they were together the undead had a space to surround. It struck

them as odd that the undead weren't attacking the bandits and that as the bandits moved the zombies moved in advantageous spots rather than stumbling, sprinting or walking straight at the four warriors.

Giles struck hard forward, his double-bladed axe literally exploding a zombie's head, and used his shield to butt two more back. He managed to get away from Mave while the giant mountain man slashed hard with his broad-sword, keeping the bandits back while he cut a zombie nearly in two.

They fought viciously but the undead were getting too close.

While they fought on the inside Benny struck at bandits mainly on the outside. His weapons, designed for small wounds or throat kills, were far from ideal when it came to fighting the undead.

So he targetted the living opponents.

Benny dashed forward and backwards, jumping, rolling, using his agility to his advantage. The undead followed him, often nearly trapping him with their numbers and their unusually strong tactical movements. But everytime they seemed to have caught him he was strong enough to punch through them without getting caught by their grasping fingers.

Silo rushed around the outside, trying to keep from getting cornered but it wasn't unoften for him to climb a building to escape. The undead inside the wall, easily numbering fifty now, were tiring the four warriors out.

"This is ridiculous!" Benny shouted to Silo when they got near each other. The two warriors, huffing and puffing as they gasped for breath, turned to fight for a moment. Benny's blades struck lightning fast. The tip of his short sword poked into a zombies' right eye, killing the creature as the blade destroyed its brain, while Silo put an arrow into another zombies' forehead.

"They are working too-" Silo began but he was forced to duck under a zombies' attack, "well together!" They both were drenched in sweat after only a few minutes of battle but as they looked at the undead laying on the ground they realized that they'd only created more zombies as they killed the bandits.

"Too damn well," Benny grunted as they charged in the opposite direction of one another, working hard to keep the undead from surrounding them.

Melinda found herself in the Preta's memory. She wasn't in the real world, or at least her mind wasn't, and she could see the flaws in this world as easily as a human could in the opposite gender. This Preta, once a human, remembered the sky as purple – which it likely had been when this woman had died.

She realized it was a woman both by the way it described everything in its memory but also because she saw an image of her walking the sands of the Kingdom's deserts. The sky, purple, had no clouds and there was no chance of rain. But the way the sand felt beneath Melinda's feet showed her it wasn't an accurate memory. The sand was too fine.

The winds, picking up the sand, seemed to fill her mouth with the fine grains and she understood how this woman had died. Melinda watched as the woman fell to her knees, dehydration finally taking her into its dry embrace, and the sky was suddenly engulfed in darkness.

The world, shrouded in a dark purple fog, filled Melinda with nothing but penitence, a quiet thoughtfulness. Then, as a life lived selfishly flooded her mind, she felt the spirit of the woman's rage. Where there had been a human soul there was now only a memory, a sliver of the woman, and the only thing in that sliver was her death and her feelings as she died.

Melinda felt the Preta's rage and felt suddenly more dry than she'd ever felt before. It was as if all the moisture was being drained from her body. The world around her seemed to collapse and the sliver no longer remembered anything but the rage and pain, the dryness and the thirst.

She heard words from people looking at the Preta's previous body speaking in an elegiac fashion and it was all Melinda could do not to collapse immediately. The spirit, still standing over her corpse, heard the words. Then, as the spirit, not yet a Preta, watched, the men lifted her body. Melinda, disgusted, heard one say that they'd eat well that night.

Then the world collapsed again, shrinking down on her. Bright red eyes, surrounded by an immense and profound blackness, stared down at her with nothing but abhorrence and loathing. The druid tried to hold her ground but waves of mental energy shot forward. Melinda concentrated but felt her mind being corrupted by the Preta's hatred.

The Preta, nothing more than a sliver of the woman's previous consciousness, imparted its own emotions and thoughts on Melinda's mind in attempts to corrupt her, to taint her. The Preta, nothing more than the woman's dying thoughts and emotions, tried to force Melinda into understanding. The Preta, seeing happiness in her past, was wiping her clean and filling her up with its own misery.

Melinda felt her mind becoming lost and felt the Preta taking over and infecting her mind, making her into another spirit. Melinda, eyes closed in the real world, screamed in agony.

Silo, mid-stride, reached into his first quiver but there was no arrow. In the same stride, he grabbed an arrow from his second quiver. The arrow was off before the closing zombie could get to him and it gave him a second to survey the scene.

The wall was perhaps twenty five meters from two village-houses. Mave and Giles rushed about between the two houses, which were about ten meters from each other, while Benny sprinted back and forth around the entire scene. Were their lives not in danger it might have been a comical situation but as Mave received a deep scratch on his arm, one of the zombies' blackened and infected fingernails left dug into the mountain man's skin, Giles was nearly dragged down by a trio of zombies clinging to his legs.

They were in trouble. Silo's arrows flew out to kill two of the zombies on Giles' left leg. A third arrow killed a zombie that had grabbed a hold of Mave's right shoulder. Silo looked around the village and realized that the majority of the undead were attacking here. There were fights with bandits around the village but the vile undead were mainly attacking in their defensive area.

Silo ran out of time to process, he'd only had a couple of seconds, and he was forced to rush away again. The archer knew they'd done damage to the zombie ranks but he could see that all of them were beginning to tire. He could see the fatigue in their actions, in their less powerful slashes and pokes and in their delayed reaction times.

They'd been fighting feriously for many minutes now and still he could hear Melinda screaming in the middle of the village. But he realized that he was half-way glad that she was still screaming.

It was when she stopped that he'd be worried.

Melinda's druidic magic was all that saved her in that moment.

The neutral nature of her power tugged away from the sudden darkness imparted by the Preta and it gave her a fighting chance. As she regained memories, slowly at first, she remembered what her opponent was. Then, as the memories came back faster and faster, she remembered how to beat it and what it was doing.

She pulled back mentally, clinging to memories of light and happiness and the Preta was enraged. It focused more on her, sending its misery and morose-covered hatred into her, and Melinda found herself being engulfed again.

Silo noticed that the zombies were less focused, that, at one moment, they all shifted towards their closest living foes rather than those that were tactically better to attack. But they turned back towards their previous targets and Silo, once again in immediate danger, had no time to wonder.

The Preta may have been focusing more on Melinda than the physical battle but Melinda had only one goal: destroy the Preta.

But Melinda couldn't do that in this world. So Melinda pulled her mind back into herself, working desperately to keep her mind safe as she retreated back into the physical world. She felt the

Preta clinging to her, trying to pull her back, and Melinda's physical body grinned.

"You're mine," she whispered in the real world.

The screaming stopped and Silo looked up, hesitating for just a moment. But it was too long and one of the undead grabbed his arm. The creature tugged hard and Silo knew he was caught. The archer pulled back also, jerking as hard as he could, but the undead's hold was solid and he felt his hand tingle with the loss of circulation.

Melinda opened her eyes just in time to see the Preta, which she'd held onto as she came back fully into the physical world, materialize in the hut. The creature, half a dark fog, half a rotted-skeleton, opened its bone-mouth and screamed at her.

The wail, so filled with pain and hatred, was nearly more than Melinda could handle but she kept her calm. She closed her eyes, raising her hand palm-forward towards the creature, and began to incant.

The hardy villagers, throughout the village, heard the scream and barely held their weapons. Silo and Benny, mid-jump, hit the ground off-balance and tripped, falling to the ground, but managed to roll out of their blunders.

They came up ready to fight but the zombies were upon them.

Melinda looked at the creature as it wailed, for the first time physical in a long time, and incanted, "Animæquior esto quies et pax discere. Animæquior esto quies et pax discere. Animæquior esto quies et pax discere," over and over again.

The Petra moved forward, reaching out with hands undead, and tried to engulf Melinda in its rage but Melinda's steady words, "Animæquior esto quies et pax discere," kept it back and continued to roll on.

The Petra howled as it began to fade into nothingness, literally becoming the air around it. The sliver of a poor woman killed by her own flaw, for that was what produced a Petra, lost its memories and became just what all memories become: Nothing.

The zombies were upon them but they were no longer organized.

Mave saw his opportunity and rushed forward, slicing down hard with his blade. The broadsword split the wrist of the zombie that was holding Silo's arm. Silo, freed, jumped back while Mave slashed once again. His blade cleaved one zombie's head off then dug deep into another's shoulder.

Mave ripped his blade back out, splitting the zombie in two, and began to fight again, his strength renewed.

All of the villagers fought better. It was as if a weight had been taken off of them. The zombies were still a challenge but the bandits were dazed. Many of them were about to question where they were when they were knocked out or cut down.

Dozens of zombies still poured in. The bandits were beaten but the undead were still strong.

Maria heard it first. She wasn't trained to fight like the rest but she had magical power that was still unknown and it seemed to warn her.

"What is it?" Copla asked when she stopped her horse. Maria began to point when Lidia's eyes widened.

"I see it," Lidia said softly.

"See What?" Copla was in the middle of saying when Lidia suddenly urged her horse forward. It was night but she led it well.

"What?" The Nose Breakers behind complained but without a word Maria and Copla took up

chase. Jeffy, his Nose Breakers in line, could only grumble as he took off also. His soldiers wordlessly followed their leader.

They were moving hard when they heard sounds of battle ahead... and the moans.

“Oh no,” Jeffy heard a Nose Breaker behind him mumble and Jeffy could only share the sentiment.

They rode into a group of perhaps thirty zombies, Maria, Lidia and Copla leading.

Upon seeing the undead Copla released three bolts of lightning that literally cut seven or eight zombies in two.

The rest of the undead turned on them but the Nose Breakers, Jeffy and seven others, were on the ground and generally well rested. Their weapons were already unsheathed and the zombies stood no chance.

With the help of Copla, Lidia and Maria the outside of Frival was secured.

Melinda stumbled out of the middle building of Frival just as Silo, his three friends in tow, rushed up to it. They were covered in blood, most of it the black goo of blood long dead, and more weary than they had been in a long time. The warriors had many wounds. The fighting around the village had ended for the most part but there was the occasional groan cut short by the crunch of cold metal on soft, decayed flesh or bone.

“Are you... okay?” Silo asked, still panting from the battle. Melinda nodded, “I am well.”

“Are you?” She asked and Silo shrugged.

“I...” Silo said, at a loss.

“I am thinking no one is really okay,” Mave supplied and no one argued.

“Shall we meet the new folks?” Giles asked, looking towards the hole in the gate where Maria and the others rode in on horse.

“Nose Breakers,” Benny said with a grin as he and Mave recognized the hardy warriors as well. Though both of them recognized Jeffy neither knew him especially well. But they were previous Nose Breakers and that was enough for Jeffy as he stepped forward to embrace his former comrades.

“I am surprised to see you here,” Jeffy said and Benny shrugged.

“I am thinking we’re surprised also,” Mave agreed. They shared a moment of relief, as if taking comfort in the others presence, and who would blame them; recognizable sights were appreciated much when unusual things were happening.

But the moment passed and they looked around. Bodies lay on the ground, villagers working to put them into heaps, and the hole in the wall had grown as the undead had pushed through it. But things weren't all bad.

They'd survived a night and now had two wizards and a priest in attendance. Two or three wounded villagers were being attended by an awkward Lidia.

“Did you see other creatures in the area?” Benny asked and Jeffy nodded the negative, “No, we only heard of this battle because she...” he pointed to Maria, who spoke with Copla quietly, and paused, searching for the right word, “... felt?” He shrugged in acceptance of the word, “this battle.”

“Right,” Benny said. He turned and stared at her for several seconds, his eyes seeming to glaze over and Jeffy chuckled. Mave slapped him on the back and Benny was back in their world. The young man looked at Jeffy, who was still cackling a little, curiously.

“What?” He asked.

“She is taken,” Jeffy said and Benny sighed.

“Tank?” He asked and Jeffy nodded. “Last I heard Tank was going solo because he'll end up getting whoever he's with killed.”

“I'm confident that he will say that everyday of the week,” Jeffy responded and Benny smiled.

“Then she's single,” he said triumphantly and Jeffy just shrugged. Mave, behind them, grinned and sighed.

Benny walked away from the pair, in Maria's direction, and both men chortled.  
"I'm thinking he's going to get himself into a lot of trouble," Mave said.

## Chapter Six:

"What could it be?" Wombly wondered aloud as she, along with the other riders, moved towards the Lightning Chain.

"My guess is a fire," Ashe deadpanned from beside her. Wombly scowled as she looked back to the blonde.

"I meant what could be causing the fire."

"Humans."

Wombly sighed. "I wish things were always that simple."

"They might be," Trina said from her horse. Wombly shrugged. Ashe made no reaction.

"We can only hope so," Tank said from the back of the group. He'd been riding in silence, his head cocked to the side, deep in thought. Wombly had long since given up trying to force him to talk when he didn't want to talk so she rode forward to ride next to Ashe, who'd never tried to get Tank to talk when he didn't want.

"What? You don't want anymore excitement?" Ashe asked. Tank nodded his head the negative immediately, almost as if instinctually, and Ashe stared at him for several seconds.

"What did you lose your stones?" she asked.

"I'm not afraid, if that's what you're implying," Tank answered and Ashe scoffed.

"I'm not saying you're afraid. I'm saying you're paralyzed by your cowardice," Ashe's eyes were filled with fire at that moment and Tank glared at her.

"I'm not afraid," he said through gritted teeth.

"Then quit complaining," Ashe said evenly. Tank glared at her for several seconds and Tuff, who rode off to the side but heard and saw all, saw Tank's knuckles whiten. They rode in silence for many moments. The seven Hornet-Lancers, led by the female, who's name was Laurie, rode in silence also.

They were close to the woods that surrounded the forest when Laurie looked up, her eyes squinted.

"What is it?" Tuff asked but she shh'd him and continued to listen. Then she looked to the mountain. Laurie had darker skin than Tuff did but wasn't as dark as the mountain men and the desert dwellers in the far west. Her hair, dark black, matched her all but black eyes.

"I grew up on de mountains," she said, "And dere is someding wrong." Tuff waited for her to say something. They were close enough that many of the beasts from the mountains, and there was no small number of mountain dwelling animals, came down to hunt in the forests below if they couldn't find food in their natural habitat.

"An animal?" Tuff asked but Laurie shh'd him again. Tuff looked back to see the eight other riders, including Tank, Wombly and Ashe, coming up from behind.

"What is it?" Wombly asked from the distance, still fifty or sixty feet back, and Tuff motioned for silence. Wombly pulled out her idol and quickly said, "Vombatidae, come to me," quietly. A black and purple fog began to appear and took the form of the powerful wombat. It was many moments before the wombat was fully formed.

"Can Vombatidae help?" Wombly asked and Laurie shrugged. Wombly turned to her animal companion, "Will you go find the danger?" The wombat stared into her eyes and Wombly saw a deep intelligence that few, if any, animals exhibited. Then the wombat nodded its head up and down, its stocky shoulders moving up and down with the movement.

The companions watched as Vombatidae walked almost lazily towards the forest, looking back

at Wombly more than once as he strolled slowly and in a relaxed fashion. Vombatidae was only a few steps from the forest when he looked forward, his body suddenly tense. The wombat's large paws were brought forward, keeping them in a spot where he could bring them up in any direction at any time.

Vombatidae was maybe a step out of the woods when suddenly, without warning, a giant cat launched itself at the wombat. The beast was just barely shorter than Vombatidae but was a little longer and far thinner than the wombat. But where Vombatidae was strong the leopard was fast.

Unlike most leopards this one's fur was black with dark red spots. The creature, weighing a good three hundred pounds, was far lighter than the five hundred pound wombat. They glared each other down for several seconds then both launched themselves forward.

The leopard was faster, closing the distance far faster than the wombat did, but at the last second the leopard dodged to the side. Vombatidae tried to turn and hit the leopard with his large paws but the smaller, leaner animal was already behind the wombat.

Digging its claws into Vombatidae's back, the leopard tried to tear the wombat's skin off but Vombatidae's hide was too thick and the leopard was unable to do any real damage. The wombat noted this and seemed to take satisfaction in it. Seeming amused, Vombatidae began to slowly turn on his foe. But then the leopard, with long and sharp teeth, bit into the wombat's back and Vombatidae cried out in pain.

The companions, who'd been stunned at first, rushed forward on their feet since they weren't good at fighting from horseback. Wombly lifted her crossbow, leveling it towards the leopard, but they were moving too fast for her to get a shot. Tank and Tuff were both closing in on opposite sides, Ashe rushing straight down the middle, while the Hornet-Lancers rode forward on their horses.

The first Hornet-Lancer to get to the pair of animals lowered a thick lance in the leopard's direction. The man, stronger than he looked, punched forward with the lance and the tip of the weapon barely missed the dodging leopard. The creature, red eyes glowing, turned and made eye contact with the man's horse.

The horse faltered, hesitating as it ran passed, then collapsed on the ground after a few steps. The Hornet-Lancer cried out as he watched his horse, Hornet-Lancers kept the same horse as long as possible, begin to shake violently. The leopard's stare, a withering gaze, caused the horse to shake and, after a few moments, its flesh began to catch fire.

It wasn't long until the horse was completely in flame.

"By the Gods!" the Hornet-Lancer whispered in rage, his hands shaking as he struggled to unsheath his blade. The leopard and Vombatidae were clashing, the leopard always once step ahead of the Vombatidae, as the Hornet-Lancer rushed forward with his hand-and-a-half blade in his grip.

The man got close to the pair and tried to cut at the leopard but the giant cat just turned and swatted at him, almost as if he were an after-thought, with a single paw. The leopard's claws tore easily through the man's face and he was launched to the ground, the force breaking his neck.

He lay dead.

"No!" Laurie screamed. She and the other Hornet-Lancers were rushing in, their lances at the ready. They charged hard, keeping from making eye contact with the dangerous animal, but the extra animals added to the fray didn't help.

One of the horses fell to the ground, having made eye contact with the leopard, and another was cut across the stomach by the leopard's claws. The two Hornet-Lancers who were knocked from their horses, Laurie and another, were forced out of the conflict because they simply couldn't keep up with the speed of the fight.

The four remaining stayed in the fight for a few moments. Wombly, outside of the fight, hesitated to take a shot with so many moving bodies. She grimaced as one horse was accidentally hit by Vombatidae as the giant wombat struck out at the leopard, which cleverly dodged just when a horse was in the way of the wombat's attack.

The horseman was trampled by the leopard, its claws leaving bloody trailmarks across his body.

Another soldier was knocked from his horse as the animal fell to the ground, dying from the withering gaze. The soldier came up with his battle-axe in hand, slashing hard at the leopard, but with no results other than his frustration.

"Would someone kill the damned thi-" he began to shout when suddenly his eyes met the leopard's. He fell to the ground, his eyes bulging and shaking. Then he burst into flame much like his horse had done earlier.

The two remaining horses, terrified beyond their training, knocked their riders off and fled back towards Sprinkleberry.

Tank rushed in, his flail spinning and hammer in left hand. The leopard was looking at Vombatidae and didn't notice it when Tank launched his hammer. Wombly saw this and took her shot as well. The leopard cried out when Tank's hammer slammed into the back of its hip with enough force to nearly break the beast's bone.

It turned, seeking eye contact with Tank, and would have gotten it had Wombly's crossbow bolt not slammed straight into its eye. The leopard's cry, this time, wasn't that of a natural animal but rather sounded like nothing but a demon or some other being of another world.

Vombatidae, seeing his chance, rushed forward and slammed down hard with his front paw. The leopard turned and made eye contact with Vombatidae but the wombat wasn't a natural creature of this realm and the leopard's stare had no effect. The three horse-less Hornet-Lancers, Ashe, Tank, and Tuff rushed in to help finish off the leopard.

After Vombatidae's big hit the leopard lost its speed and suddenly it was just a giant target for the stronger and heavier wombat. The leopard nearly got away but when it turned to flee a Hornet-Lancer was there. Unfortunately for the man eye contact was made and he fell to the ground, dead. But the leopard was contained by this, for Laurie and Tuff managed to slam their weapons into its neck, and Vombatidae got ahold of it fully. And the fight was over.

They sat in a circle deeper in the woods, having walked in for a few minutes to get away from the leopard.

"Dere might be oders who will want to eat dem," Laurie had explained the companions had agreed.

Now they sat around a fire as the sun began to drop below the horizon.

"Do you have any idea what that was?" Tuff asked Laurie and she nodded her head the negative.

"I don't dink anyone would," she said and both Tank and Wombly sighed. They knew a certain wizard who seemed to know about everything magical.

"Navok would know," Ashe muttered off to the side. She referred to the old wizard who had helped them to slay Azeroth, the Prince of Chaos. No one knew where the wizard was. It seemed he'd just disappeared after the Chaos War was finished.

"Where is Navok anyway?" Tuff asked the three friends and they shrugged.

"As if we know," Tank replied, "He only told us one real thing and that was for Wombly to bring Vombatidae when we needed help."

"That seems like it was pretty vital information," Tuff remarked dryly and Tank shrugged.

"Vombatidae has been extremely helpful but we don't even know what that was," Wombly said, "We only beat it because Vombatidae could fight it. On our own we'd have been killed."

"Well it wasn't from our world, that's for sure," Laurie said as she and the only other Hornet-Lancer, a light skinned, light weight man named Herbert, walked back in with firewood.

"I think we can all agree that wasn't natural," Ashe muttered.

"It withered our horses with a look," Tank sighed, "How do we fight something we can't even look at?"

"We don't need to. Vombatidae killed it," Tuff replied and Tank shrugged, "There could be more. We don't even know where it came from. All we know is it can kill with a look and that it scared away

our horses."

"Hell it'd have scared us away if we were smart!" Herbert almost shouted and everyone looked over at the usually quiet man. "If... if we were smart," he said softly, as if embarrassed. Ashe looked at him with a slightly shocked expression, as if shocked he was there. They all sat in silence for several moments.

"And all our food," Ashe continued to mutter.

"It killed my horse," Laurie said, "I think that's more important than food."

"Nothing's more important than food when it comes to survival," Ashe replied bitterly.

"Water is," Tuff, stupidly, said. Ashe glared at him and Tuff nodded, "I yield," he said.

"Well the real question now is what's our plan," Tank said and everyone concurred.

"We go to the mountain. Nothing like that has been seen before. Maybe they know how to kill them, or at least what it is," Tuff said, "We were sent on a mission by King Jev and we should finish that mission."

"Screw missions," Ashe said, "I'll go up there but only because I feel like we'd stand a better chance. King Jev can take his orders and shove them up his-" Wombly shoved her and Ashe stopped her sentence and looked away.

"Ashe doesn't like authority much... and being scared," Tank said and Ashe turned to glare at him. But she saw his smile and realized that even if he did think she was scared she could be assured he was afraid too.

In the distance they heard the howl of wolves.

"I believe that means we should be moving," Tuff said and no one disagreed. Everyone grabbed a 'home-made' torch, which Wombly had been making, and stood.

Herbert, who seemed somewhat infatuated with Ashe, walked up to her.

"My name is Her-" Ashe stopped him, "No, no names!"

"What? Why?" Herbert asked.

"I might have to gut you and run," Ashe replied coolly. She picked up her pace to catch up to Wombly and Tank, who were talking amongst themselves. Laurie and Tuff walked next to each other. This left Herbert in the back. The man looked around, suddenly very afraid, and hurried to keep up.

"Are you okay?" Tuff asked Laurie as they walked. Laurie, for the last two hours, had marched with her forehead slightly down, staring at the path in front of her, her eyes glazed over. He'd seen the preface to tears many times and she seemed to be on the verge of a breakdown.

"They were my friends. I knew Harley her entire life," Laurie said. Harley was her horse. "She was born in front of me."

"Hornet-Lancers know their horses that long?" Tuff asked and Laurie smiled.

"How else would we be the best calvary in the world?" She asked, "A Hornet-Lancer applies when he or she is very young, only ten or so. Then we are assigned a horse. The horse you get is almost always very young, or not even born yet, when it is assigned to you. Harley was four days from birth when I joined.

"See... being a Hornet-Lancer isn't being in the military. Well, it is, but it isn't like being a Nose Breaker. A Nose Breaker is a good fighter who joined and becomes an elite fighter. Nose Breakers are almost unstoppable on the battle field. But Hornet-Lancers serve many purposes as scouts, guards, heavy calvary, mobile archery or dragging artillery for long distances.

"We aren't made to protect Sprinkleberry, we are able to ride. Our lot in life is to protect Sprinkleberry or at least serve a purpose in it. We apply at a young age because we want to grow up with horses. Of course there are bad choices and many Hornet-Lancers in training never become Hornet-Lancers because they quit or can't cut it.

"But even they share a bond with the horse so they're given smaller missions to complete, sending a letter for some merchant or serving as a scout in one area or another. It doesn't matter how

long you're in the Hornet-Lancers for, after just a year or so you are fit to serve in most armies as a calvary unit or a scout. You and your horse know each other, love each other."

"Sounds like you guys are thinkers," Tuff said and Laurie shrugged.

"Nigil and Trina, when they were making this, said this wouldn't be a force for war but a force for life. We are people, we are human, we are brothers and sisters, mothers and daughters, fathers and sons. We train hard because we love our horse and our horse loves us..." Laurie smiled to herself, "Harley was my best friend in the whole world."

Tuff stared at her and in the dim light of the torch he could see tears streaming down her face.

"To be a Hornet-Lancer without a horse is to be a tree without half its roots and branches. It cannot survive," Laurie said softly.

"Just... try to keep your chin up," Tuff said, "We're all in this together. Herbert lost his horse also... so someone here knows your pain. We are all trying to survive. When we get back to Sprinkle-berry we will help you to honor Harley."

Laurie smiled and thanked Tuff, "We will. We will also honor Sheryl, Herbert's horse." She nodded back to the back of the group, "He was very attached to his horse." Her smile was gone. She looked back, ready to offer her apologies, when she frowned.

"What is it?" Tuff asked. He looked back. There was no one there.

"Hey, guys!" Tuff said and Ashe, Wombly and Tank turned. "Herbert's missing!"

General Atkins watched as the wall exploded. Men were launched fifty feet in the air, landing on the ground with a disturbing crunch. General Atkins, an old man and veteran of the Chaos War, watched with eyes that had seen too much as the guards, bodies broken and eyes glowing orange, rose from the ground.

"What can we do?" He wondered. He watched as Captain Marc and three other soldiers of Walston fought through a small crowd of the undead. The old man realized that Captain Marc might be their only hope at that moment.

"Get him over here!" the General said to a dozen archers who'd been standing just behind him, picking off any undead that got through the all but broken gate, before it'd exploded. They unsheathed their blades and rushed forward.

"At all costs!" He shouted as they ran forward.

Captain Marc saw them heading his way.

"What are General's orders?" He asked the lead archer responded, "He called for you to be rescued! Come on!"

"What about the others?" Captain Marc asked. He looked back at the dozen or so remaining guards fighting for their lives as their former comrades and bodies from the forest attacked them with a savage light in their dead but glowing eyes.

"We're to leave them," the archer said. Captain Marc stared at them.

"No," he said, "We're going for them." He turned, his three loyal soldiers close behind, and rushed towards a trio of guards who were trapped in a corner. Sixteen soldiers, the archers, Captain Marc and his soldiers, were able to tip the balance and they saved the three men.

The fight went on for many minutes and eight of the soldiers were saved.

"You are an idiot! We have to go!" General Atkins barked as Captain Marc, the twelve archers and an additional twelve soldiers, rushed up.

"You said to leave them?" The Captains asked and General Atkins nodded.

"We only have horses for a dozen and a half," he said.

"Then at least let them run for their lives. It's only another mile before we get to the main gate. This won't take long," Marc said and General Atkins nodded.

They took off, rushing towards the main gate to Walston, with well over five hundred undead

following behind.

The sun was far below the horizon. Captain Marc stood on the wall. This wall, like the outer wall, was built between two small-ish mountains. They served to reinforce the walls with their ancient strength. Atop the mountains battlements were being built, a few catapults, dozens of ballistae and flame-pitch launchers.

He sighed then looked down at himself, regarding his own position in this world and his appearance. Surely he looked nasty but he wasn't terribly smelly. His armor was used but it wasn't ugly. He continued his inspection of his own body, looking for wounds as well as for anything that could lead to a wound.

He looked around and wondered just how he'd come to command as much respect as he did. After all he wasn't an especially tall man but he an inch above six feet tall, and weighed about one hundred and eighty pounds. Like about half of the Walston population he had dark skin but in most places his skin color meant absolutely nothing. His hair, cut short, was covered in sweat from their run and the desperate fight... and maybe a little bit of nerves...

For in the distance he saw more glowing orange dots, each one accompanied by a second, than he could count.

"We are in trouble," he said. He looked down at the half-wood-half-stone wall. It wasn't nearly as good as Sprinkleberry's or Keell's but it was all they could do in the three short years that Walston had been in existence for. He looked back at Walston, at the three hundred soldiers on this wall, and sighed.

"Does anyone know how the Northern wall is doing?" he asked.

"We sent a messenger to find out a few hours ago but it is a four mile run through the city. Plus the actual Northern wall has no one on it. They're supposed to be at the outer Northern wall, which is eight miles from here," a higher ranking officer responded. General Atkins, who felt sick suddenly, had placed Captain Marc in command when the General wasn't there.

"A few hours ago?" Marc asked, "That doesn't sound good."

"He may be walking back because there isn't anything to know," the officer suggested.

"We can only hope," Marc said with a sigh.

## Chapter Seven:

Heide, Maria and Giles stood in front of Bullk, who was tied to a chair. The large man looked up at the three, his eyes calm and cool as he regarded them, but found that they were speaking some other deep and slow language, or at least that's what it seemed to him.

They weren't, of course, but Maria's spell, a clever one, was slowing the sound waves before they got to Bullk's ears. Thus he heard a distorted version of their words.

"What to do... What... to... do..." Maria wondered aloud as she looked at the large man. Giles and Heide were talking about what to do with the few other bandits who had been captured before they either fled into the forest or died.

"We've interrogated them all to the point of breaking but this one," Heide muttered. Giles and Maria shrugged.

"We have been very persuasive on him, just like we did for the rest. He seems to be pretty tough," Giles said, "But I think we can break him."

"Give me a few minutes alone with him and I plan to," Heide said. Heide was a strong woman, strong shouldered and powerful. She certainly had the ability to inflict large amounts of pain on a person.

"If you say so," Maria said and she and Giles left. Heide looked dead into Bullk's eyes. A stare-battle began. Neither batted an eye. Finally Heide stepped forward, viciously punching Bullk right on

the nose. The big man looked at Heide after the punch had been launched and smiled, letting the blood from his nose go into his mouth.

His eyes, in that moment, weren't those of a human. For a wraith looked through them.

Melinda was sitting in the meadow when suddenly she gasped.

"What is it?" Silo asked but Melinda was deep in concentration, meditating as was usual for her, so the druid didn't hear his call. He was about to ask what had happened again when suddenly he saw a growl off to the side.

He saw a pair of red eyes, burning with rage, and was about to stand and square up with the beast when suddenly Melinda cried out.

"Don't make eye contact!"

"What?" Silo looked at her. The beast, a giant black, with red spots, leopard stepped out of the forest where it'd been next to invisible a few moments before. It hissed at them but didn't walk forward.

"A cat?" He asked but Melinda nodded her head, "No. Something is terribly wrong... What could have tore a rift?" She wondered aloud. The giant cat looked at the ground in front of it as if there was a line that only it could see.

"Why doesn't it step forward?" Silo asked but his question fell on deaf ears as Melinda was deep in thought.

"A wraith could have done this," she said then her lit up, "That'd explain the Preta and this... abomination!"

"What?" Silo asked but Melinda still wasn't listening.

"We've got a cat to kill," she said. "Don't make direct eye contact. It's a Rift Runner. They aren't made in any world... they're just random energy that is lost from other worlds... look, I can't explain it right now. They're natural but they're naturally evil. They're angry and deadly... So we have to kill it."

"How?"

That question gave Melinda a pause. Rift Runners only really occurred when a being from one world was trying to summon a very powerful being from another. It was because their spell, a spell of summoning, sent shock waves throughout the entire region surrounding the source of the spell.

Thus, the smaller rifts, not nearly as powerful as the main one, couldn't connect to another world. And because the rifts couldn't 'punch through' to another world they were like open doors to the reality, open to the endless abyss of a world without physical substance, to the 'lining' of the realities, which was pure magical energy. And because that door was open, Rift Runners could come through.

"We just have to kill them... like we kill anything. But it takes more than normal things," Melinda said.

"How come it isn't attacking us?" Silo asked.

"I am a druid. They don't like us... I can keep them away through force of will," Melinda said and Silo nodded, "So he can't get to us?"

"How many times do I have to say that?" Melinda asked and Silo shrugged.

"I was just asking... because Benny, Mave and another are walking towards us," Silo muttered and he heard Melinda curse under her breath. It shocked Silo more than a little for it was the first time he had ever heard her curse. But more than shock him it alerted him as to how dangerous this beast must be.

"You really believe Tank would be mad?" Benny asked and Mave snorted.

"I'm thinking mad would be an understatement," the large man said. The third man, Minsc, walked by him. Minsc, large by any standard, was far bigger than Benny but not quite as large as Mave.

Before this moment they'd been talking about his three children, the oldest nine years old, the middle child was seven years old and the youngest four years old, were all growing up like him, with the exception of his youngest son. The four year old seemed to have taken after his mother.

"Well why should he have her all to himself? He's not that great. I get it, he's a strong fighter and he's... y'know, he's not all that great," Benny said. Mave shrugged as they walked.

"I'm thinking there's a large need for heroes in the world, and he's one," Mave said. "I'm thinking girls tend to like what the world needs." Minsc chuckled in agreement.

"Well hell, I'm a hero too!" Benny looked over at Mave, who stood straight, suddenly. Mave unsheathed his blade. Benny's hands dropped to the hilts of his blades immediately. They were out of their sheaths before the Rift Runner stepped forward out of the forest. It was only a few feet from them.

"Don't make eye contact!" they heard Silo yell.

"What?" Benny asked, "Why not?" He was the only one of the three that would have asked such a question... but, nonetheless, he got an answer. For Silo's warning had been too late for Minsc.

The large man took a step back, his body convulsing, then they watched as his eyes began to burn. Then, before their eyes, he burst into flame.

"No!" Benny gasped. He turned on the leopard, which jumped forward, but he had no chance at actually slaying the beast. Benny's blades, dirk and short sword, cut deep into its side but Rift Runner was too big and too strong for Benny's blades to do any real damage.

The beast turned and was about to lash out at the warrior when Mave's broad-sword cut deep into the Rift Runner's forearm. It roared and looked at Mave. It was all the large warrior could do to keep from making eye contact with the beast.

The leopard was about to turn on him when, through a stroke of pure luck and Melinda's pure skill, the druid launched a spell of holding on the leopard. Giant vines tore from the ground, each one foot thick. The vines were nature coalesced, the roots beneath the surface all combined into one strong force, and they were stronger than any carnal being could be.

But this wasn't a carnal creature. The vines wrapped around the leopard's hind legs and dragged it to the ground. The Rift Runner was immobile. It couldn't move forward but the leopard turned on the vines and began to tear at them with its giant teeth.

Mave and Benny went to town, slashing and hacking at the beast. Their blades cut into it but blood didn't flow out. Silo's arrows flew forward, slamming into it with enough force to shift to the side. Neither of them did as much damage as Silo but even the archer's force wasn't enough to slow the beast.

"Magic doesn't do anything! We have to hit this thing!" Melinda shouted.

"Damn!" all three warriors shouted at the same time. They were hitting it with all they had but couldn't do much damage.

Silo's arrows streaked and Benny's blades slashed. They were attacking harder than they'd ever fought before. Mave, eyes closed and body relaxed but strong, lifted his broad-sword over his head.

Roaring with the rage and strength of a man tormented by a past unknown Mave brought his blade down. The broad-sword cut deep into the leopard's back, splitting the beast's spine. The leopard, at that moment, fell to the ground, limp.

"Damn," Benny said with a grin and Mave shrugged.

"I'm thinking we got very lucky," Mave said.

Heide screamed. Maria and Lidia, who were talking, looked up then immediately began their run towards the building that held Bullk.

They got there first. Lidia tried to open the door. When it wouldn't budge she tried to shoulder through it but the door was securely locked.

"Stand back," Maria said and Lidia nodded. Maria incanted for a few moments then released the spell. It was a small burst of red energy which shattered the door, sending pieces of splintered wood all over the room.

Bullk stood there, Heide on the ground with a broken neck, and looked up at the pair with blackened eyes.

"What?" Maria exclaimed. Lidia, realizing what was to come, incanted for half a second. She had a spell trigger ready and it raised a wall of energy. Bullk through himself forward with the same strength that had allowed him to shatter the strong wooden chair that he'd been tied to.

But Lidia's barrier was too strong and Bullk's eyes widened. He saw the look on Maria's face, who had liked Heide, and realized that he was done.

Maria incanted for several seconds, too long for Bullk to have any doubt he'd survive, and a small pea shot forward into the room. Lidia's barrier held back the flame as it shot outward from the middle of the room, engulfing and consuming everything within the building.

Bullk was dead before he knew it.

There was a somber about the village that day. Two town leaders, Heide and Minsc, had died that day.

"How... how did he die?" Minsc's wife asked. Benny sat in silence for several seconds.

"He was the victim of terrible luck," was all Benny could really say, "He died where any good man would have died. He died where all but the gods would have. He died so we could live."

She looked at him, a sad smile in her eyes, "He always said he'd die unlucky."

"Does he have a child?" Benny asked.

"He has three."

"Were any of them given his name?" Benny asked and the woman nodded.

"The middle child... he came out and we realized he would grow up to be just like his father," she smiled, "I hope he does. Minsc was a wonderful man."

"That he was," Benny concurred.

A pair of pyres had been erected. Upon them lay the bodies of Minsc and Heide. The first pyre, Heide atop it, was lit and her husband sat with a simmering fire in his eyes. Their child, a stocky young girl, stared at it with an emotionless face. Her dark blue eyes, in the dark of the night, were unreadable, much like her face.

The second pyre, Minsc atop it, was lit. Minsc's middle child, named Minsc also, watched along side his older brother and younger sister. Giles stood across from them. He was shocked to see that the middle boy was reacting better than either his younger sister or older brother, both of which wore their emotions on their sleeves.

Minsc, though, wore a mask of calm and collected grief. It was hard for anyone to tell if it was a facade or not. No one was sure. But as the young boy, shaped like his father in all ways, stared on they could see the mental calculations of a very aware boy.

"He'll go places," Silo said quietly into Giles' ear. The man nodded in agreement.

"He will."

The companions, both Maria's group and Silo's group, left the village together the next morning. The villagers seemed upset to see them leave but Jeffy left some security in the six Nose Breakers he left behind.

"Stay until a second patrol reaches here. We need to figure out what's going on," Jeffy ordered and his men nodded. The seventh Nose Breaker, the one who'd tried to put the moves on Lidia, had been selected to head back to Sprinkleberry.

Lidia and Maria walked behind everyone as they moved towards the Lightning Chain. Jeffy, realizing that none of the attacks here were normal, had offered not only to pay Benny and Silo a large sum of money to help scout the region but had changed his orders to go out and check on the mountain.

He began to explain, "There should be some Hornet-Lancers and Tuff-

"And Tank?" Maria asked. Jeffy nodded.

"And Tank... on their way there. We should meet up with them," the officer said, "We can

probably get there in a day or two." They were on foot because in the combat their horses had been scared away.

Thus, as the group moved, Maria and Lidia found themselves able to talk in relative isolation.

"How did that man get so strong?" Maria asked. Lidia didn't have to ask who Maria was talking about, for she already knew. Though neither knew Bullk's name they did know that no man should have been able to snap through the thick rope and strong wooden chair like he had.

"I believe it was a Mind Meld," Lidia explained, "A mind meld is a spell that lets the strength and energy of two beings combine in one body. It's very risky because two minds inhabit one body... so if something happens to that body then both minds are killed. Plus if the mind that belongs to the other body is still attached to its original host. So if that second body is hurt then both minds are hurt.

"So... they must have some sort of evil boss who is magically powerful. How else would undead still be roam the lands? Plus it'd make sense because during the Chaos War there was undead even after Azeroth was killed. So something must have been left behind.

"So whatever was left behind is coming back. I'd guess it's a wraith or something like that. Something strong enough to raise the dead but not strong enough to take over the entire region..." Lidia trailed off, deep in thought, "Oh no."

"What?" Maria asked.

"This creature wouldn't be acting up if it didn't have a plan.. and it seems to be trying to create more and more zombies... so it probably needs souls... and if it's trying to get souls..." she stopped, "Oh no."

"What is it?" Maria asked.

"We have to get to the Lightning Chain!" Lidia said.

At that same time Melinda and Silo walked next to each other. Melinda stared at the ground, deep in thought. Silo noticed this. He was looking over, trying to think of a way to talk to her but there seemed to be nothing worth talking about. The group was walking in relative silence, aside from Maria and Lidia talking.

It was partly in due to the fact that they'd been walking for several hours straight and were soon to be taking a break but also it was because no one knew what to say; there were great dangers in these woods, dangers that matched those of the Chaos War. And nobody wanted another Chaos War.

Finally he decided to speak.

"So what're you thinking about?" he asked and immediately realized that he was probably disturbing her thoughts by simply asking. She looked over but didn't talk and Silo felt as if he'd been slapped in the face by not only his own stupidity but her realization of his stupidity.

Then she spoke and his inner turmoil was erased, "Rift Runners don't appear unless there's a rift.. and a really big one. Or, really, a bunch of really small ones."

"Hmm?" Silo was at a loss.

"Alright... there are a bunch of realities mixed together with each other. Druids know this. That's why we are powerful. But in between the worlds, the realitises, there is a layer of pure energy, which is called the abyss. The abyss is both a limited layer, like a padding, between the realities and an infinite amount of energy that grows thicker and thicker as you get closer to the middle of the 'padding'.

"It takes a certain amount of energy to create a rift from one realm to another... enough energy to not only 'punch through' the abyss but also to move things through it. The energy that is required can splash out of the rift and hit places near it... so if there's a really large rift, and large rifts are used to bring something very powerful into a world... then the energy used to make the hole is enough to splash off and creature other smaller rifts around it.

"But the smaller rifts don't have direction or energy so they 'punch' out of our reality but don't pierce another reality... so they reach only into the abyss. The abyss, a realm of random and pure energy that is all but limitless, released Rift Runners into the world until the rift is closed. Think about it as if

there is a swarm of flies outside a house. Everytime a window is opened some flies get in.

"There are so many flies outside that it seems limitless and that even if you hit them with a fire ball they'd continue to be a pest..." Melinda sighed.

"The real trick isn't opening a portal to the abyss to let in the Rift Runners... it'd be to let something else in... something very powerful."

"So what you're saying is that these... Rift Runners aren't what our enemy is bringing in?" Silo asked and Melinda nodded. "Are you saying they aren't as powerful as what our enemy is bringing in?"

Melinda nodded again and Silo sighed.

"Oh good, I thought it was going to be a simple mission," he muttered.

"The problem is," Jeffy said from behind, "We don't yet know what our mission is."

The companions sat in a circle around a camp fire. It was late when they'd finally decided to stop and Silo was the one volunteered to gather firewood. The archer went about the task without any complaint.

"Do you believe in alternate realities?" He muttered to himself at one point when he was looking up at the stars, gathering the wood. He looked over at Melinda and felt his stomach clench up more than a little. He sighed to himself, trying to figure out himself at that moment, then looked up again.

"I don't know," he said softly, "Do I believe in alternate realities?"

He bent over and picked up another piece of wood.

"Do you believe in miracles?" He said softly again. He looked at Melinda for several seconds, thinking of her shady past and his lack of knowledge.

"Where are you from?" He sighed. He walked over and dropped the firewood off. He noted that their initial fire was getting low on wood already and decided to go out and find more wood now rather than later.

"There is too much of this world I don't understand," he muttered as he collected it. He enjoyed nights such as these because it gave him a certain clarity of thought that he wasn't used to. It was a type of silent lucidity that he appreciated when he had things to think about.

"I wonder if there is another world out there where Melinda loves Silo," he mused. He was about to talk aloud again when he heard another voice.

"I'm sure there is," Benny said as he dropped from a tree above Silo. "We live in the type of world that anything is possible. I can't see how there wouldn't be another world out there. And I'm sure there is a funny looking guy named Silo," Benny and Silo both grinned, "who is absolutely in love with a druid who is way out of his class," they laughed.

"I'd like to think madly in love with is an overstatement," Silo said and Benny shrugged. Silo could only barely see it in the dark.

"And I'd like to think Maria was as open to new things as she is beautiful," he said, "But apparently she really feels strongly for Tank."

"How'd you find that out," Silo muttered sarcastically. Maria's affections for this Tank, who had been spoken about several times by the villagers of Frival and by Maria herself, was obvious.

"Well I told her I wanted to kiss her," Benny said, "Then she said she felt strongly for Tank. Then I said I feel strongly that I am a much better choice than he is. Then..."

"Then what?" Silo asked.

"I tried to kiss her," Benny said. He seemed a little less confident with himself, "And she laughed at me... Then told me to get lost." Benny sighed and Silo suppressed a chuckle.

"You always have to learn the hard way, don't you?" the archer asked and Benny shrugged.

"I like living dangerously," he said.

"Well this is the right place to be if you want danger," Silo said with a chuckle.

They walked back to the camp fire and as if to prove Benny's story true when the young man sat

across from Maria she asked to switch with Lidia so that she wouldn't have to look at the warrior. Silo chuckled and Giles raised an eye brow. Mave, who'd seen the whole thing, just sighed at his friend.

Deabla sat deep in thought. He looked at the mountain, at the smoke reaching high into the sky, then, on sudden inspiration, stood. He was sitting atop Harold's Hill, as had become usual for the small young man, when he realized that he had to do something.

Thus he climbed down from the top of the building and immediately rushed to Marko's house. Marko, being one of the warriors who had saved his life during the Chaos War, was an older fellow. He had been old even during the war and that was three long years past.

Deabla was glad it was early in the morning for he came out to see Marko's rocking chair in the far left.

"That won't do," he sighed. He walked over and moved the chair further to the right of his small and humble porch. Deabla nodded then walked off to hide in wait.

Marko, several minutes later, stumbled out of his house with the same little shuffle that all veterans of war who were too old to fight or run any longer but not too weak to move about. The scars and wounded of his past were shown, though, in this walk.

Marko looked over at his rocking chair, in a different position than was usual, and grumbled to himself. As he grumbled he walked, more of a stumble, over towards the chair. Once he got to the chair, wooden and painted white, he placed his hands upon it. Then he lifted it, more easily than one might expect, and carried it back to his original spot.

Deabla watched all this for several seconds.

"Mm... that'll do," he said. Then Deabla moved about the city slowly, moving only a couple more people's things. He watched to make sure the people reacted. Then he smiled to himself.

"It will do."

Deabla got back to Harold's Hill just in time for Esmeralda to open her eyes. Denerick had been watching the front.

"Where have you been?" Esmeralda asked with a smile and Deabla just smiled back.

"Oh you know, just saving lives," he said, cryptically as usual, and Esmeralda just laughed.

"I'm sure you were."

## Part Two: Winter's Embrace

### Chapter Eight:

Tank looked up the side of the mountain. He looked back at his companions, Tuff, Laurie, Ashe, and Wombly, then back up at the mountain. It was a strange landscape for the ground was relatively flat up until it got to the mountain, where it raised up at a very high angle. The rocks, reaching out the side of the mountain, might have been mistaken for defenses spikes and poles, for they poked out as if they were the defenses of some sort of castle against a calvary charge or infantry attack.

But it had been there for as long as anyone could remember. The mountains were one of the only things to survive the Chaos Curse of Azeroth, in the times before the desert. The Lightning Chain was a chain of mountains called such because any storms that went over the area hit the mountain chain repetitively. Thus the peoples around them had called the mountain chain the Lightning Chain.

Now, as Tank looked up, he could see a black smoke rising high into the sky.

It was a disturbing sight to say the least, for not only did it block out the sunlight in some places below it, making it seem like dusk throughout the entire day, but it was a sign that something had gone terribly wrong.

In times past the Lightning Chain had been covered in trees. The inhabitants used fire as a weapon back then and on a hot summer day the fire, in the form of a weapon gone wild, had spread all over the mountain, burning everything. The mountain peoples and all the animals had been killed or forced into exile.

Thus an agreement had been struck between the temporarily displaced tribes not to use fire as a weapon ever again. It was a source of life and heat alone. The fact that a flame had gotten so large was a terrifying event. But even worse the fact that no help had been sent for from the tribes was even more unsettling.

"How do we get up?" Tank asked. When it was evident there was no response forthcoming he shrugged, grunted and began to climb.

"Dat, my friend, would foolish," Laurie said. Tank turned and looked at her curiously. "Dese mountains have human life on Dem for a reason. Dey are hard to conquer because Dere are only a few trails up de side of the mountain. We're not going to just walk up de side of the moutain."

"So what do you propose?" Tuff asked when he saw Tank getting more than a little frustrated.

"I don't know," she said, "In de mountains from my home we have people who wonder around de side of de mountains in case dere are merchants or wanderers who are lost."

"So we wait," Wombly said and Tank shrugged.

"Meh!" Tank grumbled as he climbed down the three or four steps that he'd made it up before Laurie stopped him.

They sat with their backs to the mountain, looking at the forest. There were creatures in the woods that they didn't feel comfortable behind them. But Laurie had warned against the dangers of the mountain also. So she alone sat facing it.

"You know... if dere is a Mountain-Rounder who comes near us I might miss him..." Laurie said. She referred to a man who traveled around the mountain in search of those who couldn't find a way up.

Everyone made eye contact then Wombly sighed.

"Fine, I'll look also," she said. She turned around and sat back to back with Tank.

"Horses are such a pain in the butt sometimes," Wombly mused aloud.

"Hey!" Laurie complained and Wombly nodded, "Sorry." Laurie was quiet. She was lost in thought soon after, thinking of the death of her beloved horse.

"But really, we can't travel nearly as fast on foot as we can on horseback but there has to be some way we can move just as fast through manpower and machines. I know how pulleys work and we have to be able to pedal and wheels... maybe we'll be able to make a pedal-powered machine to move around in," Wombly said. Tank just chuckled.

"You always have the most unusual ideas," he said, "But I think it's a good one. But they probably won't be able to move side to side nearly as well as forward."

"Agreed," Wombly said, "But I think it's possible and a start."

"It sounds like a good idea to me," Ashe said and both Tank and Wombly looked over in surprise. Ashe rarely, if ever, spoke of any of Wombly's inventions that weren't lethal.

"Thank you," Wombly said, masking her surprise fairly well.

They sat in silence.

"Hey Ashe," Tank said.

"Yes?"

"Are you mad at me?"

"Yes."

Silence.

"Why?"

"Because you had something good going for you and you screwed it up with your self-righteous

beliefs," Ashe didn't turn around as she spoke.

"What?"

"Maria loves you now. You love her, I know you do, and you won't do it because a stupid demon said you shouldn't because she'd die," Ashe said, "Because you don't think she can take care of herself."

"It's not that-" Tank began to argue but Ashe cut him off, "It's exactly that!" She yelled, "You can't handle the thought of her dying because of you so you're too afraid to take a chance. Gods damn you Tank, you're too... You sometimes. You can't be this way because if you keep doing this you'll never get happy."

"She'll never get happy either. You're being selfish because you're not willing to take a chance with her. She will take that chance with you, she understands the risks. Why do you think she's out here with.." Ashe's words died in her mouth.

"What?" Tank said, "She's out here?"

Ashe looked to Wombly and they made eye contact. Both had concerned expressions and Tank looked at Wombly.

"You knew too?" Tank asked.

"She made me promise not to tell," Wombly said and Tank growled.

"Damn it. If I knew she was going to just throw herself into danger to prove herself then I'd.." he lost his steam and Ashe looked at him.

"You'd do what?" she asked. Tank looked downwards. Ashe tried to force him to look her in the why but he wouldn't.

"You'd do what?" Ashe asked again and Tank sighed.

"I don't know."

"That is your problem," Ashe said, "Even if everything were laid on a silver platter for you, a snack on the side of it too, you wouldn't take it. Because nothing can ever be simple with you. Nothing at all."

Tank looked up and glared at her, making direct eye contact with her, then nodded.

"Perhaps you are right," was all he said before he stood up. Ashe and Wombly traded concerned looks then looked to him.

"Where are you going?" Tuff asked from his seat.

"To get some air," Tank grunted in response.

Ashe and Wombly stood as well.

"Where are you going?" Tuff asked, exasperated.

"The last time he went out to 'get some air' we had to save him from an assassin," Wombly said and Tuff sighed. Laurie and he didn't bother follow the pair.

"If they die... we will be in a great bit of trouble," Tuff muttered with a sigh.

Tank stalked forward, his brow furrowed as he sat deep in thought. Possibilities flew around in his head, faster than lightning, and he realized that Ashe might be right.

"Damn," he muttered. "I always figured I was the one who needed less maintenance."

"I don't think it's a maintenance problem," Wombly said from behind and Tank turned. His lips tightened when he saw the young woman.

"I guess we don't have any reason to trust one another anymore," he mumbled, more to himself than to her, but she heard it.

"We do trust each other Tank... never think we don't," she walked up and put her hand on his shoulder. Tank turned and looked into her deep, brown eyes.

He saw understanding there.

"Then why didn't you tell me?" Tank asked and Wombly sighed.

"She had to prove a point. A point to you," she said and Tank gave a bitter chuckle, "Yeah,

because going out without me ever finding out will change so much."

"She was suffering," Wombly responded and Tank nodded, "Aye, I was too!" Wombly shook her head, "But you were the cause of both your pain. She needed to prove a point to you."

"Wombly, you know that people don't even notice when you're in pain unless you let them know. Maria would know this because I was hurting for many years for her. She didn't know, though, or if she did then she didn't acknowledge it, and now that it's all done she wouldn't remember knowing it even if she had," Tank said. "We can't not tell each other things like this. I'd tell you if anyone was talking about you in a fashion that was romantic or if anyone was doing anything that effected you."

Wombly nodded then sighed.

"But this argument isn't about me," she said and Tank muttered something undisguishable.

"Tank," Wombly complained and Tank said, "Fine, I said-"

"No, Tank!" Wombly cut him off and Tank turned. In the clearing stood a giant black bear. The creature looked down at them with oddly intelligent eyes. Not oddly intelligent because they'd seen so many bears before that this one stood out but because though they'd never seen a bear before they had always assumed bears weren't all that intelligent.

"How do we react to this?" Wombly asked and Tank shrugged. Bears were new to the region and there were few hunters who had any consecutive success against the powerful animals. They were knew, intelligent and strong. The hunting styles of the desert before had been against mainly smaller, faster animals dependent on camoflaue hiding them.

That's not how bears work, though. A bear, when cornered, could easily snap a sword with its padded paws. Their claws broke tore armor and their teeth pierced even the strongest shields. These bears, though not fully natural to all worlds, were the type that this realm was used to.

Tank noted Ashe making her way towards the bear, from behind it, and saw that her blades were at the ready. He was unconvinced about her course of action. Then he saw the bear's ears flicker backwards.

"It knows you're there," Tank said and the bear looked back and seemed to nod to her. Ashe, frustrated, looked at the bear and Tank wondered if the bear would burst into flames.

"Well... what now?" Ashe asked and Tank shrugged.

"I've never messed with a bear before," Tank hardly answered her question.

"Think we have to fight it?" Ashe asked.

"I hope not. Look at its hide," Wombly said, "I don't think my crossbow can punch through that..."

"I don't think any small blades will work," Tank said.

"Well... what now?" Ashe asked again, growing more frustrated and Tank sighed. He put his hands up in a relaxed fashion, trying to calm the beast, and stepped forward. The bear looked at him, its ears flickering. Tank could see the tips of its giant teeth peaking out the bottom of its lip.

It didn't seem aggressive, however, so Tank stepped forward just barely more aggressive than before.

"Tank," Wombly said but the thick man nodded his head the negative.

"Shhh."

The bear lowered down off of its two hind legs and began to walk forward, very slowly, towards Tank. The warrior made sure his flail was unhooked.

"Go ahead, let him kill himself," he heard Ashe mutter and couldn't help but crack a small grin. He didn't let his teeth show, though, for he figured (for the first time in his life) that to another animal it might seem as though he was bearing his teeth.

The bear was only a foot or two from him when he stopped. The bear did likewise.

Tank reached out slowly, ready to pull his arm back at any second, and the bear stared at it with the utmost intensity.

Then Tank's hand touched the bears side. Its fur was relatively soft.

*That's why they hunt them...* he thought of himself.

The bear let him pet it for a couple of minutes then burped and turned. It walked off, searching busily something. When it found a bush, covered with berries, it sat down and went about collecting the berries both in its mouth and in two small piles.

When it was done two smaller bear, cubs, walked out of the clearing. They began to eat the berries as well.

"Aww," Wombly said with a smile. Tank and Ashe, who'd just walked out into the clearing, watched with some amazement.

"Well... I'd say its time to go back to Tuff and Laurie," Tank said.

The three shuffled off with the awkwardness of a group who realized they'd just brushed with death and that death, in return, had poked them. They came upon the group to see Laurie and Tuff blushing slightly. None of them questioned the pair.

## Chapter Nine

Deabla walked about Sprinkleberry with a merry stride. He had just left Marko's house, moving the man's chair like he had every morning since he'd first done it, and continued to move the things that some people would notice moving. He noticed that sometimes the people moved that way habitually, as if it were second nature.

That pleased him.

He walked around for a couple of hours and was on his way back to Harold's Hill when the hair on the back of his neck stood up. Deabla looked around, his eyes narrowed slightly, trying to figure out what had caused his senses to scream out that he was being followed.

He sent out the sensation that he usually did when he was trying to figure something out. But there was nothing that stood out to him.

"Strange," he mumbled. He continued towards Harold's Hill.

Esmeralda looked up and smiled.

"Saving lives again?" she asked and Deabla bowed.

"As is the usual," he smiled. Esmeralda smiled back and the two shared a moment.

"You miss him," Deabla stated. He'd seen Esmeralda's smile weaken slightly and she nodded.

"I miss him," she agreed. Deabla walked over to the bar and motioned towards a drink. She gave it to him and he handed her a coin. She smiled. "There's no point in paying me. We all share the same money."

"I bring money into our world from the outside world," Esmeralda cocked her head to the side, "Think about it this way. I go out and get money from the rest of Sprinkleberry and only spend it here. This means that you only gain money when I buy anything here, even at the cost, because others will always be buying here," Deabla finished and Esmeralda shrugged.

"I'm not the magic one here," she said and Deabla smiled sadly.

"You miss them," she said and he nodded.

"I do," he said. They sat in silence. Denerick chuckled.

"De troubles of de young," he said light-heartedly and Deabla nodded.

"So when will they be back?" Esmeralda asked and Deabla gave her a confused look, "Well you guess things. I think you'd be able to know when they're coming back." He sighed.

"I see two likelihoods," he said softly, too low for them to hear. Esmeralda, of course, hadn't expected a real answer. She was just playing him, as was usual. None of them were sure the limits of his abilities but she didn't surely believe he was psychic or magical. But he knew what he felt.

"And we will not be happy either way."

"Bears?" Benny asked, "Bears?"

"Yeah," Silo responded, "Bears."

"To the abyss with bears! They aren't really *that* tough. I doubt we'd have any trouble killing a bear," Benny said. Mid-sentence he lost all credit with Silo, Giles and Melinda. The two former had personally seen the raw power of a bear and Melinda had spent many weeks in the presence of a bear.

"Your blade wouldn't be able to even poke through a bears hide hide," Silo said, "Even my strongest arrow from my long bow couldn't pierce its fur," the archer grabbed a steel-tip arrow and showed Benny its razor sharp point.

"We wouldn't lose though," Benny said and Giles snorted.

"No, of course not. Not with them," he pointed towards Lidia, Copla and Maria. The three magic-based companions were walking ahead of them, talking about some sort of matter that seemed of the utmost importance.

"What do you know about mind melding?" Maria asked Copla. He looked curiously at her.

"Mind melding?" Copla asked, then, "Well, I suppose enough. I know that it is very risky. If one body dies then both minds are forced back to the same body, whether it's the possessed or the possessor. I just know that it is very risky-"

"You said that already," Maria cut him off, "Do you know if anyone can perfect it?"

"Perfect it?" Copla asked, repeating her yet again, and Maria rolled her eyes, but Copla didn't notice and Maria said nothing.

"Yes, perfect it."

"Do you mean to... use it effectively?" Copla asked and Maria nodded.

Copla looked suspiciously at her.

"Why?"

Maria got a most innocent expression and smiled, "Oh for the good of the group only."

"For no personal gain?" Copla demanded. Maria nodded.

"For no personal gain," she answered evenly.

They stared at each other for several seconds before Copla shrugged.

"It wouldn't matter whether I've heard anything or not," he said and Maria gave him a curious look, "You would have to master it on your own eitherway, since I've never done it before."

"You've never done it?" Maria asked.

"I didn't say I hadn't done it." Maria looked curiously at him.

"I don't like the thought of taking over other people. I don't think anyone should have that power over anyone," the heavy mage said and Maria raised an eye brow.

"Plus it's dangerous... if a third mind is brought into it and one body is destroyed... there are three minds and two bodies. One of the people is drowned out... and usually the victim is the one who was possessed."

"Bad experience?" Maria almost asked but she refrained from it at the last second. Copla was a nervous man. She didn't know what had happened to him in the past, no one really did, they just knew that he was a simple man most of the time. He had an appetite but that couldn't be held against him. He was a nervous fellow.

She just wondered, at that moment, if mind melding had anything to do with it.

"Well.. I'm not so keen on innocent people dying..." Maria began but a certain level of awkwardness killed her words. The tension in the air, from his obvious dissatisfaction at speaking about the subject, was a little too much and Copla decided to slow down his walking pace. Maria didn't slow down and both seemed to appreciate their mutual desire to end the conversation.

Lidia, who'd gone to look for food for their night, returned and noticed Maria's pensive look.

"What happened?" she asked and Maria looked over.

"What do you mean?" she asked. She didn't, at that moment, want to talk about what was going on her head. She needed more time to think before she'd have anything to say.

In a moment of clarity she wondered if this was how Tank had felt all those times when Wombly or Ashe pressured him to talk about something. She remembered that Deabla, during those times, never seemed to question him. He always knew the right time to ask questions.

She realized she missed Deabla at that moment.

"Maria?" Lidia asked and Maria looked up.

"What?"

"I said something and you didn't respond," Lidia said then she got the 'weird look' that she seemed to get whenever she had an unusual insight.

"The dialogue never stops," she said in a soft and pensive voice and Maria looked at her curiously. Lidia turned and walked away and Maria was flabbergasted.

"Alright then..." she muttered. Then she wondered what Lidia meant. But even after many minutes of thinking there was no solution for her. Thus she walked alone, behind Mave and Benny, who were talking about whatever it is guys talked about.

"This must be what Tank feels like," she thought aloud. It was strange. She'd done several things that Tank usually did, like not hear when others spoke to him, and she didn't like the feeling.

It was stressful.

Copla sat deep in thought. Memories flooded through his mind and he was quiet as he walked fully alone. He could hear Benny and Mave talking about something in front, at the very front, and Silo speaking with Melinda at the front. He ignored all this but couldn't completely block it out.

He rubbed his thick fingers together to try to ward off the cold; winter's long arm was already beginning to reach to this side of the Lightning Chain. Usually the snows would hit Walston first. He wondered what it was like over there. The days were growing shorter, this was obvious, and the wind was getting stronger and sharper by the day.

"I hate the cold," he muttered to himself as he stepped. A small voice in his head seemed to sigh.

"You are a wizard, aren't you?" he could barely hear it. But it was enough to make him smile. He incanted for a moment and a small, all but invisible flame appeared in front of him. He used it to warm his hands for a few moments.

"I miss you," he said aloud, and the words were louder than he intended.

"What?" Lidia asked from the side. Copla looked over at her.

"Oh nothing," he said with the same nervous voice he always got when he was lying. Lidia glared at him for several seconds.

"Nothing," he said again, firmer than before, and Lidia nodded.

"I don't believe you. But I recognize that you won't tell me what it is that is bothering," she said. Copla looked at her weirdly, a look that Lidia was used to, and the priestess just shrugged.

"The more you suffer doesn't prove that you care more. The person you suffer for doesn't notice your suffering, so it does you no justice to feel the pain and not share it," she said.

"They'll always notice," Copla said quietly, this time too low so for Lidia to hear, "Always."

But the priestess knew he said something but didn't press the point. She muttered. It wasn't long before Copla realized that he was talking only to himself.

It was far later in the day when Giles slowed.

"What is it?" Melinda asked and Silo looked over curiously.

"What was the being that attacked you in Frival?" He asked and Melinda scrunched her brow.

"Preta," she said.

"These are... unusual beings?" Giles asked and Melinda shrugged.

"They aren't too unusual," she said.

"Meaning that if one is around, are there going to be more?"

"They don't usually travel in groups-" Melinda began but Giles cut her off, "You said it might be a wraith that is raising the dead?"

"Yes," Melinda said. Then her eyes widened as the implications hit her. If one Preta was called in by a wraith or other undead being then more could be summoned just as easily. "Oh no."

"Is Frival in danger?"

"I'm not sure," Melinda responded.

"Should we head back?" Silo asked and they walked in silence.

"I don't know," was all Melinda could say.

"Do you think they're in danger?"

"Who isn't these days?" Benny asked from the front. He and Mave had heard them then turned back and listened in on the conversation.

"We are going out to destroy whatever is summoning the preta's. I'm thinking that preta will still come even if we kill the preta. Destroying it will end them all, no?" Mave asked.

"No end them... but they'll stop coming our way," Melinda said.

"So we find out what is causing this and we destroy it," Benny said.

No one was happy to leave Frival on its own but they all understood the risks.

They were about four days from the mountain when the first snowflake fell in front of Benny.

"Ah damn," he muttered.

"What is it?" Giles asked and Benny sighed.

"I hate the cold," Benny responded. Giles gave a small laugh, "Then we had better get to the mountain real soon, huh?"

"There is a blizzard coming," they heard Melinda say to Silo behind and the entire group slowed.

"So what do we do?" Maria asked. "We don't want to get caught out here."

"The blizzard is only a few days out at the most..." Melinda said.

"So we book it there, then?" Silo asked and Benny cracked a grin.

"Book it?" he asked. Silo shrugged.

"I dunno, sounds right."

"What does that even mean?" Benny asked and Silo shrugged again.

"Records are recorded in books," Maria said, "He might be saying that we go fast enough that it's a record... y'know... to be written in a book..."

Benny eyed Maria for a moment, a dry look on his face, "Right."

They stood in awkward silence for many moments.

Finally... "So we book it there, then?" Silo asked and Melinda nodded.

"Seems to be our only option," and with that the druid began a slow jog in the general direction of the city. A small canal-like opening had been carved into the mountain years ago. It was the main trade route between Sprinkleberry and Keell and Walston. They were currently headed in that direction.

Mlaster stood on the mountain, looking down at the two approaching groups. One, on the side of the mountain, was already too far away from his new favorite type of creatures. The wraith inside of him had grown in strength. And now it was calling on stronger denizens of the darkness. There were plenty of things he still couldn't gather. But he wasn't frustrated.

The portal would be ready soon enough.

Thus he looked at the second group, moving faster than the first, and looked at the undead behind them. There were far more beings behind him than before.

His army was growing. And as he looked down at the two forces he knew that even if he lost a hundred undead fighting them he would gain in destroying them. They were powerful. He looked up at

the sky and saw the clouds.

The weather would help.

They'd be jogging for about two hours when they heard some noise. They weren't sure what it was but they knew they needed to rest.

"Think... we can... stop... soon?" Benny asked and Silo shrugged.

"Ask Melinda, she can feel the weather," Silo responded. Around them the snow was growing thicker and more frequent. There were more and more flakes of snow every second. At their feet there was two to three inches of snow already. And it was only getting taller.

"We should stop," Benny said and Melinda nodded.

"We must rest," she agreed.

They all stood, trying to be ready to run if whatever was making the noise, a high pitch and squeal-like moan that lasted for several seconds, caught up to them. There was no relaxation. And the weather, fast and cold, was an fair reflection of their moods at that moment.

Then it happened. And they scattered.

The creatures were too fast.

Each was about six feet tall, thin and emaciated. They were bent over, running on all fours, and their skin was black and decayed. They had six inch long claws that were as sharp as Benny's dirk.

Lidia's spell hit first. It was a defensive sanctuary that flashed light and warmth upon them. The creatures, shade-walkers, screamed their high pitch wails and winced. Benny's blades were out, despite his numb fingers, and he tried to go on the aggressive.

But even when recoiling the creatures were too quick to be hit directly. It dodged back.

"Clear out!" Maria shouted and everyone did so. In the snow it was hard to see who was with who but Copla, Maria and Lidia happened to be on the same side.

Maria hit the middle with a fireball and half a dozen of the shade-walkers burned. Three more survived though.

"Run!" Maria, Lidia and Copla heard from the otherside and they took the advice. None of the companions turned around, they just put their head down and sprinted. When they couldn't sprint they ran and when they couldn't run they still jogged.

Maria turned around, panting and saw that one of the shade-walkers was in persuit still. Its legs had been burnt off but its long arms still worked. And yet it was keeping up with them somehow. She turned and launched a trigger spell, one that she could call upon at convenience rather than cast for, and the shade-walker was obliterated.

The low moan of the walking undead continued to fill the air. They hadn't noticed it before but it filled their ears and the woods around them. The snow was thick and their hands and feet were numb. Their legs and shoulders burned, somehow, in contrast with their cold extremities.

"We have to keep going," Lidia said and Maria nodded. She could feel warm tears rolling down her cold cheeks.

In her mind she realized that they had been separated from the others. And in her heart she knew that she would never see them again.

"We have to stop," an exhausted Copla collapsed on the ground.

"No, Copla, we have to keep going," Lidia said and the man looked up at her.

"I can't," he panted, "I can't."

"We have to keep going," Lidia insisted. She wasn't the strange young woman that she normally acted like. She, like Maria, was determined fully to survive this. But Copla, in that moment didn't have it in him.

*You have to keep going. For me. You owe me that.* He heard in his head. And Copla, putting his

hands under his body, slowly stood.

"Okay," he said softly. Maria and Lidia exchanged looks but neither complained.

"Which direction should we go in?" Maria asked. Lidia looked back, where the moans floated over the snow towards them from. Maria would have shrugged had she not been so exhausted. "With the exception of that one."

"We're moving in the right direction," Copla said and the other two looked at him curiously.

"You didn't cast a spell?" Maria asked and Copla nodded, "We were supposed to keep the mountains on our left."

They stood, catching their breath for several seconds, then they began jogging again.

It was getting dark. The sun was almost below the horizon. The woods around them seemed ominous. The tree limbs seemed to reach out towards them, spindly-wooden fingers gripping at their cloaks as they ran.

"How much further?" Maria gasped.

"I don't know," Copla growled. Both young women looked at him, unaccustomed to him speaking that way.

Their exhaustion was too much, though, and they, as a group, fell to the ground.

Maria opened her eyes; she didn't immediately remember where she was. But as soon as the memory returned she felt her eyes grow warm again with tears as she lay there, still on the ground. She looked to Copla and Lidia, both of them still passed out from their exhaustion, then realized why she had awakened.

"Guys, we need to go," she said as the moans of the undead grew louder and louder by the second. She saw a pair of glowing orange eyes in the distance.

"We have to get up," she said loudly and Copla stirred. Lidia's eyes opened already. She was beginning to get up.

"Guys. We need to leave," Maria said, "We need to go!" Copla's eyes barely opened. Maria, seeing a faster walking zombie getting closer, released another trigger spell. She only a few more. The zombie fell to the ground in pieces.

"We need to leave, Now!" she yelled and Copla's eyes popped all the way open. He was on his feet in a couple of seconds. They looked back and saw dozens of undead emerging from the woods in front of them.

"We run," Maria said and he was about to turn and run away when Lidia paused. She lifted her hands and incanted for several seconds then a giant wall of light formed between them. The light had a radiant glow and repulsed the undead.

"How long will it last?" Copla asked.

"A couple of minutes at most. We run now," Lidia said and the three magic-based companions rushed away.

Benny's breaths came in pants. They'd been running for hours. Unlike the magic-based companions they hadn't had time to sleep. He was in the front, scouting out. Silo was just behind him. Mave just behind Silo. Melinda and Giles ran in the back.

Blood covered the front of Giles' armor. He'd been wounded in the initial battle. Two gashes across his chest had been the initial problem. Melinda, while running, tried to cast her spells but she wasn't able to both heal the wounds and the insidious poison that came along with shade-walker claws.

Their leader was growing pale and his eyes were bloodshot.

And Giles was slowing.

"We can't keep going for long..." Mave said, "I'm thinking we'll have to turn and fight."

Benny turned and looked at him again, "And I'm thinking we don't have any choice but to run. There's too many of them."

They looked back to Giles, the man's eyes were vacant.

Finally he stopped running and turned.

Melinda looked to him, "What are you doing?"

"We only have a few moments. You must continue, I'm turning," Giles said. He pulled his two-bladed battle-axe from off his back. He almost reached for his shield, the purple raven, but realized he could barely hold his battle-axe in both hands.

"Run. I have no more strength to give. Run," the man said. His companions looked to him, "We only have moments," then one undead burst through the woods.

He hit it with the battle-axe, literally slicing the zombie's head from its body. A second came through and Giles cut it in half. His friends looked to him and saw in his eyes that he told them the truth. The man's hair was graying over by the second. His shoulders, less muscled than before, was enough evidence to prove his claim to them.

"Run!"

And his followers, companions for three years, followed one last command.

## Chapter Ten

Tank looked up the side of the mountain. Their camp wasn't exactly comfortable but with the storm coming in it was the best shelter they had. Smoke still raised off the mountain, as was constant for the last few weeks. But now more smoke lingered in the sky than before. There had been another explosion only a few hours before. The companions had been searching for some cause but no one could see it.

"What is that?" he heard Wombly ask and he looked over to her. She was pointing upwards and to their right. He saw a man rushing down the side of the mountain.

"Who is that?" Tank asked. No one had an answer. Then they saw three beings chasing him down, all three moving strangely fast. The shade-walkers were charging downwards, gaining on him slowly. One of the beasts tripped and flew down the side of the mountain. It landed, with the loud crack of bone snapping, only a few feet from Ashe.

The shade-walker jumped to its feet and all but fell forward towards her. Her hands were a blur as she unsheathed her blades and slashed at the creature. Her hands were a blur as well when her blades slashed through the things face.

"Well, that was easy," she said, looking at the others, then she heard the man scream. The companions, as a group, looked up to see him trip.

"We have to get up dere!" Laurie shouted. Wombly, to the side, called on Vombatidae then lifted her crossbow.

The man turned and watched in terror as the closer shade-walker tried to get to him. The fear was palpable and he screamed just before the creature lurched backwards, a crossbow bolt embedded deep into its skull.

The second shade-walker was only a few from the man when vombatidae realized the situation. Wombly didn't have to tell, or ask as that was the nature of their relationship, the astral wombat to do anything. Rather, the wombat jumped up and forward twice, closing the distance with a pair of bounds.

The wombat punched out with its front right leg and the shade-walker's head snapped backwards. The undead body hit the ground limply. Then, as if mechanically, the shade-walker slowly climbed to its feet.

Vombatidae turned on the mountain man and watched, for a moment, as the man rushed away. Then the wombat turned to see the shade-walker burst towards him. The wombat's heavy paw slammed into the shade-walker again and it flew to the ground.

With two powerful swipes the shade-walker was in two pieces, its skull smashed.

The man sat next to Tuff and Tank and the rest of their companions, panting and sobbing slightly. He was young, barely fifteen years old, but he had the body of a man. Standing at just over six feet tall, he was a large figure with broad shoulders. On his left was a deep and bloody gash.

"So... who are you?" Tuff asked and the teenager looked up at him.

"I am called Grewslough," he said. He was of relatively light skin for the mountain tribes' men. Muscular and tone, he had the traits that most of the mountain men shared.

"What happened to you?" Wombly asked and he looked up to her. Then he paused, for several seconds, staring at her. His own eyes, dark brown, matched hers. She raised an eye brow and realized that had Grewslough's skin been lighter they'd have have seen him blushing.

"Um... My... I'm sorry," he said to Wombly, "I just... have never seen anyone so beautiful." Wombly stared at him for several seconds blankly.

"Uh... okay," she said, genuinely uncomfortable, then snapped back into the real world, "Thank you. I uh... I'm just not used to hearing that." Grewslough seemed about to ask a question so Wombly hurried, "Anyway... what did happen to you?"

Grewslough looked around at the rest of the companions, "My tribe was attacked by all these... things. We were trying to get away when..." he looked down, "Our shaman knew what must be done and he approached the rest of the our tribe's shamans. They combined their powers and hit the force with their most powerful spells..."

"Mountain shamans most potent spell are dose of ice..." Laurie said and Grewslough nodded.

"Dey slaughtered us," the teenager's eyes glazed over as if he were a thousand miles away, "Too many. De screams... they were..." his voice quivered.

"What can we do?" Tank and Tuff asked at the same time. They looked at each other but it was only a few moments before they ignored the unusual occurrence.

"Aye," Grewslough said softly, "What can we do?"

The others realized that he wasn't asking a real question that was to be answered. They were asking the question in order to find out what action might make a difference. He was asking out of only helplessness.

"How many were there?" Tuff asked.

"Dozens, if not hundreds," Grewslough sighed and the others blew their own sighs.

"What can we do?" Grewslough asked again.

They walked slowly, following Grewslough as he traveled south. They were trying to comfort the young teenager.

"Where are we going?" Tank asked and Grewslough didn't respond.

"Grewslough..." Wombly said and the man let out a small grunt of frustration.

"Soud," he grunted in response. Wombly studied him for a second. He had dark hair that reached down to his shoulders, the same hair that almost every mountain man had. He wasn't bad looking but neither was he a 'prototype male'.

"Why?" She asked.

"Storm is coming," Grewslough said quietly, unwilling to raise his voice for reasons even he didn't understand, "We must get to Walston."

"We're to go up that mountain," Tuff said, "Those are our orders."

Grewslough laughed aloud and it was a bitter one indeed. The companions stared at him.

"I'm not sure why you're laughing..." Wombly said and

"None of you have ever lived on a mountain, have you?" he asked. No one had any response.

"Winter is not de time to go up dis mountain. We don't have any gear, any supplies. We'd be dead widin de first two or dree days of climbing."

"So what do we do?" Tank asked. Grewslough grunted quietly in response and Tank asked the question again. Then Wombly asked the their questions for them once again. For a reason no one really understood, aside from maybe Tank as he looked at the young mountain teenager, Grewslough responded only to her.

"We winter in Walston. Den we do whatever it is you need."

They walked for hours. They weren't moving fast but they were moving at a constant pace and that was as much as could be asked for from the tired warriors. They made decent progress, less than Grewslough, as a mountain warrior, would have gotten on his own but he realized that had he not been with them he'd have sat and waited.

Plus, without them, he'd have died while fleeing the mountain.

The snow fell in giant flakes around him, piling up several inches tall at their feet. Their feet were wet from the snow and their extremities felt as though they were freezing. It was hard for them to keep their feet moving, their knees moving up and their toes from going limp.

Many times as she walked Wombly wiggled her toes just to make sure they were still attached to the rest of her legs. She wished, more than anything, that she'd been prepared for the dramatic shift in temperature. She, like the rest, was trying to get used to this land. But their seemed to be a large amount of magic in play on their world and it was causing major shifts in all the natural paradigms of a world.

Last year there had barely been a winter. But the mountain men had been prepared for pretty much all of it. All of the natural parts at least. The undead had certainly surprised them and, more than anything, slaughtered them.

"Fire is de key," Grewslough muttered to himself. Wombly looked over at him.

"What?"

"Fire is de key. It's why we can't stand up to the undead," Grewslough said, "Dat, and our damn unwillingness to adapt."

"What do you mean?" Wombly asked.

"Our head shaman began to use fire spells. Den our tribal leader cast him out into exile. Rivnick knew dere was something amiss but because of our people's terror at doing anyding new... we cast him out. Dere is no time anymore, noding we can do. De undead will have de mountain. And I fear Rivnick is correct. De wraid-"

"So it was a wraith!" Tuff said loudly. "I knew this." Everyone stared at him for several seconds.

"We were informed of possible what enemies this could be," Tuff said, "This sounded most like a wraith... and I knew..." he silenced awkwardly.

"What was the wraith going to do?" Tank asked and Grewslough looked directly at him for the first time.

"I know not. Rivnick feared the wraid wasn't just building an army to take over de mountain but to collect souls. He spoke wid de great and powerful Mixtus," he referred to the God that most of the tribes of the mountain prayed to, "Or was informed at de least. I know not what he feared. But I know now dat he had good reason to."

"Do you know where we could find him?" Tank asked. Grewslough shook his head the negative.

"Do we know anything?" Tank muttered and Wombly shrugged.

"Walston might have answers if we can find an able priest," she suggested.

"Well, Sprinkleberry can't offer any help right now," Ashe muttered and Wombly sighed.

"I wish Deabla was here. He'd know what to do," she said and her friends all shared the sentiment.

Deabla sat deep in thought, focusing on the winter clouds that were only a few miles from the

city. Colds winds had already gotten within the great walls of Sprinkleberry but it wasn't snowing over him. He sighed.

"Magic must be the answer," he sighed. He sat atop the roof of Harold's Hill that day, wondering what might be happening. He was about to leave to make his rounds when he heard a voice behind him.

"Well done. Your intuition has led you far," it was feminine and her words were filled with a certain sweetness. He felt like they, her words, were poison, though, and could feel his mind rejecting them.

He turned to see her staring at him. She was rather pale with bright blue eyes and blue lips to match them. Her hair, also blue, reached down to the middle of her chest. Her nose was pointy and he could see pointy ears sticking out the side of her head.

She had a aura about her that was of magical influence. He had no doubt she had several spells placed on her and they weren't all for defensive purposes.

"Thanks," Deabla said in response and the young woman smiled. She was about the same age as Deabla, or looked it at least, which was about twenty one years old. They stood in silence, the woman seeming amused as Deabla worked to analyze her.

"So what, no 'who are you?'s?" she asked and Deabla shrugged. Silence ensued.

"I'm going to drive this conversation, aren't I?" she asked and Deabla shrugged again.

"You are the one who started it."

"Ooh, I'd heard you had no guts," she said, "They said you were the mitigater of the group, that you did nothing but try to ease the pains of others." She gave a wicked grin, "I'd expected you to be a lamb. And maybe you are. But you might be a wolf as well." Deabla cocked his head to the side.

"Wolves aren't always aggressive," he responded, "And lambs aren't always defenseless... and I like to think of myself as more of a crow. I like them the most."

"The black bird is clever," the woman agreed, "So, young Deabla, you still have yet to question who I am and why I'm here."

"You'd have told me already if you intended to tell me easily," the young man responded. She gave the same grin.

"I must say, I'm impressed. Aenigma led me to believe you would be... simpler than this," the woman said. Deabla did nothing in response. "I am called Eliza." Once again Deabla did nothing. He actually motioned slightly behind him, moving his fingers around a small dagger he had concealed in his pants.

"No need to do that, I'm not here to harm you. In fact, quite the opposite. I'm here to help you," Eliza said. She gave the wicked grin, "But not only for your sake."

"I find people are rarely helping only for themselves," Deabla said. He had no idea where the fire that was coming out from his mouth was coming. He knew only that for some reason he was able to match this young woman with his wits, something that was unusual. Deabla found himself facing a girl where usually he'd crumble and simply close up. But now he found himself trying to think of what Tank might say in response.

"Hmm... the point is moot either way. We're here because the world is going to need your help," Eliza said and Deabla stared at her for several seconds.

"Where are we going, then?" Deabla asked and shocked Eliza in the process.

"You're coming?" she asked then regained her composure. "Of course you're coming... follow me." She began walking in a direction. Deabla followed then realized she was walking towards the side of the building. He heard her incanting at the last second and it was too late for him to back out.

Suddenly he was flying through the air, faster than he had ever thought possible. Then he appeared in a dark place. He couldn't see much in his surroundings but he heard running water. He also heard Eliza speaking though her words were muffled.

Then he realized he was standing in a small circle, as he looked down and his eyes adapted to the light.

"What?" he wondered aloud then saw markings in the circle. He wasn't trained in the magical ways but he had enough intuition to realize he was in some sort of ward.

"Don't step out, it might explode," he heard Eliza say and Deabla immediately regretted just deciding to follow her. He didn't know why he had. It'd just felt... right?

"You're underneath Sprinkleberry," another voice said, one that Deabla somehow recognized. Then the owner of the voice stepped out of the shadows. She was older, with some wrinkles though she looked relatively good for her age. Her long grey hair reached down to the middle of her back.

"You're friends Tank, Wombly and Ashe were here before when my Nose Breakers trained them," she said, "They had and have great futures ahead of them. But you do as well, my young friend, and we will explain this to you."

Deabla cocked his head to the side.

"How do you mean?" he asked. He felt uncomfortable asking a question that he didn't know the answer to already and realized it'd been a long time since he'd been around someone he didn't know very well. He realized, also, that she understood his uncomfortableness.

"You have an uncanny ability to sense things before they happen. It is not just basic intuition that all humans, and other races as well, exhibit. There are individuals who are connected to the world around them to the point that not only can they sense what is coming next but also can influence it beyond that of average mortals.

"You are one of these peoples. Magic runs about you whether you realize it or not. Such is why the boozers found you once you left the building. Yes, we were watching. We had to make sure you weren't a dud," she shrugged as she explained it, "My name is Aenigma."

"I am Deabla," the young man replied. He was processing all of the information but decided not to question her about it yet.

"She isn't human," he pointed to Eliza, who smiled at him.

"No, she's not. She is Rivanti, a race that is kin to elves," Aenigma said, "But we will have time to teach you all this. Today, I think, it would be good to explain to you just who you are and why you can do what you can do."

Deabla nodded. He sensed great power within her but more than that he could feel a deep sense of knowledge and wisdom built up in her. So he agreed to sit with her and speak with her, to listen to what seemed a child's tale of gods and goddesses. She explained that they lived in a multiverse filled with thousands of worlds, each one connected by a layer of pure energy that served as a barrier.

"So you're saying that there are hundreds of worlds out there and each one has its own heroes and that one day all of the gods, those that rule over these... worlds will call upon their champions?" Deabla asked.

"Such is expected to happen, though when and how is yet unknown," Aenigma responded.

"And you're saying that because of my gift I am, perhaps, a champion of a god?" Deabla asked and Aenigma shrugged.

"That has yet to be determined. We are still unaware of the power of the gods and goddesses on this plain or even if they remain alive."

"You mean they can die?"

"Everything dies eventually."

"That's comforting."

"It should be. There is a balance to everything. We can only go along with it and influence it for the common good when others do so in a negative way. We can only act as guides for the world as it grows. Then maybe we'll understand what this is all about."

"This?"

"Life in general. No one really has an answer."

"Or there is one," Deabla said, "and you just won't tell me it."

Aenigma smiled, "We may not be telling you everything but I will not lie to you."

Deabla stared at her for several seconds, "I'm not sure I understand you."

"We'll have to talk about it again tomorrow," Aenigma said.

"Tomorrow?"

"This isn't a one day event. If you agree to follow you will unlock powers deep within you in order to serve the worlds... but we cannot let you in if you aren't ready for it. We will return you to your home, this Harold's Hill, then bring you back tomorrow," Aenigma finished and turned away.

Deabla was about to complain, noticing that something didn't seem right, when suddenly a bright blue orb was flying at him. Then all he knew was darkness.

Deabla awakened atop Harold's Hill. He looked around for several minutes, trying to figure out what happened to him, then just sighed to himself and surrendered. The people who'd retrieved him had some powerful magic on their side. He didn't understand his gift, as they'd called it, but he knew that his power at that time was far less than theirs.

So he walked about the city, moving people's stuff as always. When was done he returned to Esmeralda.

"Saving lives again?" she asked and Deabla smiled in response.

## Chapter Eleven:

"They're gaining on us," Mave said grimly. No one said anything back. No one had anything to say.

Melinda looked back and saw the glowing orange eyes in the distance. She wasn't shocked to see it. It had become the norm over the last few days. They'd been running since the initial attack when they were still with Maria, Copla and Lidia.

It'd been non-stop running since. They'd slept for three hours, maybe, since they'd split up. Fatigue was playing on all of them. They realized that they couldn't keep it up much longer. But to turn and fight was suicide.

"Maybe Giles was lucky," Mave heard Benny mutter and the large man turned on him, "I'm thinking I misheard you. Giles was wounded and had to stop. We are still alive and can continue."

"No we can't," Benny replied with a growl and he glared at Mave for several seconds. They were moving at a fast walk, the slowest they'd moved when they weren't asleep, which was pretty much the entire time.

"We have no choice but to continue," Silo said off to the side, "And arguing takes precious energy. We'd be better off running in silence than walking in conflict."

"Yeah, let's all just be friends," Benny muttered and Mave scowled.

"Do you not remember Keell?" he asked, "We were in similar situations such as this."

"Yes, we were, but for two or three days. It's been four days of running! Four days of terror, four days of being chased by an enemy that doesn't tire!" Benny shouted. "Four days of running through a small blizzard. Four days of running through snow! Four days of running in the wrong damned direction!"

Mave, Melinda and Silo all winced at that. Benny had a point. The moan the undead had filled the woods around them since the beginning of their flight. And they were headed away from the small passage to Walston, their only hope of refuge.

"We have to keep going," Melinda said softly. "We have to."

Benny just scowled and tried, deep inside him, to fight off hopelessness. But at that moment, with the snow stinging his eyes and the cold numbing his feet and hands he found it a hard battle to win.

Mlaster watched them through the eyes of his undead servants. They were ahead of his fastest undead, the few remaining jogger-zombies, but he knew that there were more powerful undead to call upon. Several Preta were wreaking havoc on Walston and his Shade-walkers were ravaging yet another village on the mountain.

He wasn't sure how important these figures were but he recognized that they had power. The wraith inside him insisted on simply harvesting souls in Walston but Mlaster, the human portion of his mind, understood that men were inspired by others. And these four warriors were an inspiring bunch.

"Bring the Preta down upon them," he said and the wraith complied.

It was a day later, a day of hard running. They'd found a small cave. Melinda cast spells of defense on the mouth of it. Silo had found a back exit that they could use to flee after a little while of rest.

"We can do this," Benny heard Silo say and the young warrior figured the more experienced traveler had some insight he didn't. But at that moment Silo was speaking more out of desperation than from any previous experience. None of them had ever experienced anything quite like this.

With the exception of Mave, who took first watch, they all lay on the ground to rest. Benny closed his eyes.

Benny was shaken awake several hours later. Melinda's barrier, the result of twenty minutes of hard concentration, was still holding.

"It's your watch," Silo said and Benny nodded. He walked to the front of the cave to watch. The undead pounded on the invisible barrier, trying to get through it to the living beings inside, and Benny realized that one little wave of anti-magic, something that wasn't uncommon in these lands, and he and his companions would be scrambling for their lives.

"Go ahead and jinx us," he muttered to himself as he finished the thought. He looked at them, studying their movements. Their eyes, glowing orange, were staring at him as they slammed their limbs into the barrier with abandon for the damage it might be doing to them.

"They truly don't tire," he sighed to himself. He felt old in his bones at that moment. The cold had reached into the middle of his body and he shivered at almost all moments. His eyes burned from the wind and his lips had some frozen water on them.

"We do though," he sighed.

Benny watched for a couple of hours. His eye lids were beginning to slide shut when he heard a groan from the front of the cave. That struck him as odd. He realized, for the first time, that he hadn't heard their groan the entire time the shield was up.

Then his eyes popped open.

"Oh no," he gasped as the undead stumbled forward, many tripping over each other initially but they quickly regained their feet and continued towards him.

"Get up! Get up! They're in!" He shouted and his companions awakened immediately. They were on their feet and the group was running immediately.

They'd just gotten out of the back side of the cave when suddenly Melinda gasped.

"What is it?" Silo asked when she fell to the ground, clutching at her temples. She screamed in agony.

"Preta!" she moaned and Silo turned on the cave mouth. The undead could only come out two at a time, three at a time if the bodies were more decomposed, but even though only a few could come out at a time it was still a daunting number.

"We have to hold them off," Silo said. He lifted his bow and released an arrow with perfect aim despite his numb fingers. The arrow slammed into the skull of one undead, shattering it, and the magic that held the skeleton aloft was shattered as well.

Benny and Mave both shrugged, figuring now was as good a time to die as any, and rushed

forward. Mave lifted his broad-sword and cut straight through the skull of one undead. His sword nearly slipped from his almost-frostbite fingers but he continued to fight anyway.

Benny's fighting style, so dependent on his maneuverability, was tempered by the snow and his own weariness but he still was a lethal force. The three fought viciously, killing over a dozen undead in the first moments of battle but quickly their breath began to grow short and their lungs grew emptier and emptier.

Melinda battled with the preta. She almost had it beat when she felt the presence of a second one. She realized just how much trouble they were in at that moment. A single preta was beyond the average Druid and while she was a powerful one she knew that two would be a mighty challenge.

She fought back, trying to separate the two's death, trying to figure out which ones were bringing which version of death to her when suddenly she felt a third presence.

"Oh dear Aequus," she invoked the name of her goddess, something that was rare, "I am afraid." If her goddess heard her there was no sign of it and Melinda felt a fourth and a fifth presence.

"We're done," she whispered to herself.

Then suddenly she was filled with a power.

"Aequus!" she said with glee but she realized that it wasn't her goddess. She realized quickly that it was a Preta, one that had died in a suicidal spell of pure energy. She grinned to herself, seeing a chance to balance the world once again.

The six preta all closed in on her, all attaching to her, all killing her in their own individual ways. And this one gave her a good way out.

She took that Preta's death and accepted it.

"I'm taking you with me," she growled. She had the power within her and took it and turned it on all the other preta. She wondered, in her last moments, if this was what her goddess had given her. It matched her goddess's description. Balance was their game.

And as she released the energy out towards all the preta she felt the balance being restored as they, her included, were destroyed.

Many miles away Mlaster screamed in agony as the righteous power of a goddess of balance released power into his slaves. He was connected to them and thus he could feel, minutely, what they felt. And the sudden loss of connection with over half a dozen of warriors he had been fully connected with was painful to him.

But more was the pain of the wraith's anger. Preta, while not hard to control, weren't overly abundant. He'd lost over half of his total preta force in a single instant to take down a single warrior and one that hadn't done much.

"She was growing dangerous," he said to his mind.

*She was a nobody. You have wasted resources!*

"She was a druid and backed by a powerful goddess that gave her enough power to take down seven preta in a fully hopeless battle. Aequus will play no further role in our little drama."

The wraith considered that for many moments.

*Agents of Salvatore are still in the region. Must we lose seven powerful slaves for every one of their goddess's pawns?*

"The priestess of Salvatore is not so powerful as this druid was. She is far younger and less connected to her goddess," Mlaster assured the wraith and the creature nodded. The relationship of their bond had changed. Mlaster was not an evil guy but initially the wraith had gone into the mind of the mercenary and twisted it. Then the soul was the next step.

Now Mlaster was a purely pragmatic figure, feeling almost no emotions. For now, at least, that was true.

Silo heard a loud pop. He looked to the side to see Melinda shriveling up.

"No," he gasped, "No."

"No."

His world collapsed around him. He dropped his bow as he fell to his knees, throwing himself to her body. She was a skeleton, nothing but bones. He felt that way on the inside.

"Melinda," he whispered and he remembered all their talks, late at night, all their jokes and all their laughs. He felt a hole in his chest as the realization that she was dead, gone truly and forever, and knew immediately that he would never be able to fill it.

"Melinda," his voice was little more than a whimper at that moment. He felt his eyes become blurry with tears and felt the warm liquid traveling down his cheeks. He looked up to see his friends fighting viciously for them.

For Melinda.

For nothing.

"Run!" Silo shouted, "Run!"

Both Mave and Benny noticed the sudden stop of arrow fire. Neither had time to turn, however. They were too surrounded by enemies, too entrenched in the battle, to find any time. They fought as only best friends and brothers in arms could.

Their movements complimented each other as Benny danced a vicious dance, Mave following in a less graceful but no less brutal tango of his own.

Then they heard Silo shouting for them to run.

Both couldn't help but look back. They only saw the image for a moment, Benny leaning over a dead body, but it was enough.

"Oh no," Benny exclaimed but he was forced back into the battle. He brought his blades across and blocked two attacks from two skeletons narrowly. Mave, however, wasn't as fast and took a wicked gash across the chest. The bony fingers of another skeleton dug into his forearms and Mave cried out in pain.

Benny slashed with his own short sword, cutting the skeleton's arm in half, and Mave jerked back.

They both retreated and got to Silo as he cried over Melinda's corpse.

"We have to go," Benny said, "We have to go." Silo looked up and the look in his eyes was almost too much for Mave to take. But Benny lacked that empathy and grabbed him.

"We're running now," he ordered and Silo nodded numbly as was half-dragged as he ran along with his companions... leaving Melinda behind.

Leaving his love behind.

Captain Marc stared outside the wall, at the thousands, literally thousands, of glowing orange eyes that made up a sea of undead. He looked back inside the wall at the peoples of Walston, their eyes wide with fear as they went about preparing the wall. Their fears were well founded, he knew, and even if it could help it would be completely hopeless to try and deceive them with the low moan, the dull thud of undead fists on the wall and the horrid stink of the undead.

"We're in trouble," he said too softly for the officer next to her to hear. On this side of the wall stood three hundred soldiers, all well armed and armored. They had at least two thousand arrows to rain into the crowd but as he looked at the living corpses of the deceased for the last hundred and fifty years he realized there were far more than two thousand zombies out in the field.

"We can defend," the officer to his left said, "We can do this."

Immediately Marc realized that was wishful thinking at the best. He looked out at the undead for several seconds and wished that General Atkins was here. But the older man was balancing on the line between life and death and this was the type of thinking only a man in good health could truly

endure.

"We're in trouble," he said again, louder this time. He looked to the officer, a young woman, and sighed.

"The walls are too strong for the undead to get through," she said and Captain Marc nodded, "That's not what I'm worried about." He thought back to the giant holes blasted through the large and quite fortified walls of the outer gate. They may have been wooden but whatever had caused the holes in that wall could almost certainly, in his mind, punch a wall through this stone wall.

Marc looked down to the left and right at the hundred and fifty guards, all holding bows and with ten arrows in their quivers, that manned the wall.

"Let a volley fly. We want head shots, skull splitting shots. We can't afford to waste arrows. Get the peoples inside the wall to making arrows. We want to kill as many as possible before the things that are truly worrying get here," Captain Marc said and the officer nodded. As she turned and ran away Marc wondered at her name.

He watched as the woman efficiently and adroitly relayed her orders. Then she sent another messenger down to the regular peoples. The messenger got to the blacksmiths and fletchers and they began working almost immediately.

"This is a good place to stand," he said as the woman got back. She beamed with pride for several moments. Then she saw his look go sour, "But I do believe Sprinkleberry would weather this better."

"We are not nearly as established as they are," she said and Marc nodded. He had been born in Sprinkleberry and had helped in the building of Walston but hadn't been in the city that much. He was a captain of the scouts and the rangers. He wasn't as comfortable with the city as the officer was but he was aware that though Walston was relatively new its people had the stubbornness of cities far older cities.

The arrows rained down on the sea of undead. A hundred and fifty bodies rippled back, knocking into each other and the moans of several dozen zombies were cut short by the dull thud of arrows penetrating decomposed ribcages and the crunch of skulls being shattered by the point of the arrows.

He nodded with slight acceptance as he saw over three dozen zombies fall over, their brains splattered across the ground around them.

"Well, that's thirty less than we had before," he heard the officer beside him remark and he gave a small smile in response.

"Indeed."

"No word from the scout." Marc scowled at this information. He was beginning to grow worried. But there was no smoke to the north. Perhaps there was only undead piling at the walls, like on this side.

"Could this be the extent of their powers?" Marc wondered aloud.

"It seems so. They've been at our wall for two days now. We are making arrows almost as fast as we put them out with your volley system," the female officer said. Marc had learned her name was Mayla. She was, as her post of head officer, second only to Captain Marc, suggested, an able officer and was keeping the city in relative calm despite the seemingly undefeatable army outside their gates.

He wondered, and feared, that the undead might just be filling the valley with their undead ranks before really beginning their attack, headed by some sort of dark magic. It'd be a good tactic, especially if the living side took their time in destroying the undead.

He voiced his concerns but Mayla nodded her head.

"The undead are hardly clever enough," she said confidently. Marc just nodded in response, hoping that she was wrong.

"Do we have any battle mages?" Captain Marc asked and the woman nodded.

"They were all at the Northern Gate," Mayla answered.

"Do we have any way to get in contact with Sprinkleberry?"

"Aside from riders, no."

"Damn," Marc grunted. He looked at the wall, where another volley of one hundred and fifty arrows flew into the sea of undead. Nearly three thousand zombies stood out there, staring in, pushing inwards. The wall wasn't close to giving. But Marc's system of controlled volleys, a single volley every hour, was helping to keep the nerves of not only the civilians but the guards calm. The volleys may not have been doing anything but it was a heroic sight to see the men launching an organized volley into the crowds.

"This is going to be a long battle," he muttered to himself. He was walking back to the wall, armed and armored as always, when suddenly an explosion to the left shook the wall. He unsheathed his sword and called out for his men to rally behind him as he charged in the direction of the explosion.

Finely armored warriors, their metal armor polished recently, in dark blue and white cloths followed Marc as he turned the bend to see a familiar hole in the wall.

"Damned spirits," he muttered to himself.

With a hundred and fifty or so soldiers behind him Marc charged into the fray. He saw guards atop the walls shooting arrows into the sea and silently prayed to whatever gods or goddesses might be listening that friendly fire didn't occur.

Whether divinely inspired or not Mayla, atop the wall, suddenly realized the danger of shooting arrows into melee between friendly and enemy soldiers and redirected the flow of arrows towards the outside of the wall.

Captain Marc and his soldiers fought hard, pushing the undead back with every step but the undead just kept coming and coming.

In the back of Marc's mind he remembered, and was almost amused by, Mayla's sureness that the undead weren't simply building up their numbers before they really began their attack.

Benny looked to the side. They'd been running for hours, once again. His entire body ached despite the numbness that gripped his body. He was trying desperately to keep going when he noticed that Mave and Silo were both moving almost sluggishly.

"I'm done," Silo said as he came to a stop. Mave and Benny, suddenly aware of his pale face and blood shot eyes, turned on him in shock. Silo unsheathed a short but stout sword on his hip.

"I'm done running," he said, "I'm done." Tears rolled down his cheeks.

"We have to keep running. We're dead if we fight," Benny said but Silo nodded.

"I'm already dead," was all Silo said before he turned to run. Benny was reaching forward towards him when Mave grabbed him and held him.

"No. We must continue. Silo is lost and cannot be found out here," Mave said, "But we can continue. He will die a warrior's death and that, I'm thinking, is enough." Benny's eyes watered.

"No... No, we can't let him..."

"We cannot stop him," Mave said and though he knew it was true Benny didn't want to accept it.

"Damn it Mave, why?" he asked but Mave had no answers.

"We must go," he said. They heard the sounds of Silo fighting, heard him grunt and heard his blade shatter a skull. They heard many noises. Then they heard a single scream, one of a man being dragged to the ground and eaten alive, and it was all they could do to keep running and not just turn and die as well.

"Everyone's dying," Benny said quietly and he didn't, couldn't, understand it.

"Why?"

## Chapter Twelve:

Wombly looked back at her companions as they walked forward. They'd passed through the pass between the Sprinkleberry and Walston side of the Lightning Chain two days before. Several times a low moan filled the air around them, the sound carrying over the snow and through the seemingly dead trees.

"Undead," Grewslough had mumbled to himself and Wombly was the only one to hear it. She turned and mouthed the word to Tank, who nodded grimly. This was the day before they made it through the pass.

"Hopefully Walston is a secure haven for us," Tuff said. Nobody said anything in response for many seconds.

"To you we pray," Ashe said after several seconds, the customary ending to most prayers to the divine beings of their world.

Tuff gave her a curious look and she shrugged, "That was a prayer if I've ever heard one."

Now they were just two days of hard travel from Walston.

"When we get there how will we explain to let us in?" Laurie asked the group and Wombly shrugged.

"They accept new visitors every day. That's what I've been told, at least."

"The real challenge will be getting something done about the fire up there. If they haven't seen the undead then it will surely be a challenge to explain to them the extent of our troubles," Tank said and Wombly nodded.

"We're assuming that the undead masses haven't come off the mountain and gotten to Walston already," Tuff said and everybody knew him to be correct. But the truthfulness of the statement didn't make the thought any less disturbing. In fact the realness of that possibility put no small amount of fear in their stomachs.

"We've no real choice. We don't have the supplies to survive out here," Tank said. With that thought in mind they all put their heads down and trudged forward.

"Oh no," Wombly gasped when she looked down on the small valley that made up Walston's outer gate. Undead still littered the area. The wall still stood and the holes in the wall were still there.

"Well, at least Walston will know what we're talking about," Ashe deadpanned and Tank chuckled.

"If there still is a Walston," Tuff said.

"We're up against something far stronger than we thought," Wombly said.

"We thought anything before this?" Tank looked to her curiously and Wombly shrugged.

They sat in silence for many minutes.

"Well," Ashe said, "We need somewhere to hold out for winter. We're not safe right now," she motioned towards the groups of dozens of undead that were moving around in packs, "so we should start moving."

"Where do we go?" Wombly voiced the question in their minds.

"Towards Walston, up the mountain or back to Sprinkleberry," Tuff said, "Or that's all I can really think of."

"We could never get back to Sprinkleberry," Grewslough asserted. It didn't slip past Tank that the mountain man said 'we' but he didn't really know what it meant beyond that he planned to stay with them, or if it even did mean anything beyond that.

But there really wasn't much time to think of these things.

"We had better head to Walston," Tuff said, "The mountain will be hard to climb," Grewslough scoffed, "Even if we had the best equipment that could be found."

"And no small amount of magic," Grewslough added.

"So to Walston," Tank said and the rest of the group agreed, saying as much.

Ashe led. She was the best at sneaking and there were only two ways through the valley, through the gate and up the side. Grewslough knew that up the side of the mountains that surrounded the valley would leave them exposed to whatever had the magical power to punch a hole through the giant gate so he asserted they should go through the wall.

Thus Ashe, the sneakiest and stealthiest of the group, led.

The wall had a few zombies beside it but, thankfully, their skin was almost all the way rotted away and their noses were too damaged to be used. Because of this the zombies couldn't smell them and sneaky ambushes were possible.

A trail of corpses, their skulls smashed or a blade cut through their eye sockets to destroy the creatures' brains, followed the companions as they made their way to the wall. The undead were almost completely oblivious to them until the companions were so close that they were already upon the undead.

"We have to keep going, and silently. That last battle almost cost us our hard-fought stealth," Ashe scolded the rest of the group. She looked directly at Grewslough, who had all but roared before he used his powerful war hammer to smash a zombie's head.

Grewslough nodded his head, the closest thing to an apology he'd give Ashe, and she turned.

"We're almost through the gate," she said softly. Her companions all tried to follow exactly in her footsteps but even had they followed exactly they would have left tracks unlike hers for her footsteps were soft enough not to break the snow.

Grewslough, Tank and Tuff's steps were accompanied by the crunch of frozen snow.

They got past the wall and knew their mistake.

Three shade-walkers turned on them. The creatures screamed aloud, their wails disturbingly high pitch. The undead beings rushed forward with their twitchy running.

"Kill them," Ashe said to Wombly, knowing that their crossbows could save them at that time. Wombly lifted her weapon and took aim. She released the bolt and lifted her second crossbow. By the time her second shot was off her first bolt had shattered the skull of one of the shade-walkers. Her aim for both shots proved true and the seven shade-walkers were now five.

Wombly reloaded her first crossbow and saw that the closest shade-walker was only a few feet from Tank. The warrior lifted his war hammer and launched it, head over handle, at the shade-walker. It was fully dead a moment later. He moved to retrieve his hammer but a bolt flew over his shoulder and slammed into another shade-walker.

He looked back at Wombly, who released her second bolt. She shrugged apologetically as she did so and Tank chuckled. He grabbed his hammer and made his way back to the group. They were all tired and ready to continue their slow and steady pace forward but the zombies behind them had heard the shade-walkers.

"Oh no," Wombly said and everyone else agreed with the expression.

The cold bit at their extremities more than anything as they ran. They were exhausted but Walston was within a day's reach. It was hard running and the number of undead following them grew with every moan of the undead.

"We can keep going," Wombly said as they rushed forward. Tank and Tuff led, their powerful legs and thick bodies letting them plow through the snow. Ashe rushed around off to the side, her light weight and her grace allowing her to run on top of the snow. Wombly and Grewslough followed, keeping their sight behind them.

The undead couldn't move as fast as the group but they didn't tire. And these companions surely understood the dire consequences of slowing.

"We have to get... to Walston soon," Tank said and Wombly nodded.

"We're going to make it," she said and Tank nodded, forcing himself to believe her.

It was late at night and there was no real light. The first moon, Magna the largest of the three, was hidden by clouds while Parva, the smallest, and Mediis, the middle sized moon, had yet to raise up at all. They were running blind. Only Grewslough, who'd lived on the mountains all his life and had endured many nights without the light of fire and the moons, could really see.

They relied on him in that moment. The orange glow of undead eyes only helped them move but it also filled their stomachs with terror. They had to keep going, they knew, but it had been hours of running desperately and their arms and legs ached.

*We have to keep going* Tank thought to himself, *We have to keep going.*

He looked to Ashe in amazement as somehow paralleled their progress as they moved forward. They were trying to keep their heads forward and their chins up but the pressure of the run was almost too much. The snow was piling up, almost a foot tall.

They looked to each other as they continued on, finding strength in one another's presence.

"We have to keep going," Tank shouted

They looked down at the inner wall of Walston, their last hope. They heard the sounds of battle, the moans of the undead, the dull crunch of bone being smashed by blunt weapons. They heard the thud of balled up fists slamming into metal shields and metal armor. And to their horror they heard the occasional scream of a man being dragged to the ground.

The undead were filing through the hole but it seemed to be under control. Dozens of arrows flew down into the undead outside the wall. A large pile of corpses, heads cut off or brain smashed, had been stacked to the point that they formed a wall of sorts. The impromptu barrier was effective enough but the flow of zombies wasn't deterred.

The companions looked down on it.

"What can we do?" Grewslough echoed himself, this time there was an even more bitter edge to his voice.

"Fight," Tuff said and Ashe snorted, "And die?"

"And die," Tank said in agreement with Tank.

"We've been in situations that we were going to die, that we had run out of options. And I don't know about you but I have learned a couple of things: Sometimes doing nothing is the best thing to do, and unfortunately that doesn't seem like an option right now, so I'm going to rely on the second piece of wisdom I learned. When you're cornered and they're expecting you to give up, you get up and punch them in the nose. It might not hurt them as much as they hurt you but when you're cornered the only thing you can do is put your head down and charge," Tank looked at them, "We will die if we stay out here and do nothing. We will starve and die of cold.

"I don't know about you but I have no intention of dying in the cold and because my well-fed stomach is grumbling. I, for one, vote that we try to get into that city, try to bolster their ranks, try to help however we can."

He looked away from them as he stepped forward, bringing his hammer and flail up to a ready position, "But I plan to charge through that crowd and get into that city."

"Is he... seriously doing this?" Ashe asked Wombly right before the ever so logical young woman took off in chase, trying to catch up with the charging Tank. Tuff and Laurie followed. Ashe and Grewslough stood alone with each other for several seconds.

"Son of a whore," Ashe spat, her voice dripping with venom as she followed them. Grewslough shrugged to himself, the slight curve of a grin creasing his face as he followed them into a charge that was, to any sane person, suicide.

Deabla woke up. He stood and looked around for several seconds and wondered why he'd

awakened. It was the middle of the night. A cold wind was sliding between the cracks of the window. He shivered.

Then the window slid open, for a moment, and was shut before his eyes really recognized the movement.

"Hello," Eliza purred and Deabla almost rolled his eyes. He was tense, startled but somehow not startled by her appearance at the same time. He had sensed her, known it was her from the second the window opened but for some reason it was

"You could knock," Deabla said and Eliza chuckled.

"Ah but that would be no fun," she said. Deabla didn't smile. "What's wrong with day time? That is when most people are awake.." Eliza didn't respond. They sat in silence for several seconds.

"I'm guessing I'm supposed to come with you," Deabla stated more than asked and Eliza nodded. "You are a new recruit. We pick you at our pleasure, not at yours." They sat in silence for several moments. Deabla noticed her lips moving but didn't hear any sound.

Deabla was about to say something when suddenly Eliza finished her spell.

The next thing he knew Deabla opened his eyes in the middle of a dark room. He could sense the presence of the others in the room.

"Good morning Deabla," Aenigma said and Deabla nodded back.

"Why do you keep grabbing me? What do you want from me?" the young man asked and Aenigma smiled, "I do believe I explained that earlier."

"Well explain it better," Deabla snapped back and Aenigma's eyes widened for a moment.

"I suppose you deserve as much information as we can give you," she said, "Alright. There is much you cannot yet know, but there are things that I may tell you. First, being, that we live in a multiverse that is connected by pure energy, as I explained to you before.

"But there are a few small... bubbles on the outsides of the multiverse that regard time in a fully different manner than the rest of the verses do. These pockets are home to my closest comrades and the men and women who I am most loyal to. This group, who have been called the Overwatchers, watches the realm and work hard to keep those that wish destruction upon all the worlds in check.

"Among this group is a powerful warrior known as Ben, a wizard called Navok, two vampires named Tenebris and Bert, and more. We are a united force that comes to the worlds when beings who have less than noble intentions threaten a realm."

Deabla looked straight at her for several moments.

"Alright. So say I believe you... where do I come into this?" Deabla asked.

"You have great potential for power within you," Aenigma answered, "And there are forces at play within this realm that threaten to become too powerful to be contained to this realm alone. Were this wraith to grow too strong then the rest of the realms might be threatened."

"What do you need from me?"

"You can be trained to become one of the most powerful beings upon this realm. In less than a year you'd be more powerful than any wizard or magician King Jev could summon," Aenigma said and Deabla sighed.

"A year?" he asked.

"Magical training is no small matter."

Silence ensued.

"What would I have to do?" Deabla asked.

"You could stay with your friends for a few months, maybe."

"And after that?"

"You'd have to stay with us until your training is complete," Aenigma said and Deabla's eyes widened for a moment.

"I don't think I can do that."

"You'd still be able to talk to them during your free days..."

"How many of those are there?"

"Once a month."

Deabla considered her response for many moments.

"I cannot make that decision right now," the young man said and Aenigma nodded.

"We hope you will think on it," Aenigma said. Eliza was already half-way through her spell when Deabla noticed her words.

"Oh no, not aga-"

"-in," Deabla appeared back in his room. He looked downwards, to the floor, and sat on his bed, deep in thought.

Eliza looked to Aenigma, "Is he really destined to be powerful?"

"He will put Maverick on his heels if he grows to the potential we expect," Aenigma responded. Eliza's eyes widened for a moment. Maverick was the leader of the Overwatchers and was considered the most powerful wizard in all the realms. If Deabla could grow that powerful then the evil here must be great, for balance was the nature of the multiverse and for every action there was an equal and opposite reaction.

Thus, everytime a great evil showed up, a great good would rise. And on the other side of that coin, everytime a great good showed up... many people died.

When Wombly caught up to Tank she shouted, "If we're going to do this, we should be smart. Veer off to the right. We can punch through their smaller populations and make our way to the wall. Once there we..." her lungs ran out of air and she had to breath in as their sprint took its toll, "Once we get there... if... and if... we get lucky... we'll be able... to get to the... wall..."

"Let's do it then," Tank shouted. Tuff caught up quickly. Tank and Tuff lowered their shoulders as they veered in the direction that Wombly had pointed towards. The two warriors hit the wall of undead and plowed through. Neither had their weapons bared, as it would almost surely tangle them up with the zombies, but their shoulders and armor protected them and wounded the undead as effectively as their flail and sword might have.

The companions that followed killed the zombies that were on the ground while Tank and Tuff, Tuff holding his shield in front of his body, continued to plow through the sea of zombies.

They broke out of a the patch into open snow and sprinted forward with adrenaline induced speed and strength. They hit the next wall and almost split one zombie into two pieces. The wall of undead shuttered as the two hit it. They stalled for a moment, unable to push forward, but Grewslough was close behind and the mountain man put his weight behind them and the trio overpowered the thick patch of zombies.

Wombly, Ashe and Laurie followed in close pursuit, killing the undead with every step. Wombly had her slider-blades out and was putting them to good use in poking through the eyes of the undead. Ashe's katannas were a blur as she ran, slicing undead into multiple pieces. Laurie's own weapon was also put to use but her skill was fighting from horseback and the running and swinging or poking at the same time was hard for her.

It was almost a mile of undead, forcing themselves through the patches of zombies on the far right side of the undead host. Their arms and legs were fatigued and heavy by the time they got to the wall. One guard had launched an arrow at them but Wombly, in a stroke of almost goddess-like skill had launched a crossbow bolt to hit the arrow mid-flight. Its aim had been true and would have downed Grewslough, likely killing him.

"We're human, you fool!" Ashe spat, an unusually loud yell, and the guard paled atop the wall. To help them he motioned to other archers to start shooting the undead in front of the group. Before

long the group was only a few hundred feet from the wall.

Tuff and Tank heard a scream behind them and almost turned around but the press of the undead was starting to push back and they couldn't do anything.

"What... happened?" Tuff asked but Ashe silenced him with an order, "Keep going!" she spat. All three male warriors, Tuff, Tank and Grewslough realized that she was likely about to stab one of them in the back if it would help to speed them up.

They were fifty feet... forty... the wall of the undead thinned, several falling with arrows in their skull or neck... thirty... twenty...

They got to the wall. Tuff turned to see Wombly and Ashe, Tank and Grewslough.

"We have... to keep... moving..." Grewslough panted. Almost as if to prove his point several undead turned and started stumbling in the companions' direction. They all agreed and continued on, working desperately to force a gap in the undead. They were only a few hundred feet from the hole and knew they could make it.

Tuff, Tank and Grewslough put their shoulders down, pumped their legs and punched forward at the undead. Fortunately for the companions most of the undead were intent on getting inside the wall rather than turning on this small group of warriors. Many of the undead didn't even realize they were there until they were on the ground. And by the time that happened they were dead too quick to do anything about it.

They were only fifty feet from the hole when Tank tripped.

He growled, trying to pull himself up but the undead had iron-strong grip and no matter how hard Tank pulled the zombie had him. Around them the undead turned and as the group stopped moving he saw the folly of his actions.

"Go on without me," he shouted.

"Captain! There are people fighting their way in!" an archer shouted from atop the wall.

"What?" an incredulous Captain Marc responded.

"There are people fighting their way in! They're only about thirty feet from the wall and they're losing speed!"

Captain Marc cursed aloud then looked back. He wasn't fighting at that moment, as he'd been fighting for many moments before, then looked to Mayla, who was working on cycling troops out and said, "I need your craziest warriors. We're gonna go get those crazy bastards."

Mayla grinned, "Only if I get to come along also," she then turned and ordered up a small group of men, "Get my Boom-boys!" she shouted.

Eight men rushed forward, each one wearing heavy armor. They didn't seem overly mobile but each man stood easily six feet tall, the shortest of the bunch standing three inches above six feet. They were giants among men and their armor covered almost all of their body.

"We can get ya where ya want'n," the largest of the group said. He winked, "I hear there are some son's o' whores who're thinking they're crazier 'n me and my boys here. Let's go out an' get 'em, I'm thinking?"

Captain Marc stared at the man for a moment, trying to figure out what he was saying. He studied them for a moment, the large cylinder, the pouches of black powder and chunks of old metal, then shrugged, "Yeah, alright, let's go and get them!"

"No!" Tuff growled. He slashed down with his sword and the undead hand was shattered but the zombies around them were still attacking them. The group formed a circle.

"I'm sorry," Tank said when he was standing. He was next to Wombly and Ashe.

"You know what, instead of talking how 'bout we come up with an idea?" Ashe growled and Tank nodded quietly. His weapons were out and they were fighting but somehow, for some reason, he knew that Ashe was right. They could fight for many minutes but they'd be overwhelmed. They needed

someone who was fresh... someone who wasn't tiring.

"Vombatidae!" He shouted, "Gods be damned! Get Vombatidae into this!" he shouted and Wombly shouted her companion's name. It was only a few moments before the smoke that marked the wombat's approach appeared in front of them, above the undead.

When the wombat hit the ground he immediately began a violent shudder, one that, with the strength of the astral-wombat, literally tore the zombies apart. The wombat began to rush around, his paws and claws destroying multiple zombies at once and the group was able to move... But it wasn't enough.

Too many zombies were coming. The arrows, felling zombies around them, helped but still it wasn't enough. A loud *boom!* filled their ears but none of them took note of it, so focused on the battle they were.

Then a zombie flew into the air, the middle of its body literally on fire.

"What in the hells?" Tank wondered and Wombly's eyes widened.

"How did they do that?" she wondered.

She got her answer when she heard another *boom!* Then another, and another. Several zombies flew away. Wombly chanced a look back and saw eight men adorned in thick, heavy metal armor and holding giant cylinders that they continually refilled with black powder and small chunks of metal. Then they threw a flaming match into the cylinder and held on tight.

The explosion not only knocked the zombies back but buried shrapnel in their faces and bodies.

The group suddenly noticed a path clearing. The explosions from the cylinders were powerful enough to knock the thin and light undead straight to the ground. Those that didn't fall immediately or that got back up quicker than the rest were smashed down by the men holding the cylinders.

"Boom!" one of the men, the largest of the bunch, howled as his cylinder exploded. Several undead flew to the ground, blown to pieces or simply knocked to the ground.

The companions followed the path and got inside the wall. The appearance of the Boom-boys, a group of warriors who could only fight for a few minutes, had bolstered the soldiers and the line was now held in front of the wall rather than behind it.

Workers rushed forward to try and rebuild the wall while soldiers lifted heavy chunks of wood, each log weighing in the hundreds of pounds, and began to place them in the way. The Boom-boys were given pedestalals to shoot their weapons from and as the soldiers holding their line retreated behind the impromptu wall the men with the never before seen cannons were keeping the hole clear.

The wall was finished in only half an hour and the undead were all but locked out by the thousands of pounds of lumber that were locked in place. The Boom-boys, exhausted, climbed down and walked over to the supply stations not only to refill their pouches but also to rest.

"Who are you?" Captain Marc asked and Tank smiled weakly.

"We're supposed to be the help from Sprinkleberry," he said. Marc just chuckled.

"It seems we're all surprised by the scope of this battle," he remarked and everyone agreed. No one had expected a conflict this big... no one had really expected a conflict at all.

"Wait a second," Tuff said from behind and everyone look to him.

"Where's Laurie?"

### **Chapter Thirteen:**

Maria looked up.

"What is it?" Lidia asked in the form of a whisper and she nodded her head the negative. Lidia cocked her head to the side.

"I just... thought I heard something," Maria said. Copla walked behind them, his feet plopping with every step, his eyes cast downward as he sat deep in thought.

*Just keep going.*

*I will. For you.*

None of the three figures shivered as they walked, their bodies protected by spells of warmth. Copla was the one casting the spells, expending energy for their comfort and well being, while Maria was responsible for the arcane-based defenses of the group. Lidia was responsible for healing and cloaking them from the eyes of the undead.

The agreement had been silent but it was binding just as well. Now the three walked in relative silence, at least in the physical sense. In all their minds conversations were flaring, their minds working to process their predicament.

*We shouldn't be walking. We should be jogging.*

*You know I can't jog for very long.*

*This is your fault Copla. We'd be jogging if I still-*

*I'm sorry.*

Copla looked up, hoping no one could hear his internal conversation.

"The outer wall," he heard Maria say and he looked over in the distance. His heart dropped.

"So Walston isn't as safe as we'd hoped," he stated. There was no response forthcoming so he looked around the wall. He was about to comment about the groups of undead still standing there when he realized Lidia was already casting her spell.

She finished and looked up, "We'll be invisible from them for several hours. We should get a move on."

So they continued.

*I could have helped here.*

*I know. I'm sorry.*

They walked straight through the ranks of the undead without any of the zombies turning on them. The trio were tired and quiet. Maria, as she walked, could barely keep her eyes open. Suddenly she remembered how tired she was. More than that, she remembered what would have happened in the past.

She hadn't been an executor then, she'd only been an influencer who could get others to do what she wanted. Now she was fairly good at doing things. She doubted she could work metal like Tank did or build inventions like Wombly, or sneak around and find information like Ashe does.

But at this point she wasn't totally helpless in the face of physical labor or working for hours straight. And, fortunately for her, she still retained her skills when it came to convincing others to do what she wanted. That was the power of influence.

Unfortunately out in the cold snow and among undead who heard no words her influence meant nothing.

Though even with her newfound ability to do things, to execute, she wasn't overly good at it. Her spells were potent enough but now they were in the middle of a real struggle she found her skills lacking.

"We have to continue," Lidia said. Both Copla and Maria needed it, she knew, for neither of them were conditioned for real combat nor were they prepared for it mentally. None could simply jump into the world of these struggles without preparation.

Lidia recalled the fact that they'd fought the undead before this and realized that they were as prepared as any but Tank, Ashe and Wombly for this. They'd done their share of fighting. It seemed a hollow goal to prepare someone for this type of struggle. She considered that for many moments and sighed.

"It's impossible to prepare for anything like this," Lidia mumbled and Maria looked over.

"What?" she panted.

"Nothing," Lidia said in response. She'd grown up in a rough area, surrounded by death and pain. So this struggle was well within her realm of normality.

"We're nearly there," Maria said and Lidia just smiled softly. None of them knew how far away

Walston was. It was all Lidia could do at all that moment not to say something negative or obscure at that moment but she understood that the other two were barely keeping their heads up.

Mave looked to the ground as his and Benny's feet crunched the snow.

Blood flowed freely down his chest, the legacy of the poison of a shade-walker. One scratch was all it took and Mave had taken a scratch. His body was shaking with every step, from more than just the cold wind that cut through their armor.

The undead followed but with less vigor than before. They moved slower and didn't hunt them with the same ability to guess where they were at all moments. The two had actually found rest. They had run for several days, trying desperately to keep ahead of the undead. And though they weren't led by the wraith any longer didn't mean the undead couldn't smell them.

The chase had continued. And the pair of warriors hadn't fared well for it.

Now the two companions were limping forward, their feet barely raising above the surface of the snow. Benny was healthier than Mave but that wasn't saying much. Both were weary from days of hard travel, their legs bloodied and wet, to the point that they might be developing diseases. Their armor stunk and began to rust but neither dare take it off for battle occurred quite often.

Mave's broad-sword had been lost in the snow at one point. Neither remembered it. They only knew to keep going forward.

Their labored gasps filled the air as they stumbled forward. The moan of the undead was still in their ears but that was the last thought on either of their mind.

"We have to find somewhere to rest," Benny said and Mave barely acknowledged him with an almost imperceptible nod. Benny looked to his right, towards the mountain was, and searched for any cave that might be hospitable.

"There we go," Benny said softly as he helped Mave fall to the ground. The large man's eyes were dark and glazed as he stared up at Benny. They maintained eye contact for several moments but the larger man's eye lids slid shut.

"No... no, no, no," Benny, panic-stricken, cried out. His words came out in something akin to a moan and Mave cracked one eye open.

"I'm thinking... Some water would be nice."

Benny nodded and barked a desperate laughter, "Thank you, you insane man."

He turned and rushed out of the cave, looking for a stream to gather water from. He came upon a group of undead and they turned on him. They could smell, but not nearly as well as before, and so they began to follow him. But they couldn't keep up with him at this point.

He struck him that he could move much faster without his companions. The thought occurred and he wondered if he was wrong for thinking such. The thought possessed him for several seconds. Then he burst into a clearing, into a group of undead. The zombies turned on him, over half a dozen, and his mind was suddenly preoccupied with fleeing for his life.

One of the beasts got close and he scratched at him. But Benny was too quick. He dodged backwards, his dirk shooting forward and lopping off the zombie's hand in the process. Two more came at him and it was all he could do to keep his balance as he dodged forward once again.

He whipped about, his short sword unsheathed, and slashed at one of the undead's foreheads. He saw over two dozen of the undead coming at him, their attacks forcing him into the middle of a zombie made ring. He was in trouble.

He felt undead fingers close around his ankle. He felt himself falling.

He saw the ground rush up at him.

Maria and Copla suppressed groans as best they could. Lidia kept their pace up, leading the trio the entire time, but even she was beginning to tire too much to dig deep or push hard. No one spoke but

conversations were still rampant, all of them in the middle of personal and internal debates. Copla felt inner turmoil.

*I can't run anymore.*

*I could have.*

*I wish you were here. I wish you would run all the way... I can't anymore.*

*Maybe you don't have to run all the way.*

*What do you mean?*

The idea, inspired by something aside from him, appeared in his mind and he came to a sudden halt.

"Stop," Copla said, "Stop, we have to stop." Lidia and Maria turned on him.

"What is it?" Lidia asked. Maria, standing there, couldn't deny a small amount of relief that it wasn't her who broke first. Her internal relief was dashed almost immediately when she saw the look of determination in his eyes. As she considered her feelings she suddenly felt ashamed of herself. But there was no time for her thoughts to linger.

"I can teleport us... at least a mile," he said, "That gives us at least an hour to rest..."

"How far can you teleport at any time?" Maria asked.

"Accurately?... Maybe one and a half at best."

"That will get us to Walston," Lidia said, "Or at least close enough to walk."

"So do it," Maria said. Lidia was less enthusiastic than Maria but she didn't disagree. They sat in silence for several seconds while Copla close his eyes.

"It will take a minute," he said. Then he sat on the ground. He reached out and they held his hands. His lips parted as he mouthed the words of a spell. No sound escaped his lips. He sat deep in contemplation.

*What would you do without me?*

*Not now. I'm trying to cast a spell.*

*When, then?*

*Later.*

*How far later?*

*I... can't answer that.*

*Sometimes I tire of you.*

*I wish we were together.*

*We're always together.*

Maria and Lidia noticed that his concentration seemed to lapse but neither made any comment of it. They waited patiently as he started, stopped and restarted his incantation. The two ladies watched it all but neither judged him aloud.

*You can't do this, can you?*

*I can. I can and I will.*

*Then why aren't you done? It's been two minutes now. A third approaches already.*

*You keep distracting me.*

*You want me to leave?*

*No. Never. I... I love you.*

*I loved you.*

*You don't anymore?*

*I didn't say that.*

*Loved?*

*I don't know anymore.*

They watched as beads of sweat rolled down his forehead.

"Copla?" Lidia asked tentatively but the middle-aged man said nothing in response.

"He is deep in concentration," Maria said. She meant it as a statement but even in her own ears she heard that it was a prayer more than a declaration.

*How can you say that?*

*You expected anything else?*

*We loved before.*

*Yes, we did.*

*Then why don't you love me anymore?*

*We will talk later.*

*No.*

*No?*

*Answer me now.*

*Finish your spell.*

*No.*

*Finish your spell. Now!*

Copla complied. He released the magic energy... and lost control.

Lidia and Maria screamed as the red energy burst from Copla, engulfing them in a bright red orb of magical energy. They gasped as they felt their bodies shrink, as if they were being pulled into a small area, the size of perhaps a small pea, then felt themselves flatten. Neither of them could describe the feeling as their bodies were, in a physical form, fully rearranged to follow Copla as he teleported.

But they found no guidance and their minds and spirits, the only thing left in their body that wasn't falling apart, clung to Copla's own form. The two held on only through pure force of will and desperation. Neither of the girls felt any comfort in that moment. Panic rose up as they continued in the air for what seemed to be hours. They could feel their mental strength fading as they clung to him.

Then they had bodies again.

They heard the wind in their ears and the snow on their faces. It stung, they quickly realized as their senses came back to them. It stung... and burned. Lidia opened her eyes first. She felt weightless for a moment, then realized it wasn't that she was weightless. They were falling.

To her left Copla lay unconscious, knocked out for some reason. To her right Maria screamed in terror, her eyes barely open against the cold and bitter wind and the freezing snow flurries.

Lidia squinted and tried to see how far below them the ground was but it was all in vain. She couldn't see. She felt warm tears streaking across her face.

"This is how... I die..." she said aloud and it seemed strange to her that she couldn't hear her own words. She saw, in the last moments of her consciousness, the ground. She felt herself gasp and her Maria cry out. Then she saw blackness.

Benny hit the ground and rolled. His rapid motions tore his feet from the grasp of the zombie. He knew he was lucky but he slammed into the knees of another zombie. He was desperately trying to find a foot-hold but it was all he could do to keep his composure at that moment.

His blades were still in his hands but he couldn't bring them up to bear. He worked hard to keep his feet moving, trying to keep himself moving. To stop was to die, he knew, especially when tireless undead surrounded you.

The zombie whose knees he took out toppled on him. He rolled to the side, his legs pumping as hard as he could, and managed to push off the ground. He got his feet under him and burst forward. The undead fingers reached in on him but none found hold. His leather armor protected him from painfully sharp nails, the last legacy of anything but bone on the zombie's body.

Benny lashed out with his dirk, the blade cutting through the arm bone of a zombie in front of him. The lithe warrior's eyes narrowed and he growled, slashing with his short sword. The blade was fine but it couldn't cut straight through the thicker bones of the zombie's forehead.

He jumped in a different direction, trying to keep out of their reach, but there were too many. Desperate, he lowered his body weight, lowered his shoulder and burst forward. He kept his head up, trying not to hurt his neck, but paid for it in the form of bony fingers scratching his face. He cried out in pain but no one would hear it.

No one was there to hear it.

## Chapter Fourteen:

Tuff stepped forward and slashed with his sword. Ashe was ready. She ducked under it and stepped forward, too close inside his reach for him to put any real strength into his attacks. She snapped a punch forward and was about to land it when Tuff got his metal shield in the way.

Ashe growled in pain and jumped backwards. She realized that Tuff's rage would make him stronger and tougher than ever before but as he came forward again, his sword swinging towards her, she realized he would be less accurate with his attacks and more likely to fall for tricks.

Her mind was calculating a dozen different defensive stances and counters but Tank intervened in the form of a flying tackle.

The two forms, muscular and powerfully built, hit the ground and rolled around for several moments. Tank grunted as Tuff punched him in the gut. All the while Tank rained blows on the taller and heavier warrior's ribs.

The two growled and grunted, trying to break the other, but for different reasons. Tank, at that moment, was fighting for a friend of old times. Tuff, however, fought for revenge and with rage. Tank tried to subdue the second man but Tuff kneed Tank in the crotch. The shorter, stockier warrior's eyes widened.

Tuff put both hands on Tank's arms and threw him to the side. Tuff's rage filled him with strength.

"You killed her, didn't you!" Tuff growled at Ashe, who glared at him. Tuff was about to take a step forward, shouting, "You told us she didn't fall down! You told us not to stop or slow!"

"We'd have died if we'd slowed!" Ashe shouted back before Wombly's bolt slammed into Tuff's shield. The thick man felt his body recoil with the impact. He calmed, looking up at Wombly, who very easily could have killed him right there.

"Alright. Alright," he said through almost gritted teeth. He glared at Ashe but didn't step forward. Ashe just stared back. Tuff still held his weapons at the ready but, despite the feelings in his gut, didn't move to attack.

"Well," Captain Mark said from the side, "You two gonna fight all day or are you going to tell us why we spent those lives to get you here?"

Tank turned, still holding his crotch, and nodded, "We.." he grunted, "I think owe you an explanation."

"Aye, I'd think that prudent," the man said in response.

They found it was hard to get Tuff and Ashe to work in the same room with one another.

Thus Ashe and Tuff weren't in the room when Tank, Wombly and Grewslough explained to Marc why and how they got there.

"Seems this isn't just hitting us," Captain Marc said, "But even if Sprinkleberry and Keell sent their entire army-"

"Keell can't offer any help. They're supplying Epop with a large amount of soldiers. Orcs and

others of that species, half-orcs and the kind, have been raiding the small town," Wombly said. Tank looked at her curiously.

"King Jev and I spoke often. We've been working on new weapons to improve the army," Wombly explained and Tank nodded.

"Anyway," Marc interrupted and Wombly nodded, "We won't be seeing help from Keell. And without Keell armed for major battle Sprinkleberry won't empty. There are pirates to the South who are already working to raid Ssorwell. They're more of a town than anything, maybe five hundred peoples, but the nations to the South remember the bounties of the North and a full blown attack is a possibility at the least."

"Nations to the South?" Marc asked.

"The pirates have a home. It's been three years and already they have sent people to us... it isn't unlikely that cities down there survived the Chaos Spell as well as we did," Wombly said. It was news to everyone in the room but she who spoke it.

"Well, we have maybe three hundred soldiers left," Captain Marc said, "Of that three hundred only two hundred, or so, have working armor left. We have weapons for them all but we're about out of arrows. We're fighting an army that does not tire. But we do. And our weapons and armor dent and break.

"We paid a price to get you in. There is a chance you can pay us back... there are about thirty villages of two hundred or so peoples around us. We sent scouts to go and try to find them. Our goal, to bring back people."

"C'mon, now," Tank interrupted, "I know you're a good man but that's not why you risked good and healthy soldiers to find them."

Captain Marc stared at Tank for a moment, his brow furrowed for a moment in thought, "I don't know what people in Sprinkleberry serve for, your cause, at least, but I know that here we work for the good of the peoples."

"You need soldiers," Tank responded. Wombly stared at him, her mind analyzing his reaction. For the four years, or so, that she'd known him she'd come to love him like a brother. She had come to see a certain distrust of those in power but never had it been as vehemently stated as now. She imagined it might explain why he'd never joined in the military as an officer, for he certainly had the mental and physical abilities to lead men in battle.

Captain Marc's eyes narrowed for a moment, "We do need men." His admission seemed painful to him and Wombly realized that the soldier had likely lost sleep over this decision. He was fighting a war, both he and Marc knew, and the peoples who weren't helpful were hurtful. He was trying to keep both his men and his morals alive.

"But you offer safety to those who seek it," Wombly said and Marc nodded, "If they come, they will be accepted. We cannot guarantee safety but we have a big wall to hide behind." He smiled weakly, trying to lighten the mood, but no one else returned the favor.

"So you're sending us out to find villagers and bring them back?" Tank asked. Marc nodded and Tank sighed.

"How many villages?"

"Thirty one," the aptain responded.

"We'll leave tomorrow, I guess," Wombly said and Tank shrugged.

Ashe, Wombly and Tank sat in a small inn. They sat at a table, all of them considering the warm drinks in front of them and the map supplied by Captain Marc. The unsettling moan of the undead still filled the air around them but at least between the mountains that surrounded the wall the cold wind was blocked.

"No rest for the wicked, right?" Ashe muttered.

"No rest for anyone, it seems," Tank responded and Wombly gave a small smile.

"We have to go several miles to get to the furthest village," Wombly said, motioning towards the map. Red dots on the paper map marked each village.

"How the hell are we to get to them?" Tank muttered, "We already lost one person getting in here and we were a group of strong friends, all who knew each other. The villagers will likely be tired and sickly. The kids will be exhausted... how do they expect us to get them in?"

A voice from behind answered.

"A small path through the mountain exists. It is easy enough to get through. The real problem is finding it," a soldier said from behind. The groups regarded him. He wore light leather armor, unlike most of the Walston guards, and on his hips a pair of short swords hung in their sheaths. His hair was graying and his eyes had the look of a man who'd seen more than any should.

"My name is Gerard," he said, "And I am the scout-master of Walston."

"Will you be accompanying us on our trip?" Tank asked and the man smiled for a moment. It was a sad smile.

"I do wish," Gerard replied, "But I fear my knees wouldn't hold up in the cold snow. I've grown older than any good soldier should. Especially in times like these." No one responded to the sadness in his voice.

"But I will be there when you leave and when you come back," Gerard said, "I have a few more scouts to hold the place while you are out. We are going to keep the pass open. We will signal you if we see you."

"You will have trouble holding that pass open on your own," Grewslough declared, "I will help you with that."

The man nodded gratefully, then looked to her friends.

"When we leave," Ashe muttered. She could already feel the cold.

Deabla's eyes opened once again. He knew what was about to happen.

The window slide opened and Eliza slipped into. She smiled at him.

"You're getting better," she said with a smile, "It's kinda cute." Deabla felt himself blush but the dark hid it. The young man wondered at his emotions, so unexpected, but decided not to make an issue of it at this moment. Eliza was a wildcard. They'd been friendly enough in the past but it wasn't enough for him to lay aside caution.

"Are we going to teleport to Aenigma's office again?" he asked, almost sarcastically, and Eliza nodded.

"We are," she said.

"If I refuse?"

"We are."

Deabla considered her for several moments. "Why?"

"Aenigma already informed you of why," Eliza said. Deabla sighed. "Alright," he said softly, "Let us go." She was incanting before he finished the sentence. By the time he recognized what she was doing they were compact and flying through air. It felt like both long hours and just a few seconds passed in the travel but when Deabla rematerialized he was in the same room as before, sitting in a chair in front of Aenigma.

"This is getting old," Deabla said dryly and Aenigma smiled.

"I believe this will change soon," Aenigma said confidently and Deabla's eyes narrowed. He didn't say anything about the rising suspicion in his stomach. Aenigma saw it and hid the recognition in her expression.

Eliza, however, didn't. She stood behind Aenigma and she winced at Deabla's suspicion. She saw the breaking of a possible future, he knew, he just wasn't sure if that future was advantageous to he and his friends or not.

"We are not your enemies," Aenigma said, "But we will lead you to where you need to be."

Deabla stared at her. He was unsure. He was certainly dealing with powers beyond his understanding, that much was clear, it was just unclear as to whether they were powers for good or not. He'd heard many men of less than noble intentions claim that they were doing what they believed was right.

Very rarely, in his experience, did the 'bad guy' believe they were bad.

"What could change our circumstance?" Deabla asked.

"Context," Aenigma replied. The room was bathed in silence for many minutes. "Context is always the key to every decision. That is why there is no rigid set of rules that govern the multiverse. There will always be a grey area. And in that grey area you will find the true heroes."

Deabla's eyes narrowed again, "I'm growing frustrated with your riddles."

Aenigma smiled, "Would you like to see your friends, then? A true and clear physical depiction?" She asked. Deabla regarded her suspiciously then, almost reluctantly, nodded. Aenigma brought a small mirror to him. He looked at it for a few moments. Then she began to incant for several moments.

Suddenly he could see Tank and the others. He saw the snow, saw them traveling. He watched for many minutes, his eyes drinking in the details. He realized that he only really cared about the magic because it allowed him to see his friends. He and his friends at Harold's Hill had tried to use the magic bowls that had been supplied to them during the Chaos War, which they'd used to watch their friends for short amounts of time, but for some unknown reason the bowls hadn't worked.

This time the friends still at Harold's Hill, namely Denerick, Esmeralda, Alron and himself, were completely in the dark when it came to their companions. Now that he got a chance to see them, and that they were in good health, in general at least.

He saw they were sporting minor wounds, most superficial but one on Ashe's forehead seemed rather uncontrolled. He watched them for many minutes, clinging to the image of his closest friends as he watched them trudge forward in the snow. He saw them as they lowered their chins, putting their heads down, keeping their knees and feet above the snow.

He smiled as he saw Wombly talking, likely about some idea or another, then Tank respond. He could all but hear it as Ashe said something sarcastic and Tank responded in some witty manner. He felt a smile growing on his face, the first real grin he'd known since his friends had left. Stress had its way with money people.

His grin faded as the image in the mirror faded.

"Why?" he asked and Aenigma smiled sadly.

"We have goals as well," she said. "Magic is hard to produce." Deabla stared at her for several moments.

"Well, tell me what you want," Deabla responded.

"I already told you."

"Tell me again."

"We want you to accept training with us."

"And use it for what?"

"A battle."

Deabla stared at her. "What kind of battle?"

"The titanic kind."

"I'm a titan?" Deabla replied suspiciously. Aenigma chuckled.

"No, not a titan.. or at least not in the sense you think. Everyone believes that titans, that champions, are born as champions and titans. That is something that must be earned, something that must be gained. The first titan was not born a titan. The titan was born a being much like you. That being achieved such greatness.

"Every realm has its own titans. And these titans, above all things, protect their realms from those that threaten it," Aenigma looked back at Eliza, "But champions will be forced to endure the most

terrible of pains and to make the greatest of sacrifices. And those that are near them... will suffer if they do not surrender to the inevitable."

"That being?" Deabla asked.

"Champions are too powerful to remain around those who aren't as powerful as they are."

Deabla eyed her curiously, "A rat and cat may be friends, but the rat can't outrun the dogs forever."

"What do you mean?"

"The rats can dodge long enough... but eventually they will be caught."

Deabla looked at her. The implications of her metaphor didn't fly over his head and the fact that he was, according to her, a champion.

"Why did we shift from champions to titans?" Deabla asked and Aenigma smiled.

"Champions have been given that name because they're considered good guys by the common peoples. Titans are considered beings of powers. Champions are just titans that have taken the welfare of the 'goodly' races of the realms."

"So titans are just powerful people?" Deabla asked and Aenigma smiled.

"That is essentially correct," Aenigma said and Deabla raised an eye brow, "How do you mean?"

"I cannot explain. Only titans really know what they are," the old woman gave a helpless smile, "I wish I could explain it more."

Deabla sat deep in thought. He wondered at the depths of the sacrifices of the titans, or so called champions, and what it might entail.

"I want to go home," he said. Aenigma nodded and she looked back to Aenigma. The younger wizard nodded, then walked up to Deabla. With a few incanted words both of them were traveling by magical means. The sensation, one that Deabla had grown moderately accustomed to, was still far from comfortable for him.

He arrived back in his room and looked down at Esmeralda as she served drinks to a man. Denerick still sat in the corner, as always. He wondered at them for several seconds, then he allowed himself a small smile. The rock of his world, Harold's Hill, was still in place.

He allowed the smile to become a broad grin, for he knew it'd take a mighty powerful force to disrupt this little ecosystem.

His smile disappeared, however, when he realized that such forces were likely already in play.

"My friends," he said in the direction of Tank, Wombly and Ashe, "Keep yourselves safe... and kill whatever it is that is threatening this little haven."

He let out a stressful sigh, one still filled with the painful worries of one on the edge of sacrifice, for he knew that if they couldn't take care of it then he would have to get involved and begin training.

And that would change everything. He feared.

Aenigma incanted for several seconds. A dark-purple portal in front of her, eight feet tall and eight feet wide. The sides of the portal was dark purple and the middle was black. She sighed, looking at it, and wondered if she was making a mistake.

Then she thought of Deabla and his potential. She knew what she had to do. She stepped through and immediately found herself in the middle of a giant library. Books lined the walls, hundreds of them. She had spent years in this library, learning everything she could, but even now she couldn't name even half of the books in the cathedral-like building.

"Maverick?" she asked. Her voice was soft as nerves filled her. She never felt sure when interacting with people of such extreme power. A chuckling off to the side made her look that direction.

"Aenigma," an older man said with a smile. He stepped forward and Aenigma smiled, "I like this form."

"I know you do," Maverick said. As Aenigma said Maverick was 'wearing' a different form.

Always shrouded in illusion, Maverick had traveled to many worlds in many different guises, working to make heroes on the other realities in order to save the worlds.

This form, an elderly man with a bent back, a receding hair line and a long, grey beard that reached down to the top of his chest. His eyes were grey and he appeared to be a blind man. He wore brown robes.

The two shared a smile and a moment, their eyes meeting.

"Why do you come here?" Maverick said moments later. He knew that while they had feelings for one another there could be no relationship. They were, as a writer from one of his favorite worlds had called it, 'star-crossed lovers'. Both of them were fighting the good fight, raising the forces required to save the multiverse.

"I have need of Dean's assistance," Aenigma said.

"Dean?" Maverick looked up curiously, "You know as well as I do that he is in... suffering."

Aenigma nodded, a deep sadness in her eyes. Dean and one known simply as Jessica had been close for many years. The two were powerful wizards and had tackled many missions together with one another. Their last mission had ended in terrible battle between them and a demon of more power than any had ever been seen before.

Dean had survived. Jessica hadn't.

"It may take his mind off his troubles," Aenigma offered weakly but even she could hear the feebleness of her argument.

"He is unstable," Maverick replied.

"Am I?" a voice asked from the side. Maverick winced as he looked to the side to see a man in his late twenties. A brown beard, less than a month old, covered a young face. His hair, brown also, was cut short. He was a small man, only five and a half feet tall and weighing no more than a hundred and twenty pounds. His dark blue eyes, so filled with turmoil the last few weeks, were suddenly filled with determination.

"What do you need me to do?" Dean asked Aenigma.

"Save someone when the time comes," the old woman said and Dean shrugged.

"I do that all the time," Dean said.

"Please go," Maverick said to Aenigma and the old woman nodded. She walked back to her portal and stepped through. It would last for many minutes longer so she didn't fear Dean needing to find her specific reality. It could take days, weeks, even years sometimes to find a specific reality among the millions that there were.

"What is it?" Dean asked. He looked into Maverick's eyes, suddenly clear of all the 'blind man's marks' but still grey.

"You are young, my friend, too young to realize this now, but there is life after love," Maverick said. Dean gave a mirthless smile, "That's just a stupid song."

"Not so," Maverick responded in all seriousness, "There's always going to be a struggle. And sometimes the struggle is simply finding something to struggle over. I truly hope that this is good for you, but I fear it will not be.."

"I regard you as I would my son," Maverick said, "but I also understand that you're going to do what you will, no matter what I say."

"You lead the Overwatchers," Dean said, "It is my duty to follow your orders."

"You will do what you desire when it really comes down to it," Maverick said firmly and Dean didn't deny it. Maverick had taught Dean many great lessons but ultimately Dean's rise to manhood had been through struggle on his own. He'd been fighting and scraping from having meager power to becoming one of the most powerful beings in the multiverse.

"I understand that you have lived for far longer than I," Dean replied, "I understand that you understand things I don't yet, gained only through experience. And I will try to keep that in mind when the time comes."

Maverick smiled, "Go, my friend, and enjoy your life."  
Dean turned and walked through the portal, into yet another new reality.

## Chapter Fifteen:

Benny wasn't sure what had happened but he found himself in the open. But he felt a gash on his face, four bloodied lines, and some blood flowing down his forearm. He looked back and saw two zombies close behind him.

Their eyes glowed orange as they stared hungrily at him, unaware that their skin to decaying and that both had a broken arm. He jumped into the air, pushing off a tree that was in front of him, and kicked out. His foot slammed into one of the zombies heads, smashing the weathered skull on impact.

His blades were in his hands already when he hit the ground in a roll, quickly finding his feet after a small stumble on the snow. The zombie came hard at him but found itself falling backwards as Benny's weapons flashed forward in a pair of violent swipes.

He quickly smashed its skull. That zombie killed, he turned and began to run where he knew Mave to be sleeping. He crossed a stream and took out a water pouch. He filled it in the stream as quick as he possibly could, at one point being forced to lower it and kill a zombie that had caught up to him, then took off once again.

It wasn't long until he got to the cave.

It took Benny almost a minute of talking to wake Mave, the man's eyes barely opening as he looked up at his companion.

"I'm thinking... I'm not dead... yet..." the man said weakly, a faint smile crossing his face. Benny's forced smile was even weaker, "I'm not letting you off that easy."

Benny offered Mave the water but the man was too weak to take it. So Benny put the opening next to Mave's face and allowed him to drink. Mave drank it quickly, draining the pouch in only four gulps, and Benny realized that he'd need more water to keep his companion alive.

"Please," Mave said before Benny could leave, "Don't go... I am... I am thinking I'm dying. Soon. Stay."

"I can go get more water," Benny protested, "Hold on, I can go get more-"

"It won't help."

Benny wanted to argue but even the energy it took to argue, to talk, had drained Mave of any energy gained by his rest within the cave. Mave was withdrawn. His eyes were bloodshot and, due to the poison, his skin was beginning to sag on his face. Mave looked bad.

Very bad.

"I will stay," Benny said and Mave smiled.

"Thank you."

Lidia's eyes opened first. She looked around. Copla and Maria laid sprawled on the snow, completely unconscious. She felt a trickle of blood down her face and realized that her nose was likely broken from the impact. A single finger touching the mangled bone and tissue confirmed that belief. She quickly went into a spell, the words painful as she moved her jaw, and healed herself as much as she could without depleting her magical energy.

Maria had begun to stir when Lidia finished her spells.

"Ooow," Maria moaned as she turned over. It was a wonder they hadn't suffocated, Lidia thought to herself. "What... what happened?"

"I'm not sure," Lidia said, "Copla-" the chubby wizard jumped to his feet screaming upon the sound of his name.

"YOU DID THIS!" He screamed, "YOU DID THIS!"

*I didn't.*

"YES YOU DID!"

*You did this. I didn't cast the spell.*

"I COULDN'T HOLD CONCENTRATION BECAUSE OF YOU!" Copla roared and Lidia and Maria watched in shock.

"What?" Lidia asked and Copla looked at her, his eyes wide with, what appeared to them to be, insanity.

"She... she doesn't love me..."

*How could I ever love you?*

"You... you used to..."

"Used to what?" Maria asked

"You used to love me..."

*I don't... I can't... Please... I am silenced now.*

"Don't go! Please... I... I miss you. Please don't go..." Copla cried as he barely whispered the words, his eyes wide with, the young women perceived, insanity. Desperation gripped him as he fell to his hands and knees, burying his hands in the six inch deep snow. He vomited for several seconds.

"I love you," he whispered to himself. Maria and Lidia watched in shock.

"Well if he cracks, at least he won't be here anymore," Lidia said, once again revealing her unusual point of view, and Maria sighed. "I wish Tank was here."

"Where... is here?" Lidia wondered.

"I don't know," Maria responded. "Do you have any spells that can locate us?"

"No... but he does," Lidia said, pointing towards Copla.

"I think we're on our own here," Maria replied and Lidia couldn't disagree. Copla lay on his back, staring up at the sky, his eyes wide, whispering some indistinguishable words. Then he stood up. He looked over, embarrassed.

"I'm... sorry," he said. He looked at the ground, where his vomit lay, then up at Maria and Lidia, "I think I have some explaining to do... but not now. We need to get to safety first."

Maria and Lidia looked at him, genuinely worried, but they couldn't deny the truthfulness of his point. They were about to point out that they had no idea where they were but Copla began chanting. He incanted for several seconds then looked behind them, "The Northern wall of Walston is only half a mile that way. The Southern wall, and actual city, is a mile that way..." he pointed in the opposite direction.

"Where do we go?" He asked.

"To the Northern wall I think," Maria said, "that's where Tank would go."

Lidia shrugged. While she might have known Tank for three years she'd never really seen him in battle and his decisions on the field were something of a mystery to her. She'd heard all about his deeds on the battlefield but she knew that stories rarely reflected truth. But even if she knew what he'd do that didn't really effect her decision making.

"Sounds good enough to me," the priestess said.

"Let us go," Copla said.

Benny sat next to Mave as he lay, bouncing back and forth between consciousness and unconsciousness. His eyes would open for several seconds and Benny watched in hope, wondering if the poison of the shadewalkers might be weakening, or even fading away. But the big man's eyes would close again and Benny felt a sadness he could feel in his stomach.

Bile filled his mouth as he looked down on his friends, unbidden tears streaking down his face and his lips threatened to quiver. He silently contemplated ending Mave's life. He quietly considered it, trying to decide if it was more or less humane, but he didn't have time to make a decision.

Mave's eyes opened, "You were my... my broth-... my brother..." Blood coated his lips and slowly it made its way down his jaw. It began to drip onto the floor. Benny watched as the last lungful of air left his lungs. Benny reached out and grasped Mave's hand. The skin was cold to the touch and slightly clammy as he died.

Benny watched his friend, the closest thing to a brother he'd ever had, for many minutes. He closed his eyes and sat. He could feel the heart in his chest and knew it wasn't his. Not anymore. It was a dead heart. And when his eyes opened, they were no longer eyes that saw humor in life. And as his fingers felt to the hilts of his blades he knew immediately that his fingers were no longer fueled by a desire to do good.

As Benny rushed out of their cave his legs were fueled with anger. He remembered, suddenly, where his friends had fallen. And whenever he ran into enemies he slaughtered them, splitting bones with his blades and crushing skulls with his hilts.

Benny dropped the shield to the ground. A purple raven was coated atop the black shield. A double-bladed battle-axe and suit of armor lay on the ground as well, the legacy of two other trips out into the cold and among the zombies. Across from the cave lay Mave, his broad-sword in hand. Benny had spent five days finding and collecting the wears of his allies.

Now he'd built a small shrine to honor them. Silo's bow and two of his arrows, both broken, lay next to sticks placed in a manner that was considered honorable to the druidic peoples of the far west. He'd tried his best to honor them, to give them something that would leave his conscious feeling clean.. but nothing worked.

"It's not fair, you know," Benny heard from behind. He turned, eyes wide, as he gasped at the voice.

"You... you're dead," he said as he looked up to the image of Silo.

"Yeah..." Silo said with a shrug, "I am."

"We are," Melinda said from behind. Giles stood to her left and Mave to her right.

"It was the wraith, Benny. It was the wraith," Mave said, "I'm thinking that much at least."

"The wraith?" Benny asked and Mave nodded, "He's on the mountain. You should go there and kill him. Now."

"I... Tank and the others could help," Benny said, "I'll go to Sprinkleberry and bring the army."

"It'd take too long. You have to act now," Silo said, "I've done the math."

"And I've looked around, using my magic. You have to do it," Melinda said, "You must avenge us."

Benny thought for several seconds. Then he nodded his head the negative, "I won't charge in with no plan... we have to be ready in this."

Mlaster scowled. The spirits of Benny's friends were slipping out of his control. They were his puppets for a small time, the wraith giving him control over the dead, but they were stubborn and had strong wills. They were beginning to tear themselves from his grasp.

He looked back at his army, two hundred shadewalkers. Zombies made up of the rest of his main force, which was three thousand strong. Another thousand were outside the walls of Walston on the south side. Another two thousand to the North. He did, however, have a final force to bring down upon Walston.

Five hundred ghouls, their nails tipped with poison of paralysis. They were particularly lethal once the holes in the wall were already made. One claw-cut would leave a victim paralyzed in seconds and the effects would last for hours.

He scowled as he turned and looked at the last tribe of the mountain. These were radical tribesmen. They'd given up their abhorrence of using fire as a weapon. The leader of them, some shaman who he'd tried to kill for many days, was rallying them and fighting only when they had the

best circumstances.

But he had them cornered, to a degree at least.

"We shall win," Mlaster grinned as he saw the flames bobbing up and down in the distance. He knew he could send powerful magic in their direction, likely enough to destroy the entire tribe, but the action would leave him too drained to control his armies. He'd already expended too much energy in raising the forces of ghouls and shadewalkers. Now he had several hundred zombies wandering around, aimless and following only their senses, between the Lightning Chain and Sprinkleberry.

Where Benny was.

He considered putting concentration into that area but reconsidered. He needed to focus on the walls of Walston. Somehow the southern wall was rebuilt by those within and the northern wall had held for many weeks.

He considered sending his shadewalkers over the mountain but decided against it. He'd have to raise more preta and destroy the city from within.

Maria and Lidia looked up. A storm had passed over and slowed their traveling. They were lucky to have made a mile the day before. Now, the second day of traveling, the wind had lessened and now they were only leaning slightly forward in response to the wind.

"Not... much further... to go!" Copla shouted over the wind and Maria nodded. But she needn't have, for Copla looked forward the entire time. He was looking forward all the time, up into the wind, as if the assault from the cold wind didn't sting his eyes.

She saw, in those eyes, a conflict, an inner turmoil that put any fight outside his head on the back burner.

She was about to ask him about something when suddenly several blasts of flame hit the area around her. All three companions cried out in fear as the snow went up in steam around them.

"Who are you? And why are you trespassing on Walston Land?" a voice asked from above.

Maria looked up to see twenty men on a small tower. Six of them wore thick and warm robes. The rest held bows up, their strings held taut, aimed at the companions.

"We're from Sprinkleberry. We're here to help!" Maria said and one of the guards laughed.

"Looks to me like you're the one needing help," the guard observed and others shared in the laughter.

"How far is the Northern Gate?" Maria asked and the laughing guard pointed behind them, "Less than a half mile."

"May we enter?" Maria asked and the man looked to one of the wizards, the leader. The man, garbed in light blue and black robes, the colors of Walston, nodded, "You may."

The snow was piling up in front of them already but it didn't really matter. Any snow less than a few feet thick was a welcome obstacle to the companions.

"Who are you?" The man asking the question was gaunt and tall, a serious face that matched his demeanor perfectly. His eyes, cold and dark, reflected the frigid calculations hardly hidden just beneath the surface. He wore armor, worn and weathered by weeks upon the wall, fighting and commanding his soldiers against seemingly impossible situations against terrifying odds.

But still the walls held and Maria, as she watched him, could see that it was likely in no small part due to his intimidating intelligence. Once again, it lurked just beneath the surface. In the distance Maria could hear the shouts of men at work and there was little doubt that any of them were doing some useful task or another. There was even less doubt that they weren't working under instructions set by him.

"My name is Maria Findella," the young woman introduced herself, "I was sent with a patrol from Sprinkleberry to investigate the fire on the Lightning Chain. We've been visited by some... hard times."

Lidia and Copla looked at her but didn't say anything other to introduce themselves as well, "My name is Copla." "My name is Lidia."

"My name is lieutenant Levin," the man said.

"You're in charge?" Copla asked and the captain nodded.

"But you're just a lieutenant... no disrespect..." the nervous wizard said the last part quickly.

"We had a general, he was hit by some... magical blast, and two captains but they died in combat. We've been fighting for around a month now. It's chaos out there.

"We tried to send a messenger to the southern gate but no one seems to be able to make it through.

"You were sent by Sprinkleberry?" the lieutenant asked.

"Yes," Maria answered before either of her companions could, "Yes we were."

"Are they sending soldiers?" Levin asked and the urgency in his voice wasn't lost on the three companions.

"We don't know. We haven't been there since before the winter snows came. A lot has happened, it seems, because when we left the only thing we knew about was the fire."

"How long have you been out there?"

"About a month, it would seem," Copla said.

"A month out there? In this winter... damn me if you're not crazy," lieutenant Levin said, the first show of humor in the entire conversation.

"Well," Levin said quietly, "There's a lot of work to be done. And if you've survived out there, then I expect you to share tips with my men." He stood up to leave, limping hard on his left leg as he did so.

"Where are you going?" Maria asked.

"To make sure no one else is dying."

## Chapter Sixteen:

Tank and Wombly smiled at each other, trying to take comfort in the others compatibilities. Ashe had already left, earlier that morning, heading to the most northward villages. Tuff, too, had left earlier. He was going to the furthest village to the south.

Now Tank was going to the furthest village while Wombly headed to the closest. They needed to cover a lot of ground over a small amount of time and to do that they needed to split up. It didn't make anyone happy, aside from maybe Tuff and Ashe, who didn't want to be around one another, but it was required.

It was saddening to Wombly that Tuff was so filled with rage as he left. She knew that feelings often got in the way of combat, that one bad feeling could lead to an abnormally aggressive act. She'd be fine if Tank was unhappy because he was always a head first fighter but Tuff was more calculating in his actions.

Tank could handle being put in the desperate situations that are caused by attacking head first because he was used to them, he had a lot of practice getting out of that type of combat fine. But Tuff was less accustomed to fighting from a disadvantage and even less used to changing disadvantage to advantage.

It wasn't that Tuff was a lesser fighter than Tank, for in many situations Tank put them in dire straights with his aggressive actions, it was just that he was less likely to react correctly in the desperate situations.

She sighed again.

"Good luck," Tank said. He smiled to her and she tried to return it. She'd seen him on the edge too many times to feel overly confident about this. They worked best as a team, her archer fire mixed with Tank's aggressive strikes, Ashe's sneaking ambush attacks and dazzling displays of fierce swords-

manship and Deabla's impossible intuition.

They, together, were an effective team. Together they were unstoppable and no foe could stop them. Alone...

She wasn't so sure.

Tank looked backwards. He had passed a couple of villages and knew he would have to get them on his way back and now he was nearing the final village, nearly ten miles out of Walston. He was currently five hours of hard travel from when he'd split with Wombly.

As the crow flies it was only about ten miles between the village and the furthest village. But because the mountains stretched out from the Lightning Chain and he had to travel twenty or so miles further than he would have. The villages were on the opposite side of Walston from the Fire on the Lightning Chain. As he looked back he wondered how Wombly and his other friends were doing.

"Damned mountains," he muttered as he walked. He stepped forward and suddenly he felt himself falling forward. His right step had pushed through the top layer of ice of a pond. The rest of his body followed his leg into the pond and he struggled for several seconds before he could get out of the frigid water.

He grunted as he laid on the ground for several minutes, trying to regain his composure. He tried to stand but getting out of the water had taken all the energy he could put out at that moment. He could feel his body shivering but, for some reason he didn't know, he couldn't feel the coldness in his limbs.

But he knew he was dead already if he stayed there. Thus he struggled for several seconds before he could finally stand. Once he was on his feet he felt himself shivering once again, then he was moving, trying to warm his body with motion.

He was about an hour of hard walking when he heard the low moan, the noisecarrying on the breeze. Somehow the long, low note of the undead carried on the bitter-cold wind so very clearly... It was all he could do not to feel hopelessness in his gut. The young man grunted and lowered his head, fighting the wind as it somehow made its way through the mountain-like stone that jutted up from the ground. It was that very stone that lengthened his ten mile travel to thirty.

He traveled forward, shivering, realizing he was in trouble. The last village was about two miles from him and the one behind him was three of so away. He wasn't sure how much further he could go. The night in Walston hadn't done much to heal him and now he was suffering from extreme coldness and wetness.

Then he turned a corner to see a dozen pairs of glowing orange eyes.

He turned to run and saw another dozen or so zombies.

They'd surrounded him... how hadn't he noticed? He wondered as they got closer.

He lifted his weapons, setting his flail spinning with muscle memory, and easily shattered the head of the closest as it jogged towards him. His fingers, however, had almost no grip on the handle of his flail and the weapon flew from his hands, spinning end to end through the air.

"Damn," Tank muttered as he looked at it flying away. Then he lifted his hammer, barely getting it in a way as another jogging zombie got to him.

Deabla awakened but it was too late. Eliza was already in the room, already chanting.

"What?" he complained as the world around him flashed black and white in half a second. He felt himself being sucked into a small amount of space. His eyes opened and he looked straight to the figure of Aenigma, who he'd become used to seeing.

"I see you're growing used to this," the old woman said dryly and Deabla shrugged.

"I guess being kidnapped on a regular basis will do that," the young man muttered. Aenigma shared a laugh then seemed sad.

"What is it?" Deabla asked, immediately worried at her expression.

"Watch," Eliza said as Aenigma cast her spell. Mid-spell, the old woman handed Deabla the magical mirror. He took it and watched it as an image formed. Then the image became a quick series of images. He watched as Tank threw himself to the side, to the ground, away from a fast moving zombie. Tank's skin was slightly pale-blue and he looked fatigued.

Deabla watched the warrior jumped to his feet and bulled forward, slamming through one of the zombies and knocking it straight to the ground. The zombie's head slammed into the ground, cracking the undead's skull. It was dead but its fellow zombies were still strong.

More of them rushed at Tank and the warrior whipped his hammer across to smash another undead skull.

"He is a fine warrior.. but there are too many," Aenigma said softly.

"Then save him!" Deabla shouted sharply and Aenigma was off-balance. She'd never seen such vehemence from the young man. And now that she saw it she felt some fear for it.

"We will," Aenigma said, "but you must promise to-"

"I'll do it." Deabla's voice didn't shake, "I'll do it. I'll do your training. Now go!"

Aenigma looked to the side to Dean, who walked out of the shadows.

"Go," she said and Dean nodded.

Tank felt several fingers digging into his skin. He'd fought for many minutes, working as hard as possible, but he was bleeding and they were too close. He screamed in agony as one of the fingers dug into his collar bone. He wasn't sure when but he'd dropped his hammer.

He felt fingers clench his legs and he was dragged to the ground. He tried to resist it but he couldn't. He was beaten.

He was dead.

Then suddenly the fingers ripped out of his skin and he was on the ground. He looked down at his chest, four fingers dug into his chest. They'd somehow slipped through his armor. He knew, at that moment, that he was already dead. For an open wound was a death sentence for infection was all but inevitable.

He growled as the dead fingers were ripped from his skin. The wound was opened and extended even further. He cried out even louder and was tripped to the ground as the bone hand around his shin was torn away as well. His face slammed into the ground and it dazed him more than anything else.

Tank struggled to keep his eyes focused but they blurred. He couldn't see anything... but bodies flying.

Dean's right hand shot out and he hit one zombie in the chest with a burst of fire. The flame tore through its chest. Dean's left hand reached out and grabbed at Tank with his magical grasp. Through sheer force of will the young man lifted the wounded warrior and lifted him. He pulled the warrior to his side, to safety, then focused on the rest of the zombies.

Almost three dozen of the undead had shown up by this point and now the mage could focus his most aggressive spells. He reached under the snow, under the grass and into the soil. He pulled sand from it, the driest pieces he could find, and raised them up, surrounding the zombies with it. They grains slashed through them, tearing skin and grinding bone.

But that wasn't why Dean had done this.

He released another burst of fire, this time enough to fill a thirty meter radius. The flames solidified the sand into glass. The zombies were trapped within. Dark brown eyes narrowed with concentration and both hands raised. He released a burst of magical energy, in its purest form and they energies cut through the glass, shattering it, and the zombies within.

Several of them managed to survive them but Dean made quick work of the last undead.

He turned on Tank.

"Well, you're a tough son of a whore, aren't you?" Dean said with a small chuckle. He wondered

at himself for several seconds, as Tank, who was barely on his feet, searched for some response. It was the first time Dean had smiled or had any type of laugh.

"You could say that," Tank mumbled. He was about to say something when his eyes hardened for a moment. "Damn," he muttered immediately before falling over again.

"Where were you going?" Tank heard the man's voice in the background, as if it were an echo off the far side of some cave or another. "Where were you going?"

The question was repeated several times and he felt his lips move and a voice escape. It wasn't his voice, or, at the least, it didn't feel as though he was the one speaking. But the voice sounded and the man seemed satisfied.

Tank's eyes slid slightly open. He recognized figures around him, people, but couldn't make out any specific details. He heard voices and what seemed to be questions but his throat was too parched to form any semblance of a response. Fortunately for him, those above his body noticed the small crack between his eye lids. He felt a coolness flow between his lips and filter down his throat. It stung at first but he equally realized it was water. He drank greedily and generous amounts of the glorious liquid was allowed.

He felt his body lifted into a sitting position and his eyes, upon awakening with the stimulus of water, cleared his vision. He recognized one figure only by his eyes.

He saw an intensity in the dark brown orbs that filled him with fear. For in those dark brown scanners he saw judgment based on parameters and experiences that seemed to hold a harshness that he could scarcely imagine. At that moment, Tank wondered what could have happened to cause a glare like this man's.

"His name is Tank," the man, Dean, said, "My name is Dean."

"Well thanks for lett'in us know," a rough looking man said. His teeth were yellowed but he was healthy enough. The years of living in a small village, the furthest from Walston, had taken their toll on him. The man was the result of four dozen years in a harsh and unforgiving environment, whether a seemingly endless stretch of desert, harsh summers and even harsher winters, or a grassland that was a home to hundreds of biting insects mixed with winters that dropped feet of snow a week.

"My name's Henry," the man said, "And I'm now 'bout to ask what's go'in on. You got here a couple o' minutes ago. We been tending to yer friend... Ye ought to be tell'in us what's goin' on."

"When he comes to I'm confident he'll be able to explain this. I just asked him where he's going and brought him," Dean responded.

"Wh-who are you?" Tank asked as his throat became less and less pained. But it was still pained and the words came out as little more than a croak.

"What's that?" Henry asked but Dean heard and understood the question, "As I said, my name is Dean. I was sent to save you by Deabla and Aenigma."

"Dea... Deabla?" Tank was barely coherent as he voiced the question.

"Yes, your friend bargained for your safety," Dean said, "He sacrificed himself, in a sense, for you."

Dazed and confused, Tank didn't understand the words immediately. But as soon as his mind was able to process them his eyes widened despite the glare of the light around him, far too bright for his weary eyes.

"He..." was all Tank could say. Dean watched as the warrior struggled with this reality, that he'd been saved by someone's actions, which had in turn cost them, and felt more sympathy than Tank could ever have guessed.

"He... for... me?"

"He is not dead," Dean said and his relief was palpable for a moment. Then Tank's eyes narrowed once again, "What did... he give?"

"He gave his time. He will train with a friend of mine, in return for your life," Dean said. The

mage noted the shift in Tank but had no time to respond to it. Warriors had one major advantage over wizards: Speed.

Aside from several weak spells that had to be prepared beforehand, wizard spells took time to cast. Thus as Tank burst forward, his rage and, deep down, shame, allowing him to overcome the pain in his chest. The infection had spread in a small amount of time but somehow Tank moved forward, too fast for Dean to produce a spell.

Then warrior's hands were around Dean's throat but over the course of the half-second Dean realized what was happening. Thus he was thankful that his spells didn't require a vocal component. He punched forward with his fist while Tank choked him. Dean's hand hit Tank in the stomach and had it simply been Dean's strength versus Tank's the warrior might have laughed. But it wasn't physical strength against physical strength.

Dean's punch was backed by magic.

Tank flew backwards and slammed into the wall behind him. The wooden material that comprised the wall barely held its integrity as the heavy body slammed into it at a fast speed but it held and Tank fell forward, unconscious, to the floor.

More amazed than angry, Dean looked down at Tank with a deep sense of sympathy. The mage knew what it felt like to know that someone had given something up so that he could live. He knew the feeling of shame and helplessness that it created and he knew that even though Tank's life would continue there would always be the blight on his honor, on his conscious, that someone had given up their life, in some way or another, for him. The blight would result in helpless rage and, more deadly, guilt.

And if there was one thing that could consume a man it was guilt.

"Heal him, if you would. I will be back with help of some sort," Dean said matter-of-factly and turned. Before Henry or any of the other villagers could complain the wizard was gone in a puff of magical energy.

Ashe looked back over her shoulder. The last three villages were following close behind. She had left several markers for them to follow. She knew the 'scouts' of the villages would find them. That wasn't what bothered her.

In the pit of her stomach she felt as though there was a disturbance in the air around her, as if something she couldn't see was making an appearance. She didn't realize that in the distance a wraith was grinning in Mlaster as if considered its luck.

It'd found more slaves.

The first scream came from the middle-most child in the group. Ashe was filled with dread, for she had heard such a scream before. Years ago, before she'd met Deabla or Wombly, she'd been in the employ of some powerful spell casters. They, being priests of a less than noble order, often dealt in spirits of great power.

Ranked in that number were the dreaded preta, ghosts who were so enraged with their deaths that they roamed the land, searching for living beings to inflict the same fate. To make matters worse preta were only formed when a truly terrible death occurred. Thus, when these wronged spirits forced their death upon another it was never a peaceful or painless process.

All the pain of a death that often lasted several days was condensed into a few moments, the victims often became preta themselves. The ghosts were like a virus, reaching out and converting all they could touch. Anything they couldn't convert they killed, ending both the life and the threat it presented.

"Oh no," Ashe said. She had little concern for the world around her but there were certain experiences that elicited sympathy from the young woman. And death from a preta was one of those circumstances.

She tried to think of some way to save anyone from this death, anyway, but she could think of

none. She realized quickly that when this girl was finally killed by the preta there was a good chance she would rise up again as a second preta. Then two of the ghosts would be wreaking havoc upon the group.

The woman's mother didn't realize the futility of the moment and stared at her child with desperation. Ashe looked into those eyes and recognized the look in her eyes. It was a look she had seen before.

Suddenly Ashe wasn't in this world anymore. A spell by Aenigma, cast four years before, came into effect. The goal of the spell was to speak of the instant that created weakness in the target of the spell in hopes that it would remove their fears or their lack of confidence.

Ashe's eyes opened and she stared at a small child. In front of her was an older woman, who resembled Ashe in many ways but there was an obvious difference. Anyone but Ashe who might have been watching would have realized that it was her mother but Ashe hadn't seen the woman in so many years that her mind had warped the image and instead she saw just herself.

"My daughter," Ashe's mother spoke, "You must flee. The priests are angry... you are in danger. Please, my daughter, my love and my soul, you must flee! My life may be enough for them if you are out of their sight."

Just over five years old, the young Ashe had little understanding of what was happening but it was enough to realize that her mother wasn't being overdramatic in the least. She was too young to realize the slimness of her mother's hope. Had her older self been there she would have muttered, "Amen," to the prayer, but at this still-tender age Ashe was too little to consider the irony of hoping a priest of evil would be satisfied with a simple death.

Ashe's mother was about to say something again when suddenly her eyes began to roll up into her head. She screamed in terror and agony, the two emotions rolling together in her voice. "Run! Run my love!" the mother screamed before the pain became so much that she gritted her teeth.

As a child she didn't recognize her mother's tongue fall out of her mouth, severed by her teeth, but now, in retrospect, Ashe understood that her mother's pain had caused her to bite off her own tongue.

The young girl turned and ran, sprinting as fast and hard as she could. She found a small corner to hide in but in a moment of terror she didn't take the tempting offer of the shadows. Even at the young age Ashe tended to find darkness more comforting than the revealing light. She sprinted past and, in the eyes of an older and more experienced, Ashe recognized it was a blessing that she'd run on.

Preta didn't need light to see.

A large house of light seemed to be the young girl's only hope. She didn't, at this age, recognize it a temple to the goddess Salvatore at this time but as she rushed in she found the preta locked out. She could, for a reason she still didn't understand, see the ghosts. She saw them rush into what seemed to be a line.

At that age she didn't even wonder about it. Still at this age Ashe offered it little thought, considering it the temples to be a lesser of two evils, but she did recognize that there was an advantage to the religion.

The young girl found a dark corner to hide in. Not a tear streamed down her face, not a drop of sadness rolled down her face. She sat in stunned silence, staring at the world outside the temple. She could still hear the screams of her mother but, in that moment, there was nothing but a burial of emotions.

As the young Ashe looked up, she hardened her skin and buried it all.

"No!" Ashe screamed, "Get away from her!" The younger Ashe's skin cracked and her worry for another poured out, "She's gone already... we can't do anything for her."

The mother looked up, terror in her eyes.

"My baby..." the woman whimpered and Ashe felt sorrow.

"There's nothing we can do. If she wins the mental battle we might be able to-" Ashe was cut off by the scream of the young girl, a shriek filled with such misery and agony that Ashe couldn't suppress a grimace.

Then the girl's body, still held in the mother's hand, seemed to disintegrate into dust.

Two Preta, Ashe knew, instead of one. Another man, to her left, cried out. Then a third person, a woman, screamed in terror.

Ashe's eyes teared up a bit.

"Run now!"

## Chapter Seventeen:

"Mind melding is dangerous," Copla said vehemently and Maria raised an eye brow.

"It has certain risks but you have fought the idea tooth and nail. We have to practice it eventually. We may need to do it sometime," Maria said, "You know as well as I do that we need to know every magical trick we can in battle. It's chaos... mind melding could be very useful."

"Mind melding is-" Copla began again but Maria cut him off, "Dangerous?"

Copla forced a smile, "Though it is true, I wasn't going to say that."

"Risky, then?" Maria responded and this time Copla smiled for real.

"No, I was going to say it's simple.. it's a brute force type of magic. It's about mental strength against mental strength, about brutal anger and will," Copla said, "It can be a difficult thing to control. Especially when you get proficient at it. It isn't something you wield like a dagger. It more resembled a flail, where you direct it and let it fly..."

"I thought it was a direct spell? One that you hit people directly with?" Maria asked and Copla nodded his head the negative, "Well... it begins that way. But when you get stronger, you begin to grow confident with it and instead of careful. Then you use it sparingly... and it grows to become part of your normal spell repertoire," Copla's eyes began to look distant.

"You use it in a battle where they are mentally stronger than you and they destroy your body..." Copla didn't sound like yourself, "Then you become trapped in someone else..."

"Copla?"

"Forgive me," the much less pudgy wizard said softly, "I forgot myself."

*Which one?* Maria thought to herself but didn't say aloud. She wasn't sure of the level in which Copla was inflicted by what she suspected to be a multiple personality disorder but she didn't want to push it.

"It is fine," Maria said. She studied him for several moments, gaining a facial expression that was one that might have been found on Tank's face. As she studied him she also considered herself for the first time in a while. Was it better now that she considered others? She wondered.

Inspiration might have been found had Copla not begun to speak again.

"If you want to practice it... Lidia may be a suitable partner," as Copla spoke Maria felt relief. She felt a need to practice, yes, but to open her mind to one with Copla's mental disabilities? That was a wild card beyond her desire to grasp. But, at the same time, she wanted to retain her friendship with the wizard. And to say, 'I won't share my mind with you,' wouldn't be the most tactful thing she'd ever said.

"Will you teach me?" Maria asked.

"You're going to do it?" Copla asked.

"With or without your help," Maria answered.

Copla sighed. "Then I will help. You needn't be messing with something this dangerous without an experienced party."

It didn't take much for them to convince Lidia, who'd finished casting all her daily spells of healing on wounded soldiers from the wall, to join them in their training. She, in all truth, was glad to

be distracted from the grim reality of the soldiers wounds. Most that recieved a wound would die. And though she'd grown accustomed to death at a young age she couldn't block out a sense of sadness in the look in their eyes.

She knew this was their home and they would die for it. That wasn't what messed with her, for it would have built a sense of happiness in her had that been all. It was the fact that these men would die to defend their homes and it might do nothing.

For in the eyes of the most wounded, of those who would lose limbs or would bleed out soon, she saw a shame in their eyes. They realized that with their deaths they would lose far more than just a much needed body to defend their homes but also the enemy would gain one to stand against their home.

She felt sad because of their shame.

Thus, when she recieved Maria's invitation she was eager to escape the morose mood of the barracks. It took her only a few minutes to follow the ropes between buildings. Because the winter blizzards often got so intense that no one could the hand in front of their face. So the Walstonians tied ropes between the buildings so they wouldn't get lost while in transit from one building to the next. The days where the ropes were truly required were few but when they did happen it lasted for several days at a time.

This day the blizzard was picking up but it wasn't so strong that anyone traveling between the buildings was at risk of being lost in the cold. They could see well enough, the ropes just added some security to those in tranzit.

When Lidia got there she found her two friends sitting across from each other in the shape of a triangle. A third spot was open. Lidia didn't wait to be welcomed in by either friend, who looked up at her. Instead she sat down immediately and looked directly at her companions.

"So what do we do now?" Lidia asked. Copla smiled and raised a finger to signal for silence. Lidia gave him a puzzled look then, after a few moments, she felt something bump into her mind. Not literally, or at least she didn't think she it was physical. She wasn't sure because it felt solid but she saw nothing.

Her understanding of magic was that even things that weren't visible could still hurt. And things that were visible weren't always real. Further, things didn't have to be real to be lethal. Thus as she felt the intrusion on her mind she couldn't help worrying for multiple reasons.

Then it scraped her consciousness again... and again and again.

"Let it in," Copla whispered and Lidia raised an eye brow.

"What?" she asked, louder than Copla had, and Maria stopped in frustration.

"How am I supposed to focus if-" the young wizard noticed Lidia, "Oh. Sorry, I didn't notice you."

Lidia shrugged.

"I assumed you knew of Mind Melding," Copla began, "I apologize. Think of mind melding as two castles reaching out to one another. Now each mind, each castle, has a wall and an army and a class of merchants and people within it that work on the all of the functions of the mind. Now when two people mind meld they open a direct route between the two minds. Anything can be sent along this line, whether its information in the forms of merchants or a desire to control, or even kill, in the form of soldiers.

"Now mind melding can be used to share the powers of people but only if both minds are okay with it. The mind has its own mental walls, think of them as the walls of the castle, that can be lowered at the desire of the owner of the mind. However, if they don't want to be opened the soldiers coming from the other mind are forced to try and take it over.

"Most minds have simple soldiers, like spear men, while good minds have archers and maybe ladder men. The more advanced will have rams and the greatest will have even more advanced forms of siege engines. But still, full control of another is almost impossible to maintain if both sides are open

to it."

"Meaning that if Maria is to control me she would need my consent?" Lidia asked and Copla nodded.

"And if you want, you can try to take her mind as well. Your soldiers dying in the fields between your minds don't hurt you. They aren't physical manifestations so don't worry about beating one another. You don't do any real or lasting damage," Copla said.

"So... can we begin?" Maria asked and Copla nodded.

The two girls turned and looked each other in the eyes, Maria's light brown matching Lidia's darker brown. Maria reached out brushed against Lidia's mind. The young priestess quickly learned how to reach back and soon Copla watched as sweat rolled down their foreheads in response to their struggle with one another.

Were he less afraid of the effects of mind melding he might have found amusement in it, pride even, but as he watched all he saw was the same look of determination that another, in the past, had known. And it tore at his heart.

As he watched he saw them staring at each other with eyes that didn't really see. Their minds at battle, the two women couldn't physically see anything. Or if they could then they were skilled beyond their years.

The ghosts followed Benny as he stalked forward, his eyes closed, his ears open. The undead groaned before they attacked so he was rarely caught unawares anymore. But he had learned in the first week of struggling that one zombie moan could attract another undead. And when that zombie heard a groan it would issue its own groan.

The chain could stretch for hours and lead to a warrior not receiving any sleep for hours due to well placed paranoia. The snow at his feet was thick and he could feel a blizzard on its way. He wasn't sure if he was going insane or achieving a new level of sanity, not that the two things weren't the same, with his new senses so he decided not to think about it.

The new senses served their purpose and he didn't argue with the newfound ability. His fingers fell to his blades and he stopped walking. The crunch of snow beneath his feet ceased and his hearing stretched even further. Then he heard it.

Soft breathing.

It wasn't undead.

Silent as a shadow, Benny crept towards the noise. Were he not so desperate for silence his stomach might have groaned with hunger but even his organs seemed to acquiesce his need for stealth. His ears had found the animal's general direction but it was his eyes that located its exact spot. He licked his lips at the sight of a full grown deer, a bit malnourished but strong enough looking.

He looked down at his weapons, a pair of blades, and realized that a single throw might not kill the majestic animal. He was hardly about to risk his dirk in a risky attempt to kill the deer with one strike. He knew his skills well and recognized the speed difference, even over distance, between himself and this animal. His mind, as he considered the deer, was unclouded by emotions and thought critically only.

Thus he crept forward, suddenly the silent hunter, with his blades unsheathed as if by magic. The deer's ears might have perked up but it didn't notice him specifically. It didn't turn its head so Benny could sneak up on it, his eyes narrowed in concentration. He was only five feet from it when it finally turned to look in his direction.

It was too late.

The deer sprang forward, trying to escape the reach of his blades but he was too quick and his weapons gave him extra reach. His blades bit into the animal, rendering its back two legs immobile, but he didn't slow. Quickly, mercifully, unemotionally, he slashed at the deer's head, ending its life in a single stroke of his short sword.

Benny looked at the dead animal, its red blood staining the snow, and silently thanked whatever god or goddess that might be listening for his bounty. Then he considered the deer. He looked down at it and wondered at its lot in life. Emotions threatened to resurface.

A figure appeared in front of him.

"It is a simple beast, spare no thought on it," Silo's specter said and Benny nodded. No thought could be spared on anything.

The young man lifted the deer and quickly shouldered it. He was moving before long, leaving the image of Silo behind. He didn't notice the frown on the specter, as Silo fought to wrest control of himself from the wraith, or the look of regret in his eyes.

Benny looked down at the corpse of the deer. Its still open eyes stared into his soul at that moment and thought threatened to resurface. Emotions bubbled just below the surface.

"I'm thinking you will need the strength to kill our murderer," a familiar voice said from behind and Benny felt his eyes grow wet and warm. But he felt nothing in his heart, nothing in his chest, at the moment. He couldn't feel anything, it seemed, or at least nothing that didn't happen in the physical world.

"I will need the strength," Benny said softly.

"I'm thinking gathering fire wood would take too much strength," the voice said again and a warm drop of salty liquid flowed down the warrior's face.

Alone in a cruel world, Benny stepped forward and sliced the deer open. He felt himself drinking the blood, eating the meat, but didn't remember making any actual decisions. He felt himself fill with rage, the only emotion he dare let manifest, and he felt his body fill with strength once again. He felt himself growl and heard his heart pound as he devoured raw meat.

When Benny looked up his eyes were filled with naught but brutality.

Night fell and only rage left the cave. Nearly half the deer was eaten, the first meal of a warrior in a week, but with hunger defeated a new thirst rose.

Blades still sheathed, but ready to be unsheathed at any moment, Benny started off. He heard sounds in the distance that called to him, that promised the release of violence. He heard the call of a fight and knew that no noise out in this barren world of snow and death would be anything but a call to battle.

He sprinted for miles, covering time at a pace that was wrought of only rage. His eyes burned with tears but he didn't really feel it, he only noticed it. He didn't bother wipe the salty liquid from his stung eyes.

"Go to it," he heard a friend's voice say to the side.

"Kill them."

"End them."

"Eat them."

The last one might have given Benny pause but it was no longer Benny. It was rage, the only thing left in him, the thing that itched for a battle. The thing that thirst for blood. The thing that found the noise. A light ahead indicated the end of his run.

"Hide inside," a man cried, "Hide inside!" His crude spear dug into a zombie's head, killing it. He didn't bother look back to his family, two small boys, a daughter and a mother, for he knew they were following his orders. Across from him, guarding the other entrance, was the last member of their family, a young man that was the man's son.

"Father!" the daughter cried out in terror but the man couldn't look back. He was fighting to defend them. A grunt from behind did, however, force his attention. He saw his other son fall and the man knew true regret. He'd had his chance to escape, to take his family and flee to Sprinkleberry, but

the rumors of undead legions marching through the forest, slaughtering people, had been ignored. He was not a superstitious man and the thought that the gods might be angry hadn't impressed him.

But now, as his little house was surrounded, as his family was trapped, he knew he'd been a fool.

He whipped around just in time to see his son fall under the weight of three undead. They'd pushed through a small opening that had been opened at some point in the past, some family accident. He didn't remember how at that moment. All he could see was his eldest son, who hadn't lived even a score of years, scream in pain at a bite.

"No," the man gasped. "No!" but his denial meant nothing to the undead, who began to eat the young man. The father rushed forward, butting at them with the back of his spear, but he was grabbed from behind. The man went down hard, the grip around his ankle too solid to give even an inch, and was forced to watch as a zombie ate his son's throat out.

The gurgling of the boy filled the man's mouth in bile. He felt a mouth bite into his shoulder but it meant nothing to him at that moment. His younger family, and wife, hid inside a small bunker-like structure that had been built into the ground years before they'd moved there. He tried to rationalize his decision to stay in that moment and it drove him insane.

But insanity finds no lasting hold in those who are dead.

The undead pounded on the door of the underground bunker and the young girl wept.

The two sons fought tears as well but they were hardly successful. The mother, who heard the screams of her dying son, could only hold them and pray that somehow her mind had tricked her. She pleaded with any god that might listen to her pleading.

Above they heard a scream of rage, such a scream that filled them with terror, which was followed by thumping unlike before. They heard growls and grunts of rage, all suppressed by the wood that served as a door, which, if pulled was easily opened.

The struggle lasted for a minute or two then stopped. Tension filled the room and the woman wondered if somehow a god had sent them a savior. She hoped, prayed more so, that they came back in the form of her son and husband. She crept forward, her children behind her, still crying.

She reached for the wood and slowly pulled it open. She saw the corpse of her husband and her heart almost stopped in her chest. Above him she saw a form, panting and slouched, blades raised to the side in his grip, his shoulders hunched over slightly. When she opened it further she saw her son laying, his eyes wide in his death.

"Wh-who are y-you?" she asked, barely able to speak past the lump in her throat, and the man turned on her. One look in his eyes and she flinched, immediately filled with terror by the dark brown orbs, so filled with pain and anger.

"You saved us," the woman said, though it was more of a question. The young man, Rage, stepped forward towards her.

"No," the woman gasped, seeing her future in his eyes, "Please, no. I have childr-" the rest of her words came out as a gurgle, for Rage's sword shot forward, slashing her throat. Rage didn't think at that time, only acted. He didn't feel at that time, only killed.

His eyes shrouded by a thin layer of denial, he stepped forward and slashed his blades only three times more. Then he turned on the woman, whose dead eyes stared at him in horror, and felt the echo of an emotion... grief.

Then rage sparked as a voice whispered in his ear, "We were taken from you," and his blades cut the air and a dead body.

The small house smelled of dead and decaying flesh. Benny's eyes cracked open and close again. Then they popped fully open. Red filled his vision. He realized quickly that he wasn't suffering from a visual disorder for the walls were covered in blood. He looked down to his own hands, covered in blood, then felt liquid rolling down his face. Beyond them he saw a young girl, dead, her dark eyes

empty as she stared at him.

He lifted a hand, with a clothe, and rubbed it across his mouth. The clothe came away stained. Blood red.

Benny looked around in terror, revulsion filling his mouth with bile, and when he saw the stomach of a woman ripped open he gagged. He turned to the side and vomitted, trying to expel all of the blood from his system, trying to purify himself.

But it didn't happen. He couldn't get it out of him.

He looked around in terror again. He felt bile building again.

Instead of facing himself he turned and ran, sprinting away from the house, trying to rationalize who he was, trying to understand what could have happened.

He sprinted.

"What have you done?" he heard a friend say.

"What have you done?"

"You did this!"

"Murderer!"

"Killer!"

Monster.

## Chapter Eighteen:

Dean traveled in the form of smoke, as he'd been taught by past companions. Vampires both, Bert and Tenebris had been among the most powerful beings he'd ever meant. They still might be, he mumbled to himself, for they were still alive as far as he was concerned. He just hadn't seen them in close to eight years, long enough in their life styles to consider one dead.

Especially since they were often involved in reality-changing, multiverse shaking events. He, among that group, in that context, was the least powerful of the trio when it came to brute powerful. He could beat them, he and others had thought, if he was allowed time to prepare and could beat them with his superior tactics.

Then again Tenebris was centuries old and surely knowledge had been gained over that time. He sighed as he considered times in the past. Chelsey, a powerful, if not as powerful as Bert or Tenebris, who could move things with her mind. It wasn't magic that fueled her like Dean, for he, too, had that same ability, but rather she used some innate ability that was considered impossible by many studies made by others in the library of ages.

He remembered fondly, thinking back to her bright blue eyes that were filled with a level of understanding that still dumbfounded him. He was wondering where she might be at this time, somewhere in the multiverse saving people, he hoped, when he heard screams.

He reached out with his mind and saw half a dozen figures formed of a light green hazy haze, their dark red skeletons easily visible in him. The natural world around him was comprised of shades of light and dark grays. Only things comprised of arcane magic were different colors. The dark red showed that intense amounts of emotion filled the magic that fueled the beasts. The light, almost transparent green made it obvious these creatures were of ghost-like origin.

His vision, made sensitive to disturbances in the natural weave of magical powers in this universe, allowed him to see even things such as these, which were invisible to the carnal eye. And even as he considered them his mind was whirling as he analyzed not only what they were but also how he might defeat them.

Small red pulses appeared all around the preta, which he recognized as a rare and deadly, if simple, type of ghost. He considered that they might be dead only because of their simplicity. They killed in such a way that was brutally simple and hard to counter if one wasn't expecting it. Thus as he considered his not so small list of spells he wondered if he was prepared to take on the deadly beings.

He quickly realized that he didn't really have a choice. The preta spread by forcing their wrong and perverse deaths upon another. That person, in turn, felt wronged by the terrible death and moved to spread their own misery upon another. They were a virus, unthinking and constantly spreading, only seeking to convert or destroy.

His thoughts seemed to get away from him as he finally selected a single avenue of power to send at the preta. Breathing in, he began to move his arms in the needed ways, bringing about the power. He knew he didn't really need to chant or to wave his arms but it helped him to steady his concentration. And at this time in his life he felt that he should direct his spell perfectly.

He felt his chest beginning to burn as magical energy built up inside it and his eyes lit up with a fiery orange.

"Get out of my way!" He roared, his voice filled with magical suggestion that the people under attack couldn't ignore. The preta were ghosts and could avoid all but few attacks. But fire was constant and destroyed all if applied in the right way: Thus he sent the flames forward in another form. The flames, light green and translucent, traveled in the same phase of reality as the ghosts and it hit them.

The people really hadn't needed to move, as he could attack ghostly things with ghostly attacks that didn't hurt carnal things, but he needed to be sure that even if his spell went wrong he wouldn't inadvertently hurt anyone.

The preta howled in pain and many of them were destroyed. But the last two, a third of the original number, turned on him and released an otherworldly wail. They charged forward, their ghostly matter floating through the air at their will, and beamed their mental will at the wizard.

Dean felt their assault and was surprised by it. He could feel all the pain the preta had felt and it nearly consumed him. Immediately he recoiled but, after a wince and a grunt, he regained his ground. A tide of despair threatened to take over his mind but his own stubborn will held it at length.

Then he began to push back, sending waves of power down the link between himself and the preta. The ghost-kin wailed in pain again, this time shocked to the point that they'd lost their defenses because they'd never been attacked by a creature. Most only held their ground while the preta wasted themselves in an attempt to overwhelm the mind. Instead Dean pushed back and destroyed one initially.

But suddenly the preta was backed by more than its own mind.

Miles away, up high in the mountain, Mlaster looked away from the struggle between his zombies and Walston's southern wall. He growled in anger and sent forth his will, backing the preta with his own willpower.

But he didn't overwhelm this mind like he'd expected. Suddenly the wraith was enraged and it added its own willpower to the battle.

So Dean fought the preta, the clever mercenary and the wraith. They sat at stalemate, Dean's temples throbbing as he fought three fronts against dedicated enemies. But every second he began to realize the avenues of attack and he began to seal his mind from the assaults. Soon the trio would have to tear down well placed mental walls before they could even begin to engage Dean's mind.

And with the walls up he would be able to strike out at them with near abandon. So long as he wasn't so fully overwhelmed that his mind destroyed itself he would be able to take refuge behind the walls.

Mlaster, on one side, was backed by wraith and preta. Dean, on the other, was backed by his own experiences, by pain and agony wrought of years of struggle.

The two gritted their teeth, pushing back and forth. Finally the wraith focused only on it and its mental power flooded forward down the link with strength enough to destroy the beginnings of Dean's walls.

"Gods," Dean groaned as Mlaster, too, finally took all focus off of the zombies and put it all on the wizard. Dean realized the wraith was a powerful being, much more so than most of its kin, and that

the man it had joined was equally impressive in mental ability.

"You're... mine..." Dean growled. He pushed back, putting all his mental strength into it. Assuming the same analogy that Copla had put up, Dean and the wraith-man combination were sending their mental soldiers forth to meet at the middle, their weapons swinging hard. They fought with a zeal that was inspired only by desperation and the two forces groaned in agony.

Then Dean looked inside himself, finding images of Chelsea and Bert, of Tenebris and Maverick and pulled up an inner strength he'd only found a few times before. He closed his eyes all the way and pushed out.

The wraith put all its force in at the same time and suddenly a ringing sound filled the ears of both magical forces. And everything around them.

Maria, Lidia and Copla cried out in pain as the ringing filled their ears. Atop the walls of Walston men groaned, barely holding their feet as an overwhelming force of destruction slammed into their minds. Only Copla might have understood what was happening but at that moment he was struggling to keep his lunch in his stomach.

Tank and the villagers all cried out at the disturbance, which was enough to force many strong men to their knees and to knock several of the weaker people straight out.

King Jev and his advisors, as well as every soldier, citizen and child in Sprinkleberry, all tried to shield their suddenly bleeding ears from the pressure of the magical attack. The ringing, so high pitch, caused many horses to fall over, dead already.

Deabla, Aenigma and Eliza looked up. Aenigma's eyes were filled with worry while Eliza's were filled with fear.

"What is it?" Deabla asked, yelling to try and gain attention, but Aenigma paid him no heed.

"It is good we brought him," she said to herself, "If forces this powerful are to be traded then he will be needed sorely."

Eliza, who read her lips, nodded. She knew mind melding could lead to effects escaping the minds at battle if they were powerful enough but never had she seen enough power to effect anything beyond a few feet from her. She knew she was many miles from the battle because of the way it hit her. She didn't know how she knew, she just did.

Benny, still running from himself, tripped and fell to the ground but rolled to his feet, his blades unsheathed.

"You have to run!" Silo said.

"We've been forced to say what we've said," Melinda yelled.

"Get away!" Giles shouted.

"My friend, you must get away. The enemy you fight is too mu-" Mave was cut off as the ringing ceased.

Dean fell forward as his mental push ended. His body, sensing the effort, launched itself forward to try and compensate for the sudden lack of returning force. Dean lay on the ground for several seconds, stunned, then brought a hand up to his nose. Blood fell rolled down his lips.

"Wh-who are you?" a man asked from the side. His ears were covered in blood as well.

"Did we? Did... we do that?" Dean asked himself more than anyone else. As soon as he saw the people all standing up off the ground as well he realized that the power he'd been putting out could have matched anything he'd ever done before.

*What are we fighting?* He wondered to himself. Suddenly he was very worried.

Many minutes passed in silence as Dean collected himself.

"Come with me," he ordered, "If you want to get to Walston."

"Why should we?" Ashe asked and Dean turned on her. His eyes glowed orange and he lifted his hands, conjuring fire in his palms. Ashe's blades were unsheathed.

"I saw an attack just now. What did you do?" Ashe asked, suspicious of him. The preta were gone but she'd never seen more than one or two. The presence of six or more might have produced something physical; she truly didn't know.

"I was defending you from a wraith, from something much more powerful than anything you know," Dean responded, "Now I suggest you follow me. I can transport you to Walston if you wish."

Ashe regarded him silently for several seconds. Then, realizing she hardly had a choice in the matter, reluctantly nodded.

"Alright."

Dean quickly transferred the people to Walston then, without a word, disappeared back to the Library of Ages.

"Dean?" Maverick asked when Dean appeared.

"I am here," Dean responded and the man smiled. His smile disappeared quickly.

"You're hurt?" concern was evident in Maverick's voice.

"I was fighting with something. I require assistance in something. That realm will be the home to something truly terrible if we don't stop it," Dean said, "And they need soldiers to fight the grunts while the rest of their heroes take on the real bad guy."

"Why don't you simply destroy it?" Maverick asked, his eyes knowing.

"You know as well as I," Dean responded, "Each realm needs its champions. And sacrifices must be made for these champions to rise. Were I to simply go in fighting the wraith then we would be disrupting some plan of the gods or another. Each hero from each realm might save all of the others some day."

"I am proud," Maverick smiled.

"I require help," Dean reiterated and Maverick nodded, "Who?"

"Chelsey," Dean said.

"She is a difficult one to control in matters that Bert can't be involved with," Maverick responded and Dean nodded.

"I need someone who can move as easily as I can," Dean said, "I need someone who can move things like I can."

"Chelsey is the only one I can truly think of, at this time at least," Maverick teased at the end. The man was eternal, it seemed, and part of time. His eyes seemed to see everything, what will be and what was, what could be and what might have been, and as Dean looked into the dark orbs he wondered at the man's mortality.

*Am I standing next to a God?* Dean often thought to himself.

"I will call for Chelsey. Now you should go back to this world. Surely there will be those that need assistance," Maverick said and Dean wondered if the man already knew they needed him. Then, as he considered their lifestyle, it wouldn't be unheard of for a major battle to be continuing even as they spoke.

Wombly's crossbow had been clicked into position minutes before. Now she sat, ready for any threatening movement. Some two hundred men and women were equally intense behind her. They, too, were vigilant.

But nothing showed itself. The ringing from a few moments before had terrified them, filling them with fears of boozers attacking or of the hordes of undead pouring out of the forest around them. She finally decided it long enough for them to begin moving again. Not a person disagreed. The fact

that she'd made through the blizzard had impressed the men and women enough to follow her orders.

Her skill with bow and blade had also made an impression, especially when they were attacked by a small group of zombies. She and her crossbow had claimed a full half of the undead's numbers. Now, depending fully on her, they'd left the false security of their homes and trekked through the snow to refuge in the city of Walston.

"Hey," a voice said from behind and Wombly turned to look at the source. He was a young man, about her age, with curly hair that stood up slightly. His skin was light and his eyes blue. As they made eye contact she noted a deep intelligence behind the light blue orbs; but more than that she saw a sense of understanding that had only ever been seen in Tank's eyes. But this was different.

"Hi," Wombly said softly, the gaze of her brown eyes fully enthralled by the soft blue orbs.

"Hi," she repeated and the man smiled.

"I think we already said that," he said and she blushed, "Might be dull but I'm thorough."

The man smiled, "I'm Carser. You're Wombly, aren't you?"

"Y-you know me?" Wombly stuttered in response, shocked that anyone out here would have heard of her. Carser smiled and lifted a crossbow, "You've made your impression on the world around Sprinkleberry."

Wombly smiled with recognition of her design.

"I'm glad to be of assistance."

"I'm sure you aren't dull," Carser said seemingly randomly many minutes later. He and Wombly had walked side by side, leading the disheveled pack of humans with the same urgency as before, only now there was a distraction in the form of tension between them.

"What? Oh... I was just making a joke..." Wombly found herself without her usual wit. She couldn't help but feel overwhelmed by his presence, as if he, in himself, was a source of joy for her.

"Well, I figured that. But I don't really think you're dull, else I wouldn't be here," Carser said, then his eyes widened, "Not that I wouldn't be here if you were boring. You're very attractive, in a way that is not normal. Not to say that you're not normal, because I'm sure you are... but then you aren't normal because you're special, so you aren't normal but that's good, so not normal in a good way.

"But I'm not here jsut because you're attractive either, if that's what you think..." Carser spoke for many minutes, his dialogue following his stream of consciousness. Wombly listened all the while, enthralled by the openness of his mind as he floated down his mental path. Somehow, minutes later, he got to a new topic that gained her attention.

"And I don't mean that your friends being male, like Tank and Tuff and all them, is a bad thing but I don't really know how most guys might feel about it... Not saying that I'm not like most guys but I'm really not, but I guess that you don't really know me so I must seem similar to most guys, so, like, I don't really know how to explain who I am to you."

As he spoke Wombly wondered how far their tale had reached. He seemed to have a general understanding of their relationships, even the painful and convoluted one between Tank and Maria. She could only wonder how that might have happened.

She zoned back right as he stopped.

"So what do you think?" Carser asked.

"About what?" Wombly felt some embarrassment.

"Well I think that the Walstonian Boom-boys' aim could be improved by lowering the amount of stuff they were shooting. Maybe if someone narrowed the barrel of their... barrels, then they could put a small chunk of metal and put some boom powder in the back of the gun. Maybe flip a switch and it lights the power, shooting the chunk out," Carser smiled as he finished.

"What do you think?"

"I... I think that's smart. But we'd have to make all the pieces of metal the same size or their aim would be changed with every shot," Wombly said.

"That'd be the easy part. Building it would be hard. Unless you can get Tank to make it for you," Carser said and Wombly smiled.

"If he thought it could work in any way, shape or form he'd help," she said.

"Well then," Carser said, "I'm glad we agree. Because you're really smart. But I'm not saying that even if you weren't smart I wouldn't want to agree with you. I just value your opinion a lot because you're so smart. But I'd still value it if I didn't know just how smart you are..."

Wombly listened, genuinely entertained and appreciative of his rambling as they walked in disturbing times. It was the first time in many weeks that she'd smiled without fear that it'd be taken away in moments by the ever-present specter of death.

As that thought passed through her mind she couldn't help but wonder how her friends were doing.

But his stream-of-consciousness speaking stole the stress from her mind and she couldn't help but feel comforted by him.

## Chapter Nineteen:

Benny looked up from the graves. He'd spent the entire night digging them and dragging the partially devoured bodies to them. Now that he was done, he vomitted yet again. The pangs of guilt, regret and disgust at himself were too powerful for him to resist. Now that he'd finished the grave digging and placing, he was left with nothing.

Nothing.

The holes in the ground, filled with dirt and bodies, seemed to simple, so... empty to him. So useless. So weak.

How could he, the murderer and eater of the family, ever hope that this had been enough to make it up to the family. But in his heart he knew he'd never make it up. As he looked down at the mud and snow, much of it red-brown from old blood, he fell to his knees as he felt the bile raise yet again.

"You murdered them," Silo's voice sounded.

"It was all you," Giles whispered.

"You are a murderer," Melinda said.

"You are a monster," Mave accused.

Benny tried to deny them but found no foundation for his arguments. He was beaten by his actions and their accusations. He was beaten. He wanted to curl up and die, to lay down and let himself starve to death. He wanted to end it. He felt his fingers reach around and grip the hilt of his blade and knew it was possible to finish it all. One stab would be all it took.

One cut could end it all. End the pain. End the suffering. End the shame.

But as he looked at the graves, still on his knees, he knew he wasn't brave enough to do that.

"Coward," Mave spat, "You are a monster and a coward."

"I am."

"You'd end it if you were smart," Silo said.

"You'd end it if you were good," Melinda said and Giles chuckled.

"He's never, and never will be, good," the man's words stung Benny more than anything.

He lifted his blade and his wrist, determined that if he was going to die it would be as slow and painful as he could make it. He wouldn't let himself off easy. He wasn't a coward. He felt the bile rise against and retched, spraying stomach acid onto the ground, for that was all he had left in him.

He lifted the blade to his chest, deciding against the slow death. He'd end it, he knew, because he was more than they thought he was. He was a monster but he wasn't a coward. He closed his eyes and the salty liquid stung his eyes. His numb fingers gripped the hilt of his dirk tighter and he could almost feel the sharp blade point through his leather armor.

He sucked breath in, preparing himself for death. He was ready. He began to push and felt the

blade part the top layer of leather that comprised his armor. The second layer was broken. Then the third. He felt the cold, metal, sharp tip of the blade on his chest, over his heart. He felt the tears, somehow getting through his closed eyes, rolling down his face in beads of salty liquid. He felt the blade beginning to dig into him, felt the cold metal part the flesh, felt damnation...

"Hi."

Hi?... *Hi?*... The word didn't immediately process in his mind. Hi... Hi? Hi. He was so ready to die at that moment that the word held no meaning, that the sound, considered a way of communication by the still living, meant nothing. But as his brain functioned past his grief and pain, past his rage and shame, he realized he'd heard a voice.

Benny's eyes opened and he turned to see a young girl.

"Hi," she said again.

"W-what?" Benny asked.

"Hi," the young girl said again. She had dark skin and her hair was braided behind her head. She wore a dark brown, tight coat, thick and comfy pants and large boots. She seemed to have no weapons. No other way of surviving.

"Hi," she said again, "My name's Selie. What's your name?"

*You used to love me.*

*I did.*

*I miss you so much.*

*You do.*

*Do you miss me?*

*I did.*

*Did?*

*I am always here now. I cannot miss what I always have.*

*Oh.*

*Mm.*

Copla sat in silence, his eyes shut, sweat wetting his brow as he felt himself being torn in two.

*I love you.*

*You do.*

*Do you?*

*I did.*

*Why? Why are you always saying it in the past tense?*

*Because.*

*That's not an answer. Please, tell me.*

*I can't.*

*Can't?*

*It just can't happen. I can't do it. Not today.*

Copla's eyes burst open. He felt a hot rage.

"You can't tell me?" He snarled. Maria and Lidia looked over, eyes wide, concern and questions in their eyes.

"Copla?" Maria asked, "I'll tell you anything you want to know..."

"I... was having a bad dream," the heavy wizard responded. Nervously, he lifted an arm and wiped off his brow.

*Some dream...* Maria thought to herself. She found it strange that she was worrying so much for him. And even more strangely, she was trying to figure out what was bothering him.

Before these last few years she'd never really known the feeling. Now that she had it it was both a gift and a curse. Suddenly she could 'see' things from other peoples perspective, which made it easier for her to work with others and to guess what they were doing. But it was double edged sword, for she now felt strongly for others in ways she'd never felt before. She shared in grief, to a degree, but also in joy. And as she looked at Copla she felt genuinely sorry for him.

"I'm just tired," Copla said weakly, "I think I'm going to retire to more private quarters."

He stood and shuffled away, his brow still filled with sweat. Maria tried to look from his point of view, to try and see how he feels about things, but she wasn't good at it yet and she couldn't really find a point of reference and was left feeling like a child with a broken flashlight in a dark room.

She sighed and turned to Lidia, who was chuckling to herself as she read the scroll.

"What is it?" Maria asked and Lidia continued her chuckle, "Think he's got a chicken to choke?"

Maria scowled, suppressing a stupid grin, and shook her head.

"Seriously," Maria said, "I'm worried about him." Lidia raised an eye brow.

"That's new," the priestess didn't even look up from her scroll.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Maria asked, offended, even though she knew the answer to come.

"It means that you used to be a cold hearted bitch." Maria just glared at Lidia.

"It's okay though. Now you're a warm hearted bitch." The priestess finally looked up at Maria, who was working hard to suppress yet another grin.

"Fine," Lidia relented, "I'm just messing with you. It's just you aren't usually worried about others and now that you are you've gotten more... annoying."

"Annoying?" Maria protested loudly, "Annoying? You're the annoying one! Always reading your scrolls and saying sarcastic jibes!"

"Oh I'm annoying?" Lidia asked and she cracked a grin that mirrored Maria's. The two young women sat in silence for several moments. Lidia began to read again.

"I think he mind melded with someone and something bad happened," Maria said and Lidia looked up from her scroll again.

"What are you a mind reader?" Lidia's sarcasm didn't go unnoticed.

"What do you mean?"

"He's been deadset against the thought of you learning to mind meld since day one. It seems pretty obvious that he'd have something against it that was more than just a passing distate. Nobody gets that upset about something that hasn't hurt them pretty bad," the priestess looked down to her scroll once she was done and Maria knew she was left to wonder at her friend's misfortune.

As she considered everything she knew about Copla she could only sigh with regret. He'd been hurt. But what had caused it was beyond her knowledge at that time.

Jeffy's eyes opened. He looked to the side, trying to figure out where he was. It took several minutes for his eyes to adapt and he saw red chains sliding off his body. He looked to the side and felt relief. His soldiers were there. But all relief fled at the sight of similar red chains, all appearing to made of magic, wrapped around them as well.

Then they slid off. He and his men fell to their knees. The others seemed to be gaining consciousness just then. Their weapons and armor were still there, they were still well fed, still healthy in all ways visible. But when he looked up he saw the sky. It had to be midwinter. They lay in a cave, the mouth of it immediately in front of them.

His mind was still adapting when he felt hands grab him from the front of his armor and lifted him up, off the ground. He tried to focus when he heard words.

"Can you stand? Can you stand?"

"I think... yes," Jeffy felt himself say.

"You need to run with us," the voice said. Jeffy's eyes fully adapted and he saw his men being

treated the same way. The men lifting them were barbarians, strong and tall, each one of them clothed in winter armor. They held weapons, used but still well-kept, of all sorts. Jeffy noted several kingdom weapons.

These men were mountain warriors but they were armed with weapons from Sprinkleberry and the rest of the Kingdom.

"How much time has passed?" Jeffy asked himself and the man who'd held him raised an eye brow.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I... I don't know. Just forget it," the soldier said and the man nodded, "Then follow us if you want to live."

The soldiers and Jeffy were dragged along as undead followed in attack. They were running on the side of the mountain. Jeffy didn't know where he was but he could chance a guess at the Lightning Chain. He wasn't sure what was happening but he could guess the fire had something to do with it. He wasn't sure exactly what to do but he figured running was as good as any option at that time.

"What's your name?" the little girl said again.

"S-selie?" Benny asked and she smiled, "No, silly, that's my name." At that moment the pure innocence in her nearly broke him.

"My name's... my name is Benny," the young man said and Selie smiled. "I'm glad to meet you..." Selie's voice cracked on the last word. "I'm so glad to meet you. So glad... I'm scared... so scared and I don't know what to do," tears filled her eyes and Benny felt his heart stop in his chest.

"I don't want to die out here," Selie said quietly. She fell to her knees, weeping. "I don't want to die." She repeated the words over and over again, her eyes red and sad, her shoulders bobbing up and down as she sobbed.

"Please... I don't want to die," Selie looked up at him and he couldn't help himself as he moved towards her, bringing her close to his body. She wrapped her arms around him and they stood, for many minutes, she taking comfort in the stability of his body and he trying to figure out who he was.

"I will get you out of here," Benny said quietly, "I promise."

## Part Three: Beginning of the End

### Chapter Twenty:

Tuff considered the scene before him. The implications were disturbing. Gore lay, scattered across the ground, a white canvas of snow painted red with the blood of the villagers. Every village he'd gone to had been slaughtered, much like this one, and that thought disturbed him more than a little.

He couldn't help but fear that their enemy had known what they were going to do and sought to cut them off. He wondered how everyone else was doing. But more than anything he was prepared to fight whatever it was that was killing all of these people. His shield was looped on his arm and his sword was unstrapped in its sheath.

He heard a low growl and felt his fingers grip the hilt of his blade. The warrior crouched, ready for battle, when a shrill screech filled the air, splitting the air with its sound. He felt his ears beginning to bleed as the screech continued. His head burned as time continued on, then it stopped.

In front of him stood perhaps three dozen warriors. They all stood at the ready, their eyes wide, their weapons ready to be used. Each man glared at Tuff, for several seconds, then they spoke in an alien language.

"What?" Tuff asked as the man continued. He motioned with his hands but none of his gestures meant anything to Tuff. Then the man's hand turned to a fist and Tuff realized what that meant. A large warrior, presumably their leader, stepped forward, bringing a strangely colored mace across his chest.

The men wore little but some leather armor but seemed not at all uncomfortable with the cold.

Tuff stood at the ready, his eyes narrow, his blade unsheathed. The man bellowed some sort of challenge and began to rush forward, his eyes aflame with a fiery light. Surprisingly fast for his size, the man covered the ground between himself and Tuff faster than the warrior could have anticipated.

Tuff barely got his shield up in the way when the man's mace swung across. The weapon, heavier than it looked, slammed into Tuff and nearly knocked him to the ground. Tuff stared at the man, suddenly more than a little unsure of his own strength, and dodged another heavy strike. The man was strong and fast but as the fight continued, the man swinging and Tuff barely escaping what seemed to be a certain K.O. hit, the large warrior began to slow.

Tuff realized his enemy had very little stamina and knew that the longer the fight lasted the slower his enemy would be. Pretty soon the man's mace swung through the air with more help from gravity than his own strength. Tuff was about to take his advantage when suddenly both of them were lifted off the ground by some force.

Both warriors looked to the side to see two hundred more people. The majority of them were clothed like the mysterious warriors. In front of the people stood a short man, his dark eyes filled with magical power, his brown robe billowing in magically made wind.

"Stop!" Dean shouted in a tone that even the foreigner understood. "Your name is Tuff, right?"

Tuff nodded, alarmed that he was still floating in the air.

"You will take these people with you to Walston," Dean said then he handed Tuff a small object. "It's called a pill. Swallow it and you'll understand them and they'll understand you."

"Why should I trust you?" Tuff asked through clenched teeth.

"I could rip your heart out of your chest if I wanted," Dean responded.

"That's hardly enough to gain trust..." Tuff's dry response brought a laugh from Dean.

"You should trust me because my associates are working with King Jev to solve this problem for you," the young man said. Dean's still narrow eyes widened a bit as distrust began to fade.

"Alright. Now... who are these guys?" Tuff asked and Dean shrugged.

"Does that really matter?"

"If I'm going to be their liaison to the new world, then yeah, it does." Dean sighed.

"I rescued them from a dying planet. I could have saved the planet, maybe, but the cost would have been many times larger than them just fleeing it. They were barely surviving on their world, anyway, though that in itself is impressive. On their world shadows are real and they can reach out and steal the life force of humans pretty easily. These guys must have been pretty tricky to be able to take on the dark beings that inhabited their world," the small man explained.

"Not much for stamina," Tuff remarked sarcastically and Dean chuckled. The mysterious people all whispered among themselves, staring at the native of this new world, who'd fought for many minutes with no sign of weariness. Their large warrior panted, his mace sliding along the ground.

"No chance of escape on their world. Either fight or die," Dean said quietly. He handed the pill over to Tuff, who eyed it suspiciously. Reluctantly, the warrior lifted the pill and swallowed it. It tasted strange in his mouth and he felt unused to swallowing something that wasn't for energy in the future but he got past it, the smooth capsule sliding down his throat easily.

Suddenly their whispers became words that he understood and he could hear the fear in their dialect. Tuff looked over.

"You fought mightily. More so than most people in all our world," Tuff said to the large and proud chieftan, recently shamed by near defeat.

The man nodded his head, "The same to you," the man said in his own language. It felt strange to Tuff, listening and understanding words that weren't really words to him, and even stranger to speak with the same unlearned language.

"Your world and mine are different. Here battles will last hours and the victor is he who has the longest stamina as well as the strongest strike and fastest movements," Tuff smiled as he spoke, "With

us endurance means a lot. But fear not, for it comes quickly, if not easily."

"Hours?" a man said in disbelief, "What shadows attack you?"

"Rarely do shadows attack us," Tuff responded. He was about to turn and speak to Dean when he noticed the man was gone.

"Well," Tuff said with a sigh, "I guess we're going to our city of Walston."

"City?" The chieftan asked.

"A... large group of homes?" Tuff suggested and the man's head tilted to the side in curiosity.

"This is going to be a long walk," Tuff sighed to himself, speaking his normal language. In the back of his mind, no matter the mirth he considered, he still wondered at the slaughtering of the villagers.

Dean was exhausted. Plane shifting was hard enough when alone, much less with another person. He sighed to himself. This was going to be a long process. He'd found the smallest world with humans on it that he could. The entire planet, which was larger than the planet of his home verse, had been home to only a couple hundred humans.

He was lying when he said their world was dead. But it might as well have been for them. The shadows on their world were growing stronger and would have wiped them out soon enough. He was sure that he and a few of his companions could have purged the area for the people's to live in, but the shadows would have simply reached back into that area.

Magical power was the only real way to kill large numbers of shadows. So with the dull sun that 'lit' their world, the men couldn't have survived much longer. The simple fact that they'd been born was a testament to their luck. But to Dean, who'd seen battles more intense and filled with more power than almost any other being in the multiverse, luck wasn't a dependable factor. In his mind, he'd saved them.

Wombly and Carser still spoke when suddenly a low growl filled the air. Wombly's crossbow was raised immediately and Carser stepped behind her, lifting his own crossbow. Both realized they were in a better shooting position if she, the more experienced group fighter, was in front. Carser, a 'rookie' in battle, would be better off being able to see her as they fought.

Then a loud screeching filled the air. Both of them tensed up as the people behind them screamed out in pain. Then a young woman appeared. She had blond hair, bright blue eyes, and an innocent manner that threw them off. The screech ended with her appearance.

"Who are you?" Wombly called out.

"You are going to Walston?" the young woman asked and Wombly re-aimed her crossbow.

"Who are you?"

"A friend of the Kingdom, are you going to Walston?" the woman seemed to struggle for several seconds. Wombly nodded and she sighed.

"Thank the gods," she said, then she warned, "Your ears are about to hurt." The screeching filled the air again, for longer this time, and Carser pulled the trigger of his crossbow, thinking the woman to be casting a spell. The woman swatted in the general direction of the bolt and it flew to the side. She gave the man an annoyed look and he blushed.

Then the screaming stopped and suddenly there were about five hundred people. Many of them weren't armed but at least two hundred were. The warriors stared at the villagers, who numbered maybe two hundred.

"Oh boy," Wombly muttered.

"Bring these people to Walston," the woman ordered.

"Who are you?" Wombly asked a third time.

"You remind me of another friend," the woman smiled, "She was nice... my name is Chelsey. Dean and King Jev will both vouch for me if you need it." Wombly didn't recognize Dean's name but she knew of King Jev and was in no place to deny this woman and the people she'd brought with her.

Then Chelsey reached out with a hand.

"Take this pill," a small capsule floated into Wombly's hand, "It will help you to understand them."

"What is that?" Carser asked but Wombly, seeing something in Chelsey that was worth trusting, immediately deduced its function and put it to her mouth. She swallowed it and suddenly the words of the mysterious peoples made sense. She understood them!

"Woah!" Wombly said, delighted. "What is this?"

"Something built on a world far from here," Chelsey said, "And the only reason I brought it is because these people are going to Walston with you. Their own world was casting them out as misfits because of birthmarks. So I bring them to you. They are a fierce people who will serve if they are given a fair chance at life."

"I'm sure they will be appreciated," Wombly said and Chelsey smiled.

"I hope so," then a screeching filled the air for a second and the young woman was gone. Wombly marveled at the magical power. Then she turned to the people.

"You are new to our world," she said when she noticed they were staring at the snow in wonder, "And maybe to the cold."

"Cold is new. But your world seems similar enough," a woman said. She seemed to be the leader. "What is this... Walston?"

"It is a city of ours," Wombly said, "If you'd be willing, my world is in danger. We offer a fair chance a life worth living if you'll fight for it."

"Point us at this enemy," an older man said from the side, "And we'll smash them!"

Wombly considered these people and saw honesty in them. She smiled, glad that they were allowed to live in this world, especially if their last was about to destroy them.

"To Walston!" Wombly said excitedly.

Chelsey and Dean sat together in the library. Silence ruled as they both sat in deep thought, a deep stillness filling their manners. Neither really had anything to say. They knew what Dean proposed was risky, but it was worth the risk Dean had felt and Chelsey hadn't disagreed. The peoples of The Kingdom would need every body they could get if things turned out to be the way it seemed they would.

And they would need their main heroes on the mountain, not in the field, if true victory was to be found. A large portal, most likely to bring in something more deadly than anything they'd seen in a long time, was being produced. The two knew they could move in to destroy it but the heroes of this world would never be realized if that happened.

And messing with other realms was always dangerous, as it threw the balance of the realm off. Often if they interrupted the natural flow it'd end in a major shift in the rules of that reality. Some realities, for example, couldn't handle magic being cast. Thus if magic was cast it changed all the rules and many people died as the planet shifted in response to new forces being at play.

What they were doing was risky but to take a direct roll in the events on this world was suicide, both for their realm and the realms around it. But they could change small things, or bring new players in. The problem wasn't the power to change it, it was finding the limit of what they could change.

Both knew that when truly powerful battles were being fought, where the power of the opposite sides were immense enough, their energies only added to the reaction and it wouldn't effect anything but that moment in time. Thus, if the fight became truly big enough, Dean and Chelsey could make a move and actually participate in killing the enemies.

It was the same concept that if two beings were fighting one another then a third being would make a big difference. But if ten beings were fighting another ten beings, one added being wouldn't cause as big a change. But Dean and Chelsey had the power of hundreds of beings. Thus if the enemy Tank and Wombly and Ashe and Tuff fought was powerful enough, like four hundred people fighting

another four hundred, then the two wizards could add their own strength to it without throwing it off.

Now, as they sat considering what they were doing, they could only hope that the heroes of this realm had would it took.

The traveling back too several days but when the groups made it back they found the pass still open. Grewslough and a group of people, outlanders who'd been brought by Chelsey, had kept the pass clear of snow. Ashe and her group arrived first. Soon after Tuff and his people got there. Wombly and her group followed behind closely.

Tank and his followers were the last to return. The pass was barely open and Grewslough was relieved to see they had made it, for as winter intensified it got harder and harder to fight the approach of the snow. Soon, all three thousand gained people made their way into Walston, where little had changed as snow built up.

The undead made several attempts at getting into the city. But it was a silent couple of months... off the mountain, at least.

## **Chapter Twenty One:**

Jeffy and his men were all traveling together. As one they turned with the Mountain dwellers in a counter. The undead, who'd tripped on a spell cast by the leader of the clan, a shaman named Rivnick, were quickly slaughtered but they were replaced almost immediately by more undead. The weapons, some metal, others erintium, a wood-like substance that grew far to the south. Some of the men had traded recently with some strange caravans.

Nearly two hundred warriors remained. It'd been four weeks since he and his men had been freed from the red chains.

"They capture soldiers and begin to transform them into the shade-walkers. Those red chains change men into those... things. So whenever we find anyone with those, we do our best to free them," Rivnick explained to them on one of their first days of meeting. Now, as they traveled through the mountain, Jeffy realized two things: First that they were fighting a battle of attrition with an enemy that never tired or starved, second that they were fighting for more than seemed apparent.

The tribe's warriors had rallied behind Rivnick because it was the only way to keep the zombies, and other worse creatures, from getting to their families. Most of the families had fled to Sprinkleberry with hopes of finding haven there. Now they were fighting in order to keep them from advancing on the city.

He realized that they were fighting to keep them from their families. They were fighting for what they loved.

"Sir," one of his Nose Breaker said from the side, "We're moving again." Jeffy nodded absently, standing tall despite his age and the wariness he felt in his bones. His legs and feet felt heavy as he and the others rushed forward, moving to yet another defensive position on the mountain. Many times in history the cities had considered trying to invade the tribes upon the Lightning Chain. Now he realized the folly of that idea.

These men knew the mountain like the back of their hand and if the soldiers from the Kingdom weren't prepared to chase for hours to get around a single corner. These men could lead the less Lightning Chain savvy soldiers in a loop for hours then slip away in some secret path that would be all but invisible to the Kingdom soldiers.

Now, as they traveled along some trail or another, he looked back to see the undead stumbling, jogging or running after them, oblivious to the certain death, full death, they approached. He genuinely appreciated the skill with which these men forced the undead into trap after trap. The population of the undead went down throughout the day but the next morning, after a night of quick rests and periodic running, the number always grew again.

More than just their strategy, however, Jeffy had to respect their grit. Somehow, despite the impossible odds they faced, they were still rushing forward to fight the enemies with zeal inspired by love for their family. Their rage was fueled by passion, and that was unusual for most warriors, but he understood that even without the impending threat they would fight viciously. Passion fueled their attacks and hard-earned experience guided their strikes. The precision in their attacks was the type only men fighting for their homes could achieve after this many hours of constant movement and combat.

It was impressive to him that the leader of the group, Rivnick, had rallied them so well. Even more so was the fact that he'd kept them together for as long against such an enemy. In the last day three men had fallen and gotten back up to fight. That was a disheartening sight if Jeffy had ever seen one.

This day, like all, passed slowly but seemed a blur. It was during the day time that they got any deep sleep. It was comforting to know that no matter how fast the zombies came the people would see them before they got there. Thus those who got to rest found what sleep they could.

The sun dipped below the horizon and Jeffy sighed.

"I don't know what we're going to do when those damned shade-walkers get here," he said. Rivnick, who'd realized his ability as a leader in the field, had taken to listening to him as example. "We're not faster than they are as a group. One on one, maybe, but one scratch is all it takes."

The fact that Rivnick had saved Jeffy from that exact fate didn't escape the older warrior as he spoke, "But we're not about to make sacrifices to keep people back. We don't have the numbers for that."

It pleased Rivnick that Jeffy had taken to speaking of them as a single unit.

"I'm thinking we'll have to hit them with all our magic when they finally come. Then rely purely on our warriors after the strike," Rivnick said finally. Jeffy and the other advisor nodded in agreement.

"There's hardly another course," the second advisor said, "once they come we either lose all our warriors to their poisoned nails or to their vast numbers. And I think we all agree that we'd rather die to the teeth of the zombie than the painful and slow acting poison of the shade-walker."

"Maybe we should take a vote," Jeffy offered with a grin and the shaman reflected the expression.

"You Kingdom people have so weird a sense of humor," Rivnick chuckled grimly. Then they looked back at the soldiers, all of them sitting in deep thought, murmuring some joke or another to one another or catching what sleep they could. The snow had covered some men throughout their nap and as the tribe began to move Jeffy watched two of his men lay in the snow, oblivious to the world around them as they slept.

"Wake them," Jeffy said softly and two of his Nose Breakers moved to wake them. He sighed, when he saw his men shake their kinsmen but to no effect. The men lay on their backs, their faces pale, their eyes closed. Their eyes, Jeffy knew as his men tried to wake them, would never open again. The cold, it seemed, had claimed them.

"Some are not accustomed to the lives on the mountains," Rivnick said from the side, a sadness in his voice, "They were sent to the desert nomads if we noticed in time... or they were when we had desert nomads."

"This is a hard life," Jeffy observed.

"It is," the shaman agreed.

Quickly the group was moving, the undead finally making their way over the natural defenses of the mountain.

Deabla sat in silence. In front of him stood Aenigma, her dark eyes matching his.

"Reach into yourself," the old woman pleaded, "You can do it. Just reach!" The young man closed his eyes and concentrated, trying to find power where he'd never felt any before. He felt a small pull, then, and realized that something was different. He lifted his hand, reaching towards a small stone.

He felt something in him reach out with his hand and he could almost feel the stone even though it was several feet from him.

He didn't open his eyes, didn't see the stone raise off the ground, but felt it instead. It was maybe half an inch off the ground when suddenly he felt a wariness that threatened to overwhelm him. He felt his chest burn and he began to sweat profusely. He let go of the rock and felt the pressure lift from him. It took many minutes for him to calm his breath.

Aenigma stared at him, calculating.

"You should be stronger than that," she said bluntly and Deabla would have laughed had he not felt so drained.

"Yeah, I'm guessing I should be able to lift a small stone," sarcasm dripped from the young man's words but Aenigma ignored that.

"Maybe telekenetic magic isn't for you," she said weakly, "But I can't imagine you being able to do anything great unless you have at least that ability."

"That's encouraging," the young man muttered to himself. He'd found himself being more and more sarcastic and rebellious since he'd been blackmailed into training under them. For some reason that Deabla didn't quite understand they were intent on making him a powerful wizard. But he wasn't, that much he knew about himself, and as much as he tried to tell them that they didn't accept it.

"Maybe I'm just not a wizard," Deabla said and Aenigma shook her head the negative.

"No, you raised the stone. You have some magical power. We just have to figure out what area of magic it will be strongest," the wizened woman sighed to herself. She leaned back in her chair, the only floor-level object in the room and was about to close her eyes when she saw a globe above Deabla about to fall.

She was about to warn him when he raised his hand and righted it, without even looking.

"Did you know that was going to happen?" Aenigma asked and Deabla raised an eye brow.

"Yeah, I looked at it," he answered.

"I was watching you... you didn't look at that globe," she assured him, "How did you know that was going to happen?"

"I don't know what you mea-" Deabla ducked before Aenigma released her blast of energy. The wave of magical power slammed into the wall behind him, where it crushed a few inches of stone to powder and Deabla cried out in shock.

"Are you insane?" he asked and Aenigma laughed.

"Of course you wouldn't be a warrior," she said, almost mockingly. Frustration was evident in her voice, "Of course you wouldn't be a battle mage."

Deabla stared at her, "Battle mage?" he asked.

"Wizards who base all of their magical prowess on the art of war. They don't have to be aggressive, or even use spells that do damage. Sometimes they just have spells that defend from attacks or that blind enemies before our soldiers rush in," Aenigma explained, paying little attention to him as she sat, deep in thought.

"And you wished I would be a battle mage because you need someone who can fight whatever enemy you think I'm to beat?" Deabla stated more than asked and Aenigma looked at him for several moments.

"Yes," she said, almost disappointed with herself at this moment, "I did wish that. But I should have realized that magic is still too new a concept to the rational beings that we have access to for us to truly understand it. There may be a new avenue of magic that you have access to that we have never heard of or perceived.."

She sighed to herself.

Eliza walked into the room from a back door. The opening of the door allowed for light to pour in and Deabla could see that they were in a small room of a library, or at least that's what it seemed to be. Hundreds of books lined the shelves around him, many stacks of them seeming to be volumes in a

series, others seeming so old that there could be no other copy of it or any other book in the same time period as it.

He studied them while he could, for as a growing mage he was to grow in power only if his mind could concentrate on what was within. Thus they tried to cut him off from the outside, trying to remove as many details of the world as possible. The less detail from without he had to ponder the more thought he could put into his own abilities.

Obviously behind the door music was playing, for Deabla and the others in the room could hear it. It was a lively tune, one with a simple beat. One that, Aenigma realized with frustration and distaste, could easily get stuck in someone's head.

Aenigma scowled at Eliza, who smiled sheepishly in response.

"My apologies," the younger wizard said softly, "Anyway, Maverick would like to speak with you."

Aenigma nodded. She turned and looked at Deabla.

"Please consider your own abilities while I'm gone," she said. The song from without could still be heard and she looked to Eliza with distaste yet again. Without excusing the younger wizard for her fault, the wizened woman opened the door to leave, but in doing so allowed the song to come in more clearly.

"I hope that doesn't get stuck in your head," Eliza said softly to Deabla. She wasn't supposed to speak to him about anything but magic but she was very fond of the young man and desired friendship with him.

"Too late," Deabla said with a smile. He'd tried to be mad at Eliza, who was his first encounter with this strange group of people, but he realized that Eliza was just as much a victim of her own talent as he was. She was a wizard and thus had been taken by these people for, he hoped, her goodly nature. Now, as he sat across from her, he could see that she was a friendly young woman who wanted companionship just as much as he.

"Well, I should leave before she burns my palms in anger," Eliza said but Deabla shook his head.

"No, you should stay... I shouldn't be left alone. I might try to escape," they both laughed at the end of his statement. They were in the Library of Ages, a place that neither of them really understood. The thought of escape had been smashed when he'd first asked about the library, for it seemed to be separate from the rest of the multiverse, Deabla's home included.

"Maybe I should stay," Eliza said after a little while. Her voice was soft, for they realized a level of attraction between them in that moment. It was hard to ignore such stimuli when there were so few other things to worry about.

Of course Deabla felt worry for his companions, fighting in a war without him, and he wondered what Esmeralda and Denerick had done. He'd simply disappeared. He couldn't help but wish he'd been given a chance to say goodbye to them. Regret, however, was a waste he'd learned long ago. Things had played out the way they would and wishing otherwise was a waste of mental ability.

But as time weighed on him, the weeks away from Sprinkleberry and the struggle, from moving peoples' things in order to save them, had worn at him.

But now as he sat in the silent darkness across from a pretty girl he found such concerns hard to think about. She looked good in the dim light. He thought to tell her as much when the thought that the compliment could be taken as an insult rang out in his head. Instead of speaking he just smiled and she smiled back.

"You won't be a disappointment, I'm sure," Eliza said and Deabla realized that it was all she could think to say. He intuitively knew that wasn't what a young woman, barely over twenty years old, was supposed to be talking about but he realized that she likely had been with these serious wizards for many years.

"How long have you been here?" Deabla asked.

"Since I was five," Eliza said softly and a sad manner seemed to replace her own.

"If you don't want to talk about it... I can't force you to, but I'll listen if you'll tell," Deabla smiled.

"Okay," Eliza's blue eyes matched his and there was something in her that Deabla didn't recognize, something he'd never seen before, in anyone, "My parents died when I was young. We lived on a world where our kind were hunted for sport. But because of my magical abilities I was worth more than most of our race... they take us as slaves if we have magical potential.

"Well my parents refused to give me up. We lived in tribes outside the human empire. And my tribe was strong enough to resist their hunting parties so my parents could resist. But I apparently was more powerful than most of my kin and the empire decided I alone was worth the obliteration of my entire tribe.

"Some three hundred warriors from the empire attacked and my parents tried to get me away. Apparently a woman, an older human, had been trying to bargain with them to take me from this world. They'd refused initially but because they were destined to lose me anyway they decided to find the woman. The woman, Aenigma, made a bargain. If she were allowed to take me, she would destroy the empire's hunting party and make it look like I died in the conflict.

"Because the people believed that magic was always self destructive, because it was on my world, they didn't realize that Aenigma could cast mighty spells of damage that wouldn't hurt her as well as the humans. So when she unleashed her power and destroyed the humans, leaving one to run home and tell of the powerful display of magic, the empire believed I died in the process."

She was silent for many moments, her eyes filled with tears.

"It's okay to cry," Deabla said softly and the tips of Eliza's lips curled upward in a sad smile.

"You're sweet," she said and Deabla felt himself blush. "I just... I remember being so very afraid of her. And I barely remember my parents. I barely remember my people. I look in a mirror and I see blue hair and blue eyes, gifts from the gods and goddesses of my people, but I don't remember the tales and stories, the lore of my people. I don't remember who my people were.

"I don't remember my culture. I don't remember my family. I don't remember anything about who I was, who I was supposed to be... and to be ripped from my family, people and culture like that is... is terrible and terrifying."

Deabla reached out and held her hand in his.

"It's okay," he said. He smiled, "If I turn out to be as powerful as they say, we'll go back to your realm and revive your memories."

Eliza forced a smile, "You're sweet," she said. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

The door behind them opened and the music, a happier tune, was let in. Eliza stood and nodded to Aenigma, who eyed her curiously for a moment. But Eliza wasn't there long enough for the woman to inspect her deeply so she shrugged it off.

Turning towards Deabla, who she did have time to inspect, she sighed.

"You'll learn of nothing more today, will you?" she asked rhetorically and Deabla responded with a sheepish grin.

"Go have lunch. Or sleep or... do whatever it is boys your age do," she said and Deabla, who was nineteen years old, didn't question her calling him a boy at all as he rushed off to eat. His stomach was empty from hours of deep thinking and he suddenly felt he could eat a mountain.

The food, as always, was served by a magical machine called a microwave. He watched as the bag of food was warmed by some energy he didn't understand in fascination. He wished dearly that Wombly was here, for she'd likely stare at this single machine for hours, trying to understand all that she could about it.

He had no doubt she would soon be able to build one, if she was able to study it, but she wasn't here and he felt loneliness in his stomach. Eliza, when she was there, could fill the pit in his stomach

but when she was gone he was left to worry about his friends and to miss them. Now, as he ate, he wished Wombly or Ashe or Tank or Esmeralda or Maria were there.

He knew that Tank would appreciate the food and crack jokes. And Esmeralda would simply appreciate the time to sit and have a pleasant meal. Wombly would no doubt be explaining some idea for one invention or another, or wonder aloud about some concept. Ashe would sit and think, quiet but pleasant, for somehow she could exert a sense of sureness, of security, that Deabla could depend on. Maria, recently, would smile and gossip, talking about people and trying to figure out what was about to become big in the city on the matter of fashion.

He missed his friends at that moment. The tune in the background of the Library of Ages was somber.

A book cracked in front of him, Deabla hummed a song. He was reading about theories of magic. He wished Wombly were there, for she'd no doubt have the book read already. But she wasn't and he was fascinated by the concept.

Some experts in magic believed that there was a certain amount of magic in a realm and that if someone casted magic they took the energy from a more potential form and convert it to an action form and that no matter what someone did the energy would remain equal, just in different forms. The book he'd read before this one had claimed that magical power came from within, that one's willpower was equivalent to one's magical power and that if one over extended oneself then it would kill them.

Deabla wasn't sure what to believe. But as he read, he hummed the somber tune from earlier. He didn't hear any music and had no mood to base his emotions on so he hummed what was most familiar to him. He sighed, continuing his hum once he finished breathing out, and looked up.

Around him people seemed to grow more calm. They were very relaxed and very sober, as if they were in the moment but also too mature to worry about anything not worth worrying about. If it was weird to him he didn't really question it.

There was a population of people who visited the Library of Ages but most of the people seemed to be too busy to worry about anything but their own personal mission. The others also weren't always human. Most were like Eliza, which was humanoid but not human, but there were a few that had more arms and legs than Deabla was used to. The strangest had been a rather intelligent giant insect. The man, Deabla had learned he was male, had been looking up the best way to dig nests in stone.

Deabla had asked about this and Eliza explained that there was a spell in place that stopped any violence from happening, covertly or overtly. Nobody could fight or harm another person in the library. The young man had questioned the limit to which the 'no harming rule' had been set to. Eliza, seeing where Deabla meant to go with the argument, had insulted him.

"Some say Maverick spent years formulating the perfect way to set his defenses. They're solid," Eliza seemed to take pride in this, "There are rooms where training can commence so we can work on our offensive, defensive and destructive spells but if malice is the intention then most spells are stopped and I know where you're going to argue.

"If someone is finding information through a spell then it isn't restricted, even if malice is intended with this information," Eliza smiled. Deabla's sense of rebellion had grown into long lines of questioning. Many times he would be asking a question and realized that, three weeks ago, he'd never have asked such a question.

Time passed and Deabla closed the book. Wariness forced him to stop reading. At the end of his study, for this was the eighth day that he'd spent investigating this, Deabla personally believed that magic came from within and that if it was overused it taxed the owners own energy, for his few successes at spells had come at great personal discomfort.

He was pleased that Aenigma hadn't denied him the right to study things so long as they were to help those around him or help him in his studies. He figured learning about magic would be helping his

studies.

Tired, Deabla hummed a sleepy tune he'd known from his childhood. Before he left the library the room was filled with snores. But tired Deabla didn't notice.

The next morning Deabla awakened to hear music playing next to him. A piece of machinery, named Radio by Eliza, emitted the noise. He enjoyed the music and wondered at how it was made.

Unaware that he was under close inspection, he listened to several more songs then left. As he did, he hummed a happier tune to himself. As he passed through the halls of the Library of Ages people seemed to perk up, their stride lengthening or their chins raising.

Deabla didn't notice this, for his thoughts were internal.

"Hello," a voice said and Deabla looked up to see Eliza. Smiling, the young man greeted her back.

"Going to train with Aenigma?" Eliza asked and Deabla nodded.

"We're going to see what kind of magic I can do," the young man said with a smile. Eliza looked past him, at the smiling people, then back at him.

"You're in a good mood," she observed and Deabla's smile weakened.

"You say it likes it's a bad thing," he said, for the first time in his life totally caught off guard by someone.

"It's not! I'm just..." Eliza searched for the right word, "I'm just... observing! Making an observation. And I was just looking around and everyone around you seems to be in a good mood," she felt, and looked, awkward as she spoke. She found it hard as she scrambled for words to say, for any explanation she might offer.

"Oh," Deabla responded, "Well maybe everyone's just..." the words died as he considered her line of logic. "You think that's what I can do? Influence moods?"

"You are unusually good at understanding people..." Eliza said, "Maybe you can always guess the right thing to say because you have some... extra sense?"

"Right, because me being nice to people and trying to understand isn't why that happens..." the frustration in Deabla's words caught Eliza off guard. Then, even more unexpected, Deabla continued, "I think I want to be alone right now." He turned and stormed away.

Eliza stared at his back, dumbfounded at his mood change, which seemed completely and totally random.

But as Deabla left, doubts filled his chest. Suddenly thrust into a position where others depended on him, he refused to believe that the special part of him was only the ability to sway the moods of others. He didn't know what he was to fight but he doubted that he'd be able to defeat it by making it sad.

Frustration and self-doubt haunted him as he stepped away, the pressure of vague prophecies weighing heavily upon him.

## **Chapter Twenty Two:**

Benny and Selie walked forward. Benny's feet touched toe to the ball of his foot as he stepped, spreading his weight so evenly that the snow barely compacting below him. His steps didn't crunch the snow and had Selie not been walking next to him she might not have noticed him.

However even if Selie had been a hundred yards away Benny would have been able to tell her exact position. Somehow, almost impressively, she made enough noise with her small feet to warn anyone of both their position. Somehow, despite her small weight and little body, she made enough noise for her, Benny and another person.

The young warrior, who was so deep in thought, might have said something to her about it had he thought it would do any good. But as he watched her, awkwardly stepping forward, always on the

verge of tears, he knew that any criticism might break her. He found it strange that he was being understanding towards her but he didn't question it. Where one's soul might come from didn't matter so long as one has a soul.

"Do the zombies scare you?" the young girl's voice was soft with fear. Benny looked over and down towards her and his eyes met hers. He smiled.

"No, they don't scare me," he assured her.

"They don't scare you?" she asked incredulously and Benny nodded.

"Not at all," he tried his best to sound reassuring to her.

"Are you afraid of anything?" she asked, her eyes wide with wonder.

"Well... yeah, I'm scared of stuff," Benny became thoughtful as he answered, trying very hard not to scare her but also not to lie.

"What are you scared of?" the question dug into Benny. He couldn't really tell her that he was afraid of himself, that he was afraid of what he might do, of who he might be and who he actually was. How could he explain his fear to her when he himself didn't really understand it.

"I really don't like mice," he said, forcing a smile and Selie grinned.

"What! Really?" she laughed with glee.

"Yeah, really!" Benny responded with equal, if forced, enthusiasm.

"Oh! Can we make a deal then?"

"Sure."

"If I fight off all the mice we run into, will you fight off all the zombies we run into?" she asked, her little voice seeming to wilt when she said the word 'zombie'.

"Of course... but you have to fight all of the mice for me," Benny genuinely smiled as she nodded and puffed out her chest.

"I don't sweat mice," she said laughed again and seemed a safe and normal child for a moment. Then Benny noticed the snow around them and the occasional red streak in the snow, the remnants of some previous encounter or another, most likely from hours ago, and remembered that she wasn't a safe and normal child.

And remembered who he was. The smile became forced once again.

As they walked Benny considered himself. He decided that he would have to realize himself if he was going to try and protect Selie. He couldn't feel self-doubt if battle was joined. He couldn't feel anything but the supreme confidence that he would make the right choice, which was the attitude most good warriors needed to last.

*Who am I?* He asked himself. The question bugged at him. He could still remember the warm, coppery taste of blood, could still see the dead eyes of the father and the terror in the eyes of the mother before he slayed her. He could still remember the feeling of his hand as it guided his blade into her flesh.

The memories seemed engrained into his being and the shame that came with him remained a crippling weight for his conscious. And, to make things worse for him, he couldn't just give in. As he looked to Selie, who walked along in such confidence of her protector, he felt even more shame that he'd lied to her.

Not about the fear, for he wasn't afraid of the zombies, but in the fact that he'd promised to get her out and to keep her safe. How could he, who had murdered an entire family in cold blood, protect her? From himself, much less the outside world!

As he looked down at his feet he could all but see the shackles. He was trying figure out who he was when Selie looked over at him.

"Can we sit for a while?" she asked and Benny nodded.

Benny quickly found a small area that they could sit without getting too wet. They rested for many minutes in silence. Then Selie looked up.

"Why are you out here alone?" Selie asked. Her big, hazel eyes met his. He felt tears beginning to fill in his own eyes but dismissed them, refusing to give into human desires. As he saw the innocence in her eyes he realized they were familiar in a way that terrified him. But her life, and saving it, seemed like a second chance.

Maybe if he could get this poor, innocent girl out of this trouble he would be allowed to live with himself. Then the reality of that statement hit him. He would never, never, find peace with himself and his deeds. There could be no peace for one like him.

There could be no life, no friends, no family or love. There would be no dreams, no comfort, no happiness and no happily ever after.

There could only be nightmares and shame and pain, only rage and a tortured existence.

"My friends left me... and I... I pushed some other people away," Benny said softly. He spoke softly, his voice barely a whisper. "I don't know why I'm even here anymore. I should have died a long time ago. I shouldn't be the survivor... I was the wrong one to live."

"I'm glad you're here," Selie smiled at him, "Because if you weren't, I don't think I'd ever get out of this forest."

"Why are you out here alone?" Benny asked. Selie seemed about to answer when a moan filled the air. Benny looked up and sniffed, immediately smelling the rot and decay of a walking zombie. He immediately jumped to his feet, grabbing Selie and dragging her to her feet. Then, without warning, he scooped her up and ran with her in his arms.

"They're here! They're here!" Selie began to shriek but Benny shook his head, "No no, you have to be quiet. It will be better if you're quiet. Please!"

But she cried, weeping, as her nightmares rose up from the snowy forest around her. The landscape, which might have been the fantasy of a child wondering about winter festivals and forest life with animals. Instead it was the home of her fear incarnate. Instead it was the one thing she hated most of all.

And as they ran, Benny begged her to look into his eyes, to try to comfort her. But when she did, she saw the worry and the desperation. And as she stared into his eyes she saw the pain behind them.

And that was far from comforting.

They stopped some two hours later. Benny was hardly breathing hard, as he'd become accustomed to long runs over the last months. He lay her down as she cried and tried to calm her. He ended up trying to sing to her. She recognized the song and her soft voice sang along. It was an old tune, one that was meant to bring comfort to kids on cold nights in the desert, to ward off the demon boozers and to bring luck.

"There's a place I know, Where we were long ago, Where the rivers flowed, And the hearts of people glowed."

The words came slowly to Benny, who only vaguely knew the song, but somehow whenever he couldn't find the next word or syllable, Selie would pick it up. The two sat and sang, the wind seeming to sing along with their soft tune. It was hard for both, for in this they had to support one another. Self-doubt ate at Benny and fears in the shadows of the world around them filled Selie.

"They say that when you sleep, You see that place in dreams, Close your eyes and drift away, And I will be there waiting."

As the snow fell to the ground around them it stole warmth with a false promise of happiness. Nothing, at that moment, seemed right to them. But Benny felt thankful, somehow, for the wind sang along and supported them. And though it filled them with chills and shivers it also canceled out the sound of the zombies' moans.

So, as night began to fall and now visible pairs of orange lights filled the forest around them, Benny peacefully lifted a sleeping Selie and carried her. His feet were silent as he stepped forward and

his breath was deep and slow, hardly louder than falling snow. The wind canceled out the sound of Selie's occasional whimper in her sleep.

"In that place called Paradise."

As Benny looked back he knew that had she not been there he likely would have lost himself in rage and fought them, aggressively, suicidally, throwing himself at them. But now she was dependent on him. And even if he knew in his heart that he would never be able to take care of her he knew that it was his duty, at least, to get her somewhere safe.

The wind howled and Selie slept. The snow dropped but the moan of the undead was unheard. And Benny, working to get her to safety, forgot his shame.

Maria sat across from Lidia. They sat in deep concentration.

*Ready?* Maria asked.

*Ready.* Lidia responded.

Maria sent forth her desire. She felt the sensation of her left arm raising but it wasn't her left arm. It was Lidias!

*Is it.. is it really happening?* Maria asked and she 'heard' the mental equivalent of laughter from Lidia.

*You did it! My turn!* Lidia was actually enthusaistic, which caused Maria some shock. Lidia felt it and considered questioning it. But before she could Maria explained mentally. She was just unused to Lidia showing any emotion aside from a strange one Maria couldn't define. Lidia just replied with the thought of indifference.

Lidia rose both of Maria's arms, to both of their shock, then Lidia dared try something far out of their experience. Maria felt her arms moving in a pattern, which seemed chaotic but had a pattern for sure, then felt her lips moving. They were trying casting a spell as one!

Maria felt Lidia adding energy to spell and knew that she, also, was using energy. In between Maria's hands, which Lidia was influencing, an orb of light appeared. After several seconds it grew to four feet wide, large enough to engulf Maria's still moving hands. The ball was growing when Copla walked in.

"What are you Doing!" the wizard roared and both Lidia and Maria were shocked out of their mind melding.

"You ruined our spell!" Maria complained and Lidia agreed, "I've never gotten an orb of light to get that big!"

"You aren't ready for that yet," Copla said, "I promise you, it will come in time. But accidents can happen if we don't prepare correctly. And unless you're sure exactly what you intend to do then the results, the risks, are too bad for it to be worth reckless experimentation."

"'Reckless experimentation' is what makes us what we are," Maria said sarcastically, "besides, we are ready for that."

"You aren't, I promise you aren't," Copla said, "Please, believe me, please. Please."

Both Lidia and Maria groaned.

"Fine," they said at the same time.

"We're going to continue practicing," Maria said sternly and Copla acquiesced.

Then the wizard sat down, watching the two young women as they practiced. As Lidia and Maria established their connections they went through the motions of spell casting. Lidia was better at it than Maria was, for Lidia naturally, it seemed, had more empathy than Maria did and could guess where and what Maria was doing. Thus as Maria's limbs moved Lidia could guess where they were and knew where they needed to go and could send them the next directions.

Often they were trading remarks about Copla, who watched them with more attentiveness than either had ever seen. They traded theories over why he might be so very concerned over this. The two were still deep in their thought-conversation when a man rushed into their tent.

"You Maria, Lidia and Copla?" the man asked and Copla nodded. "A message arrived for ya from the Southern Gate and Walston city. You're to report to lieutenant Levin's."

Copla nodded again.

"We'll head that way," he said. Maria and Lidia looked to him.

"What do you think it is?" Maria asked.

Copla shrugged. "Let's go find out."

With winter beginning its end the undead were coming onto the walls of Walston harder and harder. Maria and Lidia had helped on the wall, sending magical blasts to destroy groups of the undead. Friendships had been formed on that wall and as Maria, Lidia and Copla left many farewells came from the soldiers.

A message had been sent by Tank and the others. Finally, after some many weeks, a messenger had managed to make it through from the Southern Gate. Messages had been sent back and forth. And because Maria couldn't help it she asked about Tank and the others. Now they were being summoned. There was no real authority behind the letter, no reason for them to feel pressured by anything but personal feelings, but because Tank had sent the letter and urged them to come to Walston, with much worry mixed in with it, Maria felt compelled.

Plus because Lidia and Copla had been dragged along by her they were determined to follow her wherever she went.

Now, as they traveled, Lidia leaned, "Maria, I don't usually care about this stuff, but you know what's going to happen, right?"

Maria looked to her curiously, "What do you mean?"

"You both are so... frustrating," Lidia complained and Maria continued to stare curiously.

"What do you mean?" Maria repeated herself.

"Every single time one of you calls out, the other rushes to help and the two of you have an amazing couple of minutes then everything goes back to normal," Lidia explained.

"Who?" Maria asked.

"You and Tank! Every single time one of you have a hard time or spend any time from each other, you both come together and spend time. Then he pushes you away because of that demon, that damned demon and his damned prophecies. And after all this you are left alone and he is alone too," the priestess sighed.

"This time you can't do that," Maria looked at her friend as she spoke and saw genuine emotion. "You are better than this. And so is he. You just have to be the one to push away first. And I hope he'll get his head straight and come to you for real."

"So you're saying..."

"I'm saying you shouldn't embrace him when you first meet him," Lidia finished for Maria, "I'm saying you shouldn't let him come to you and rebuff you again. You shouldn't give in to temptation and let him push away from it, and you, like he always does."

Maria sat deep in thought for several seconds.

"I don't know," she said softly, "I miss him."

"I know you do."

"And I can't stop thinking about him..." Maria's voice was barely above a whisper.

"He's a person to feel that way for if I've ever seen one," Lidia said, "But he's got a part loose in his head. And it'll take action to fix it. Action and time. And he's had plenty of time, three years' time, to fix it."

The two spoke in privacy, for ahead of them walked Copla and his mind was occupied.

*They are mind melding. That is a mistake. You know it's a mistake.  
I can't stop them.*

*You could if you tried.*

*I tried! And it didn't work.*

*You have to stop them. It will end in disaster!*

*I prepared them. There won't be a mind-melding accident with them.*

*Not all disasters are an accident.*

*Neither will be hurt by mind-melding...*

*No. But they will be hurt because of it. They will be hurt because of it. Just like we were.*

Copla winced visibly. He tried to understand why she was being that way but it couldn't happen.

Fortunately for him the two girls were distracted and didn't notice his internal struggle. It was hard but he knew that they'd all be better off if they didn't know what had happened and who he really was. There was sadness in him and it was all he really knew at that moment.

And to his torment, Maria and Lidia noticed. More so than that, Maria asked what was wrong.

*Tell them.* A voice that wasn't Copla's spoke in his head.

*Must I?*

*You must.*

"My name is Copla."

"We knew that."

*I don't want to.*

*You must. Or I will.*

*You couldn't.*

"And I used to be a master of mind-melding."

"Why aren't you now?"

"I still am."

*I could. I just haven't.*

*Because you love me?*

*I did.*

*But you don't now?*

"Then why are you so afraid of it? What happened to you?"

"There... was an accident. A terrible accident."

*How could I love you?*

*The... same way you did before!*

*I can't love you anymore.*

"My wife and I were together. We were in battle and she wanted to combine to cast a mighty spell. We hoped to save many lives. But we weren't in the same spot on the field and the soldiers who were guarding her couldn't hold. They failed... and she died."

"She... died? I'm sorry."

*You used to.*

*I did. I loved you more than anything else in the world.*

*What changed?*

*You know what changed.*

"When people are in mind-meld and one dies, one mind is left without a body. It can either perish or it can try to... 'shack up' with the other mind in the second body. But when two minds come together into one... there can be some hard things to deal with. The stronger mind is the owner of the body. And the weaker one..."

"The weaker one?"

*I do.*

*How can I possibly love you then?*

*The same...*

*You know I can't go back to that way.*

*I know...*

*How can I love you?*

*I don't know.*

*I can't.*

"The weaker one is slowly driven mad... The effects can vary. But... she was drawn into my mind. And now... things are hard and they have changed. And the weaker one is assimilated by the stronger mind... and the stronger mind takes the weaker one... and they become..."

"Become what?"

*We are one... and how could I possibly love you the way I did before when... when you are me.*

"They become... one."

### **Chapter Twenty Three:**

Deabla sat in his room, reading about magic. He'd been locked in seclusion for many days, trying hard to keep from other people. He was in the middle of his second book of magical theory that day when Aenigma walked in with three men in tow.

"Hum a song," the wizened woman ordered.

"What?"

"You heard me," Aenigma reinforced, "Hum a song. A happy one."

"Um..." Deabla began to hum one of the songs he'd heard while in the library. The three men, all angry at being awakened, listened for several seconds. When nothing happened, their moods continued to be angry.

"How are you feeling right now?" Aenigma asked and Deabla stuttered a response, "I-I dunno!"

"I can make him feel something," a voice said from behind. Eliza walked in and lifted a crossbow. She pulled the trigger and the bolt slammed into the wall behind him, narrowly missing his head and smashing the brick wall.

"What the hell!" Deabla cried out. "How do you feel now!" Eliza shouted. Deabla tried to sputter a response.

"Hum!" Eliza shouted and Deabla complied desperately, trying to avoid the seemingly random onslaught of anger from Eliza. He hummed and suddenly the room seemed somehow more intense. The eyes of the tired and angry men widened slightly. They felt their stomachs begin to tighten and they wanted to run more than anything else.

One of them, so effected, bent over as he threw up on the floor. Even Aenigma felt some nerves as Deabla hummed the happy song in a terrified tone. Eliza looked at them. She was the only one not effected by him.

"So he can direct it," Eliza said, "Else I'd be effected too."

"Leave us," Aenigma dismissed the men, who all left happily, one of them even running. "So that's your magical ability," Aenigma thought allowed, "Which means that if you practice enough you can probably send other emotions out. Or even heal people. Maybe even if you're put in a terrible situation you can harm others through your ability."

"He'd be a powerful ally in a battle. Which means that their enemy won't be defeated by magical means, or at least there was no main wizard or clerick who will be tasked with defeating the enemy," Eliza said. She seemed so cold to Deabla at that moment.

"You don't even care that people are dying right now, do you?" he asked, his voice an accusation.

Eliza turned to him and stared for several seconds. She was about to speak when Aenigma cut her off.

"We don't have time for you to be crying about her right now," Aenigma said, "There is a portal being opened and you, and your friends on your world, need to close it. I'm going to train you with all

the ability I can. We will be very, very lucky if we can make you an effective warrior. As winter on your world comes closer and closer to an end the portal comes closer and closer to being finished.

"And once it's finished the enemy we fear will come through it and destroy not only your universe but those around it. None will be safe. Now Dean and Chelsey and Maverick and Bert and others can be brought to destroy this beast... but it will result, likely, in the end of your realm as new and powerful forces are released in the battle.

"It'd be a fight to save thousands, even millions of realms with your own realm as the sacrifice. But if the portal isn't opened then the enemy cannot come through," Aenigma stopped and looked to Deabla, staring directly in his eyes, "You were brought here not for our selfish reasons. No, you were brought here because in the near future a portal will be opened that will allow for the most dangerous being in the multiverse to manifest itself physically.

"We cannot let this happen. So if you and your friends don't stop the portal, we will. And you've read what can happen to a realm if new forces are released on it."

Deabla stared at her.

"How can we close a portal?" he asked.

"There are many ways. The most effective way is usually to kill the one who is supporting it with power," Eliza answered, "But usually the thing that is creating portals such as these are... very powerful and aren't easy to defeat. But if he is concentrated on you then maybe you can bend it."

"Will you help us?" Deabla asked Eliza and they were silent for many minutes. Deabla looked to Aenigma, who watched with great intensity.

"We cannot force her, or even you, to this battle. It is not our place to force people to fight their or others battles. We can only arm you with the knowledge to do so," she said, "I'll.. leave you two to this." She departed, leaving two very silent, very conflicted young adults to their feelings.

"I don't think I will," Eliza said several hours later. No answer had been forthcoming so Deabla, now given a mission, began to work on his ability and studying how to close portals. She had followed him throughout the time, thinking about her answer. She wanted to be there to tell him when she finally realized her decision but realized it was also because she wanted to keep him from doing anything overly stupid in case he decided to do that type of thing.

Deabla looked up from his book. They made eye contact and Eliza shook her head.

"I'm sorry... but I have to go back to my world and rescue my people from their struggle. I can't fight your battle if it might stop me from fighting mine," she said softly. Deabla didn't seem to judge as he stared at her but she saw emotions fighting behind his eyes.

"Are... are you okay?" she asked. But Deabla didn't answer with a word. He instead hummed, a tune without emotion, one that he could share exactly how he was feeling with. She realized he'd been practicing since he'd found out exactly what he could do for as she listened she could feel exactly what he was sending her.

A deep sadness. A hurting heart. And a desperate cause.

"I... I can't go with you. I'm sorry," she said. Deabla stared at her for several seconds, still not talking, but no longer humming.

"I will be here for a few more days. After that, I'm leaving," Deabla said, "And you won't have to see me. After I leave, though, I'm not coming back. I'm going to save my home, my realm, all my friends, and then I'm going to stay there."

He looked back at his book. Eliza stared at him, at the expression on his face, and could only guess at what he was really feeling.

His face a mask of stone, Deabla didn't look up. He only read the information, which could be critical to his friends lives, and put her out of his mind.

Jeffy and the last two Nose Breakers fought to keep their balance. Rivnick and the others, a

dozen mountain warriors, paused only for a second.

"We will quit the mountain this morning. Hopefully Walston has some Refuge for us," Rivnick said loudly, to get over the howl of the wind, and Jeffy nodded.

Then a dark laughter split the air.

"You'll never get there!" A dark voice said. All ten men looked up to see a dark figure floating above them. Mlaster, the mercenary leader, floated to the ground in the middle of them. He didn't seem an imposing figure for he was of medium height and medium build. He was lithe and strong but any of the surviving men seemed more than a match for him. On his back lay a quiver, his bow made of dark wood still strapped in. His right hand, covered by a black glove, lay on the hilt of his blade while his other hand, in a brown glove, tilted his hat in greeting.

The man stroked his well-trimmed brown beard. The beard matched his brown hair, which was tied in a ponytail behind his head. His eyes, once dark brown, were now red as the wraith within him changed his body. He seemed darker and almost as if he were made of shadow.

"You have passed a good number of tests. Now I'll measure your worth personally," the man said.

"Who are you?" one of Jeffy's Nose Breakers asked and the man bowed.

"You may call me Mlaster, the Wraith King," a cocky grin accompanied the greeting. Then the man's long blade flashed out of its sheath. Faster than Jeffy could protest, Mlaster stabbed forward with his blade and jabbed the point of the blade into the man's throat.

"Oh, rest easy now friend," Mlaster's red eyes glowed with a madness that couldn't be described as he retracted the blade. The stunned Nose Breaker crumbled to the ground, gurgling in weak protest. The man to Jeffy's right, a mountain warrior, rushed forward, weapon over head, while another of his kin rushed from the other side.

The first man felt the cold steel of Mlaster's blade slide through his ribs before the man could react. The blade was retracted but the damage was done. Mlaster's aim was true and the man's lung was punctured. He fell to the ground while his kinsman rushed forward also. The other mountain warrior managed to get an attack off but to no avail.

The heavy hammer slammed into Mlaster's blade and the wraith-possessed man stepped inside the warrior's range quicker than seemed possible. Then Mlaster punched out, his fist splitting the man's skin and breaking his ribs.

The warrior flew backwards, already dead.

Jeffy and his Nose Breaker rushed to get next to Rivnick.

"Who are you, really?" Rivnick asked.

"I am the one who is ending all of you. The blood need has been met and my need for caution has ended. Now I'm going to destroy everything around me. And my portal will open and my master will be here," Mlaster's eyes seemed to flare with madness.

The remaining mountain warriors all lost their temper as the creature responsible for the death of their kin stood in front of them, confident and healthy. The warriors all swung as one, fighting as a unit in such a way that no mortal man could have escaped unscathed. But Mlaster was no mortal man.

Mlaster jumped back and forward as the same time, it seemed, as his form shifted to shadow. Then, when their attacks were complete, he became flesh once again. His long sword poke and jabbed and two of the warriors fell to the ground. Mlaster grinned. Then he stepped back but his shadow form seemed to remain.

The man laughed, "Kill them, my shade." Then he was gone.

The shade, however, was still there.

The shade was just as skilled as Mlaster was. It dodged and ducked, stabbed and poked, and soon the eight remaining mountain men were reduced to three. Then two. Then one. Then zero.

Rivnick, who'd been studying the shade, looked to Jeffy and the Nose Breaker.

"I think I know how to kill it but I'll need more time than you can offer," the shaman said as the shade stared them down.

"What do you suggest?" Jeffy asked.

"We run," Rivnick said and before Jeffy could protest their likelihood of out running this creature he was incanting. Then, as the shade rushed forward, they were flying through the air, faster than any of them had ever felt. Along the fly Jeffy heard the scream of his Nose Breaker. An old man, he could tell the scream of a dying man and he knew that his soldier was dead.

Rivnick, too, screamed. And to Jeffy's horror he realized he and the shade were falling from the sky. He screamed out in terror as the ground rushed towards him. He saw, he thought, three figures look up at him. Then he felt himself slowing.

*Damned gods*, Jeffy thought to himself as he hit the ground. He knew he was dead. He knew there was no chance he'd survived.

Maria noticed four bodies falling. She immediately began casting, for she knew the fear of free fall. She managed to finish her incantation when they were about ten feet from the ground. Two of the men were dead, that much was obvious, by the time the trio got to the four falling people.

One was alive, and crawling away from the fourth member. The fourth figure was a terrifying one, a figure that seemed to be a living shadow. The shade jumped up and punched forward, launching Copla back onto the ground.

*He hit us!*

*Us?*

*We are one.*

Copla jumped to his feet, fueled by both himself and his wife. Maria and Lidia stood, stunned, as the shade stalked on Jeffy. Maria recognized the man.

"Jeffy!" She shouted, "Watch out!" the shade got there, though. In front of Maria, who stood helplessly stunned, the shade punched into the warrior's back. The man was too old to do anything but scream in pain. He thrashed but couldn't turn around to fight back. The shade's hand gripped his spine and crushed it.

Jeffy screamed in agony. His eyes were wide as the shade lifted him to lock eyes. Then the shade was flying... and Jeffy was dropped to the ground. Maria rushed towards him. When she got to him she cradled his head.

"Jeffy.." she said, "Jeffy," her voice was soft and as soothing as she could make it, "Oh Jeffy... It's me, Maria."

"Maria..." Jeffy said, his eyes barely open, "Are you.. dead too?"

"No!" Maria said, forcing a desperate laugh, "No, I'm not dead. And you aren't either."

"I might be," Jeffy said, cracking a smile, "I think I am..."

"You're not! I promise you aren't!"

The shade stood up and turned on an enraged Copla.

"You're going down," Copla said. But there was a second element to his voice, previously unheard. He stepped forward, released two prepared spells. One was a flame-line, which slammed into the shade's chest. The second was a beam of light. The light slammed into it and the shade screamed an otherworldly scream.

Then the shade burst forward, pushing through Copla's magic. It tried to get all the way to the heavy man but he was protected by a shield. The shade slammed into it but he held strong. He finished another spell and it forced the Shade back. He was hitting it with all he had.

Five spells, six spells. Seven spells, eight spells.

Two fireballs flew from Copla at once and both engulfed the shade. It responded by sending two lines of dark energy at Copla. One slammed into his barrier but it exploded, sending white sparks all

over the field around him. The second slammed into Copla, launching him back some twenty feet. The man rolled to his feet, a deceptively agile motion, casting a spell all the while.

He and the shade released a spell at the same time. The shade's orb of darkness collided with Copla's orb of dark black-purple energy and exploded outwards in purple flames. The two were already casting spells again. Copla finished first and he pushed both hands forward together, locking his thumbs inward, and a straight line of energy shot forward.

The shade sent forward its own line of energy. The two stood in mortal combat, their minds pitted against one another. The shade was too much for any one man to handle but Copla had more than one mind in his head, more than one willpower. And his wife was pissed.

The two pushed forward on the shade, destroying it, smashing it.

The shade cried out in its inhuman voice again. Then it faded from sight, dead...

Copla relaxed, his energy fully used. He fell to his knees, laughing.

*We did it...*

*Like the old days.*

*We did it.* Copla smiled as he spoke to his wife in his head. They weren't fully one yet.

*We'll be separate again in a few moments.*

"What?" Copla asked aloud. Then he felt a punch in his back. He looked downwards and his eyes widened. The shade's fist was reaching out from inside his chest. He saw the shadow dissolve and knew that the shadow had spent its last moments for revenge.

Then Copla fell to his knees. Lidia rushed towards him, praying to her goddess for some healing spells.

"It's..." Copla coughed, "It's okay." He smiled as Lidia sat over him. "I'm going to meet her again." Maria walked over from Jeffy's dead body. He would die moments later. Tears streaked down her face as she looked down at Copla's last moments.

"Be careful... with the mind-melding... but you two... I... loved you two... like daughters..." he smiled and breathed out his last breath. His eyes lost their light. But, Lidia noticed sadly, his brow was not sweaty. And he seemed content.

"Well..." Lidia said, "he won't nagging us anymore."

Maria stared at her, dumbfounded, then sighed.

"Let's go."

Above Copla's body two minds, suddenly free from each other, floated into nothingness together.

*We can be together.*

*I missed you.*

*We were together. We will be together again.*

*I love you Copla.*

*I love you Saria.*

Rivnick was still breathing, barely though. He looked up at Maria and Lidia, who watched him as he died. He wondered at Lidia, as she was incanting, and quickly realized she was a priestess of some sort. But her efforts would be in vain. He would die. That was already determined.

"No..." he breathed out, leaving only breath enough for one word, "Wraith." Then his eyes shut and his chest stopped moving. Maria and Lidia, who'd both heard the word, looked to each other with no emotion. This battle was taking many lives. Many soldiers had died on the walls around them while they were at the Northern Gate. They were desensitized to death. And the death of Copla had very little dramatic effect on them, much less the death of a random man from the mountains.

Maria and Lidia left the bodies buried in the snow. They had to get to Walston's southern gate.

Whatever it was they had killed, Maria was sure that it had something to do with the fire on the Lightning Chain. As the two of them continued to walk they could see the city of Walston in the distance.

"Do you think they will send horses out for us?" Maria asked.

"Hardly," Lidia replied. "We're random travelers walking without any armed company. I'm sure they'll be checking our eyes to see if we're undead for many minutes before they react to us at all."

The two continued. It'd taken them another day after Copla and Jeffy's death. Finally they'd reached the city proper. It was only a mile and a half from the Southern Gate. Already they could hear the low moan of undead and they could hear the shout of men as they prepared for some large battle, most likely, Lidia surmised, an offensive.

"How do you know?" Maria asked.

"They are preparing swords and light armor, not spears and shields. They're making equipment that can be moved easily and quickly and not the defensive type. They're attacking," Lidia said.

The two got to the southern gate easier than any of their travel before this. It was obvious that runners were moving between the city and the gate, for the snow was beaten down and easy to walk on. Relatively, at least. The two reached the gate and immediately saw fiery brands being thrown over the side of the walls. Then flammable liquid was thrown as well.

Soldiers were moving quick. In the middle of the gate's little community large groups of people were being trained. It was an interesting sight, Wombly and Tuff speaking while Tank, Ashe and a large mountain man sparred with the new peoples. They looked different than the peoples of The Kingdom. It was usually small things, for the people were human, but they reacted in different ways.

Those that Tuff spoke to often flinched at shadows and those that Wombly spoke to were very discomforted by the cold and the snow. They seemed that the men and women were all of a different world. But to the trainers' credit, Tank, Wombly, Ashe, the tall mountain man and Tuff, the peoples were moving in familiar formations of the kingdom.

The weapons were different, however, so even if the new men and women had been in perfect Kingdom formation then their own weapons wouldn't necessarily work. Lidia, more than Maria, saw the changes, the small modifications made so that the men and women could fight in their own ways.

"It's nice," Maria said, "They're allowing women to fight next to men."

"We're allowed to fight next to men," Lidia stated.

"We're different," Maria replied.

"How?" Lidia asked.

"We're..." Maria thought for several seconds, "Well... I'm pretty." Lidia smiled. Then the two sat down, looking at the trainers. Lidia watched Maria as she watched as Tank. It was hard for Lidia not to feel bad for her friend. Love was weird. And Tank was even weirder.

## **Chapter Twenty Four:**

Ashe sat in deep thought, in deep meditation. Lidia walked into the room and stared at her for several minutes before Ashe opened her eyes.

"Many religious spells require that type of meditation," Lidia remarked and Ashe stared at her blankly. "You seem troubled."

Ashe stared at her still, seeming content to sit in silence.

"You know that Salvatore would help shoulder your troubles if you would have her," Lidia said. It was unlike her to try and convert one but in Ashe she saw herself and saw a need for guidance. Or at least she thought as much. For one of the few times in her life she found herself unable to determine if her judgment was being clouded by emotion or not. Generally she knew the answer was a no because she rarely felt emotions enough to change her judgment.

Ashe did respond to this, however, but not in the way Lidia might have hoped, "Religion is for

those who aren't strong enough to stand on their own." The venom in Ashe's voice threw Lidia off guard and she could think of no reply to her accusations, "I have no need to take part in the thieving ways of priests who take payment for false blessings. The way of the Gods and Goddesses are too much for us to absorb and for any man or woman to presume to speak for them is to blaspheme.

"Or else the Gods and Goddesses are not as powerful as you and your kin would have us believe. But they had better hope they are that powerful for when I die, if I find myself in the domain of some God or Goddess, should one decide to claim my soul as their property, I will kill it and all of its family for the crimes they allow to happen on these worlds."

Lidia stared at Ashe, dumbfounded, as the young woman left the room.

Even after Ashe left Lidia could only stand, completely stunned. Finally, she found wits enough to speak.

"Damn."

Deabla sat with a book open, hunched over. He looked up at the people around him with tired, nearly blood shot eyes.

Then he began to hum. Some of the people were tired, sleepy, even exhausted. Over the last few days he'd hummed a few times. His own nervousness, his own intensity, had spread out over the others in the library. And they, like him, had worked to exhaustion. But he'd finished his readings on magical theory and felt prepared to finally test his findings.

He hummed a comforting tune, one that he certainly wasn't feeling at that moment. Until this moment he was only able to inflict his own feelings upon someone else but now, after four days of hard reading and practicing, he was going to try to make them feel something he didn't feel.

He tried to imagine how he'd feel if he was comforted and confident in his own abilities. He tried to send this imagined image out towards people in the form of his hum. He focused and worked to send them the feeling. He could feel his own chest thumping, could feel almost as if the emotion was real, and noticed that one person's eyes opened a bit wider. Then she wiped her forehead.

Then she opened her book and even smiled a little. A man next to her woke up from his nap and, with sudden energy, began to read his own book. Several others reacted. And though none were overly enthusiastic with their newfound energy Deabla knew that he'd achieved something rare.

He stood, ready to go back to his friends, ready to confront the portal, ready to defeat their enemy and save his world. He was making his way to his room when an older man in a brown robe stepped in front of him.

"The portal was opened right before winter came. That is all I know and all you need to know," the man said. Deabla stared at him for several seconds, weighing out the man's character, then nodded.

"Thank you," Deabla said. He moved to leave the room but the man's hand snapped out, deceptively strong despite the old and seemingly brittle fingers. "I believe in you. Dean will wait to the last possible second. But you must be successful in this. You must. I believe in you." The man smiled.

Deabla believed him despite the fact that he really had no idea who the man was.

"Thank you," Deabla said. Then he turned to make his way to the portal.

Benny and Selie walked for several hours before they truly understood it. There was soldiers, hundreds of them, in Sprinkleberry garb. The men were marching. Selie had been too afraid to the rush out to the men, too afraid of anyone that wasn't Benny, and Benny himself had been unsure. Thus they had remained hidden. But now, with the cold and the snow and their lack of food, they needed to go.

"Please.. I'll wait here if you'll go out there," Selie said, "I'm afraid."

Benny wanted to argue, to tell her to go out with him, but logically he knew she was right. Even if she wasn't afraid, it would be better for him to go alone. If these men turned out to be hostile, to be an illusion of some sort, he would be more likely to escape without her. Then, if he did manage to get away, he could find her easily.

"Just... stay here, okay?" Benny said, "I'll come back for you."

The soldiers were marching in step. Thus Benny had no problem timing his own appearance in such a way that they couldn't strike too fast for him to defend himself. He stepped out of the brush and raised his hands in an unaggressive manner. His hands were far from his blades but that really meant nothing.

"My name is Benny. King Jev sent me to investigate the Fire on the Lightning Chain. I have a friend. We were separated from our allies and need food," Benny said.

"You're Benny?" a soldier said, "The Benny who helped kill Azeroth?"

"I am?" Benny responded. When he last left Sprinkleberry very few people had known about Azeroth. Only those who had been there, and a few who had been involved with their mission, had actually known of the conflict. But now if these soldiers knew then likely everyone knew.

"I am," Benny answered more surely.

"We will get you to Walston as fast as possible then. We're sent to help them. A messenger got through, some lucky bastard named Illuck, and sent us the message of what's happening," the soldier said.

"What's happening?" Benny asked.

"You have been out here a while, haven't you?" the soldier asked and Benny nodded, "Month or two."

"Damn..." another soldier said, "We've been marching for a week and haven't had a day where we haven't had to fight the undead."

"We need to get there fast," Benny said, "Fast!" He didn't know what was happening but knew if Tank and the others had asked for help then it would be bad, "I mean as fast as possible."

The soldier nodded, "I'll bring you to the general who sent us."

Benny was about to run with him when he remembered Selie. He turned, shouting, "Hold on!" and ran back to where he'd left her. But she wasn't there. He looked around and saw no tracks. Puzzled, panicked even, he checked the ground even further. Then, genuinely terrified, he saw that only one pair of tracks had led to the spot.

"Selie?" he mumbled, trying to figure out what could have happened, "Selie?"

"Sir, are you coming?" the soldier asked from behind. Benny looked back, "I... guess." He turned and began to walk, trying to figure out what might have happened.

As he stepped away he wasn't sure if he heard it or imagined it but he could almost hear Selie's voice, the faint echo of a living girl, say, "It's okay. Go save them. I understand."

Tank and Maria stared at each other.

"I've... missed you," Tank said quietly. Maria nodded. "I know you have." Tank was taken back by the coldness in her tone.

"Are... you okay?" He asked and Maria nodded. "I'm fine." Once again her answer was curt. It hurt Maria but she needed to stand up for herself. Tank reached forward, to hold her hand, but Maria pulled back. She and Tank made eye contact and she saw pain in his dark blue orbs, saw the string of rejection, and almost enjoyed seeing it. At least he would know how she felt.

Tank nodded, seeing that she wasn't going to be with him, and nodded, "Alright. I'll go." He turned and left before Maria could say anything. She sat down, beginning to try and meditate, to try and relax, when she realized that he likely had felt what she was feeling many times before. She had rejected him many times in the past, so many times, in fact, that he'd become used to never getting anywhere with her.

Then she'd teased him with attraction when he had reason not to be with her. She realized how cruel the world must seem to him... for the only time she'd shown interest in him before was when she was using him to escape Keell. But then she remembered how sure he was that they couldn't be together and she knew he was never going to be with her if she didn't somehow force him to.

And maybe Lidia was right. Maybe she'd have to reject him first.

Wombly and Carser looked down at their invention with some pride. Carser held it up, inspecting the long barrel of their gun, inspecting the design.

"I think it will work," Carser said and Wombly nodded in agreement.

"You should try it out," she said with a smile. Carser frowned, "You're the warrior. You should use it."

"I use my crossbow. And I'm a good shot with it. You should take the gun," Wombly replied and Carser shrugged.

"Alright..." he said reluctantly. He picked it up and aimed it towards some bags at the end of the room. They were in a long barrel-shaped room that was filled with tools. They'd just finished their new weapon and planned to test it out. Carser put his eye to the aiming tube and cocked the weapon. Then, as he breathed out, pulled the trigger. The recoil was enough to force him a step back. But the bullet, the shard of metal, tore through the wooden barrack.

"My lunch!" they heard a yell from the other side and both young adults rushed out to see what had happened. A man stood with a metal mug and a plate, all broken. Their bullet had imbedded itself into the wall beyond him.

Seeing nobody had gotten hurt, they both had to stifle a laugh as they turned and ran away.

"That was great," Carser smiled to Wombly, "Just.. amazing." Wombly agreed. They were about to sit down to eat when suddenly Tuff burst into their room.

"You gotta come. Deabla's back!" Tuff said.

"Deabla?" Wombly asked and Carser just stood curiously.

"Now!" Tuff shouted and both inventors jumped up to follow.

Ashe sat in silence. On her legs rested her blades. She sat almost naked, wearing just enough to stay slightly warm, with the cold metal of her blades on her bare skin. Her eyes were closed and her hair tied back.

Her hands easily found the hilts of her blades, two katanas, and her fingers gripped them with strength beyond most humans. She was on her feet as if by magic, so quick was the movement. Eyes still closed, she went through an attack routine, one that required many jumps and many dives. The room was small, and filled with furniture. But still she didn't hit anything.

Years of fighting in the dark had forced her to take what little time she had at seeing her surroundings and memorize it. Now, as she had asked for others to rearrange the room, she had taken only five seconds to look at the entire room. And as she ducked, dove, jumped and blocked imaginary attacks, she didn't touch a single chair, couch or table.

Her concentration was as sharp as her blades and when she did come close to a piece of furniture she knew it. When she was close to the wall she could name with an inch her distance from the wall. The world around her was her battlefield and her mind was the ultimate recorder.

She'd asked for dummies to be placed around the room. Three throwing daggers, three dummies. Eyes still closed, she launched one while ducking, another while jumping and the third while diving. Now, as she looked around, she saw that two knives had struck the dummies' jugular. The third dagger had hit its target in the eye.

A grim light in her eyes, she calmly and coolly collected her weapons. Then, everything back in place, went about reorganizing the room. She was almost ready to ask her neighbors to rearrange the room further when a knock on her door stopped her.

"Come in."

Tuff walked in. His eyes were narrow and his brow furrowed.

"Deabla's here," was all he said before he stopped. Ashe wanted to say something, to say anything, to help make feel Tuff better, but she knew she wasn't wrong. Laurie had been attacked

scratched by a shade-walker and they knew no cure for her. And when she'd gone down there had been no way of recovering her. Laurie would have been dead in moments even if they had picked her up.

But still, Ashe recognized Tuff's pain.

Emotions that had long been dead were revived by her experience with Aenigma's spell and the Preta. Memories she'd long ago dismissed were back and the young woman couldn't ignore everything around her.

But she retained her aloof nature and her general dislike of those around her. Thus no one else had noticed the change. Wombly was too busy with her 'new boyfriend' and Tank was busy trying to train the world around him. He was trying to fix everything. And he wasn't going to be with Maria even though she was back.

Then again Maria had rejected him. Even Ashe, who hardly cared, had seen her refuse to embrace him when they'd first been reunited. Ashe had been helping train when they'd first met. She'd seen the look in Maria's eyes. But more importantly she'd seen the slight satisfaction on Lidia's face. It wasn't unlikely that Lidia had told Maria to stand up for herself.

And Ashe wasn't unhappy about that. It was probably the right call. But she knew that Tank already had too many problems. Now that Maria wasn't going to give him what he'd take it was a slap to the face that even Tank couldn't ignore.

But Deabla was back. For whatever reason he might be here, Ashe didn't really understand how he would be able to do anything. He wasn't a warrior nor a wizard. But she wouldn't question them at this moment.

"How did you get here?" Tank asked.

"I was with Dean and Aenigma. They were teaching me magic in order to come here and aid you in your mission," Deabla responded. Maria, Lidia, Wombly, Carser -who Deabla didn't actually know-, Ashe, Tuff and Grewslough-who Deabla also didn't know- all sat in the room. "There's a portal being opened. It was opened at the beginning of winter. It's going to bring in something terrible, something powerful. And we have to close it.

"Dean and his allies would but if they come in here and use their powers to close this thing then the world might be destroyed by the unusual powers being released... it's..." Deabla searched for a way to communicate it, "It's complicated. But if they come in here and use their powers then the world will be effected. They're too powerful to just be releasing their power whenever and wherever they think it's needed.

"So they're giving us a chance. The portal will open soon and unless we are able to close it before the last second, Dean will. And if he does it... it will be bad. So we're going to go up there and destroy whatever it is that is opening it."

"A wraith," Maria said. Everyone looked at her curiously, "It's a wraith," Maria said, "We figured that out while traveling here."

"Azeroth was a fire demon, right?" Lidia asked and Tank nodded. "Then he must have brought a wraith in. Only wraiths can control this many undead at once."

"Well, now we know where it's coming from," Ashe said sarcastically.

"At least she's helping us," Tuff replied, venom dripping from his words.

"I've done more for this world than you have," Ashe shot back and Tuff stood up.

"Right, because getting carried along by Tank and Wombly was so hard," Tuff yelled and Ashe's hands went to the hilts of her blade. But Tuff wasn't going to fight this time. He just snorted, "Always ready to kill anything that isn't simple," he sat down and looked confident with himself.

Ashe just spat in his direction and sat.

"You two done?" Tank asked. Neither Tuff nor Ashe responded. Deabla studied it for several seconds.

"We're going up the side of the mountain," Deabla said, taking control of the conversation again,

"We're going up there and we're going to kill this wraith."

"Easier said than done," Wombly said, no sarcasm in her voice, "There's an army of undead between us and them. Plus several powerful magical creatures."

"We can take care of the magic," Maria said. Lidia, who was standing next to her, nodded in agreement.

"Good," Tank said, awkwardly in his abrupt cutting off of the conversation, "We're going to get up there and destroy them. The hard part will be getting past the zombies. Once we're up there, I think anything will be easier than Azeroth."

"Gods hope," Wombly said and Tank nodded.

"So we just need to get an army to plow the way through. Then we'll get up there and kill them," Tank said. Then he paused, "How much time do we have?"

"About a week at the shortest," Lidia said, "I've heard of Aenigma. If this was something to worry her then the shortest casting time for a portal this big is two months. Sometimes they take a full year."

"So we have a week to get up there," Tank said.

"I'd prefer we get there in the next few days. We never know what we'll have to do to shut it," Deabla said. Tank nodded.

"Better safe than sorry," he said. He looked to Maria as he spoke, "Guys... this is going to be dangerous. But we have to work together and have to be fully dependent. We're going to have to fight against enemies that are more powerful than anything but maybe Azeroth, who we only beat because of Navok.

"If we're going to win this, we have to do it as a team. Together, we have a chance. Divided, we're just a couple of good warriors and powerful magic-casters. But together we're a force that is all but unstoppable. Together, we can kill a Demon Prince. Together, we can kill a wraith."

He put his hand in the middle. Deabla put his hand in the middle, then Wombly put hers. Carser quickly followed. Tuff put his hand in the middle. Ashe, glaring at Tuff then at Tank, put hers in. Lidia put her hand in. Grewslough, who'd remained silent, put his in.

Maria looked Tank in the eyes.

"After this, we all agree that we're more powerful than anything that might come after us?" She asked, "And that we'll defend each other no matter what is fighting us?"

Everyone but Tank, Tuff and Ashe agreed immediately. But even Tuff and Ashe agreed quickly.

"Anything, Tank?" Maria asked and Tank, who still hadn't committed to the pledge, felt paralyzed by indecision. And the indecision wasn't caused by fear for fighting for his friends, by the direct promise. Even without this pledge he would step up to save any one of them -even Carser, but only because Wombly seemed to feel strongly about him-, but instead it was the indirect promise. For in this he would be promising to be with her because he wasn't afraid for her safety, which was the only reason they weren't together.

Finally, Tank agreed.

"Anything," he agreed. Maria smiled and Lidia shared in her friends happiness. But there would be no celebration. Immediately after the nine friends, all friendships forged by desperation and action, by combat and by a fellow need for one another, went to convince the peoples of Walston to unite to this great mission.

As they left, Tank looked back at his friends and wondered how many would survive this oncoming struggle. Then, as he looked out at the city around them, wondered how many people would be killed by it.

And hoped Deabla was right.

## **Chapter Twenty Five: Part One:**

The area outside of Walston's southern gate were empty. This was a disturbing fact to all in attendance. An army of a thousand and a half soldiers, outlanders and inlanders together, soldiers from other worlds and this world, from this southern gate and the northern gate, marched out. They didn't walk in step with one another for fear of the sound attracting the zombies. Conversations were kept at a minimum.

It'd taken two days for the army to be mustered. It was fortunate that the smiths and other armorers had been preparing for an offensive already. The march took another day. So, a third day passed, they stood at the base of the Lightning Chain. Maria and Lidia looked up, hoping to see that the fire still raged.

But there was no fire. Grewslough, also looked for it. But Lidia and Maria had spoken to him about the death of Rivnick, who Grewslough had recognized upon their description. Grewslough knew that if Rivnick was dead then the war for the Lightning Chain had been lost. The undead had won. Now the long arm of the undead hoped to reach out into the world around them. It was a disturbing thought to him to know his entire family was likely dead.

But now, as he stared at the mountain, at this grave of his people, he knew that he had to stop the wraith from destroying anyone else's life and people.

Mlaster looked at the army with some amusement. He stood at the mouth of his cave, at the mouth of his portal area, and knew that they'd never get up in time. Unless they charged now and focused they'd never get up in time to have a chance to get up to him. He'd raised a barrier to prevent teleportation to the cave and it could stop any single wizard from getting through and having the ability to fight but if the combined might of Walston was combined then his barrier would be lost.

But unless they charged and began to make their way up now he knew they'd never make it in time. His summoning would be finished soon, within the end of this day. But he also knew that if he sent his hordes down upon the enemy army then all the wizards would have to focus on keeping their people alive. That was the fickle thing about full mortals.

Mlaster grinned, awaiting the slaughter. The humans might move up slowly to the mountain but they wouldn't make it up. He had twice their number in zombies waiting to attack. Ghouls and shade-walkers were also ready, both numbering in high hundreds.

The wraith inside him recognized victory already but Mlaster, who was smarter in the ways of man, still felt uneasy. Then, upon seeing the sun setting in the distance, Mlaster couldn't help but give away the worry. He knew his victory was complete. By the time the sun rose the portal would be complete.

He laughed aloud as he turned away from the world that would soon be destroyed.

"Why aren't they moving?" Chelsey asked. Dean looked on with equal confusion. Then he realized that they must not know. He quickly cast a spell in his mind and teleported, sending a wave out in the web that was the magical component of this realm. And, a mile above and south of Dean, Mlaster noted it.

Dean appeared next to Deabla.

"Why aren't you attacking?" Dean asked, "Do you want this world to end?"

"What? We have a four more days!" Deabla said and Dean scowled, "No you don't. The portal will open tomorrow morning. You have to get up there now!" Deabla looked up at the mountain.

"Oh no," he said.

"Do I need to take care of this now?" Dean asked, his eyes lighting up with magical energy and a fiery anger.

"No," Deabla said, "We will finish this." The man turned and walked over to Tank and Tuff, who

studied a map with Captain Marc.

"We have to go up now," Deabla said, "This is arcane magic, not divine magic. It moves faster in its summoning." Tank was about to question when suddenly above them an explosion rocked the mountain.

"A sign of the opening," Deabla said.

All nine companions were ready. They were armed, armored and awakened.

"We're going up now!" Maria said. They held hands and the young woman began to cast her spell. It took several seconds when suddenly she got smashed to the ground, as if punched in the face by a giant fist.

"What is it?" Tank asked. He was moving to pick her up but she got up too quickly.

"He has a shield," Maria said. Tank cursed and but Lidia cursed more.

"I can get through it... but I won't be able to fight up there," Lidia said, "The only way I could cast a spell is through a mind meld."

"Good thing we've been practicing that," Maria said with a grin.

Lidia began to cast her spell. Her eyes turned dark with magical energy and she looked up. She was incanting and the air around them seemed to grow thicker. Magical energy made the hair on their backs stand up and their eyes water up with stinging.

Lidia's words became deeper and deeper and she began to glow, all but her eyes, as she absorbed the power. All the others felt themselves beginning to vibrate. Lidia groaned in protest as a darker and ominous source of magical energy that turned on them. She growled and gritted her teeth. Vains bulged out of her forehead as she focused.

"Salvatore, come to me!" She roared in a voice deeper than anything she ever could have made naturally.

Mlaster felt the attack before it happened but it stunned him nonetheless. He immediately let all his soldiers loose, let the undead attack. Without control over them he put his energy up against the attacking energy. His mind met Lidia's and they sat in stalemate. Then Lidia roared to her goddess and her goddess seemed to comply.

Mlaster growled as he felt his defense give for a moment. Lidia pushed everything she had and broke through her barrier. Mlaster knew he'd lost the small battle. His confidence still there, he released a large portion of his ghoulish guards.

Tank was on his feet right after Ashe. The undead rushed them. They stood on the side of the mountain as a magically produced storm began to swirl around them. The wind cut at them and the snow stung their eyes. The portal was disrupting the environment and occasionally the wind would become fire randomly for a few moments.

Tank rushed forward, side by side with Ashe, and met two undead in front of a giant cave mouth. They could tell it was where they needed to go because of the aura that surrounded it. The undead they fought were bloated and tall, with nails coated in green poison. One scratch, Ashe and Tank knew, would yield terrible results. And with undead it seemed that death could be the most merciful of the results.

Ashe's blades were a blur as she cut into the ghoulish across from her. She ducked under a strike while Tank responded with a wide attack with his flail. The ball of the weapon cracked the ghoulish across from Ashe's skull. Then Ashe stepped forward and began to destroy the midsection of the ghoulish across from Tank.

He stepped back while the ghoulish stumbled, its legs suddenly bloody and weak. But Ashe's weapons were built to smash skulls and she could only immobilize the enemy. That was enough, however, for Tank's flail destroyed another.

The landing had been tough, especially on Lidia, who was being carried by Grewslough. Tuff and Wombly were standing while Carser, lifting a crossbow and the gun they'd invented a few days before, followed closely after the two leading warriors. Tuff rushed to the front in order to help plow their path.

More ghouls rushed forward and the three were forced to a stop. The giant cave mouth, which they'd made it into, narrowed out quick. Maria was casting spells of light to help the warriors but Tank had to turn around and yell, "Stop casting those!"

Maria stopped. She didn't really understand why, for light was needed to fight, but the light had kept them from adapting to the dark and it was hard to fight when depended on a small source of light.

Ashe and Tuff fought on either side of Tank, who held the middle. Lidia was being supported by Carser while Grewslough, who had to duck a little in the tall room, tried to make his way to the front. Then he heard a sound from behind.

"Oh no," he muttered as more undead, this time shade-walkers, rushed in from behind them.

"Maria! Wombly!" Grewslough shouted and both turned to look. Wombly took immediate action. She lifted her crossbow and pulled the trigger. Her bolt tore through one shade-walkers skull. Maria began to cast a spell when Carser stopped her.

"Save those for later," he said. He and Wombly held off the back, their crossbow bolts killing shade-walkers as they rushed in, while Tuff, Tank and Ashe pushed forward. It was slow going but they were managing. Deabla, who stood in the middle, hummed, trying to keep their energy up.

No one noticed it immediately but they weren't getting as tired as fast. Deabla, realizing he needed to keep them confident and strong, tried to feel that way but it wasn't working. He couldn't change their mood, only help them in their determination. He felt useless as he tried to make them better. Instead, he could only keep them from getting worse.

But that was better than nothing.

Tuff pushed forward, butting with his shield. They were maybe a quarter mile from where they needed to be, or so Lidia believed. Then he felt a hand grip his ankle. He looked down to see a crawling zombie. He tried to kick at it but it pulled and knocked him off balance. Tuff cried out but Ashe's hand shot out and, with a sure grip, grabbed him.

She pulled him back into a fighting stance and Tuff nodded to her.

He shouldn't have.

A ghoul stepped forward and swiped at him. Tuff got his shield up in time to stop it from hitting him but a single nail scratched his skin and the poison was let in. Tuff immediately felt the effects on his body. His left arm, the shield bearing arm, was numb and his right arm tingled with weakness.

"Oh, gods..." he said softly, "I'm... so sorry..." he said. He lashed out with his sword, pushing forward recklessly, as he was already dead. He killed three ghouls, his frenzy fueled by impending death.

Tuff growled, stabbing forward, and his sword dug deep into a ghoul's chest. Tuff snarled and tried to pull it out but he fell down. His eyes were clouded by the poison and he could hardly move. He tried to get up but it was over. He couldn't move. His eyes shut and he knew blackness.

Tank scowled as Tuff went down.

"Damn you!" Tank growled. His flail took too much space to fight in this narrow cave so he had his hammer out. He grabbed Tuff's shield and used it to guard himself. He and Ashe both fought hard, pushing. It was a hard moment for Tank to step over Tuff's body, now completely still, but the warrior knew he must.

Tank ducked a strike from one of the ghouls but it wasn't enough to completely avoid the blow. Tank knew he was dead but tried anyway. But when the strike should have hit a magical blast of energy shot past him and scorched the ghoul. He didn't look back at Maria but he thanked her anyway, with a

shout.

"We have to move faster!" Deabla shouted. He began to hum louder, trying to put more energy into them. The portal was more than a mile in, Lidia now knew.

Ashe finished off one last ghoul and the hallway was clear.

"Let's go," Tank said and they rushed forward. They followed the path, which led them left. When they turned the corner Wombly gasped.

"What the hell?" Tank asked and Ashe cursed.

Across from them stood a mirror and their own forms stepped out of the mirror.

"You're going to down," a shadow form of Tank grinned, "Because you weren't enough to save anyone."

Captain Marc directed his men as best he could. But once combat began all strategies were guide lines and his men were on their own for the most part. He could direct his men in such ways that we be advantagious but he couldn't physically fight for them. He stood on a large ramp, which allowed him to see the combat.

He looked to one of his officers and pointed to the far left, "Get men over there." Ghouls were rushing down the side of the mountain and overwhelming his men. Captain Marc scowled as his men were slashed and scratched. The outworlders were fighting hard but it was all but impossible to hold a line when your enemy outnumbered you three to one.

He looked up at the mountain and prayed that they were getting more work done than he was out here. He looked over to the Walston wizards and saw them sending their own attacks into the fray. Then he saw a pair of ghouls break through the line and rush at them.

"Get men over there!" Marc shouted. Soldiers rushed forward just in time to stop the ghouls from getting to anyone but the first wizard. The man fell over, crippled, completely still. The line broke to his right.

"Rally!" He shouted as he unsheathed his sword and rushed forward.

Tank jumped forward, his eyes filled with rage, his flail overhead. His opposite grinned.

"Always letting the temper get ahead of you," the shadow grinned as it side stepped. But Tank wasn't done. He let go of his flail and pulled his hammer across, slamming the shadow in the chest. But Tank was tough. And so was his shadow.

Across the room Wombly and her shadow fought, swords out. Carser and his shadow leveled crossbows. Ashe and her shadow fought, their blades a blur and they fought hard. Maria's shadow began to cast a spell but Maria released hers first. The spell slammed into her shadow and it cried out in pain.

Tank had gained the advantage but when he heard Maria cry out, or Maria's shadow cry out, he looked over. His shadow laughed as it stepped forward, punching him in the face then swinging its hammer at him. But Tank ducked the swing. He was off-balance however and couldn't regain the advantage he'd had before.

The shadow pressed and Tank knew he had to either take the hit or retreat. Deciding against the smart course, which the shadow might not think he'd do, Tank stepped forward and took the hit. The hammer slammed into him and nearly knocked him unconscious. A loud crack filled his ears and he knew one of his bones had snapped. The pain reached out into his entire body so he wasn't sure which bone had been broken but he didn't care.

He had the advantage. He punched a hard uppercut and the shadow was knocked back. Then it was a boxing match.

The shadow jabbed twice, landing both, but Tank took it. In response, Tank launched a heavy

cross. His right fist crunched into the shadow's face but it was as tough as Tank was and it took the hit for a better hit in response. A gut shot, a right arm uppercut, was what the Shadow gained and Tank grunted in pain.

Tank then kned the shadow in the thigh, causing it to step back, but Tank didn't take the needed reprieve and instead forced himself forward. Snapping his head forward, Tank head butted the shadow in the face, forehead to nose. The shadow's nose crunched and Tank stepped further forward, this time jabbing the shadow in the throat twice.

The shadow's eyes bulged slightly as it looked up at Tank, he unstrapped his hammer.

"I'm not pathetic," Tank snarled then his eyes widened. He looked down to see the shadow's hand around a knife. The blade had punched through his armor and into his stomach.

"You are so pathetic," the shadow grinned, "And you're emotions cloud your judgments." Tank fell back a step, looking down at his stomach. His strength seemed sapped and he couldn't get his body to listen to his mind.

"You deserve this," the shadow said, "Because you're a monster. You're going to do some terrible things if I don't do this. So I'm going to save the world and kill you, you monster." Tank's eyes widened and he fell back another step.

Ashe looked over to see Tank fall back a step. She knew she as in charge of this fight but as Tank fell back a step she knew he was in trouble. She looked at her shadow, who was her match in skill but not in experience, and knew that if she gave up her advantage it would be long before she could get it back.

But as Tank fell to the ground, his shadow standing over him, a dagger in his stomach, Ashe cried out. Sheathing a katana and grabbing a knife in one movement, Ashe launched the throwing knife. She looked back to her shadow, who rushed forward, and Ashe had to throw herself to the ground to avoid death.

Ashe didn't have time to look and see if her throw was true. She rolled, trying to get up, but her shadow wasn't letting it happen.

Wombly and her shadow dueled hard. Her blade and the shadow's blade cut and slashed, fighting and ducking. She saw Carser's shadow was still holding his bow and knew that their shot hadn't been fired. The young woman ducked an attack and stepped forward, hoping to gain an advantage, but the shadow saw it coming and kned forward, taking Wombly in the face.

Eyes watering, Wombly hit the ground hard. She rolled to her feet but could hardly see anything. Desperately she threw her sword across her body and somehow, miraculously, blocked one of her shadow's attacks. The swung across again but the shadow had waited, baiting her to defend too early.

"I'm dead..." Wombly said as she swung her blade across again. She'd expected to die immediately but it didn't happen. She looked up to see her shadow looking down at her stomach, a bolt imbedded deeply into her. The shadow looked up at Wombly, then at Carser, who was behind Wombly.

"Gotcha," Carser said. Then he grunted as his shadow released his own bolt. The shadow's aim wasn't as good but it was still an effective shot.

"No!" Wombly shouted as Carser fell to the ground. The shadow Carser stepped forward, ready to kill Wombly, when she lunged at him suddenly. The shadow jumped back, just out of range, and grinned. But Wombly didn't pull back her obviously short lunge.. because she clicked a button on her blade and it slid forward, jabbing into the shadow's stomach.

Stunned, shadow Carser couldn't believe the blade had hit him. The point hadn't dug deep at all but it was enough to stop him. Wombly lunged further forward, stabbing the sword deeper into him. The shadow looked up at her.

"You look just like her," he said and Wombly was shocked. "Wait, are you... actually a person?" she asked.

"You look just like her.." Carser's shadow said. Then he fell over and Wombly hoped she hadn't just killed an alternate form of Carser. Thought of him made her look up. She rushed over to him. He'd rolled over, sporting a shoulder wound.

"I'm okay," he said, "Just a little bloodied."

Shadow Tank stood over Tank, "She'll never love you because you didn't have the stones to give it to her. You're not worth her. You're not worth being my mirror image. You aren't even worth the effort it takes to kill you."

"Then why do it?" Tank muttered in attempt to laugh at death. Shadow Tank grinned.

"Good, at least you're brave in the face of death," the shadow said. He began to lean over Tank, to dig the dagger in further, when Ashe's throwing knife slammed into his side. Tank jumped to his feet, despite the pain in his midsection, and punched the shadow Tank in the throat. Shadow Tank gurgled as blood filled his lungs. Still enraged and hurt by the shadow, Tank beat the dead body to a pulp, for many seconds after life had fled the shadow's body.

Tank, still wounded, pulled the dagger from the shadow's throat and stood. He looked over at his companions, who'd all won their fights. They stared at him as he stood, covered in both his blood and the blood of his shadow.

"Let's go..." he grunted as he turned. He looked to Ashe, who was sporting a wound on her shoulder for saving him, and thanked her.

There were no more undead in the cave. They got to the final two rooms, both of which were giant. The roof, perhaps sixty feet up, was carved smooth. Immediately to their left a giant ring, the portal, floated. It was black and purple, with fire bursting from within. In the middle of the room stood Mlaster.

"I see you've made it," Mlaster said. He grinned. "Now I'll get to see how you die." Mlaster reached forward and sent a purple bolt of lightning at them. Magical energy crackled off the side of the bolt and everyone dodged to the side.

But Grewslough was too slow. The bolt struck him square in the chest. The mountain man looked up at Mlaster, his eyes filled with a darkness, and groaned. Then he fell to the side, dead.

"Welcome to hell," Mlaster grinned with supreme confidence.

## **Chapter Twenty Five: Part Two:**

The line failed and mortal men were losing to their undead counterparts. Captain Marc watched with horror as his men were being beaten. The ghouls and shade-walkers were too fast, too strong. The undead didn't grow afraid like the mortal men did. Where fifteen hundred men had stood to fight more than twice their number in undead, now only a thousand stood.

They were split into three groups as they fought, the outworlders in their two respective groups, and the Walston soldiers. It was strange for Captain Marc to see these soldiers, who'd trained with one another for weeks to work as a single unit, split into their factions so quickly. But it was effectively keeping them alive.

But also it was effectively ending their likelihood of fullout victory. The undead were too many and the battle was wearing at the warriors.

"We're all going to die," a man next to Marc muttered. The captain turned on the man and slapped him on the back of the head.

"That helps nobody," the man scowled at his Captain's scolding. Marc then turned. He and his soldiers were failing, that much was obvious, but would the real reason they came here be realized? He looked up at the cave mouth, where smoke was pouring out. He hoped that they were successful. Close

to three hours had passed and still they'd seen nothing.

Three bolts of energy shot forward, slamming into the wraith. Mlaster, wraith-possessed, looked up and scowled at Maria. He was about to cast a spell towards her, about to kill her, when Wombly's crossbow bolt slammed into him. Mlaster nearly attacked her but Carser's bullet slammed into his shoulder.

"No!" the wraith-possessed man hissed. Mlaster glared at his portal, which was almost completely formed, and realized that it was too late to close it. He grinned, his dark eyes matcing all eight of the companions', then turned and fled into the back room of his dungeon.

The portal, a rift, was fully formed. Already on the other side the mists of a reality that was ruled by shadows, dark flames and undeath. Forms on the other side were rushing around, too blurred for them to be recognized, but a single, giant form was taking up the entire other side of the portal. And, from the point of view of the companions, it seemed to be far larger than the rift itself was.

"Can we stop it?" Tank asked as he looked at Lidia and Maria. The priestess of Salvatora stared at the rift, looking at all its details, and it was becoming larger and growing more and more detailed with every second she watched. It was arcane magic, not divine, and so Lidia was unsure. She could barely keep her eyes open as she stared at it. But she couldn't give in to exhaustion, she knew.

"Can you stop it?" Tank asked again. Deabla and Carser immediately moved to chase after the wraith-man.

"Damn it... Go with them," he said to Wombly and Ashe. Ashe rolled her eyes but Wombly nodded vigorously, as she was already moving in that direction. The two warriors rushed to catch up with the two dedicated warriors.

"Can you stop it?" Tank asked Lidia and Maria a third time. Lidia, exhausted, finally nodded her head the negative.

"I don't think we can stop it..." she said.

"Can we do anything?" Tank asked and Lidia sighed, "I... I don't know."

"Well try. We'll kill the wraith," Tank turned to run. Tuff followed him.

Captain Marc and about fifty percent of his initial army were all that was left of the Walstonian army. About half of the original shadow-world. Three fouths of the other outwolders survived. The undead were too many. They were outmatched, Captain Marc knew.

He looked to the soldier who'd previously determined their death and scowled. He grunted as he slashed with his blade, one of the undead breaking through the line, then backed up as more soldiers moved to replace.

He was about to call in a full retreat, in hopes that some soldiers would be able to escape to Walston before the undead could get there, when great horns filled the air around them. Hundreds of arrows flew into the arena. Then battle cries fille dthe area and the press of the undead lowered substantially.

Benny led the charge. He killed zombie after zombie, lopping off their heads. Rage drove him. Selie was a lie? He thought to himself. Selie was a lie! He simmered in his rage. Then he turned to the mountain, where the cave was. He knew where the enemy was.

"See ya Talon," Benny said to the General. The man nodded, "Good luck."

Benny began to sprint in the general direction.

Dean watched as a single figure rushed up the side. He saw determination in the stride of the runner.

"They aren't doing much," Chelsey said, "The portal remains unaffected." Dean nodded. Several other powerful wizards sat in the room, all of them prepared to fight to the death. The portal couldn't be

opened. And the companions only had a few more hours.

"We will have to act if they perish. And their fight doesn't seem to be going well," a wizard said from the back. They could see the battle despite the wraith's anti-scry spells.

"They will need all the help they can get..." Chelsey said. Dean nodded. With a word he disappeared.

Lidia and Maria stared on helplessly at the rift as it grew more and more detailed and larger with every second.

"I don't know anything about rifts..." Maria said, looking to Lidia as the young woman slumped forward, truly exhausted. The spells to destroy the wards outside of the dungeon had taken more energy than she could give and still be able to fight.

"We can't close it," Lidia said, "It's a summoning. It's too far along... we can't close it. But we can redirect it."

"How?"

"I am a priestess. I can take this rift and turn it towards another realm... the realm of my Goddess, of Salvatora!" Lidia said.

"Do you have the energy?" Maria said and Lidia nodded the negative, "No... but we knew that before we got into this."

Maria thought back to all their training.

"You can do it through me, then?" Maria asked. Lidia nodded.

"It is very dangerous.. these rifts tend to react violently to being shifted," Lidia warned. Maria gave a sad smile, "We all know the risks."

Lidia looked at her friend as they began their mission and wondered if she was already dead.

Tank ducked under a sword swipe from Mlaster, which shocked the wraith. He hadn't expected the warrior to be as quick as he was. But then Mlaster couldn't follow up with another attack, which was how he beat most of his opponents, because Ashe was attacking from behind. He whipped around and blocked two slashes from her.

Then Mlaster ducked a bolt from Wombly. He dodged a jumping attack from Vombatidae, who Wombly had summoned. Then Carser's attack flew past his head. The warriors were all keeping the wraith off balance, which disturbed him, for the main wizard and cleric weren't in attendance. Even worse, Deabla was keeping them strong. Of course Mlaster didn't know these warriors by name but he recognized them now.

The wraith-possessed man couldn't finish any one of them because the others were attacking. Frustration grew and the wraith finally simmered with rage. Energy built in his chest and he released it all in Ashe's general direction. She cried out as she flew backwards then Mlaster turned on Tank.

The speed of his strikes forced Tank backwards. And even with Wombly and Carser's projectiles he could focus most of his attacks on Tank. The warrior's flail was spinning, which kept Mlaster back, and his hammer blocked any aggressive strikes from the wraith-possessed man.

Tank was stepping back but knew he wouldn't be able to keep this up, for while it was effective so far he knew he was running out of space. Plus Mlaster was likely learning his style as they fought and the faster warrior often won if the bigger one grew at all tired.

So he tried to counter one of Mlaster's attacks.

It was a terrible mistake.

Tank's flail lowered and forced Mlaster to jump. So Tank swung with his hammer, trying to knock the man while in the air. But the warrior he fought was made of shadow-stuff and could 'zone' out of the physical world for small periods of time.

Thus Tank's hammer passed through Mlaster's body. And an overextended Tank was left vulnerable. Mlaster would have gone for the kill had Carser not hit him in the hip with his bullet. But

the wraith-possessed man wasn't truly hurt.

Mlaster's blade slashed across and cut deep in Tank's exposed shoulder, his left shoulder. The young man cried out in pain. He rolled to the side before Mlaster could finish the kill. Tank rolled to his feet just in time to get kicked in the face. The wraith stood over him, then dodged an attack from Wombly. Her bolt flew by harmlessly.

Mlaster grinned and was about to slash across when Vombatidae slammed into him from the side. The wombat attacked the wraith-possessed man feriously but it still wasn't enough to truly hurt the wraith, who phased out again. Mlaster looked at Tank, who was still dazed, and began to make his way over when Ashe struck again.

Her blades a blur, Ashe scored two hits against Mlaster. The warrior grinned at her ability. But Mlaster wasn't mortal and his sword outsped hers. He blocked two attacks then kicked forward again, his strength enhanced by dark magic. Ashe flew backwards and hit the side of the cavern hard, body then head first.

She tried to get up but couldn't muster the will.

Lidia's mind reached into Maria's and where she would have found solid walls of mental defense she found an opened gate because Maria was letting her in. The two became one for several seconds and they knew each other better than anyone else in the entire world. All their memories were shared and all their thoughts became a mixture of Lidia's unusual sardonic demeanor and Maria's skeptical and generally morose view of a world gone bad.

Lidia sat on the ground, eyes closed and mind absent from her own body.

They understood one another. And that was needed. For through Maria's body Lidia acted, calling upon her Goddess to let her bring the blessings into this world. It was strange, acting through Maria's body, but Lidia understood the necessity of it more than anyone.

Both Maria and Lidia looked at the rift through the same pair of eyes, Maria's, and they regarded with the the exact same yet different opinions, for the mind meld wasn't a full mixture of the two beings. They were trying to become one but it was a long process to fully mix minds with one another.

But Lidia did control Maria's body. They worked hard and fast, Maria's arms moving in circular patterns, predetermined patterns that were the beginnings to a spell. Maria could feel her own energy building up inside her, could feel the strain of the spell as it sucked energy from her body and replaced it with fatigue.

The energy built and built and she felt her body shaking. It hurt and burned as magical energy pushed out from her chest, where it was all stored. Her limbs were sore and she felt very tired. She didn't want to hold the energy but Lidia was forcing her to.

It hurts... Maria said through their minds.

I know... but be strong.. please. Lidia responded. There's no other way to do this.

Maria was suddenly very afraid.

Dean and Chelsey tensed. Everything leaned towards them taking action.

"Are you ready?" a wizard said from behind.

"We change everything about this world if we take action," another warned. Dean looked to him and nodded. The room of wizards sat in silence as power beyond any that any single realm, aside from the God's realm, could offer was set to be released on this relatively small universe. It would shatter all that this realm was used to and likely result in the deaths of billions, on this planet and others.

The tenseness rose as no order seemed forthcoming. A few of the younger hot-headed wizards began to cast their own defensive spells.

"We wait for as long as possible," Dean finally said.

It was a bad sign when Wombly was forced to unsheath her blade. She rushed forward to defend Tank, who the wraith-possessed man was advancing on, but Mlaster hardly paid her any heed.

Wombly rushed him but Mlaster easily beat her swordsmanship with a single parry and counter, which launched Wombly back. Carser cursed and pulled the trigger on his gun. It took him a long time to reload the weapon, replacing its powder and loading the small bullet, and his aim took a long time. His shot flew just past Mlaster's head. The wraith turned on him.

"You're next," then turned back to Tank... instead of Tank, however, he found Benny.

"You..." Mlaster burst in shock. Benny, sword and dirk unsheathed, launched himself forward with reckless abandon. Mlaster barely got his blade up in time to block Benny's attack. Inhuman speed alone saved him. Benny had the advantage, he knew, and began to press it.

He nearly had the wraith defeated when Wombly released her bolt from Mlaster's backside. She knew he couldn't see... but the wraith could. Mlaster jumped to the side and bolt punched into Benny's stomach.

Benny looked down at it, at the blood rolling down his armor.

He looked up at Mlaster, who grinned.

"Damn."

Deabla looked on with horror. He'd hummed all the way up, which was keeping his allies from getting too tired but it wasn't enough. Mlaster was too fast. And Benny was wounded. Benny and Ashe seemed the only two who could get a shot in on the wraith-possessed man but their weapons weren't heavy enough.

He looked over to Tank, who struggled to get up, and saw that the Mlaster's blade was doing some sort of magical damage to the warrior.

"We need help!" Wombly cried out.

The energy burst forward from Maria. Lidia finally let it go.

It slammed into the rift, warping it, and for several seconds the rift wasn't attached to another world. Instead, it was reaching long into the abyss and Rift Runners, the abyssal leopards, were streaming in. The leopards were trying to get at Maria and Lidia but for some reason that neither could understand, not that they cared to try to understand at that moment, the leopards couldn't get to them.

The rift, after several seconds of pure energy forcing itself from Maria's body, was shifted to another world. It was bright and green, such a great contrast with the dungeon they were in.

A form, strong and powerful, rushed through to the bidding of Lidia, a loyal and powerful priestess of Salvatore.. but because Lidia's body hadn't cast the spell, it served Maria. It needed only a few moments to destroy the Rift Runners and it did, slaying all of Maria's enemies. Then, before the form could reach back into its realm, the rift shut. Locking it in the world of mortals.

Maria and Lidia stared at it in shock.

"Why did it close?" Maria asked but Lidia had no answer.

"I... don't know."

Without a portal back home, the form summoned needed a place to live. And as it looked around it saw only one obvious choice.

The rift closing was a violent affair. It sent ripples through the area around it. An explosion rocked the mountain, not effecting the immediate area around the shifted rift, but as it was shifted it'd sent rocks flying out, many miles... far enough to hit Sprinkleberry.

And Marko, who would have been sitting in his chair at that time in the morning, was moving with muscle memory to where Deabla had moved his stuff for weeks. And instead of getting hit by a flying stone that would have surely killed him Marko looked over to see the stone imbed itself into the floor.

"Damn," Marko muttered.

Throughout the city people who were moving in muscle memory according to Deabla's actions were saved by this movement. They looked at where they would have died in shock. Had Deabla been there to see it then he would have smiled in happiness. But he wasn't there. He was fighting to save the world.

Dean and the others all cheered. The portal was shifted and the enemy couldn't get in. All of the wizards but Dean and Chelsey left immediately, heading back to their respective realms or the Library of Ages.

The two stared into the scrying board, watching the warriors all scrambling to survive the onslaught of the wraith.

Mlaster screamed in rage. But instead of being distracted by the destruction of his rift, Mlaster intensified his attack. He turned on Benny and punched out. The wraith's fist slammed into Benny and the young man was launched back. As he flew he knew he would die when he hit the wall... and a song was in his ears.

The young man slammed and rebounded off the wall almost unhurt. He landed and rolled forward, ready to fight. Benny looked down at his stomach to see himself healed enough to fight. The wound was no longer bleeding but it was still enough to hurt him everytime he moved. Benny jumped forward, ready to attack.

Deabla turned his song from Benny to Tank. The warrior's arm was currently bleeding out black goo instead of blood. The goo was stinging, threatening to knock Tank unconscious. But he fought and clawed for his ability to fight. Even without Deabla's healing song Tank was getting to his feet. Deabla was healing him, though, and the wound on his side closed and he magical poison was temporarily weakened.

Deabla slumped backwards slightly as he finished his spell. It was a new attempt for him, one wrought of desperation, and the fact that he'd cast it all was an impressive feat. But now, at the end, it was up to the warriors to finish this.

Benny jumped forward, slashing viciously with his short sword then his dirk. Both blades came close to Mlaster but the wraith wasn't afraid. He could ride the line against these warriors as long as he desired. The wraith-possessed man jumped forward, ducking one of Benny's attacks, but the young warrior wasn't fooled by Mlaster's sudden strike and his dirk was waiting for the wraith-possessed man.

Mlaster took the dirk to the chest but it wasn't enough to break through his armor. Snarling, Mlaster punched out, taking Benny in the stomach. The young man flew across the room. Mlaster was ready to step forward and advance upon a dazed Benny when suddenly he was ducking a flail. Tank moved in from the side, his eyes on fire.

Mlaster blocked Tank's flail and narrowly dodged his hammer strike and was about to counter, a move that would have proved lethal to Tank, but Wombly's crossbow bolt slammed into his back. The wraith-possessed man howled in agony then snarled at Wombly. He was about to step forward when Tank slammed him in the back hard.

Mlaster hit the ground, slightly dazed, while Tank raised his hammer for another strike, a finishing strike. Tank's hammer fell, ready to slam into the wraith-possessed man when suddenly he kicked out, taking Tank in the stomach.

Tank tried to recover his attack but Mlaster was up on his feet. Benny jumped between Mlaster and Wombly, who the wraith-possessed man was moving to get, and the two fought for many seconds.

Benny struck both blades over top but pulled back his dirk, to stab with. Mlaster blocked the raised sword with his own blade. He left Benny ready to think his dirk trick would work. And Benny

did think so.

When Benny stabbed forward Mlaster jumped back while slashing down with his own blade. The long sword hit Benny's dirk at the hilt, barely missing Benny's finger, and snapped the dirk in half. Benny looked down at his blade in shock, then up at Mlaster, who was attacking already. The wraith-possessed man struck forward with his blade but Benny's wasn't a bad swordsman with a single blade.

He kept his blade in front, blocking everything the wraith sent his way, but the raw speed of Mlaster's attack nearly overwhelmed Benny. Tank came at Mlaster from behind and the wraith ducked the flail strike, which nearly hit Benny, and stabbed backwards with his blade, taking Tank in the thigh.

Grunting, Tank resisted the insidious poison in him and moved to slam Mlaster with his hammer. Benny also struck and both of their aim was true. They grinned in satisfaction... but neither blade hit the wraith-possessed man, who had become shadow-stuff again. Both of their weapons over-extended, both Tank and Benny were at Mlaster's mercy.

"You fools! I'll open another portal!" Mlaster cried out and both Benny and Tank tried to get their weapons up to bear.

Wombly was about to take her shot when she looked over at Carser, his bullet ready to be shot. She saw the look in his eyes and knew to let him take his shot. His bolts were easier to reload but not as effective if they hit. She looked forward, hoping he would take his shot soon enough. He was hesitating.

"Shoot!" Wombly cried.

"Shoot!" Tank and Benny both heard. Mlaster, too, heard it. He ignored it, knowing a crossbow bolt wouldn't be enough to kill him. He slashed as Benny and the young man narrowly avoided it. Then Mlaster grinned.

"I'll kill you next," Mlaster turned on Tank, who wasn't nearly as quick. The warrior looked up at Mlaster, who's blade was on his throat.

"You die now," Mlaster began to slice his throat when Carser pulled the trigger. The bullet slammed into the back of Mlaster's head and the wraith-possessed man jerked forward. Mlaster looked up and turned on Carser, enraged that the last of his shields had been destroyed.

Mlaster spit, raising his sword, ready to murder Carser, "You stupid son of a who-" the wraith-possessed man's eyes widened. He looked back to see Tank standing, bloodied hammer in hand.

Mlaster reached back, feeling the back of his head with his fingers and brought it forward to see red. He looked at Tank, "You... killed me?"

"Yep," Tank replied evenly. Black goo was beginning to drip out of the wound on his throat.

Mlaster began to fall when suddenly the wraith took over. Mlaster's eyes widened as his life was jerked back and forth between life and death. He was about to die when the wraith pulled him back, but only long enough to preserve itself.

"Do you think they'll kill it?" Chelsey asked.

"Not a chance," Dean replied with a sigh, "Wraith's always have a back up plan, something they can do to preserve themselves when their host dies. They can split their life force into five liches, all of which will spread around and try to regain their power. And if they're all reunited then the wraith has a chance to be reborn."

"So they cheat?" Chelsey muttered and Dean chuckled.

"Yes, they do."

The wraith was doing exactly that. Tank and his companions watched as Mlaster's body was torn to peieces. Tank was about to reach out when he exploded, blood flying everywhere, blinding them all for a moment. Benny stabbed out at images of long dead beings but they weren't physical, only the

memories.

Five beings, five liches, flew out from the wraith's previous host. They flew down the tunnel and far away, too fast to be followed. Then a giant explosion occurred in the middle of the room. And all the companions knew was the darkness.

## Chapter Twenty Six:

Deabla's eyes opened first. He looked around for several seconds, then saw Tank choking on the black goo in his sleep.

"Oh no, no no no, you're not dying now," Deabla shouted as he sprinted across the room. The remains of the wraith still covered Tank and the explosion had knocked him close to forty feet away from where he'd been standing, but it hadn't killed him... yet.

The goo was clogging his system. Deabla began singing, sending the last of his energy into Tank in the form of a healing spell. The goo slowed to a stop and Tank's wound began to heal. Deabla dug deep, trying to heal Tank as far as he could, but the healing of the wound slowed and Deabla could not finish the healing.

But Tank's eyes opened and he looked up to Deabla.

"Thank you..." he said softly before his eyes shut and he slipped into consciousness. Deabla soon followed, his own eyelids shutting as he succumbed to exhaustion.

Nearly a day later Tank's eyes opened first. He looked around, to see everyone laying on the floor. "We... we survived," he said in disbelief. He wasn't sure if he'd been dreaming or not when he felt his life being saved by Deabla. He couldn't remember for sure if it'd actually happened or not. But Deabla lay on the ground near where he'd fallen asleep after saving Tank.

"Wake up!" he shouted. The others slowly began to awake. Wombly was the first to stand up. She smiled.

"We won... wait, did we?" She said and asked. Tank nodded, "I'll find out." He turned to sprint away, down where they'd left Lidia and Maria.

As he ran half his heart screamed that he'd walk in on a scene of carnage where they'd failed to close the rift and half his heart hoped, for it dared not do any more than hope, that it would find Maria and Lidia sitting safely, no damage done to them.

He walked into the room to see the bodies of Rift Runners laying across the ground, ripped to pieces. In the middle of the room Maria lay, unharmed.

"Maria," he exclaimed, "Maria!" He rushed forward, grabbed her shoulders, and turned her so that he could look into her face. Lidia sat in the corner, eyes open but filled with worry.

"Tank," she said softly.

"What happened?" Tank asked.

"I'm... not sure. We shifted the portal... then we were knocked unconscious... by something from the other room. I don't know what happened."

"Is... she okay? Will she be okay?" Tank asked and Lidia stared into his eyes. She tried to say it, tried to tell him what she feared, but she couldn't. Hesitating only a moment, she nodded.

"She... she will be fine."

Tank nodded, "Good. Good... I promised that I'd... put aside Azeroth's prophecy. I love her..." he turned to look at Maria, who was still unconscious, "I love you." It nearly broke Lidia's heart.

Deabla looked to Wombly, smiling in disbelief, "We won!" he smiled and Wombly smiled back.

Deabla smiled and looked over at Benny, who sat crouched, staring at the cave where the wraith's essence seemed to have run away. The thin warrior looked at his single blade, at his most prized possession at that moment, and realized that the wraith was dead. In the middle of the room lay

another blade.

"I think that's yours," Wombly said and Deabla agreed. Benny stepped forward and grabbed it, looked down at its blade and nodded.

"My friends are avenged," he whispered to himself. "My family is avenged..." tears streaked down his cheeks.

Tuff rushed into the room.

"You... died?" Wombly asked and Tuff shrugged.

"I guess it wasn't lethal... I just... couldn't move, like it killed me, but instead..."

"It paralyzed you," Wombly said. Tuff nodded.

"Looks like I missed the fireworks... Shame, I think I'd have helped-" he words stopped. He was looking in the corner.

"Oh no..." his voice was nothing more than a whisper. For his eyes were focused on the ground where Ashe lay, her body broken, her eyes still open.

"What?" Wombly asked. She turned and looked at her friend's corpse.

"No... no. No!" Wombly shouted. She rushed over to Ashe's body. She looked into her friend's blue eyes, "No! No! You can't be dead! You can't die! No, you bitch, no!"

She looked up, "Please... no." She looked down at her friend's body, her corpse, and reached down. She kissed Ashe's forehead, thinking suddenly of what Ashe would have wanted, and closed her friend's eyes.

"You are my sister," Wombly said softly. Tears still streaked down her cheeks but she didn't sob anymore. She reached around Ashe's body and lifted her. Ashe's head lolled to the side freely.

Tuff, Benny, Deabla, Carser and Wombly walked from the room. Tuff held Ashe in his arms, still unsure of his feelings towards her. In the end, though, it was all even. Both Ashe and Laurie had died, and for a cause they believed in. Tuff couldn't hold a grudge against her but he knew that she was not forgiven.

But as she lay in his arms, her head lolled to the side, cold to the touch, he couldn't help but feel sorry.

"Is she..?" Tank asked, looking over at Wombly, and her grim facial expression was all he needed.

"Damn," the young warrior cursed. He looked over at Ashe and fought tears for a moment. He looked back to an unconscious Maria and cursed again.

"What now?" Tuff asked Deabla, who just shrugged helplessly.

"I guess we just saved the world..." Deabla said quietly.

"Doesn't seem like it," Tank muttered. Wombly shared the sentiment. They, as a group, began to make their way out, Ashe in Tuff's hands, Maria in Tanks. Lidia walked in the back, her face a mask of pain.

The grim companions finally found Dean, who nodded solemnly to them. He seemed about to say something to them but one looked from Tank and Tuff ended the thought.

Chelsey teleported the remaining Walstonians back to their city, back to rebuild their home. The peoples, barely half their original number, returned in grief and pain. The companions returned to Sprinkleberry.

Sprinkleberry mourned. Not everyone understood the loss of Ashe, who was slain in combat to save them all, but they wore the black and they knew a giant ceremony had taken place. Ashe's body was buried in the Vault of Heroes, a place for the heroes of Sprinkleberry to rest in. She was the first to be buried with the name of, "Hero of the Kingdom."

The ceremony was hosted by King Jev, who ruled the entire kingdom from Sprinkle-berry, and led by Lidia as the leading priestess. The other Gods and Goddesses were represented, almost all thirty

of them, as Ashe's ashes were laid in the ground.

Lidia suppressed tears as she said the final words to a most sincere prayer for the soul of her friend. She wasn't asking Salvatore specifically to save Ashe but any goodly God or Goddess to take action and preserve the soul of this amazing woman.

Wombly and Deabla stepped forward first, both of their eyes red but neither crying, and said their goodbyes to their sister. Wombly spent a full minute longer than Deabla did, holding her sister's hand. Deabla did nothing but watch. Tank and Esmeralda walked up afterwards, while Wombly was still holding Ashe's hand. After several minutes of quiet talking, Tank gently put his hands on Wombly's shoulders and guided her from Ashe's grave.

All who considered Ashe their friend said parting words, hoping that all of their sorrow would be credit enough for Ashe to get into a favorable next life or after life.

Grewsloug, too, received a burial. But his was up in the mountains and far fewer people attended. Only his immediate family and his companions in his last days were there. No one had any parting words to say for him, who they barely knew but had depended on for many weeks and felt almost a brotherhood towards.

His body was burned in flame, which was a fitting symbol, his mother thought, for he had died to preserve the way of life of the tribes of the mountain. And of all the ways to be removed from this realm a burning was the most honored way for the tribes, who rarely used fires large enough to cook a small rodent or maybe a small deer.

Weeks passed. The friends recovered in bed from both physical and emotional damage. Harold's Hill was still running, despite shock waves of energy that had been released by the shifting of the rift, so Tank, Deabla and Wombly couldn't grieve as much as they might had they shared no responsibilities but whenever they weren't busy they were sad. Tank was found at Maria's side as often as not. Training had grown a sad experience, as Ashe was no longer there to train with.

Soon a week became a month and a month half a year. Maria still lay in her bed, still asleep. Lidia went to her daily and cast spells of healing. Benny stayed with them all that time, recovering in bed from wounds. The city around them seemed silent, still recovering from the shockwaves sent out by the shifting of the rift.

Even things in Walston seemed to turn up. Dean and Chelsey brought more people in and Captain Marc had been elected the leader of the city. King Jev had even solidified his ruling by naming him a part of the royal family. He would be next in line to inherit the crown if Jev died, which was required because the Kingdom had no heir. The cities were recovering from their deaths and though people were sad there was a certain hope in the air as nightmares of boozers and zombies, of wraiths and demon princes of chaos faded.

All seemed simple to the companions at that time.

Then...

Benny's eyes burst open. He was drenched in sweat, a cold sweat, and felt his heart beating in his chest. A dream of a little girl with big brown eyes had disturbed him. More than her presence, however, had awakened him. Nightmares of his slaughter of the house had filled him with terror, had forced him to awaken.

And in the dream he'd seen Selie, seen her as the final daughter he'd murdered, the final kill. As he looked around he wasn't sure whether he'd imagined her or if she was a specter that had come back to save him in order to fully avenge herself. The theories played hard on his mind.

That day, however, he left Harold's Hill to hunt the lichs. He didn't tell any of them of his mission, for fear they might try to dissuade him, but he told them where he was going. First to Keell then beyond into the desert. He told them it was to find himself and in a way it was.

A year after the battle for the Lightning Chain Tank and Wombly sat across from each other, both looking at a chess board. Wombly was winning, as was expected, quietly thinking of each others future moves. Ashe was remembered but her memory was no longer a cause for only pain. They'd put a quiet little shrine up in front of Harold's Hill.

Neither, at this moment, was in pain. They had wounds that still ached but it wasn't the cutting pain they'd felt before, both physically and emotionally. They were free from their memories and the agonies of regret and guilt. All had made their peace with the past, or close enough to live with relative peace.

Tank moved his queen forward and it was immediately taken by Wombly's rook. He frowned then cursed.

"Hey now, watch your language," Wombly smiled and Tank nodded. Tank moved again and again lost a piece. He was about to curse again when Carser burst into the room. Tank and Wombly both looked up to him and Wombly's smile widened.

"Hey," she said. But Carser wasn't there to talk idly.

"Maria's awake," Carser said excitedly. Tank's eyes widened and the chess piece in his hand fell from his grip. He looked over to Wombly and smiled. He was through the door before Carser could move and the tall, lanky young man was nearly knocked over by an almost as fast Wombly.

Tank burst into the room and Maria looked over.

"Tank," she smiled. Tank walked forward and embraced her, hugging her tightly.

"I've missed you," he said softly and she nodded. "I've missed you too."

"I never gave up," Tank said, "I never gave you up."

"I love you," Maria smiled and Tank responded equally. Then he leaned forward and kissed her, long and deeply. They shared each other for many moments then he pulled back.

"Get a room!" Wombly said from the side and Deabla grinned. He looked at his two friends with the utmost of happiness for them, finally together despite four years of struggle.

"I think we have one," Maria said wickedly and Wombly's mouth fell open. Tank's did too.

"I think we should give them some privacy," Denerick said from the back, "For their reunion."

"Are you sure that's wise, since she'd just awakened?" Wombly asked and Maria grinned.

"I don't care if it's wise, it's what I want." Lidia just stood in the corner, staring. She nodded then walked out of the room, bringing all of her companions, except Tank, with her.

As soon as the door was shut Maria leaned forward and embraced Tank. They spent the night together, finding peace and comfort in each other's arms. The next morning, Tank and Maria both made their way downstairs. Esmeralda smiled at them, happy for Tank despite her feelings, and Wombly clapped in excitement.

The companions were together, in one way or another. Ashe was there whether she was dead or not, for her memory lived on. Maria was saddened to hear about Ashe. It took her many days to come to terms with the loss of her friend but even that couldn't over-shadow the relief in her. She looked to Tank with a spark in her eyes. And he looked back with equal emotion.

The companions were happy.

### **Epilogue:**

Nearly two hundred miles away Benny walked into a tavern of a smaller city, called North Boc. There was information to be found, information he cared deeply about. He walked up to the bar and ordered a drink, but not for himself. The figure next to him, the only other in the tavern at this hour, looked to him with satisfaction.

Red lips that matched red eyes curled up in a wicked grin.

"You're late," the woman said quietly and Benny shook his head, "You're early," he argued. The woman's smile deepened.

"Maybe. But do you have the coin?" she asked. Benny slid the drink in her direction and she caught it. Lifting the flagon and draining the potent liquid in a single gulp. She looked at him with a grin as he pulled a bulging sack of coins from his pocket. How he'd gotten the coins didn't matter to her and the fact that he'd gained the coin in only a few days didn't bother her at all. Her informants had warned her about him but she felt she understood him well enough.

"A dark creature was seen traveling far to the east... about half a year ago," the woman said.

"What's out there?"

"Nothing really." Benny eyed the woman for a second.

"What's out there?" he asked again. She smiled and pointed towards his belt, where more gold was likely hidden. Benny reached into his cloak and pulled out a smaller pouch. He handed it to her and she smiled.

"There's something new growing out there. Showed up about a year ago, when that rift exploded in the Lightning Chain by Sprinkleberry. Sent out waves of magic even out here. Opened rifts and let those damned Rift Runners in. Supposedly it even teleported a few people out of this realm. But that's not why I'm here, is it?"

"But no it is more of a reoccurring rumor than anything but it's called the Kingdom of Rust. Certain groups of people have gone out to it in search of forgotten treasures and legendary weapons. Supposedly it was the location of a long lost people," the woman looked towards the bar and motioned for a second drink.

He complied while Benny studied her. Then, licking his lips, he nodded.

"What happened to the groups? They return?"

"Not a single person has," she said.

"That a good thing or a bad thing?" Benny asked and she smiled and shrugged.

"Only got the information, not the personal stories. You'll have to go check it out yourself if you really want to know," she said.

Benny looked at her for several seconds then looked down at his blades, his short sword and Mlaster's old long sword, which seemed to speak to him every once in a while. He looked up at her and nodded.

"Get me a pair of horses and supplies and I'll make it worth your time. If you can find a group of people to go along with me that'd be even better. Make them loyal for the money I'll be supplying. I am going to the Kingdom of Rust to hunt that dark thing down. And if I'm gonna kill it then I'm likely going to need some help."

He looked out at the world and then looked into himself. He saw scars, saw rage and anger. The wraith wasn't dead, he knew that much. A sad group of ghosts, Silo, Melinda, Mave and Giles had visited him, giving him a message that until the liches were all dead, the wraith wouldn't be defeated. And that he could find the wraith's final hiding spot only when he had all of their magical force in his blade.

They'd seemed sad to him as they left. Now he was determined to avenge them. When he closed his eyes he still saw Selie's dark eyes, so filled with innocence. And the fact that he'd murdered her made him the worst thing he could be... a Monster.

But as he looked out at the world, out at a world so filled with monsters that would see it destroyed, he knew that only he and those like him could save it. Because saving it wasn't a job for normal people. No.

Saving the world was A Monster's Job.

By Roderick Kujo,

Helped by Samantha Sparrowtail.