

AMJ: Kingdom of Rust

I'd like to start off by thanking all of those who helped and supported me as I wrote this, who always gave me good advice, always told me exactly what they thought of my writing (which wasn't always as complimentary as would be nice) and always listened to my ideas, which I'm confident was no easy task.

Thank you very much Samantha Blumberg and Jesse Major, who are two of my very best friends, and my always supportive parents, Marty and Melissa Trujillo.

Prologue:

Maria shouted and Lidia looked up as she screamed. Maria's mouth was open as a bright white form flowed into her mouth and down her throat, into her body. Lidia screamed.

"No!" Lidia cried out as Maria collapsed to the ground. A stocky figure rushed into the room moments later, asking after her.

"Will she be okay?" he asked. She could see the emotion in his eyes, the desperation, the fear that he had erred and lost her forever. Lidia watched herself as she lied again, as she watched herself lie every night, and the shame was too much.

"She... she will be fine."

Lidia's eyes burst open. She was lathered in a cold sweat and her heart raced. She fought a strong torrent of emotions and tried to calm herself. She couldn't. Composing herself, she got dressed and tried to find a distraction. But the dream, a message from her Goddess perhaps, meant something. And she had to do something about it.

Lidia stepped forward lightly, the balls of her feet touching the ground before her heel. She silently prayed to her Goddess, Salvatore, as she moved quietly through the inn known as Harold's Hill. She was in a medium size hallway, one in which five rooms branched off on both sides. The once very modest inn had grown from its original six room set up to a ten room set up. The owner, Esmeralda Housekeep, daughter of its original owner Harold Housekeep, had done much to improve it.

Lidia lived at Harold's Hill with her companions, people she trusted her life with.

But now, as she crept through the hallway, it was with as much stealth as she could muster and her heart raced more than it ever had in the perils of combat, for the risks were much more dire. Her mission was unknown to the rest of the companions, who couldn't understand. Only she understood the truth, only she realized the risk and only she understood her dilemma.

The last room on the left housed Maria Findella and Tank, who had no known last name.

The two were her companions and two of her closest friends, Maria particularly. But her charge was not shared by them as she alone knew what she knew. Tank was out, working on some invention of another companion named Wombly, and Maria slept alone in her room, as was usual lately, for Maria's pregnancy was taking a toll on her stamina and she preferred to be alone more so than anything else.

Lidia got to the door, cast a quiet spell, and slowly opened it. She crept in and quietly closed it. The door hadn't made a noise because of her spell. She turned on Maria, who had gained some weight in her pregnancy but still looked beautiful. Her beauty had never been founded in slender hips or a lack of weight.

Rather, she was beautiful because she had weight in all the right places. She was a woman of stunning beauty with her long brown hair and dark brown eyes, but she was especially beautiful in her sleep, when concerns no longer creased her face. Lidia looked to her, then to the bulge in her stomach, the legacy of a child near birth. The legacy of her charge.

The need for secrecy.

Lidia began to cast a spell, one that was inspired by her Goddess, who knew of her plight and agreed with it. Maria was in month nine and the time was near that things would grow chaotic. Lidia tried to finish her spell but couldn't. Shamed and defeated, unable to carry out her mission, she quietly left the room. She slid the door open, her spell of silence still in effect, then began to slide out when she noticed Tank looking at her.

His eyes were curious rather than accusatory and that bit into Lidia's heart.

"What's up?" he asked softly and she smiled.

"Just... checking on Maria," she said, "I wanted to make sure everything was alright." Tank smiled and nodded, his face brightening. She savored the look, the smile, hoping that she would see it again.

"Is all well?" he asked.

"Perfect," Lidia blurted, lying. She smiled back and stepped past him. As Tank walked past she turned to look at him, to inspect him. He was strong, a powerfully built man, stocky and broad, and his mind was sharp. But as she looked to him she could only hope he was ready. Then, as she considered the problem and him, she knew he would never truly be ready.

He looked back to her, moving his recently cut dark brown hair out of his face. Blue eyes, filled with the anticipation, and nerves, of a soon-to-be-new father, cut through her and filled her with guilt. At that moment she almost spilled her cover for emotions were new to her. When she was in her own room she cursed the day she'd met them.

She loved them, with all her heart, but until almost a year and a half ago she'd never really cared about anyone the way she cared about them. She was aloof, calm and removed. She was a preistess that rarely, if ever, made a biased decision. But her objectivism was destroyed by her feelings for these people.

Troubled dreams alone would come to Lidia and she opened her door to walk downstairs. She noticed Tank and Maria's light was on and knew Maria had awakened. She probably had felt a kick, as was to be expected, and Tank was likely listening to her talk of her child... one that, if Lidia found the heart to carry out her mission to completion, would never be born.

Guilt weighing her down, she walked to the main room of the inn. She found Denerick, a tall, dark skinned mountain man from the far east, sitting in his customary corner. He was nice enough but he was careful never to reveal a single thought unless he felt it was required. He was growing older but was still strong with his age. Close to sixty years old, Denerick had only few gray hairs.

As Lidia sat at the bar, where Esmeralda worked, she admired the efficiency with which the young woman delivered Lidia's favorite drink from memory. Esmeralda was attractive, a cute girl who was just a year from her twenties, so a few years Lidia's junior, with short red hair and large blue eyes.

Esmeralda was petite but despite her diminutive size she was a force when she decided to be. She had run Harold's Hill for close to five years and nobody traded her for more profit than she felt fit. She was a fair trader and a strong hand to guide Harold's Hill and nobody ever took advantage of her but she had made many friends in the city they lived in, Sprinkleberry.

"Thank you," Lidia said and Esmeralda nodded. "How are you?"

Esmeralda smiled, "Oh, you know me. Always worrying about my Alron but he's fine so I'm just fine." She referred to her brother, who was a few years younger than her and had decided to join the Sprinkleberry army. But she looked to Lidia with a raised eye brow, "How are You?" Lidia smiled in pride. Esmeralda had been a shy thing when they'd first met but now she was a good social partner. It was good to Lidia to know that the young timid girl had grown to be a proud and strong young woman.

"I'm fine," Lidia lied and Esmeralda saw through it. "No," the young innkeeper argued, "What is wrong?"

Lidia sighed. She couldn't tell Esmeralda what was wrong but she wanted to more than anything else in the world. She wanted to tell someone, anyone other than her Goddess, who couldn't help her on the level she felt she needed it. Salvatore knew her problem and offered her the power to try and amend it the little she could. But the magic to carry it out was only a small part of her problem.

"What would you do if you knew something was going to happen... something... bad, really bad, and it would devastate someone. And it's going to happen but they're happy. Really happy... and you just don't want to hurt someone?" Lidia asked. As she asked the question she hated herself more than anything. But she also struggled with the fact that she was even asking something like this. In the past she would have told them immediately and taken care of the problem.

But Tank and Maria were worth more than that. They were worth effort and tact... and the latter she lacked. Thus she was trying to mask Tank's first struggle. The second would come all the same. She couldn't lighten that load. But if the first came out wrong it would lead to terrible things, to terrible pain and suffering.

Esmeralda seemed to read her.

"What's going to happen?" Esmeralda asked. Lidia shook her head, desperately trying to put Esmeralda at ease. She was a danger to be around if one wanted to keep a secret. Of her companions only two of them might guess at her troubles and one of them, Deabla, was away at this time. But Esmeralda was a sharp one and sensed something deeper than Lidia might be physically letting on.

"It's just... a friend of mine is going to ask her friend out but he's already with another," Lidia lied, hoping to throw Esmeralda off her trail. Blue eyes cut through her but they missed the lie.

Esmeralda smiled, "Hearts and love are strange things. But a hurt heart will heal more quickly the quicker the pain is put in. Nothing hurts more than walking face-first into a bad situation. So tell her and maybe she'll feel better."

Relieved, Lidia almost didn't notice Esmeralda's chuckle.

"What?" Lidia complained.

"Where is Lidia and who are you? The Lidia I knew a few years ago wouldn't care about the troubles of another's love life," Esmeralda said with a smile but Lidia couldn't really smile back. She nodded.

"I think I'm gonna go out," Lidia said. Esmeralda's eye brow raised again but she didn't question Lidia any further. Hoping maybe Lidia was just recovering from a nightmare, as the entire group of companions had in the past, Esmeralda just watched as Lidia left.

Esmeralda sighed. Her companions were a tortured bunch. It did her well to see Tank and Maria finding happiness with each other. And more, to have a child. It hurt Esmeralda, because she'd fallen for Tank when she'd first seen him, but she saw in his eyes, and Maria's, something deeper than she felt. He loved her, and she him, and that was worth far more than her fanciful fantasies.

But the nightmares had been rough.

The companions, Tank, Wombly, Maria, Deabla and Ashe, had been involved in two major events in the last five years. Tank, Wombly and Ashe had originally helped Sprinkleberry to repel then take over Keell, who was ruled by a demon in disguise. The demon, Azeroth the Prince of Chaos, had sent soldiers from Keell to attack Sprinkleberry.

Keell's initial attacks had found no real footing because Azeroth only wanted death; the souls fueled his own power. But when a Keellian general switched sides and sent his army, combined with Sprinkleberrian forces, to try and uproot him Azeroth had raised an army of undead and boozers, a mosquito-like demon.

Because the armies had no success it was up to Tank, Wombly, Ashe and others to try and kill the demon prince. The trio, and five others, succeeded but with the death of three of the eight. But they weren't the only ones to die. The war cost thousands of lives as undead rose up to destroy both much of Sprinkleberry and Keell. The struggle, known as the Chaos War, even reached Sprinkleberry's royal family and only the youngest son, Jev, survived because he was out in the field instead of at the royal palace in Sprinkleberry.

With Keell's royal family destroyed and in debt to Sprinkleberry The Kingdom came to rise as King Jev, ruling from Sprinkleberry, took control of the lands. Cities to the north, south, east and west had grown. A city called Walston, hidden in a giant mountain chain called the Lightning Chain, was becoming very prosperous.

The Lightning Chain, however, was quickly taken over by a wraith summoned by Azeroth and forgotten until its rise to power in a man called Mlaster. The wraith would raise undead in the form of zombies, shade-walkers -fast zombies with nails coated in poison lethal to the touch-, preta -a form of ghost that killed its prey by inflicting their own death upon the victim-, and ghouls -bloated zombies with hunger that was never sated and nails coated in a paralysis poison-, in the thousands.

The only warning the cities got was a fire on the Lightning Chain, which was unheard of because the tribesmen who lived there banned fire as a weapon as they'd burned down the entire mountain hundreds of years before. Thus a fire big enough to be seen from Sprinkleberry, a full thirty miles away, was unheard of and feared.

The companions, who had been summoned by a veteran of the Chaos War named Tuff, ended up lost between Sprinkleberry and Walston and for close to two months during winter. Only through luck and great skill had they survived. The wraith was going to summon a powerful beast, an unknown evil, that would have threatened not only their universe but also the universes around it. Thus the portal wouldn't have been allowed to be completed, for a group of wizards from other realms would have stepped in but with dire effects on the world. In the last possible moments the companions managed to foil a plot of the wraith to summon some sort of great evil instead of forcing the other-realm wizards to take part in it, which would have ended terribly for the realm.

Esmeralda sighed as she considered their struggle. Ashe, a friend of her and close friend to Tank, Wombly and Deabla, had died in the effort. King Jev and Sprinkleberry had buried her body in the Vault of Heroes and named her the first Hero of the Kingdom, but that was hardly enough to remedy their pain at her loss.

Thus nightmares of zombies and ghouls, of preta and shade-walkers, of wraiths and demon-princes had often awakened the companions in the middle of the night. They'd often come down to her bar and spoken to her. The descriptions alone had sent shivers down her spine. How they'd endured she didn't know.

Now, as she watched Lidia walked out the front of the inn, she wondered at the demons that tormented her. They had a past, that much was obvious, but the pain in Lidia's eyes inspired sympathy in Esmeralda. She sighed again then began to clean Lidia's glass. It was a painful business, one that left the group on the cusp of madness quite often. but it was one that only they could do.

She sighed as she considered what it was forcing her friends to be, to endure and, most of all, to do. She couldn't even begin to imagine her friends doing some of the things they they told her. Many of them terrified her beyond her wildest nightmares and seemed the acts of only monsters. Then again, as she considered the world around her, maybe they lived in a world where they needed monsters.

Because the world needed what they did... but maybe what they did only monsters could do.

Wombly sat alone, memories of her closest friend filling her mind.

"I miss you," Wombly said softly, too quiet for Carser, who sat across from her and considered the chess board before him, to hear. He did notice that she said something but didn't question her about it. He knew the pain in her heart, knew that Wombly missed Ashe. He didn't know Ashe as well as Wombly did but he'd heard many things about her and wished he'd known her longer.

Wombly and Ashe had known each other since their early childhood and grown up together in the streets of Sprinkleberry. Ashe had been a thief and assassin, had done things that Wombly couldn't do to raise money for her, Wombly and Deabla to survive on the streets. Ashe had supplied coin for food and for Wombly to complete some of her inventions, which were sold for coin, which was used for food.

That had all changed, however, when they'd met Tank and Maria, who were on the run from Sprinkleberry. Everything had changed. They found a home in Harold's Hill, which was still run by Harold at that time. Very quickly, however, that home was compromised.

Assassins, after Maria, attacked the inn in a fairly large battle that resulted in Harold's death. The five years since had done little to ease the sadness in Wombly, for Harold had acted the father in that little time he had with them, giving them a place to live and the support they needed. The assassins

inspired Tank to join the Nose Breakers, who were a feared part of Sprinkleberry's military. The Nose Breakers were feared by the enemy armies but also by those who had family members in it, for they often led the riskiest assaults in battle.

The Nose Breakers had assigned Tank to a special mission. Ashe and Wombly, who had followed him to keep him alive -and they were needed quite often- also got put in this special unit and that led to them killing Azeroth. Wombly smiled as she thought back to their first days together, with Tank and Ashe sparring viciously, Ashe often leaving purple welts all over Tank's body from their wooden practice weapons and Tank literally throwing the young woman across from the room several times.

Wombly's smile faded as she thought of Ashe's recent death, in a cave up on the Lightning Chain. She'd saved their lives with her attack but Mlaster, powered by the wraith, had kicked her and cracked her skull on the cave walls.

"Your move," she heard Carser say and she looked up. She realized he'd likely said it a few times before that but she saw understanding in his eyes, the same she often saw in Tank's. Wombly was a pretty girl, with long brown hair and dark brown eyes that, as Carser or any other person looked into, reflected a great intelligence and good will. She was attractive in her own way.

The two looked up at Lidia walked past, her blue eyes narrowed as she looked downwards in what seemed to be shame. Wombly noted that Lidia's seemingly always stringy white hair seemed less healthy than usual, which wasn't necessarily bad because Lidia didn't take care of her appearance enough to care. But Wombly saw stress in her friend.

"Hey, are you okay?" Wombly asked and Lidia looked to her and nodded curtly. Then Lidia continued on.

Lidia found herself in a small structure, one dedicated to Salvatore, her Goddess. It was one of few temples dedicated to the Goddess of Justice, who didn't require any conformity or union from her followers. She was praying for guidance, for strength, when a man walked in.

He watched her for many minutes before she noticed him, so deep in prayer was she.

"You seem troubled," the man said and Lidia gave an imperceptible nod. "I am a priest of this order, maybe you can speak with me of your plight?" he offered and Lidia smiled.

"I, too, serve Salvatore. But I fear that my conflict is my own... and my Goddesses, of course," she smiled weakly, "I am simply trying to gain further guidance from her."

"You seem unsure of your course," the man said, "Maybe you believe it isn't just?"

"It's... I wish it was as simple as justice or injustice, as good and bad... but this is not black and white," Lidia looked desperate. "My mission is... complicated and tonight may be the last chance I get to..." the words died in her throat and her vision slipped downwards, weighted by shame.

"Do what your heart tells you. Salvatore values the willingness to act for what is good in her priests and priestesses more than anything. Unless she has taken a direct interest in this and told you in no uncertain terms what you must do then it is up to you to interpret and she will pass judgment on whether you are being just or not," the man said, "It is the duty of people to make decisions. It is the place of the Gods to judge us for it later."

Lidia nodded.

"And if I couldn't find it in myself to do the... right... thing, then what would you say?" Lidia asked and the man shrugged.

"If it is so right then would you not have acted already?" he asked, "As you said, not all things are simply black and white, with a good side and evil side. Your struggle is no doubt found within the gray areas of our world. It is then your charge to take the correct action. Do what you must, what is right, even if it isn't pleasant."

Lidia nodded a second time, then stood.

"Thank you," she said and the man nodded.

Lidia began to make her way back home with a firm step but a quivering lip.

Determination filled her steps as she walked back to Harold's Hill... a determination to kill the abomination within Maria.

Part One: The Struggles to Come

Chapter One:

Lidia walked into Harold's Hill and nodded to Esmeralda, who smiled to her. Lidia made her way to Tank and Maria's room and opened it quietly. Tank looked up to her.

"Esmeralda needs you for something," Lidia said and Tank nodded, smiling.

"I think she'll give birth soon," Tank said quietly and Lidia forced a smile back. Her fingers shook and her knees nearly gave out as she stepped aside from Tank, blissfully ignorant Tank, left. It'd taken her many minutes to make her way back to her home. She knew what she had to do. She would finish her charge and leave. Forever.

This was for the best. She turned on Maria, who shifted in sleep, troubled by some nightmare or another.

"It'll be done soon, my sister," Lidia said softly. She began to chant, building up divinely inspired magic energy. She would use her most powerful and direct spell, one that would destroy the baby with no pain and without harming Maria physically. The emotional and mental results couldn't be prevented.

Lidia's energy built up as she quietly incanted the words to her spell.

Tank walked over to Esmeralda, who smiled at him.

"What is it?" he asked and she cocked her head to the side.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Lidia said you needed me for something?" Tank asked and Esmeralda frowned.

"I didn't ask her for anything... or you?" Esmeralda said and Tank shared her puzzled look.

At that moment Wombly and Carser walked in, Carser frowning also, but for a different reason. After a dozen games he'd come away without a single victory. Wombly, proud of her streak, noticed the looks on Esmeralda and Tank's face.

"What is it?" Wombly asked.

"Has Lidia been acting weirdly around you guys too?" Tank asked, "She just lied to me about Esmeralda needing help. I was with Maria and she walked in with this look on her face..." the words died in his throat. He turned and sprinted away as a realization, one he hated to even consider but could not ignore, dawned in his mind.

Lidia's spell was nearly complete. The room was thick with magical energy and Maria's eyes threatened to open at any moment. But Lidia couldn't risk releasing the spell early without also killing Maria. So Lidia continued, afraid but willing to sacrifice for the cause.

She was nearly done with her spell. Ten... Nine... Either... Seven... the door behind her burst open. Tank felt the energy and knew it was an aggressive, and likely lethal, spell. Six... Five... Four... He grabbed her, trying to disrupt her spell. Three... His hands gripped her mouth roughly but she bit him and drew blood. Somehow she managed to keep her spell going despite him grabbing her around the waist and pulling her. Two...

Maria shifted in her sleep. Tank slung her to the ground as hard as he could and Lidia lost sight of Maria just as her eyes burst open.

"No!" She screamed and she felt the magical energy still in her. She had to release it. Pointing her hand upwards, she let all of the lethal energy, a burst of flame that had no real focus. So powerful was the spell that the flames reached up a hundred feet above her head.

Ignoring the spell Tank grabbed her and began to choke her.

"Why! Why damn you!" He yelled in her face, his eyes filled with rage. He wasn't trying to kill her, she knew, just choke the breath out of her.

"I... had... to..." she gasped but Tank wouldn't stop. She was out of breath and Tank punched her in the face.

"She's to birth my child and you try to kill her!" he slapped her across the face, drawing blood from her nose. *Murderer!* Tank growled in his mind, his thoughts screaming out at the impossibility of all this. He punched her again, his rage not yet played out. He was about to hit her again when suddenly a form slammed into him.

Tank was a stocky figure and his strength was unmatched but he'd been standing almost straight up. Thus Denerick, who was as heavy as him and had a sprinting start, drove him into the wall. But the man's advantage ended there, for Tank looked at the attempted murderer of his love, his soon-to-be wife.

Denerick took a punch to the gut then to the face and lost his grip on Tank's waist. Tank wrapped his arms around Denerick and threw the warrior from his body. Then Tank stepped forward, about to hit a battered Lidia again, when a crossbow bolt slammed into the ground right between his feet.

He looked up to see Wombly.

"What are you doing!" She shouted.

"She tried to murder Maria!" Tank shouted right back and Wombly looked to Lidia, who weeped on the ground.

"I wasn't... I wasn't..." Lidia said and Tank stared at her incredulously. Lidia looked at Tank, "I can't... explain it... but I could have killed you. I didn't!"

"That makes it all better," Tank snarled sarcastically and Lidia tried to stand. Tank stepped forward and pushed her down, "No!" he shouted. Wombly leveled the crossbow towards him.

"Stop hitting her. Let's get this all figured out," she said, "I'm sure we can figure all this out." Tank glared at Lidia, who looked at him with most sincere sorrow that it almost caused his anger to relent. Almost.

Tank paced while Lidia sat.

"What were you doing?" Wombly asked. Esmeralda stood behind her bar, watching carefully to see if any reaction gave away a lie.

"Maria... isn't going to be Maria much longer. She's going to change. She's... there's something I never told you that I should have, something about the day in the cave on the Lightning Chain," Lidia said and Tank stopped moving, his face suddenly pale. Tank impatiently waved for her to continue, his nerves suddenly flaring.

"Maria and I both knew I'd be too weak to fight after we teleported up. The wraith had put a shield against teleportation up and we needed to get up there immediately. Well... I knew I could get through it but it would cost pretty much all of my magical energy. But we knew this and agreed that once up there if we needed any priestess spells we would mind-meld.

"Well, once we were up there and you told us to fix the portal I could only think of one way and it was to shift the portal from the realm it was currently on to one of my own goddess. Well, portals are rifts and we knew that to do so would be dangerous. And rifts are so unpredictable that we figured we'd both die immediately. But we didn't.

"Mind-melding, I used her body to cast my spell and we managed to shift the rift to my Goddess's realm. Salvatore answered my prayer and sent a handmaiden through. The handmaiden destroyed all of the rift runners," she referred to leopards that had red spots and black bodies and could cause any mortal to burst into flame upon eye contact, "but the portal expired too early..."

Lidia paused.

"What happened?" Tank asked.

"Well, the handmaiden was still here and it needed a form to possess. And because Maria cast the spell, technically, it blamed her for trapping it on this realm. So it possessed her," Lidia said, "And

it changed Maria. She's not human anymore. She's got handmaiden in her, she's got potential Goddess-stuff in her."

"That's not true. After she woke up she was the exact same!" Tank argued and Lidia nodded.

"She would be for a while. The handmaiden needed time to prepare her. So the first six months were the major changes. Her body was being changed so it could handle the raw power of the handmaiden. When those were done she could wake up.

"From then she had maybe a year. But I think it's going to be shorter now. And with the pregnancy, which will now be half... whatever she is... it.." Lidia was at a loss for words. She searched for many moments, "This could signal the end of this world. Texts in temples speak of the half-god who will be born. This half-god will play a key roll in the destruction of the realm and threaten the multiverse itself."

Tank glared at her, "Maria is still Maria. There is nothing wrong with her. Nothing at all-" suddenly a screaming from upstairs filled the room. Tank and the others looked up for a moment, then they were sprinting upstairs.

Tank got there first and he almost fell to his knees when he turned the corner. Maria floated off her bed, screaming in agony as she gave birth. Lidia rushed forward to do something but Tank grabbed her and pushed her back. He stepped forward and grabbed Maria's hand. Esmeralda moved in place to help deliver the child.

Maria cried out in agony.

"Maria!" Tank said loudly to her, trying to get her attention, "Maria, it's okay it's me."

"It's... It's In Me!" Maria screamed and Tank tried to grip her hand but her hands were balled up in fists that were too tight to be pried open at all. He grabbed her shoulder and suddenly Maria's eyes lit up. She looked at Tank, blue eyes with almost blinding light looking at him, "Remove Your Hands From Me Mortal!" Maria shouted in a voice that was similar to hers but wasn't quite hers.

Tank, stunned, fell back a step. Maria looked away and screamed in her own voice.

"Tank!" She screamed, "Tank! Tank... I love you Tank! I love you!"

Tank tried to reach her, tried to get to her, but winds were pushing off of Maria's body. Esmeralda cried out when the baby came all the way out of Maria. Wombly stepped forward and grabbed a second baby, which came out incredibly fast, and barely managed to cut the ambilical cords before the winds pushed them back to. Maria cried out in agony.

"Tank!" she cried. "Tank!"

He tried to find a voice to respond but he had none.

"I loved you!" she screamed. Then Maria's body fell to the bed, no longer floating above. Tank stared at her, his eyes wide. Her hair was now light blue and her eyes appeared to be blue as well. Her skin had a blue-ish tinge to it. She seemed so much less... human and so much more... powerful.

But as Tank stared at her he could only see Maria crying out in pain, crying out to him. And he could only watch on helplessly, unable to help her, unable to even comfort her.

Maria's body lay on the bed but it wasn't Maria.

A single tear made its way down Maria's face.

Chapter Two:

He looked down to the hilt of his blade and studied it for several seconds. A small skull was the only real decoration on the almost completely black hilt and the blade, a dark silver color, was without any decoration. He didn't know the metal of the blade but it didn't really matter.

He looked up from his blade, which was sheathed on his belt, and looked at his companions, all of them riding horses like he did. There were six of them and they didn't seem to realize the danger that they would be about to face. But Benny, who still had his hand on his dark blade, didn't care too much about that.

Good help is hard to find. But you know where some can be found... the sword said in Benny's mind and the young warrior just nodded quietly. The blade had a consciousness and was considered the sharpest blade in the entire realm, or so the sword had told him.

Nameless, the blade had a few magical abilities that Benny knew of and was likely worth more than most people's yearly wage. Always when he thought of the blade he considered what he had yet to know about it and what he would learn from it in the future battles. His companions weren't as quiet as Benny thought they should be as they traveled but Benny didn't bother them about it. They were young, more so than Benny, and they would learn in town that traveling in silence helped avoid a lot of surplus trouble.

Then as he considered their age, the youngest of the group being seventeen and the oldest being twenty three, which was three years younger than Benny, he wondered if they actually wanted a surplus of trouble. He sighed to himself as he heard the youngest of the group, a young girl named Sama, laugh at an undoubtably stupid joke from Tanner, a young man who was twenty one. The two had flirted from their initial leaving point, a small city called East Bocc, till now, almost four days of travel on their own.

Benny looked back down at his blade, ignoring the conversations between the rest of his young companions. He was deep in thought, considering the world around him and what had led him up to the life he currently lived.

You know where to find able companions... the sword said again and Benny ignored it. It didn't seem to understand that his odds of getting Tank and the others to come with him on a hunt were slim to none.

The sword once again imparted its thoughts and Benny found himself annoyed.

I could never get them to come along even if I went to them, Benny replied.

Not if you lied to them...

Lied to them? Benny responded, asking.

Show them a carrot. You know what you have to do, make them realize they have to do it as well. The sword intrigued him. It showed it had a shrewd mind quite often and its cunning came out in the social world as well as in combat. Many times he'd been spared a long and drawn out battle by the sword, which imparted strategies and moves in his mind.

Sometimes, though, the sword scared him. Every once in a while it physically forced him to do something, making him move in some direction. Everytime he'd been better off after the move but there was no way that Benny would ever feel comfortable with something that could do anything like that to him.

Maybe. But I have companions with me already. I don't need them yet.

If they die, then you will...

Benny considered the sword for several seconds then just sighed as he heard yet another giggle from the other side of the traveling party. He looked over, annoyed, then just looked forward again. His hand still gripped his blade, though, as if a warrior's sixth sense was telling him to be ready.

He would have considered that weird, would have wondered at it, had a low buzz not filled the air a few seconds later. He realized he was the only one who heard it, as the others were too focused on their own conversations to hear the tell-tale sounds of approaching boozers.

You could get away right now... leave them... find your companions... the sword said quietly. Benny looked up and saw two of the giant mosquito-like demons, each one with three proboscis instead of just a single one. The three sharp, spear-like mouths could stab through armor with ease. But the size of boozers had gone down and their strength was far less... but at great cost to the warriors they fought.

When the boozers lost their size and became about as tall as a human being, rather than the ten to fifteen feet tall that they used to be, they gained in speed, agility and explosiveness. Now fighting the giant mosquito-like demons revolved around being genuinely more skilled than the demons rather than simply being able to outmaneuver them and stab them from the side.

Benny considered leaving these young and stupid warriors to their own fate, considered leaving them to fight the boozers on his own -for he knew he could get away on his own rather easily-, but they were close to their destination and he would rather get where he was headed.

The boozers came in fast, aiming for a kill. Benny's companions didn't notice them until the last moment and until they were helpless. Tanner shouted while Sama screamed in fear. But the boozers that was poised to kill them jerked to the side. An advantage of their smaller size was that their hide was far more easy to pierce with a blade. Thus Benny's dirk, which he'd launched the distance to hit the boozers before it got to the pair, cut into it and wounded it.

The boozers cried out in agony while its kin rushed in towards Benny, who'd jumped to stand on his horse. The mosquito-like demon's wings buzzed, a deep noise, and its proboscis began to leak liquid, a poison that would paralyze him and begin eating at his body the second it touched his blood. Slashing across with his long blade, the nameless blade, he scored a major hit on the boozers' side.

The blade, sharper than anything Benny had wielded ever before, cut easily through the boozers' hide and deep into its body. Benny, off balance, barely avoided the boozers' far left proboscis as it flew past him, in two pieces, rather than to the side like he'd expected. Benny looked back at the boozers then down to his blade.

"Damn," he said with half a smile. While he stared at his blade the other boozers, wounded by his dirk and unable to fly, was killed quickly by his companions.

"Good throw," said Cano, the oldest of the group.

Benny just nodded absently. He'd used the blade several times in battle but never had he hit something with as much force as he'd put into the boozers just a few moments before. He was happy to see that it split boozers' hide, which was as tough as a lot of armor, so easily.

Time passed and the companions were still traveling. At this point they'd gotten outside of the forest and grasslands. Now they walked in the desert, the land ruled by dunes and sand. It'd taken them another hundred miles or so to get here but Benny wasn't tired in the least. His other companions, all of them excited to be out on what was their first adventure, shared in his energy... but for a very different set of reasons.

Benny was out here for revenge.

"Where exactly is this Kingdom of Rust?" asked Cano and Benny was aware again. He released his grip on Nameless, which was the name he'd given the blade.

"About eight miles further east," Benny answered and Cano nodded.

"I don't see much," one of the others replied and Benny realized he didn't actually know the young man's name. But that didn't bother him at all.

"The desert's less flat than you believe. And the Kingdom of Rust is said to be cloaked by a spell of invisibility," the warrior, Benny, considered his companions once again and wondered perhaps if Nameless had been correct. Maybe he should have left them to die. It certainly wouldn't have been the worst thing he'd ever done.

"How do you know where it is, then?" asked another companion and Benny's lips curled in a small smile. He realized that he only knew the name of three of his companions. As he thought to himself he couldn't help but chuckle. *How amusing.*

"You came out here to adventure, right?" Benny asked.

"Yeah," the young man answered.

"Then go on the adventure and stop asking stupid questions. I know where I'm going," Benny said. He looked forward then noticed that the sun was going down. He smiled to himself and looked to his companions. They didn't realize what was coming, for they were still talking.

Ever since the Chaos Prince, who had taken over Keell years before, had been killed the land around the Kingdom, which was now ruled by Sprinkleberry, had become less desert and had far more forests and grasslands. Boozers lived and survived by sleeping in the sand. For some reason that no one really understood the boozers couldn't survive in the grasslands and forests but nobody had complained about this. It freed up a large portion of the Kingdom for farming without fear of boozers' attacks.

But on this part of the Kingdom, the far east, to place that desert still ruled, the land was still ruled by boozers and recently they'd become more nocturnal. Now most of their killings and actions of that sort occurred throughout the night. Few people from the western cities knew and even in the eastern cities the actions of boozers were only an old nightmare. But the cities East Bocc and South Bocc knew of the terrors of night when boozers had prey... and Benny had lived in East Bocc for years now.

And, to his growing satisfaction, the others were Keellians and didn't realize that boozers still ruled. The sight of one boozers had stunned them a little and that was enough for Benny, who had lived in East Bocc, to know that the Keellians believed boozers all but extinct. But they weren't... and Benny knew that this might free him of these companions.

If they die then you can continue on your mission. Five liches remain yet. One of them in in the Kingdom of Rust... but if you die with them then the liches will not be slayed and the wraith will not be killed. Your friends won't be avenged... the sword imparted and Benny sighed.

If it gets that bad then I plan to leave them to die. But if it doesn't then I refuse to just give up help such as this. Benny responded.

Would Selie want you to do that?..

Benny winced. How did Nameless know of her? Had he told her? Or did the sword possess the ability to read thoughts and memories? Maybe, he feared, it was his dreams. Could Nameless watch his dreams. They were connected mentally but he'd never considered that it allowed the sword access to his thoughts and memories.

You know nothing of Selie.

I know your dreams, Benny. I know she hated the wraith and that's why she came to you...

Benny nearly protested aloud but he realized that the sword could only read his dreams. That was fine, he supposed. It'd only give the sword a better understanding of his need for revenge.

I will not die out here. Benny sent that thought as final and the sword, although it did send a general feeling of unhappiness, seemed silent.

The sun dipped below the horizon and a low buzz filled the air. The companions, with the exception of Benny, all had pitched their tent already. Each of them had a tent or shared it with another of the group and they'd lain in it as the sun made its final decent. The Kingdom of Rust, according to Benny, was only two or three miles away.

He'd decided they would rest until morning, or that's what he'd told them.

None of them thought to question why he wasn't putting his tent up, for he had one, and if they'd thought it was unusual that he still wore full battle armor then none of them had said anything. Benny knew that the last few days, the days they'd been in between the desert and grassland, had done nothing but dull their sense of preparation.

But Benny, who'd been out here a thousand times and found the Kingdom of Rust, had been out in the desert at night and knew how to survive. This would be their first real test. If they passed, if they survived, this trial then they might be ready to face what was within the Kingdom of Rust. Benny had only been there once and had hesitated to return. Once inside the boundaries of the Kingdom he knew that all rules of combat changed.

He knew that the world was chaotic and he knew that their enemies were endless.

He knew they couldn't win. But he'd let his companions die trying.

The first boozers to attack slammed into one of the nameless companion's tent. Benny wasn't sure if the man had died or not but he didn't truly care. The man's screams, which implied death, were what he really cared about. He watched the reaction times of his companions as he lay in the sand, his entire body covered in the stuff.

He was invisible but he didn't care enough to share his little trick with his companions yet.

Another nameless companion, this time a female, got stabbed in the chest by a probiscus. Benny watched objectively as the liquid was sucked from her body, leaving only skin and bone where a body

had been before. Her scream was short and the others barely heard it but he heard a name get called out in terror.

"Cindy, huh?" Benny mumbled to himself. Even with that name in his mind he couldn't really put it to her face... *ah well..* he thought to himself.

Cano rushed past and stepped on his hand. Benny cursed quietly while Cano slashed upwards with his blade. One of the boozers, one of hundreds, fell to the ground, dead. Benny nodded and sent a mental congratulations towards the young man. Cano was making good progress and seemed he might break away from the group, which was the best move when being attacked by a horde of boozers, when suddenly he stopped.

Benny sighed internally as Cano looked down at his chest, at a trio of spear-like mouths stabbed through his armor and into his body. He looked up and cried out right before he was sucked dry. Benny watched as another nameless companion died. Tanner was rushing past Benny when his hand snapped out with speed to match any boozers and his fingers gripped the young man's boots.

Tanner tripped and a boozers that would have killed him in just a moment flew over his head. Tanner cried out but Benny, who'd moved and was recovering himself in sand, grabbed his mouth and forced the man into silence.

"Cover yourself with sand," Benny whispered. Tanner obeyed in a panic.

Benny watched in true admiration as Sama, who moved left and right with such grace that he doubted any boozers would ever get to her, dodged the mosquito-like demons. But she was getting tired. She neared Benny when he grabbed her ankle and tripped her. He wasn't saving her as directly as he'd saved Tanner but he was saving her.

Prepared to help save her, Tanner covered her in sand as quickly as possible. She tried to fight for a moment when she realized who they were. Then she followed their directions. Soon they all lay in the sand, all of their body but their face covered by the sand, watching the boozers horde above them.

"They see with sound and heat. That's why you have your hood over your face and your body in the sand. They can't see you and they're making so much noise they can't hear you," Benny explained.

"Does this happen often?" Tanner asked and Benny considered lying and saying no then just sighed.

"I don't know," he lied. He decided that he'd rather have them thinking he was just a genius who was caught in an unlucky situation but managed to reason his way out of it.

"You brought us out here without knowing if things like this happen?" Sama asked and Benny shook his head.

"Do you know every possible chance in everything you do?" Benny asked and Sama silenced. They lay in the sand until late that night, when the moon was directly over their head. The boozers had flown on at this point and Benny began to get up. He knocked the sand off his body and slowly began to stretch.

"Be very quiet," he whispered, "Any sound will bring them back to us."

"I thought you said they couldn't hear us?" Sama asked.

"Over long distances they can. It's when you're close, close enough that they can't figure out the difference between your sound and their own, that they can't find you. They just know you're there. But at this distance, so little sound reaches them that the direction it's coming from is obvious to them," as Benny finished he looked around. His hands rested on his dirk and short sword. Nameless hung on his belt, silent in its sheath.

"Let's go," Benny said quietly.

The other two looked back at their dead friends and followed. They had no choice. Only Benny knew the way back... and only Benny seemed able to survive. They were no longer his companions, no. Now they were his hostages.

Benny and the other two walked for hours before finally the area around him seemed to change.

He smiled as he recognized a tall building, a giant fortress that reached high in the sky. There were thirteen towers, each one standing at over a hundred and fifty feet tall. At the front of the castle a

giant door, easily fifty feet tall, stood. The door was made of wood, stone and metal. All of the metal of the door was browned by rust.

Above and around the door stood gargoyles but the statues were metal rather than stone and they were of all shapes and sizes. A few of them appeared to be giant lizards and other non-humanoids but the majority were bipedal. All of the figures stood tall and strong, with weapons in sheaths or in the loops on their belts. And for some of the non-humanoids their weapons were hidden or part of the body in the form of claws.

Every statue was rusted and seemed fragile but still fierce. The eyes were all colored in a non-rusted color. It was almost as if real eyes were trapped within the rusted statues.

"What are these?" Sama asked but Benny just shrugged. He'd never gotten this close. Then the statues began to move.

Chapter Three:

Her eyes still hadn't opened a week later.

Tank and Esmeralda were taking care of the children. No one really talked about what had happened. Still shocked, they went about taking care of the children with the enthusiasm they'd have if they were cleaning something. It was the same motions, over and over, just trying to keep the children happy while they tried to process what had happened. But they couldn't.

Lidia and Deabla were finding food for the children, who couldn't get it from their comatose mother, while Carser and Wombly researched any possible cures for the young woman. But so far they hadn't found anything. According to any source they could get access to this had never happened.

"Tank," Esmeralda said two days after the incident, "Tank. You have to come back. You can't do this. It's not fair to your friends and yourself." Tank looked at her with dull eyes, which were bloodshot from a lack of sleep and grief, but there seemed no comprehension.

"Tank, are you listening to me?" Esmeralda asked again. Tank nodded almost dumbly. But he wasn't. And Esmeralda knew it. He was in auto-pilot mode. He was giving up. "Tank!" she shouted. One of the babies, the boy, stirred but she knew that this fight had to happen. She slapped him in the face and Tank stared at her.

"Tank!" She shouted in his face, "Tank, please. You can't zone out like this!" Tank stared at her but still showed no real thought. Finally, she lost herself in her anger. She balled her fist and punched him in the face as hard as she could.

"Tank!" She yelled. He barely stepped back but he turned and looked at her, lifting his hand to his face. He looked down at his fingers as he took them away from his bleeding nose and saw the red of his own blood. Whether it was the sight of his own blood or maybe it was the sound of his son crying but something in Tank's mind clicked and he looked down at Esmeralda and nodded.

"I hear you," he said quietly. "I..." he fought tears for a moment, "I hear you." He sat down as Esmeralda walked forward towards him. She embraced him as he fought grief that he could no longer hide from. He looked up at Esmeralda.

"She's gone, isn't she?" he asked, his voice firm again. He wouldn't cry. That helped no one.

"She's gone," Esmeralda said softly.

"Maria..." Tank's voice was quiet, "It's... just... damn it." He stood up and looked at the children, his daughter and his son, and he walked out of the room. They were unnamed but if there was a chance, any chance, that Maria could help in the decision of their names then he would try to find it. He made his way towards her room.

He got in it and saw Maria laying silently on her bed, her face a scene of peace. She might have been dead so still was her body. Only a barely perceptible rise in her breast indicated she took breath at all. He smiled as he gently touched her cheek with his fingers. He missed her already. He still couldn't believe that she was gone but he knew he had to accept what he could.

He closed his eyes, his hand still gently touching her cheek, and when he opened he nearly gasped. He closed his eyes again, unwilling to believe it but hoping against all logic that it was true. He opened his eyes again and his heart nearly burst through his chest.

"Maria!" he said loudly as she looked at him, her eyes open. They were brown, so beautiful, and they cut through Tank as she stared at him. But as they made eye contact and he celebrated he noticed that something was terribly wrong. In her eyes he didn't see the love or the thoughtfulness that he was used to seeing. Rather, he saw the opposite. He saw disdain and an anger that he couldn't truly understand.

"Maria?"

Esmeralda was still tending to the children when she heard Tank's gasp. She gently placed the young boy on the ground and began to walk in their direction. She hoped he was reverting back to his depression. When she got to the door she heard him say her name, this time less sure. She opened it just in time to see Maria punch Tank in the chest, launching him back ten feet until he hit the wall.

His body broke several of the wooden planks that made up the wall and he seemed genuinely hurt by the attack. But as Tank fell to his knees and looked up at Maria, who glared at him, Esmeralda couldn't tell if he was more hurt physically or emotionally. Tank climbed to his feet.

"Maria?" he asked.

"Quit calling me that, mammal," Maria said in a voice that wasn't hers. Both Tank and Esmeralda knew that her voice could make that tone but it wasn't the way Maria spoke. There was venom in her voice and anger in her eyes. "Maria is dead."

Tank's heart sank. Then he looked up at her.

"Get out of her," he said, his voice even, his eyes narrow. The being in Maria looked to him with some amusement, "You think to order me? Ha! You are foolish, mammal. I am beyond you. I am beyond any power you have to offer. I am Iustitia, handmaiden of Salvatore."

Tank growled as Iustitia, in Maria's body, turned to leave. She took a step but then Tank grabbed her shoulder. She was surprised by her strength, which was anger-inspired, and didn't immediately toss him away as she was wont to do.

"Get out of her," Tank growled evenly.

Iustitia grinned and so did Maria. But it wasn't smile that had melted Tank's heart so many times before. It was the smile of one who was supremely confident in their abilities and was ready to destroy an offender.. and would enjoy it. "Maria is dead. But just so you don't forget that, I'll prove it to you."

Maria's eyes suddenly darkened in the middle but blue replaced the whites of her eyes and her hair was shaded slightly blue. Maria's body paled slightly. Suddenly where Maria's beautiful warmth had been there was only cold beauty that still excited Tank's heart but now there was an element of fear.

"Now let go of me, you stupid mammal," Iustitia said. Tank's fingers didn't untighten despite a sudden sense of terror. Iustitia turned to leave but Tank still held her. Annoyed this time, she turned and punched, taking Tank in the stomach. He grunted in pain as he hit the wall, breaking more wood. But he stood anyway, ignoring a piece of wood that had cut into his side.

Iustitia watched as he stepped forward.

"Leave my Maria alone," Tank ordered again but Iustitia just shook her head. She punched hard, hitting Tank directly in the face, and knocked him straight to the ground. Esmeralda stepped forward, to get to Tank, but she touched Iustitia and recieved a strong shove for it. The shove slammed Esmeralda into the wall and she was knocked unconscious.

Iustitia was considering that maybe she'd made a mistake in shoving Esmeralda when she felt a hand grip her shoulder. She turned and saw it was Tank. "You stand still?" she asked. Tank's nose bled profusely and one of his eyes was swollen. Blood was pouring down the his side from the wound on his hip and he could barely stand.

"I'm not... letting you... leave in her..." Tank said, barely able to get the words out. Iustitia, frustrated, hit him in the throat this time. Tank flew backwards. Iustitia turned to leave when she saw him getting up.

"Stay down, you stupid mammal!" she shouted as she walked up towards him. She grabbed the neck of his shirt and punched him in the face six times in a row. She threw him to the ground and began to leave. "Stay down." She opened the door when she heard Tank mutter something. Somewhat amused and curious, she turned and looked at him.

Her eyes widened with disbelief as she saw him getting to his feet. She looked him up and down. "You're either brave or stupid, mammal."

"Bravery... stupidity... whatever gets it done," Tank replied with a grunt. He looked at her through one eye, the other had swollen shut, "You're not... leaving... in her." Iustitia rolled her eyes.

"Stupid mammal, I'm not going to hit you again. Why are you even standing? I've broken several of your bones. I've wounded you beyond most mortals ability to function. Why do you insist on stopping me?" Iustitia asked. Tank staggered forward but was forced to stop by his inability to balance well. He was maybe five feet from her.

"Because... I love her... I love Maria... and you're..." Tank ran out of breath and Iustitia rolled her eyes. "So it's because of stupid mammal emotions?" she asked. Tank began a response but she cut him off and instead snapped her foot forward, kicking Tank in the middle of his chest. Tank slammed into the wall behind him, actually breaking the wood and flying out of the back of it.

Iustitia, a little disturbed but otherwise fine, turned and made her way to the door. She would find out how to get back to her goddess. No mammal would keep her here.

Deabla and Wombly were walking back. Deabla held food and Wombly held a book. Both were in a hurry. They heard a loud crash and looked up just in time to see Tank, bloodied, flying from a large hole in Harold's Hill.

Wombly rushed forward and 'caught' him by getting between him in the ground. Hit weight slammed into her and she hit the ground hard. She was about to cry out when Tank silenced her with a barely audible word, "Maria..."

She looked to Deabla, "Take care of him, I'm going to see what happened." She unstrapped her crossbow and rushed towards the opening of Harold's Hill.

Wombly got to the front door of Harold's Hill just in time to see Iustitia, who was still Maria to her, punch the door out of its hinges. Denerick lay still behind her, dead or unconscious, Wombly didn't know. She raised her crossbow, "Maria, stop!"

Iustitia turned on her, unnaturally blue eyes meeting Wombly's dark brown eyes, "Stop calling me that!" She pushed her hand forward and a barely invisible force flew from her hand. When it got to Wombly it launched her back, causing her to discharge her crossbow randomly. The flew past Iustitia, barely missing her, and the being in Maria's body considered destroying Wombly at that moment.

But somewhere in her, when she looked over towards Deabla, who was trying to help Tank with his song-magic, she felt something that disturbed her. She made eye contact with Tank, who was barely conscious and in the young man's eyes she saw something she didn't understand.

Disturbed, Iustitia turned and left, ignoring them.

Lidia and Carser were only fifty feet from Harold's Hill when they noticed the damage done to the inn.

"Oh no," Lidia gasped when she saw the hole that was where a door should have been. Not waiting for Carser, who was equally incredulous, Lidia rushed forward. When she got inside she sighed with relief when she saw that nobody was dead. But that didn't mean everyone was okay. In the corner Denerick sat with a pouch filled with cool water to his head while Tank was being tended to by a priest of Tutula.

Blood caked his face where recently healed bones had been broken. His nose was still bent slightly, as the priest's magics hadn't yet had time to fix the largest breaks, and one of his eyes couldn't be seen. His upper lip was broken and still bled a little. But for all of it he didn't seem any weaker than before. Somehow he seemed stronger in his sleep.

Wombly was fine and Esmeralda seemed shaken but she was fine as well. Deabla had been singing to both Esmeralda and Denerick, using his magical ability to heal others through his voice, and mainly his singing or humming, to ease their pain.

"What happened?" Carser asked but before anyone who'd actually seen Maria could answer Lidia answered, "Maria happened."

"That wasn't Maria," Wombly replied, "I know Maria and that wasn't her." Lidia lifted her hands in a soothing manner.

"I knew Maria as well as you did, maybe even better, so don't bother to tell me that she hasn't changed. You'd be wasting your breath. So it's not Maria... just something in Maria," Lidia said. All of the companions in the room, except Tank because he remained unconscious, waited for her some sort of elaboration.

"As I said earlier, when we shifted the wraith's portal I didn't have enough energy to actually do it. So Maria and I mind-melded and we shifted the portal together but in her body. When the entity that we summoned came through instead of whatever the wraith was summoning it got trapped here 'cause we couldn't maintain the portal's energy.

"So it found a vassal to take, to inhabit, because otherwise it would die. So whatever it is we summoned, which could be anything from the plain of Salvatore, is in Maria," Lidia finished, "And it is using her body to survive.. but our bodies can't really handle a human consciousness and that of a great being of divine power, so it was clearing Maria out..."

"So you're saying that it killed Maria, that Iustitia killed Maria?" Esmeralda asked and Lidia was suddenly quiet. Many moments passed.

"Iustitia?" she asked quietly and Esmeralda nodded, "That's what she called herself."

"A handmaiden..." Lidia gasped, "Oh gods, no."

"What is it?" Wombly asked.

"Handmaidens are sometimes considered warriors of the Gods and Goddesses. They are among the most powerful creatures of divine power. Handmaidens are called such because they are the 'hands of the Gods' and they are the beings sent to fight whenever a truly powerful priest or priestess calls for help," Lidia said. Suddenly she felt incredible guilt. Maria might have stood a chance, might have been able to fight the control of the being had it not been what was considered the most powerful summonable creature in the multiverse.

She realized that she alone had killed Maria. And she realized that she could do nothing about it.

"Iustitia didn't realize it but when she replaced Maria she was literally destroying her..." Lidia's voice was soft as she considered what had happened, "Anything but a handmaiden would have simply killed Maria in a battle of wills. But no.. Iustitia literally fought for control of her body and now... now Maria's gone.

"But maybe Iustitia lost too and now they're a mixture of the two." Lidia was quiet for several seconds again. No one else understood magic quite the way Lidia did and withheld their own opinions for fear of tainting her thought process. "Did she do anything that would have been easy and would've made sense for her to do? Things that Maria wouldn't have done even if she was mad?"

Wombly and Esmeralda both nodded.

"She could have killed me when I accidentally shot my crossbow at her. I barely missed her head. I don't know if she's as tough as she is strong but I'm guessing a bolt to the face would have hurt," Wombly said.

"She had me at her mercy. I bumped into her. She could have punched me through the building like she did Tank. I wasn't even conscious when she did that to him. And I was in her way," Esmeralda said. Lidia doubted that Esmeralda was right for no servant of Salvatore would seek blood for no real reason so just because Esmeralda was in her way didn't warrant her death. Iustitia likely wondered over whether she was right in hitting Esmeralda was just or not.

But it didn't really matter to Lidia at that moment. Now she wondered at the dynamics of the mind in Maria's body. Could it possibly be a fusion of the two? It was unlikely that Iustitia had lost the

battle so the handmaiden's personality would be almost fully intact but she knew Maria well enough to know that even if a God or Goddess fought over the mind of her body she would be heard. Whether a handmaiden or a Goddess, Maria's feelings and thoughts would be included in a fusion of the minds.

Lidia smiled slightly. A little of Maria might still be alive.

The others didn't share her grin.

"What is it?" Wombly asked. Lidia's smile disappeared. She thought for a moment and nodded.

"I think I might know where Iustitia has gone. And I know how to keep her here."

The man was bent in prayer. He knew that the young priestess who had come in earlier that month, who he didn't know was called Lidia, would need aid. If she had succeeded in her mission then she would need help to feel human, to feel just. If she'd failed then she might need to be moved into the next realm gently.. or she might need powers enough to free herself from some prison or another.

Most priests and priestesses of Salvatore were only shaken when given a mission of great importance and great struggle. The fact that the young girl who seemed so experienced had come in for guidance was telling enough. Thus he was bent in prayer when the door to the little temple to Salvatore was opened.

"Mortal, stand," Iustitia ordered and the man turned to see the blue figure. Iustitia released some of her power, showing more of her true form, and the man cried out.

"H-Handmaiden?" he asked and Iustitia nodded. "Yes, Mortal, it is I, Iustitia." The man bowed before her.

"Stand." He obeyed. "I require your help, mortal. I find myself trapped within this mortal coil and have no way to get back to the realm of our Goddess. You will open a portal to the Goddess of True Justice's realm."

The man nodded. "I, Seriv, will follow your command." He began to incant immediately, preparing to open a gate to his Goddess's realm, when suddenly he was slammed backwards by magical energy. Iustitia looked up, at first afraid that her Goddess was rejecting her, but Lidia's voice cut the air.

"You're not leaving. Not yet," Lidia ordered from behind. She hadn't cast a spell on the man, only created an illusion. The portal was still in process, Iustitia simply didn't know it. The handmaiden turned on Lidia.

"Leave, Priestess, now," Iustitia ordered, "You helped trap me here. Leave now or I will convince Salvatore never to let you into her realm after your death."

"I won't let you leave. Not while you're in that body," Lidia replied. Wombly and Deabla stepped out from behind her while Carser lowered his weapon, a long barreled gun with a single shot, between Lidia and Wombly's shoulder.

"You couldn't stop me even if you tried," Iustitia replied.

"Does it strike you as odd that she is explaining herself to us, mere mortals?" Carser remarked and Wombly almost pointed out that she hadn't really explained herself to them. But Iustitia, who had the pride of a handmaiden -often considered the most arrogant of all servants to the Gods'-, didn't care to remember that part of their conversation.

The simple fact that a mortal dared to disobey her was enough to enrage the handmaiden. Pushing out with her hands and releasing the invisible force, she launched all four of the figures back. Each one cried out as they flew, Deabla's voice squeaking the highest pitch of the three. They landed roughly but didn't have time to worry about the bruised elbow for Iustitia walked forward and grabbed Lidia by the neck hole of her armor.

Lifting Lidia, she slapped her across the face.

"You will learn your place," Iustitia growled. She turned to see a completed portal to Salvatore's realm. Smiling to the man, she promised him a reward. She was about to step through the portal when suddenly she was stopped by a force from her Goddess. Iustitia felt disapproval... then her eyes became wide with shock.

The portal shut and Iustitia stepped back, stunned. Suddenly her eyes narrowed as she realized what had caused her rejection. She turned on Lidia.

"You tricked me," she accused and Lidia shrugged.

"You were leaving when there was still good to be done," Lidia said knowingly. One of the main punishments of a priest or priestess trying to use Salvatore's spell when they weren't deserving of it was to be required to do a number of good deeds before they could find access to the non-required spells. She'd risked the lives of her friends on the belief that if Iustitia attacked them unjustly, whether she believed it to be just or not, she would be banned unless she did good things.

Iustitia nearly unleashed her powers at that moment.

"You may keep me on this realm, but I will not allow you to keep me shackled to your pathetic structure and your companions with even more pathetic emotional demands," Iustitia shouted, "You are not besting me. You are only diluting yourself in the belief that you can change Your mistake."

Lidia searching for some response when Iustitia suddenly disappeared.

Wombly looked to her. "That didn't go as planned, did it?"

Lidia stared forward.

"Not at all."

Chapter Four:

Benny jumped backwards just in time to dodge the first real attack from the tower. A shower of arrows, all flying down at once, cut into the ground around Benny but the other two so skilled, or lucky, as he was. An arrow punched through Sama's armor and cut into her left rib. It punctured her lung.

She looked over at Benny, who was already sprinting away from the castle, while she died. She looked back at Cano and knew that all was lost. He gurgled as blood poured out of his throat, an arrow deep in his throat.

"Cano..." she gasped as he fell over, his eyes rolled up in his skull. She followed close behind.

Benny sprinted. He didn't look back once. An arrow almost cut into him but Nameless shouted *Dodge!*.. and he jumped to the side. Soon enough he was out of range of the arrows. He looked back to see what exactly he was running from. Every figure, humanoids and not, were animating. They seemed to be still made of rust but they were moving about. At least three dozen figures stood there.

He saw smaller forms marching outwards, as if they were marshalling to attack, and Benny knew that his plan would work to a degree.

He didn't have much time so he couldn't memorize what each one looked like or any exact numbers but he knew the enemy and that counted for a lot. He sprinted away, leaving the Kingdom of Rust behind, leaving his hostages behind, and felt no regret. He almost laughed to himself as he thought of the skill of the last companions of his.

The young and inexperienced had no real chance of survival in this world without the extreme luck that Benny had received when he was younger. But he had survived that chaotic part of his life and knew where to find truly powerful companions. He thought back to a few years before, back to the inn Harold's Hill and knew that if he could hang the right carrot in front of their face he might convince the experienced, but smart, warriors to come along.

Even as Benny ran he considered what the right carrot might be. Nameless, who had learned much about Tank and Wombly from Benny's dreams, offered several tempting lies but Benny refused to commit to any of the suggestions. Nameless might be cunning but it wasn't empathetic and that was the real thing Benny needed to win over the support of the companions.

It would take him several days to get back to East Bocc and that meant hours of thinking for him. He wondered how things might be, how Tank and Maria were, how Wombly and Carser were. He wondered if they'd gotten over Ashe or if they were still shackled by grief.

Benny had long ago shed those shackles, or so he believed, and he knew that his mission, the same one given to him by the ghosts of his dead companions on the Lightning Chain, was justification

for his current actions. And even if he hadn't convinced himself of that then he would have simply given the conflict a shrug.

Since his struggle on the Lightning Chain he'd been numbed in regards to doing bad things. Many nights when he slept he was haunted by internal demons in his dreams. Nightmares filled with a slaughtered family and a young girl who had saved him after he'd killed her often stole the restfulness from his sleep. More often than not he awoke and wondered at his own life, at the pathetic excuses he'd made to justify his actions, and wondered whether he should just end it.

And the fact that he had the nightmares was proof enough to Nameless that Benny was still wondering if he was right in his mission. The sword, though, couldn't have that. In its silence, in what Benny believed was inactivity, Nameless plotted how to fully commit to the mission.

The sun dipped below the horizon. Benny covered himself in sand, hiding himself from the eyes of always hungry boozers. The low buzz of their wings beating, deafening due to their large population, filled his ears and his dreams as his eyelids slid shut.

Large brown eyes stared at him and he couldn't make eye contact. Not anymore.

"Why won't you look at me?" an innocent voice asked. Benny still couldn't make eye contact, couldn't even look at her. The innocence in the voice nearly killed him at that moment, nearly stopped his heart from guilt, but still he held on for some reason he couldn't really remember at that moment.

"I'm sorry Selie," Benny said quietly. He looked up and stared just past the young girl, trying to fake eye contact.

"I'm not stupid you know..." she said, smiling. Benny could almost see the smile in his peripheral vision. It killed him not to see it, not to try to see the joy in her.... the joy he'd taken away.

His mistake was obvious to him when he did look at her. She was a smiling young girl with a broad smile and big brown eyes for just a moment... then she changed. Her smile faded and became a slight frown. Her hair, long and brown, was matted with blood and parts of her skull was missing. Cuts, deep and long, reached across her face. Two of her teeth were missing. Her eyes, though, remained the same and seemed to cut through him at that moment.

Then she was a skull, a skeleton. Her hair was gone and the blood with it. The skin was gone. She was just a skeleton and the white bone was the only legacy of her life. But still he saw the eyes, the large brown eyes, in her skull. He couldn't get away from them. He looked away but her eyes followed his vision. He was still making eye contact.

He tried to turn and leave but he felt his feet become rooted to the ground. As if invisible hands had grabbed his chin, he felt something force his head to turn. He looked to the skeleton, to the legacy of her life, and watched as the area around it shifted through the seasons. The ground, the trees and the soil all changed with time. The skeleton, too, began to fade with time but the eyes, the large, brown, so disturbingly innocent eyes still stared at him, unchanged by the ravages of time.

Benny watched, unable to look away, as the bones began to look like stones in the ground. Had he not seen her eyes still, not been haunted by the look of innocence, then he wouldn't have been able to recognize the skeleton. He wouldn't have realized that this was the false grave of a dead girl, of one that he'd killed.

He tasted the blood in his mouth and he tasted felt their flesh between his teeth once again... and still the eyes stared. Benny couldn't find anything but the eyes but her voice, so pure, still spoke in his mind.

"Why won't you look at me?"

As soon as Benny entered East Bocc his demeanor changed. He was once again the person that young Tanner and Sama had signed up to ride on an adventure with. He was once again someone who could put a smile on any face and tell a joke worth a laugh from anyone's belly. He was quick with his smile and he was even quicker with a compliment.

East Bocc was a smaller city with maybe five and a half thousand people in population. It was a very spread out city, with only one large wall and a dozen smaller walls that served to separate the city into smaller, more manageable sections. The side that he walked in from, which was the closest to the desert, was by far the newest section of the city. The walls here stood the tallest and strongest. As he got further into the city he would see older and more worn walls.

The buildings were short and stocky, built to withstand desert winds and large storms, and the people within were mainly people who survived off of their personal manual labor. To all appearances East Bocc wasn't very successful, and seemed a dreadful little city, but it had found success in that it had access to certain plants that only grew on the edge of the desert, where some water got to them but the intense heat killed off any other plant that threatened to grow instead other than the plant, which was called the Heat Flower. It had a hard time competing because it grew very slow but it had strong medicinal effects and was called upon in hundreds of situations on the battle field and during winter.

East Bocc also had a supply of booze hidden which was often used in shields for Keellian warriors. But agriculture was almost impossible in East Bocc so they imported almost everything they ate. Very few animals could survive in the harsh climate and the cost to feed them was too high for all but the richest people in the city.

But even though it seemed barren and alone, Benny was far more affable.

He was no longer in a place where a single word spoken too loudly could bring boozers from miles around. He was in the city, in a place where those who spoke more got more attention from those around it and the attention gained wasn't always negative. And in the humans around him he felt more than confident that even those who meant to hurt him were no real threat.

He walked past a few ladies in the city and flashed them a smile. The youngest woman blushed a little but before Benny or she could speak one of her older friends spoke and broke Benny's spell. But the young woman's friend needn't have worried. None of the women were attractive in Benny's eyes and he wouldn't have bedded one even had the woman thrown herself at him... well, maybe he would have. He smiled as he considered the thought.

He found his way to the local tavern and entered it with confidence bordering on cockiness.

Strolling up to the bar he quickly pulled two coins from his pouch. There was plenty of space at the bar but Benny decided to sit next to one of the two men at the bar. As he got closer he smiled, more than aware that he'd made the correct choice for his intention. Putting both coins on the bar, the almost unnaturally charismatic young man ordered two drinks.

"One for me, one for my friend here," Benny said. The man raised an eyebrow.

"Thanks... friend," the man said. Benny slapped him on the back, acting the part of a friendly man, and smiled.

"Not a problem for a brother in the business," Benny said and the man smiled.

"So you're a mover as well?" he asked. He was a big man and he looked skeptically at Benny for a few seconds.

"Just moved in from West Bocc," Benny lied and the man raised an eyebrow once again.

"You're a bit small, aren't ya?" the man said and Benny just smiled.

"I'm stronger than I look. Probably the strongest man in here," Benny said and the man's face split a grin as one of the few others in the room laughed aloud.

"Sounds like a challenge!" said a man from the side, "What're ya gonna do about it Taggart?" he asked. The man who Benny had paid a drink for just shrugged as the drink was delivered.

As the man shrugged Benny saw an opening, saw a chance to get his prize, but he changed his mind. There would almost definitely be a better chance in just a few moments. And if there wasn't, that was nothing a few more drinks couldn't fix.

"Nah, I'll let the young'in have his pride," Taggart said and Benny sighed inwardly. His eyes fell to the pouch for a moment but they didn't linger a moment. Benny knew that any man able to hold onto his gold this long would recognize any lingering stare towards his wealth. Especially since this pouch wasn't obvious on his belt. Benny's eyes, sharp and sneaky, had found it only by luck as he had gotten closer to the man.

Several drinks later, Benny still not touching his own drink, the young man dropped another remark about his superior strength. Taggert, who'd drunk freely thinking he knew another mover from West Bocc, considered the challenge for only a few seconds.

Benny couldn't help but smile as the man nodded, his features widening in a drunken smile.

"I'll see if that's true, my friend," he slurred all of his words as he spoke and they seemed blended into a single, long word. But Benny understood them and so did many of the people in the bar. Very quickly a table was put in the middle of the bar's room with two seats ready.

"I'm think'in you'll lose if we do, uh, a'uh... a constest've strength'n ya arms?" Tagger slurred and Benny shook his head.

"I'm thinking I'll beat'cha with anythin' you can think of, over and under th' belt!" Benny responded, his words blending together in an artificial slur. Every man in the room howled in laughter as they put together the insult to Taggert's manhood.

All of those who watched figured they were watching a drunken arm wrestle and believed Benny's drunkenness. None of them seemed to notice that Benny's original drink still sat on the bar top, barely touched at all.

One man did notice the drink, however. The man, drunk and thinking himself sneaky, didn't realize that Benny was watching him as he downed the drink, looking as inconspicuous as his drunken mind and body could... which wasn't at all inconspicuous.

But Benny just noddenn internally. Any evidence that he wasn't just as drunk as the other man was destroyed.

The table was set and Taggert staggered to it, sitting in one of the chairs. Benny did his best to seem unaware for several seconds then, as people began to yell at him to get over there and handle this like any man should, he staggered over, following Taggert. To add to his drunken facade he seemed like he was about to sit in the same seat the Taggert sat in.

The entire room howled in laughter when Taggert, grinning and laughing as well, pushed Benny off of his knees. Benny's hand nearly got ahold of the man's pouch but he missed. Benny cursed in his thoughts but didn't do anything about it physically. Instead he slowly got to his feet as if nothing had happened, as if he was unsure of how he'd gotten to the ground at all, and staggered over to the seat across from Taggert. He'd hoped to get the pouch and hide it, then seem to fall unconscious due to his 'drunkenness'. But that didn't happen so Benny improvised.

"He's look'in like he can't handle his liquor very well, huh!" one of the watchers shouted and Benny almost laughed aloud. They were undoubtably drunk and they fully believed he was as well. His little plan was going well.

As he sat across from Taggert he knew he was going to lose. Taggert, even in his drunken state, was by far stronger than Benny. Taggert's shoulders were broad and his muscular arms were nearly as thick as either of Benny's thighs. The man was strong, that much was clear, but Benny didn't actually want to win. Actually he hoped to lose. And the stronger the man the better it was, for the loss would be even worse and the worse the loss was the better it would be for Benny.

Taggert laid his arm flat on the table, then bent it at the elbow. He grinned as Benny did likewise and they reached across with their other arms, each gripping the other's hand. They made eye contact and Benny's eyes widened. They were dark brown, large and innocent. He all but gasped as he nearly pulled away.

"Looks like he'd just realized the size difference!" one man remarked with a chuckle.

"On his word he's bigger 'n some areas!" another howled and the room burst into laughter. Benny forced a smile and looked back up at the man. His eyes weren't dark brown like Selie's. No. They were nearly black and weren't nearly as innocent as Selie's.

In his mind he wondered if he was going mad. Then, as he considered what he was about to do, he realized he probably already had.

"Alrighty! Three! Two! One! Go!"

Benny and Taggert both put all their strength into their locked arms and Benny realized that Taggert wasn't quite strong enough to do what he planned so he helped him. Letting go with his left

hand, the one that wasn't supposed to be strong, and pushing up with his legs, Benny flipped himself over the table in such a way that it looked like Taggart had done it.

As Benny flew over, coming closer to Taggart's body, his free hand reached out and nimbly snatched the pouch from Taggart's belt. Had Taggart been sober he might have noticed the bold move by Benny but he was not only drunk but also stunned by his own strength.

Benny's body slammed into the floor next to the two and Benny groaned in real pain. The impact had knocked the wind out of him and he rolled to his side from his back and tried to suck in air. Around him the bar went wild with howls of laughter. More than one drink was ordered for Taggart at that moment in order to honor him for his victory. More than one drink was ordered for Benny at that moment, no doubt in attempt to not only heal the man's obviously wounded pride but also to help him get over the slam.

But as Benny slowly stood up, still holding his drunken facade, he refused the drink.

"One more 'n I'll go down," Benny mumbled, his words slurred together, and the men who'd bought drinks for him just shrugged and downed the alcohol themselves. Benny just nodded to them and shouted something that was completely impossible to understand as he staggered to the door. The men's laughter followed him out the door as Benny staggered as if drunk.

He walked over to an alley, his left hand reaching to feel the pouch. He grinned as he felt the coins within. He was about to start walking normally when he felt a knife to his back.

"Alright, now give me your money and I'll let you go," a voice said into his ear. Benny, still 'drunk', began to slur his words and say something when the man suddenly applied more pressure to the knife in threat.

"I don't need your talk'in, I just need your coin," the man said. Benny nodded.

"Jst' gimme'a s'cond," Benny slurred his words. The pressure on the knife lessened slightly. He reached to the pouch and held it out for the man to grab. The man reached for it and the knife's pressure disappeared as it lited off of him.

Benny spun around, kicked the man in the knee as he slapped the knife away with his unoccupied hand. The man gasped and tried to counter in some way but Benny was too quick. Once he was turned around he kicked again, taking the man in his other knee, while at the same time as his hand replaced the pouch back into its place in his cloak.

His blades were out and at the ready and his 'drunkeness' was replaced by an intensity that put terror in the man's heart.

"Walk away," Benny ordered and the man nodded. Benny considered robbing the man but he knew that the man likely had a family he was trying to feed. He'd learned long ago that most who stole were forced to steal and that, despite the belief of many people in well off positions, not everyone who stole was bad.

As Benny walked to an inn to buy a room with his newly acquired gold Nameless considered the act of mercy just a few moments before and decided it didn't like it. Benny could have easily killed the man, or at least beaten him and taken everything he had, but he hadn't. If Benny was to do what had to be done then such thoughts of mercy would have to be destroyed.

Perhaps, the sword thought, madness was the only route... and to get there the dreams would have to be more intense than ever before.

Chapter Five:

Tank and Maria sat alone in her window. The sun had been down for several hours and a cold wind swept through Keell. She sat in her window, shivering as she sat. Tank sat across from her, young eyes filled with love as he stared at her in the moonlight. She was shivering.

He reached across and touched her shoulder, trying to comfort her. She looked up at him, her eyes still watering.

"He doesn't like me," she softly as tears rolled down her face. She was young. Maybe ten years old. Tank, eleven years old, retracted his arm. His heart stung with envy. That boy, that idiot, had her heart. And he was breaking it.

"He's a moron," Tank said, "Probably can't see straight. If he did, he'd know the mistake he was making." Maria looked up at him and smiled.

"Thank you."

Tank's eyes opened and he found Deabla singing over him. He felt warmth where there hadn't been any. And, for one the first time since Tank had known his friend, Deabla's singing wasn't terrible.

"Y'know... you're getting better," Tank said through a parched throat, "Your singing doesn't suck anymore." Deabla grinned.

"Good to see you too, friend," Deabla said. The second he stopped his singing Tank felt some of his energy drain and suddenly he found it hard to smile. Deabla had been improving his mood with his magic, not healing him. Tank's body was well-healed by the priest. It was his emotional state that hadn't allowed him to awaken. And now that he was awake he wished he wasn't.

"Damn," Tank muttered. He lifted himself into a sitting position and groaned at the pain in his stomach. His fingers felt his back, where the wood had spiked into his body, and he noticed a scar. "I'm guessing they couldn't heal that one fully."

"Wood and skin don't go so well together," Deabla replied. They sat in the room that had been Tank's before he and Maria had gotten together. The sentiment was appreciated but it changed nothing. Memories still flooded Tank's mind and his heart still felt heavy with a grief he could never explain and could never shake loose of.

"Unless they're the same thing," Tank replied and Deabla couldn't suppress a grin. Even when hurt like this Tank could joke. That was one thing Deabla appreciated about his friend. Often the young man, skinny and moderately short, compared himself to the thick and powerful Tank. Deabla's hair, a bit darker than Tank's and shorter, was slicked back as usual. His skin, a couple shades darker than his friends, wasn't as scarred as Tank's. "I can sing again.. it'll make you feel better."

"No... but thank you. It's just a lie... and that isn't what I want right now."

"Are you okay?" Deabla asked.

"Nah," Tank replied, "But don't worry, I'm fine." He forced a smile but Deabla saw through it.

Deabla stared at his friend and tried to read Tank like he used to. Deabla's ability was built on empathy. Before he'd realized his magical ability he'd been able to read others and tell where dramatic things were going to happen. Even now he had that ability but it didn't seem as potent as before. But it was. His ability to tell things was the same, it was just that he had less time to focus on it.

Instead, he was working on his magical abilities, which allowed him to actually change the moods and mental stability of others. He could heal an emotional wound or cause one to grow again. He could rebuild the morale of an utterly defeated army or shatter the confidence of a highly skilled warrior. But he could only do it if he truly felt empathy towards the others. And he had to be able to force his own emotions on someone else... neither of which were easy.

"You'll be fine," Deabla said and Tank shrugged.

"We'll see," he grunted as he stood. He was wearing new clothes. Deabla saw him notice it.

"It was Esmeralda," Deabla said and Tank couldn't help but sigh. "Don't worry, she has moved on for the most part."

"Good," Tank said. He was about to say something when he remembered the babies. But Deabla seemed to guess exactly what was on his mind yet again.

"Esmeralda and Wombly are taking care of them," Deabla said. Tank nodded.

"I should go help," he said. He nodded to Deabla as he left, feeling completely comfortable with Deabla alone in his room.

"What should we call them?" Wombly asked and Esmeralda sighed.

"That's for the parents to decide," she said. Then she sighed again. "Parent," she corrected herself. Wombly saw frustration there. Had she heard Deabla tell Tank that she was moving on from him then she'd have recognized the lie for what it was. Esmeralda was still enthralled by Tank. But in the face of his happiness she'd buried her emotions.

"Yeah, well.."

"Cattie and Ender," Tank said from behind and both girls looked up.

"What?"

"That's their names," Tank replied.

"Why?"

"Cattie was Maria's mom's name and Ender because I like that name," Tank replied. He looked to the children.

"I'm going to raise them," he said, he promised both to himself, to the children and to himself.

"Well... alrighty then!" Wombly said and Esmeralda nodded. Maria's legacy would continue even though she was gone. That was for the best. Right?

Tank smiled, "Are they well?" he asked.

"Yes," Esmeralda said, "They are." He looked to Wombly.

"Spar match?" he asked Wombly and she nodded. Denerick watched from the corner and saw Esmeralda's expression. But he chose to say nothing and she suffered in silence as Wombly and Tank walked away.

"Enough with the drama," Tank said, "Let's train." Wombly stared at Tank and saw the facade but knew he needed it.

She unsheathed her blade and lifted it to fight. She put a small clothe over it so that its sharpened blade was dulled by the clothe. She lifted it again and pointed it towards Tank. Realizing that a fencing-type of fighting would be useless against Tank's flail and hammer combination she moved the blade so that it was perpendicular with the ground.

"Come and get it," she said and Tank took the offer. He swung the flail at head level and she ducked it. She'd seen the move before and knew that the hammer would only be delayed maybe a tenth of a second. She threw herself back, barely getting away from the hammer strike, while Tank spun to keep the head of his flail ahead of him. While he did so his hammer moved in such a way that it kept his back protected and Wombly couldn't get an opening.

She rolled to the side and prepared to attack. When Tank finished his rotation he found that his enemy wasn't where she had been and was suddenly on his heels while she slashed and poked at him with her blade. He knew that a lunge from her was especially dangerous, for her blades could extend to several inches longer than they were.

Wombly's own invention, her slider-blades had given her the advantage in many fights. So Tank was especially wary as he dodged backwards from her. He teased her, though, and kept his hips just inside range of her attack. She lunged three times before finally, on the fourth, she thought he'd stayed an inch too close to her blade.

But Tank jumped back, a surprisingly quick dodge for his size, as the point of the blade slid forward. And because she thought she'd land she didn't retract her blade fast enough to avoid it taking a direct hit from Tank's heavier weapons.

Tank's hammer slammed into her blade and the intensity of the hit numbed Wombly's fingers. She could barely hold onto the blade as Tank swung his flail towards her head. She felt some fear, some doubt of his mental stability, as she narrowly dodged the flail. But when she noticed the way it'd ended she knew he'd changed the course so that she could easily dodge it.

He'd likely have won right there but it was very conceivable that she'd have successfully dodged his attack so they continued the spar. And though she was currently weaponless she knew a single good move could change that fact. She dodged two more strikes, both of which she knew Tank was changing so she could dodge more easily, and rolled to the side again.

This time she didn't stay there but instead she rolled immediately forward towards him. Tank put his foot out to stop her from getting too close but needn't have. Before she even had her feet on the ground she was moving to the side. The rolls had moved the fight and now she was almost to her goal: The slider sword.

Tank stepped forward, trying to force her away from the blade but she was too close to give up. This was it. He'd either beat her here or let her have the blades. His flail came down in a diagonal strike while his hammer punched straight forward. She dodged the flail but the hammer would have hit her in the face.

Tank altered the course of the hammer and it stopped moving forward barely an inch from her face.

"Good job," Wombly said and Tank nodded. He was sweating and he seemed to relax a little in the hot afternoon.

"Thanks. You too," he said, "Most people wouldn't be able to pull that trick on you. The only other person who knows about the blades is..." Tank paused, "was... Ashe," he finished. Wombly smiled and nodded.

"She was a clever one."

"Damn it," Tank muttered and Wombly looked up.

"What is it?"

"We're getting old and I'm closer to twenty years old than thirty years old," he said, "Or right in the middle, I guess."

Wombly shrugged.

"Those who stare death in the face should know that death stares back into their face," Wombly said and Tank chuckled.

"Remember when I got hit by Chance's poison blade?" he asked and Wombly raised an eye brow.

"I fail to remember how that's funny," she said. Tank finished his chuckle and just sighed.

"Because we've done so many things that required all of our skill and barely survived but never really recognized that had we gotten unlucky at all it would have killed us. Ashe was the best fighter in our group but she died in combat because a rock happened to be behind her at the wrong moment. I just think it's funny that when it comes down to it we can all be as good as we want but the thing that's most likely gonna kill us is dumb luck."

Wombly stared at Tank for several moments.

"You dehydrated?" she asked and Tank smiled.

"No."

"Well... get some water. Your head isn't quite right."

Wombly tried to dismiss what he'd said but she knew that he was being truthful and that he was right. The thought of dumb luck determining her survival scared her. Then again, if he was right, then it had always been dumb luck that controlled them.

So she sighed and tried to let it go.

The next few weeks were at first filled with a nervousness at keeping the children safe and alive and wondering if one or both would do some sort of strange magic but soon the concerns were replaced by a certain repetitive routine that was at first hard, then easy, then became simple and dull. But the fact that the children were growing and that Maria, or Iustitia, was out there doing things filled them with some trepidation.

Every day they expected something to happen, something big, whether from the kids or Iustitia. But as the days became weeks and weeks became months and the months became a year nothing really happened. Silence reined.

Tank sat in a chair in his room, looking down at his hammer. It was still solid, still strong, despite years of hard use. The hammer had served him well. He smiled as he considered it and the trials

he'd been through. He couldn't really explain the connection he felt to the weapon, which he used both to survive and to make a living.

He wondered if there was blood on the hammer. He wondered if the those he'd killed still felt the hammer, even if their afterlife. Thoughts of Ashe and Maria and Grewslough and Copla took up the space in his mind. So many people had died to save the peoples of this city, this Kingdom, this region, this world.

And they weren't even soldiers.

He silently thought to himself that they wouldn't have been put in these positions had he not followed Maria from Sprinkleberry, had he not volunteered to go to Keell and fight the demon prince, had he not followed Tuff to the Fire on the Lightning Chain... but how could he not?

The people who had died would have anyway, just sooner and under the boot of a demon prince or if someone managed to stop Azeroth, under the rule of a wraith called Mlaster. And so many more of the world would have died too. How could he have not if his two children, Cattie and Ender, who were already beginning to speak, were threatened. They all would have died anyway...

But in his mind he'd killed them all.

Outside he heard commotion but didn't bother go down. If there was a struggle then Denerick could handle it. If he couldn't then Esmeralda would yell the keyword and some Nose Breakers, an elite group of soldiers trained in Sprinkleberry, would snap to action. And if Denerick and the Nose Breakers couldn't handle it then he wouldn't be of much help.

Quietly memories came to him. He felt his scars, many of them from the blades of humans but more of them from the grasp of the undead. So often had he fought zombies. So often that they'd almost become normal.

He was deep in thought when his door burst open. Deabla stood in the doorway, panting.

"What is it?" Tank asked, finally deciding that maybe he should perk up.

"You need to come down," Deabla said softly and Tank knew something terrible had happened.

Esmeralda looked at Maria, at Iustitia, in shock. Wombly and Denerick were on their feet, ready to move if they had to. Carser was quietly loading a round into his gun. Esmeralda's was quietly getting her crossbow. She was prepared to shoot if she had to but she didn't really want to... Maria was still in there somehow, she could tell. Her friend was still alive, she hoped.

"Why... why'd you come back?" Wombly asked, her bow raised.

"I have returned because..." Iustitia seemed to hesitate and immediately the whole room was put off guard. The handmaiden had never shown anything but supreme confidence. The thought that Iustitia had been rattled by something was not something they wanted to contemplate... then they remembered who she was.

She had murdered Maria.

"Leave, now," Esmeralda ordered and Iustitia turned towards her, her blue eyes staring in curiosity.

"You would cast out someone who requests help?" she asked and Esmeralda seemed taken back.

"Requesting help?" she asked as if the mere thought was mind blowing. "Re... You come here, to the home of one you murdered, you replaced, and request... help?" suddenly Esmeralda was enraged. "You come here, to the home of the one you've hurt most in the world, and you want help?" Iustitia, to their shock, actually flinched.

"Esmeralda..." Wombly said from the side, sensing that Iustitia was genuinely hurt, but Esmeralda wouldn't be deterred.

"You come to a place of us mere mortals, the mere mortals your presence burns the most, and you have the nerve, the arrogance, to request help?" Esmeralda's eyes were wide and her hands balled up in fists of rage.

"You-you... you!" Esmeralda shouted and Iustitia, who had shown no reaction other than a quizzical look and that single flinch, stared her in the eyes.

"If you would not have me, I have learned it is custom to give the owner of the inn coin in return for boarding. If I must, I will return with coin..." Iustitia seemed truly shaken for a moment, as if she was truly in pain.

"Coin you'd steal from another?" Tank asked from the stairs. His eyes were normal, as if nothing amazing had happened, but his heart beat as fast as if he were in combat and he licked his lips in nervousness. His palms sweat and his ears seemed to ring. Was she really back?

"Coin I'd earn, as is the custom of this world... so I have learned," Iustitia responded. Her voice was strong and she still seemed confident but there was a humbled aspect to her. She didn't seem to be any less powerful, only less... something they couldn't define.

"You learned a lot in a year?" Tank asked.

"You're not considering taking her in, are you?" Esmeralda asked and Tank looked to her.

"No. That is your decision. I... do not care if she stays. Maria is dead..." he paused, "And nothing can change that. So this being, who now lives, deserves a chance, I say. If... if you're going to cast her out then don't do it in my name."

Tank looked to Iustitia, who studied him, and they made eye contact. It held for several seconds and neither bat an eye. The entire room, customers, workers and companions of Tank's alike, watched carefully.

Then Tank turned and left, back up to his room. Wombly, in that time, had noticed he'd gained weight. He was no longer lean, no longer the warrior he'd been. But where he'd gained weight, he had also gained strength. He was a different warrior, a different person... and she didn't know if she liked it.

Esmeralda, meanwhile, looked straight at Iustitia for several seconds.

"If you earn pay then you can stay here," she said finally. Iustitia made eye contact with the young woman, the innkeeper, and nodded. Then she turned, almost as if she were a robot, and left the inn.

The room sat in silence.

"What the hell was that?" Wombly asked and Carser shrugged.

"I don't know. I mean, sometimes we just have to accept that things beyond our control are going to happen. And Tank seems to. And that's what really matters, right? I mean, I'm not saying that we should just accept things to happen the way they do or else we wouldn't be us but there are things that we really can't control.

"There's just stuff that is beyond our control, that is beyond the ability of humans to manipulate and it's best just to accept that. But, I mean, you know we just can't let the world kick us around so we have to try and stop the world from just throwing us around but we can't do that about some stuff. Like, I mean, we just don't have..."

Wombly listened as Carser went on, listening to him and trying to decide if he was right. She knew he typically spoke in a very stream of consciousness manner and it was one of the things she felt made him a better person, one that she could be with, because it showed that he was being honest and that he was truly telling her what he thought. But sometimes his entire stream wasn't in the direction of the conflict and he accidentally wasted several, usually amusing, minutes in his speaking.

"I don't think so," Wombly cut him off. "I don't think he's just given up on some things... Did he... give up on everything?"

Carser looked at the place where Tank had stood and wondered.

"No," Deabla said from the side, "He didn't give up on anything. He just accepted something."

Wombly stared at him, waiting for an elaboration of some sort, but when there seemed none forthcoming she just shrugged and sighed. This wasn't the Tank she'd known before. This was a new version of him.

"Are we okay with that?" she asked.

"Can we change it?" Deabla responded and Wombly bit her tongue in frustration as she moved to reply. The taste of blood filled her mouth and she could just sigh again.

"Damn handmaiden."

Chapter Six:

Selie and Benny walked alongside through the forest. Snow fell down around them. She held his hand. The cold numbed his fingers and he couldn't feel her. But he knew she was there. He knew it. Not a thing in the world could change that at the moment. In the distance Benny could hear the moan of the undead, a sound that he'd long grown used to, a sound that still caused young Selie to shake with fear.

"Do the zombies scare you?" the young girl asked, her voice shaky. Her fingers squeezed his hand for a moment and Benny realized it was his turn to answer. He remembered the conversation, the moment. It was different in real life... this had happened in real life! But in real life they'd been sitting in the dark. He felt his lips curl in a smile that he didn't have the heart to force.

"No, they don't scare me," he responded, his voice as strong as it had been back then. He felt nostalgia for who he'd been. Even then, in the first few weeks after his friends' deaths, he had been far stronger than he was today. Back then he'd had... something he couldn't recall.

"They don't scare you?" she asked, incredulous as the day it'd happened.

Benny felt his head nod, "Not at all."

"Are you afraid of anything?" her eyes were wide with wonder as she looked at him.

"Well... yeah, I'm scare of stuff," he heard his voice change, as if he'd become thoughtful at that moment. He remembered thinking of his problems at that time, at his inability to understand himself at that moment... and he wondered if anything had really changed. Could he understand himself now?

Could he face himself now?

"What are you afraid of?" and like the first day the question stung Benny, filling him with sudden doubt. Many things flowed through his head but he had no real response to give her. Even if he could define his fears today he wouldn't have been able to explain them to her. She was young, she was innocent. She'd never killed and eaten anyone.

"I really don't like mice," he said and his lips curled into a smile again. Selie's face split into a large grin.

"What! Really?" she asked, the same as the first day.

"Yeah, really!" he felt his heart hurt at the memory and knew that the enthusiasm forced that day was still taking a toll on him.

"Oh! Can we make a deal then?" she asked the same as before.

"Sure."

"If I fight off all the mice we run into, will you fight off all the zombies we run into?" The moment was the same always. Her voice seemed to grow weak and fail at the word zombie but her little voice would push through her fear and finish it. Always he felt admiration for her at that moment as she seemed to fail in the face of her fear but she pushed through. He could tell that her deal was made half in jest but also there was a part that was deadly serious. At that moment he knew she was trying to find something to depend on.

"Of course," Benny felt himself reply, "but you have to fight all the mice for me." He saw her puff up with some pride as she considered destroying her protectors only fear. He knew she believed his claim, that she believed that she was the only one in the group who could stand up to the might of the mice of the world. He smiled then and he smiled now... but it wasn't as real.

"I don't sweat mice," she said and Benny felt himself cry out in real life. He wanted to grab her, to square her shoulders, to look into her big brown eyes and shout, "It's Me You Have To Be Afraid Of! It's Me! Go Away! Don't Be Near Me! You Can't Really Believe I'm Not A Monster! Please! Just Run! Get Your Family! Tell Them I'm Sorry And Run! It's Me! Oh God... It's me.."

Benny's eyes opened. He shivered in his bed. Someone was knocking on his door.

"You okay?" the voice was young and feminine. It took Benny several seconds to remember where he was. The voice belonged to a young girl who lived in Frival, a village just outside Sprinkleberry that Benny had taken to for the better part of the last year. He was still preparing his carrot, still

learning about how to fight and kill the liches, all of which could be combined to kill the wraith that had murdered his friends.

"Uh yeah!" Benny said, unsure, "I'm fine."

"You're scream'n could be heard from al'the way downstairs. If you need somethin' then just call! Anyone scream'n like that d'serves a meal 'n bed or two!" said the girl again. Benny remembered her name was Synthia.

"Uh... no thanks!" Benny said loudly, "I'm fine."

"Suite'cha self!" the young girl said. Benny heard small foot steps as she walked away, her feet loud to him on the wooden floor of the two story building. Benny had traded meat, which he had gotten on a hunt, for his rooming his first day there. After his stay for a week he went out to help in the hunt and saved one of the hunters, a native of Frival, from the grasp of a ghoul that was still frozen from the winter. The ghoul, an undead creature that could paralyze a man for many hours with a single scratch, was a legacy of the Fire on the Lightning Chain and the wraith that Benny so hated.

It was late that night and Benny was leaving on his normal walk around Frival. He wasn't doing a parameter check like many of the villagers believed, instead he was just trying to find himself in the dark, for that was where he'd left himself before. He remembered leaving East Bocc. He hadn't looked back once as the sounds of the city slowly began to fade away and the sound of the grasslands, and occasional patch of forest, took their place. He'd walked for hours then took a rest, sitting alone in the wilderness. When he felt the desire to move on he did, walking again until it got dark. This he did for weeks as he walked, thinking about his goal and how to get there. He took his time.

He'd been around long enough to know that at night he was safe enough as long as he didn't make any really loud noises to attract any of the wild life and he didn't use any overly powerful magical items. The latter would attract magically based beings that roamed still.

In solitude he'd slept best, his dreams filled with Selie and their time together or with Maria and his other companions.

He'd dreamt of Silo and Melinda, Giles and, most importantly to him, Mave. They were companions of his who had died outside the Lightning Chain. Mave had been his brother for years and the loss had been hard for him.

Many hours of the day he'd thought of Mave, wondered how afterlife was, or if there was after-life at all. He'd wondered, and still did often, what Mave would do and what he'd think. Rarely did he wonder what his former companion, who had been his brother in all ways but blood, would think about him at this time in his life. He knew what his friend would have thought, almost knew what he'd have said.

'I'm thinking you're going too far with this. I know you, brother, and you wouldn't do what you plan to do. I know you. And I'm thinking this isn't you.' He could all but hear his friends voice speaking in his head.

God I wish he was here. Benny thought to himself as he walked around Frival. *All men need a real companion they can depend on. A partner, a brother.*

You have me now... Nameless imparted and Benny did his best to shield his thoughts from the sword. It wouldn't appreciate being considered second rate in any way. The sword had its pride and that wasn't something Benny planned to injure. The sword had warned him about any undead in the area as he and the other hunters left Frival.

Thus to the villagers he seemed a bright young man who knew the ways of the forest better than any. But in reality, he was a young man with far more experience fighting and, often to his quiet shame, killing than any other in that struggle-bound village. He simply knew how to find and take any enemy and destroy them utterly.

"Why do you always come out here?" a voice, young and innocent, asked in a quiet voice. Benny turned to see Synthia. Her eyes were wide as she looked around at the forest, dark that night and where the moan of a zombie could be heard as often as not. This night was especially dark it seemed. And to Benny, who was deep in his personal thoughts, thought that appropriate.

Benny didn't respond, just kept walking, wondering if this was just another trick from his mind. Another young girl to become dependant on him. Another young girl to fail.

"They say it's 'cause you wanna make us safe. But I seen you walk'in out here an' you're not lookin' outwards, are ya?" Benny stopped walking, wondering how a girl, who might have been at most twelve years old, had seen so much. Maybe children see what adults refuse to, Benny mused, because they aren't looking for something in particular. Maybe they just haven't decided what they want to see so in-stead they see what actually is.

"I just come out to think," Benny responded. It was the first time he'd spoken to someone during this time, during his solitude.

"'Bout what?"

Benny turned and looked at Synthia. She had short, dark hair and bright green eyes. Her skin was an olive color. Already she was showing signs of womanhood. Already she was showing signs of adulthood and adult thought. Or maybe, Benny thought to himself, she was in the last few years of it and this was the only time they had enough knowledge to use their unusually accurate observations in conversation.

"A few old friends," Benny said answered again.

"Are they dead?" Synthia asked and Benny nodded quietly. "'s okay. My daddy's dead. Died when some people came from Sprinkleberry awhile ago. I remember his burn'in." Benny realized that he'd been in Frival at the time of this attack. She'd been too young to remember him then and didn't realize that he already knew of Minsc and knew of the man's brave death.

"My brother, Minsc, got his name. Sometimes I'm wishin' I got his name but I guess Minsc ain't a girls' name," Synthia said, "But he died fight'in for us. How'd your friends die?"

Benny genuinely enjoyed her bluntness, "They died fighting, like heroes. They died fighting for a place a lot like Frival."

"Then they died heroes, like you said," Synthia said, "An' that's what matters, right?"

Benny looked at her for several seconds.

"Why are you out here?" he asked.

"You seemed lonely."

Send her away.. Nameless imparted. Benny considered the sword for several seconds, then her answer.

"I'm fine," he said, "It's not safe out here. You should go back."

"Ma says that it's never really safe anywhere. All places have their advantages. In the forest you can run an' cut, in the buildin's you can put your back to somethin' an' fight from there," Synthia replied and Benny raised an eye brow.

"You have to brothers, right?" he asked. Synthia nodded. "You're the youngest?"

"That I am."

"Where are they right now?" Benny asked.

"Proba'ly fight'in each other," Synthia answered. "Why do you care about my brothers? Girls can do stuff too."

Benny smiled at her defensiveness. She was the youngest but hadn't been spoiled as a princess. Rather, she'd been raised as the bottom and been forced to fight for what she got. And to make her even more potent she'd been told that she couldn't do anything because she was a girl. Now she was, Benny guessed, determined to prove otherwise.

"Why are you out here?" Benny asked again. Synthia was quiet for many minutes before she responded.

"Everyone says you're the toughest in the town."

"What's that got to do with anything?" Benny asked.

"I'm thinkin' you can help an' teach me what you know?" Synthia asked. "I'm thinkin' that... so that I won't be afraid of the zombies no more." Benny leaned on a tree if only to keep standing. She had somehow used two of the most devastating phrases in the same sentence. Two people he felt personally

responsible for, two people he'd cared for, had used a part of that sentence... 'I'm thinkin' and 'afraid of the zombies'.

Benny recovered himself and sighed.

"I won't teach you to fight," Benny finally said and Synthia seemed to wilt. "But I will teach you to survive and that requires self defense... so I guess I will have to teach you some moves."

A grin split across Synthia's face and Benny, for a moment, saw brown eyes rather than green eyes.

"I don't think they understand, my lord," a general said, bowing before the King of the Kingdom. King Jev, a young man to be a king, sighed.

"Quit with the 'My Lord' stuff," he said. "Now explain so that *I* understand."

"The leader of Keell and Epop are talking to you and would like to address the fact that the Kingdom's military has cost far more in taxes than ever before in history," the general said.

"It seems to me that that's obvious. The history of the Kingdom has been short and only started with an actual war," King Jev replied and the General nodded.

"Of course, my l-, er..."

"You are a general in my army and we are in a private hearing. I am just Jev," King Jev said when the general hesitated. "Look, General Stapem, you're the leader of the Kingdom's, including Keell and Walston and all of the Boccs and Epop and Limton, defensive forces. You are the one they should speak to when they are addressing the costs of war."

General Stapem nodded.

"I understand. And that is why I'm here. They are addressing me and they ask that I retire and be replaced."

King Jev raised an eye brow.

"Because of the costs of the new and older Chaos War?" King Jev referred to the first Chaos War, which was between Keell and Sprinkleberry before Walston, the Boccs, and Epop existed. Limton was little more than a fish town and would have been destroyed by the influx of boozers had we not given them aid. The newer Chaos War was in reference to several struggles in the Kingdom, whether it was Epop struggling to fight off an orc force in the north or Walston fighting the undead.

"They do understand that had you not deployed forces appropriately then they wouldn't have the chance to worry about money, right?" King Jev asked and General Stapem just shook his head, as if he were giving up to argue the case.

"I wish to have an audience," King Jev, "I will inform them that while we endured losses and we were forced to increase taxes on the peoples, taxes that have been lowering since the day the newer and older Chaos Wars ended. I will inform them that while they are allowed their personal opinion of you they are not allowed to have their personal opinion effect their work."

"You may not be the boldest general in our history but you certainly have been the most effective. And while you lack flare and often over finance your armies in order to insure victory, I do see the reason my father put you in place. I will not put you out because some of the richer aristocrats are complaining that their freedom isn't worth the gold they've put out."

King Jev sighed as he finished. General Stapem nodded.

"I will have them all here by the end of the week, I believe," the general said and King Jev nodded.

Barely twenty six years old, King Jev had the body of a scout and the strong headed mind of a man who felt sure that he'd done all that he could. He wasn't cocky, necessarily, but his demeanor was a confident one. He kept as many advisers around as he could and made sure that he listened to all their advice but he was the King and when a decision had to be made he would make sure it was enforced.

He brought a hand up and stroked his well-trimmed blonde beard. His sky-blue eyes looked around the room for a several moments then, to his dissatisfaction, he finally began to focus on a scroll sent from the Boccs. He wasn't sure what he should do about the cities to the far east. He wasn't sure

what life was like out there and didn't feel comfortable making decisions that changed lives over there unless he understood what he was doing and what it was like.

In his opinion it was arrogant of him to believe he was capable enough to make a decision for those he knew nothing about and that would have consequences he couldn't even fathom at that time. Frankly, he wanted to give them more control over themselves but at this time the Kingdom wasn't as stable as he'd prefer. It was just starting out and was still filled with turmoil, with some small riots in Keell and with Epop and the Boccs often not getting orders fast enough to react accordingly to many threats.

So he couldn't give them too much power without threatening the Kingdom. And if what he was learning from Aenigma, his adviser in magical subjects, was true then the Kingdom would need to be a united army to fight off some of the imbound struggles. He wished sometimes that they would just do what they needed to instead of asking his permission. But if he actually said that then the leaders, the aristocrats would take their new power to the full limits and potentially splinter the Kingdom in such a way that it couldn't be undone.

King Jev, who knew things he wished he didn't, felt as though every life within the Kingdom was on his shoulders and as he considered all the struggles across the Kingdom, whether pirates in their port city Limton or undead still harassing Walston or the orc skirmishes in Epop or the boozers in the Boccs. He knew that these struggles were building armies that would be bound together in their own personal struggles. But more importantly, if he the oncoming struggles weren't simply a numbers game with army fighting army, the struggles were creating heroes that could be called upon to fight the great enemies that threatened their homes.

He sighed to himself. There was no single answer that could solve all of the Kingdom's problem and that was what frustrated those who spoke with him about their oncoming trials the most. Even as a King the man couldn't simply order the entire Kingdom to become a giant army. Nor could he tell them what was coming without increasing the number of enemies within the state. He couldn't risk the shaky foundation that the Kingdom was built on.

King Jev sat in silence for several minutes before a new person walked in, ready to tell him their great plan to save the entire Kingdom. Swallowing helplessness and frustration, King Jev smiled as the newcomer smiled and offered his thoughts.

Chapter Seven:

She was quiet, her eyes barely open. She slept in her bed while Tank sat in a chair. As she began to fall into sleep, Tank turned to leave.

"No, don't," her voice was barely loud enough to be heard but Tank was listening for the words, hoping for them. He turned and she forced a small smile.

"Please... talk me to sleep?" she asked and once again had he not been listening then he wouldn't have been able to hear her. But he was... and she'd done exactly what he'd hoped. He spoke softly, of good things, until he saw her eyes close.

"Goodnight, Maria," he said quietly, softly, "Goodnight." And he climbed out the window.

Tank's eyes opened and he cursed the world. He'd fallen asleep in his bed, after attending to his children. He looked out his window. It was dark... probably ten at night. Most people were beginning to wind down... he was just waking up again.

The sun had dropped an hour before. Finally deciding it was worth it to leave his room, he stood and stretched himself out. His back and neck cracked and his arms and legs were stiff from lack of real activity. He looked down and saw he was re-developing his gut.

"Missed ya," he muttered to himself, half his lip curling up in a smile.

He got to the main room of the inn and looked around. Everything seemed normal.

"Did she come back?" he asked Esmeralda and she shook her head. Tank mumbled, "Didn't think she would." Without looking back or at anyone, and most of the people were looking at the man

who hadn't left his room to go outside when he wasn't looking for food for his children or his work in almost a year, Tank left Harold's Hill in full battle armor.

He found her standing at the front gate, looking tired and frustrated.

"Aye," he said as he walked up behind Iustitia, who turned and looked at him. Initially her eyes widened a bit but she recovered her poise and gave him the usual curious and condescending look that she gave 'mortals'.

Tank looked around at her, at the mud on her clothes and body, on Maria's clothes and body.

"You look like you could use some help," Tank observed and Iustitia continued to stare at him. People moved in and out of the gate at a steady stream. "This isn't the place to make coin quick. Unless you know how to move real heavy stuff real fast on your own."

"I asked for help earlier and found none. And I can lift a team of horses," Iustitia replied and Tank shrugged.

"Doesn't seem to be doing you a damn bit of good, does it?" he asked and Iustitia continued to just stare at him as if she'd never said anything. Tank matched her... and for a moment he felt what he'd felt for Maria. And as if she'd guessed it, Iustitia finally spoke again.

"I'm not her."

Tank's gut burned for a moment and his eyes watered slightly. "I know."

"Do you?" Iustitia asked, stepping closer to him, so close her lips nearly touched his, "Do you really?"

Tank stared down at her lips, then into her blue eyes, then a rage took him over.

"Oh I know it," he said, almost snarling, "I know you murdered her." He was about to continue, about to start yelling, when Iustitia cut him off with a kiss. Tank froze, unable to think in that moment. He kissed her back, desperately searching for a feeling he'd felt long before... then she stepped back.

"If you knew it then you wouldn't have gone along with that," Iustitia said. She seemed to be thinking, to be testing him, to be analyzing him. Tank stared at her for several seconds then just spit at the ground. He was about to say something, about to respond, when he decided against it. Instead he just turned around and walked away, his mind destroyed.

Tank was on his way back to the inn, about halfway there, when suddenly a man walked out from the shadows in front of him. He'd been taking a risky but fast route in attempt to get home before letting his feelings spill.

"You goin' somewhere bud?" the man asked and Tank just stared him in the eye. The look in Tank's eyes, the look of a man prepared to do anything and ready to do everything, almost shook his resolve. But three more men, all walking out of shadows as well, filled him with courage.

"I asked ya a question," the man poked Tank on the chest, "'s kinda rude not ta answer." Tank just stared the man in the eye. Then he slowly spoke.

"You don't understand how badly I could destroy you and your four buddies," Tank's words were even and all but dripping with threats. A fifth man, one that had been meant to kill him in a single, unexpected sword strike, stepped out of the shadows, his face a bit paled.

"And you don't understand how much I'd like to. But I understand that you are just trying to get along, just like me. So I'm going to give you one chance to walk away from me and leave," Tank wasn't joking at that moment and almost all of the men were ready to give in... all but one still in the shadows, still hidden above them.

The man was a spellsinger.

Spellsingers could cast magic through their voice, could launch spells with great powerful by singing in the general direction of their enemy. What they lacked in accuracy, mostly, they gained in a raw and brutal power. But Tank had fought them before. As soon as Tank heard a sing-song voice he was moving.

Tank's fist snapped forward, taking the man in front of him in the face. Tank's fist was retracted and already in a defensive position while his other hand reached for his flail. Two of the men held their

daggers already and were coming at him together. Tank realized that they hadn't fought together before this because when one struck the other seemed not to expect it.

He grinned to himself. This was almost too easy... then he heard the singing continued.

He looked up and his grin was gone. The man was a spellsinger and a ball of fire was building in front of him. Both men attacked with their daggers at once and Tank dodged backwards, barely out of reach of the daggers, but it was planned. His flail, ready to fight, flew across.

The ball at the end of his chain was smooth and round, instead of spiked, but it was effective in ways that most people weren't used to fighting. The head of the flail slammed into the man on Tank's right in the chest. A loud crack, the sound of several ribs breaking, was quickly followed by screams of pain.

The other man tried to dodge his friend's body but his allies momentum forced them both into the shadows, into the wall. Tank looked up and saw that the spellsinger was planning to hit the alley... the entire alley!

Tank turned, ready to run, when suddenly men were stepping in from all sides.

"Damn," he growled. He looked up and saw that the spellinger's spell was nearly done. He rushed forward, his flail spinning, trying to get out of the alley. He wondered why these men didn't seem at all afraid of the death heading their way when he saw small rings on their fingers... red rings.

"Damn!" he snarled. They wore rings of flame, which would protect them from fire... but not his flail. Tank's flail took one in the face, killing him, while his hammer punched forward, breaking a man's nose. But Tank realized he wouldn't get out in time.

Lifting his hammer, getting ready to launch it at the spellsinger, Tank saw the fireball was finished. He was about to launch it, ready to kill the spellsinger if he was doomed to die anyway, when the fireball exploded in the spellsinger's face. The flame literally consumed his body, spreading over a fifty foot radius, and Tank was burned but not too badly to fight.

Tank didn't question his luck at that moment, didn't take time to wonder about what was going to happen, when a figure dropped in the middle of the men around him. Faster than Tank could hope to move, Iustitia quickly punched and kicked, taking the men in the face and chest, killing them with each brutal strike.

Tank realized that close to fifty men had been sent to kill him, that the odds against him were almost impossible, and realized that Iustitia had saved his life.

"Who were these men?" Iustitia asked and Tank shrugged.

"Thugs, probably," Tank replied with little conviction. He was wondering the same thing. He was silently hoping that this was a random event and that he and Maria... Iustitia...- had stopped them but as he remembered the spellsinger he doubted it was random. There would likely be more attacks and he sighed as he considered the fact that he'd likely need to investigate them. His heart, the entire time, still hurt as he saw Iustitia where Maria had been.

"You speak as if they hardly matter. You nearly died," Iustitia observed, "Are you so stupid a mammal that you do not fear death?"

Tank looked to her for several seconds, "You're a handmaiden, aren't ya? It's my understanding that after-life is supposed to be better than this. And I don't have much left on this world."

"Then why are you still here?"

Tank glared at her, making eye contact.

"Because sometimes we just can't let go of things," he muttered as he turned. Iustitia watched him walk. Finally, Tank turned around, "Are you coming or not?" he asked. Iustitia cocked her head to the side.

"I'd say you earned a night's rent from me," Tank said and Iustitia walked with him.

Deabla sat in his room, deep in thought. He was meditating, using his calm to build his energies as he prepared to cast a spell. The two children, Cattie and Ender, still posed a problem. What, exactly, were they? He couldn't say if Maria's changing body had effected them or not and he didn't want to

take any chances with their lives. If they needed some special thing to survive then he intended to supply it.

But, on the other side of that coin, if they were destined to destroy the multiverse then he would take Lidia's previous mission upon himself. He was prepared to do what had to happen to save trillions of lives, even if it cost him friendship and his life. That was one thing that he'd learned in his training at the Library of Ages.

His meditation allowed him to build his energies, to focus them. His power was in his voice and his ability to help and hurt others indirectly. Thus, casting spells like this, summonings and sending his thoughts through the multiverse, weren't his forte. He considered hiring another mage to do it for him, maybe even Lidia if she felt up to it, but he'd changed his mind when he realized that Dean and the others wouldn't appreciate him sharing the knowledge of their existence to just anyone.

They were fighting to keep things in the multiverse decent and if that was going to continue then they'd better not draw undue attention. Knowledge of 'where' the Library of Ages was, something that a mage would need to know if they were going to send a message there, dangerous to give out. If that knowledge fell into the wrong hands then the ranks of enemies, those that threatened conquest of the multiverse or those who desired to end it outright, might march upon the library.

Dean and Maverick and Aenigma were powerful but they weren't Gods and Goddesses. They could fight more enemies than Deabla could imagine but it wasn't always enough. When the number of enemies was compared to the number of friendlies, Deabla realized just how uphill their battle was. He might grow powerful enough to destroy an entire universe but it wouldn't mean much if two enemies of theirs could do the same.

Too many enemies in the multiverse made them vulnerable despite their power. Thus as Deabla sent his message, sent his request, he made sure that no other magical being in the area could follow it or even tell that it was sent.

Deabla was very good at magic despite his youth and he was knowledgeable enough to realize that if he messed up it could have terrible results. So he didn't mess up.

Tank and Iustitia walked in together and the room fell silent.

Esmeralda put her rag down and narrowed her eyes slightly. "What this?" she asked.

"She saved my life from some group of thugs. I think that's worth a night's rent from me," Tank replied coolly and Esmeralda raised an eye brow. Carser and Wombly sat at the end of the bar.

"What's happening?" Carser whispered to Wombly, who watched intently.

"She saved you from some thugs?" Lidia said, from the opposite side of the room, curiously. All in the room understood that Tank was perhaps the most lethal fighter of the group and had least chance of getting killed in random violence, unless, of course, random luck took place against him.

"A bunch of 'em," Tank replied.

"A bunch just attacked you?" Deabla asked and Tank nodded. "A bunch as in how many?"

"Fifty, I'd guess. A spellsinger too."

The companions stood stunned.

"Fifty? And a spellsinger? That sounds more like a gang than 'some group of thugs'," Carser said and Wombly nodded in agreement.

"Did you get any clue as to who these men were?" Wombly asked and Tank shook his head.

"After they attacked us we left. We took 'em down, killed or just hurt," he answered, "I didn't take the time to question them when they awoke. I'm guessing that's the city's problem now."

Wombly and Deabla both watched with a quiet care while Esmeralda, who seemed the most unsettled to see Iustitia, took a more direct route to answers.

"Why did you save him?" Esmeralda asked Iustitia who cocked her head to the side.

"I saved your friend. Does this not make a friendly act? Why need I explain myself?" Iustitia asked, her blue eyes meeting Esmeralda's bright green eyes.

Esmeralda was about to respond when Tank cut them off, "I'm going to my room. Esmeralda, I will pay you for her room later tonight. Give her a night and we'll see about the morning, alright?" his

eyes met Esmeralda's and he saw nothing there but resentment, but an anger that he couldn't even begin to understand at that moment, was all he'd find.

"Fine," Esmeralda snapped and Tank walked forward, past a stunned Wombly and a thoughtful Deabla, up to his room. Esmeralda tossed Iustitia a key. "Go ahead. The room next to Tank's. Stew will be on later tonight, if you do eat."

Iustitia studied the key for a moment then looked up at Esmeralda and nodded. Then, without a word, Iustitia began to walk forward, following Tank.

Tank sat in his room, cleaning his hammer of the gore left on it by the man's head. The head was still shiny afterwards, its metallic gleam untainted by the blood of man, and Tank wondered if that was how souls tended to be. Maybe after all of the pain and torment of life, all of the blood and gore a soul would simply clean itself and move on to the after-life.

If that were the case then was the after-life really a place for those who died? Or was it simply a rebirth, another step in a wheel. If all of the pain and torment were erased then wouldn't the person who had experienced them also be erased? Personality, Tank mused, was comprised of experiences in a man or woman's past. Wouldn't it then be creating a blank slate where there had been a person before if all of the pain was removed?

Wasn't pain created by memories? So to remove the pain and guilt then wouldn't the memories have to be removed?

And if they didn't remove the pain and torment in the soul then wouldn't the afterlife simply be another step in life? Wouldn't it be just as bad as the real world. Maybe more boring but the guilt would remain. The painful memories would still be there. If the pain and guilt wasn't removed then what was the appeal of an eternal afterlife?

He sighed as he wondered if he was blaspheming against all of the Gods and Goddesses in creation. Maybe, he mused, he would offend them all and be cast into oblivion. Then, he chuckled as he thought, he wouldn't have to worry about the true implications of afterlife.

He was deep in thought when he heard a bump on the wall. Calmly he grabbed his hammer, now clean of the gore for just a few moments, and approached the door. He opened it to see Iustitia in a seated position, her back against her door, her head upwards. As soon as he walked out she wiped her eyes and Tank didn't see anything beyond her sitting.

"What is it?" he asked.

Iustitia looked at him, "I don't know how to work this," she lifted the key upwards. Tank grinned to himself. The key was broken. She'd likely broken it trying to turn it in the wrong way and hadn't realized it. She might have the powers of an almost omnipotent being but she didn't seem to have the intelligence of one. Or maybe she was, at the core, just as mortal as him. Maybe it just took a hell of a lot more to kill her than it did him.

He knew the door wouldn't be opened that night, unless he broke it, so he just sighed.

"Just come sleep in mine," he said. Iustitia cocked her head to the side. "I'm not trying to sleep with you. Just being a decent human," Tank said and Iustitia thought for a few moments. After thinking for a bit, Iustitia stood up slowly and walked towards him. She looked him in the eyes when she got closer to him.

"I'm not her," Iustitia said again. Tank almost chuckled at that moment as the body of his dead wife walked in, claiming, for what seemed the thousandth time in the last few hours, that she wasn't his dead wife.

Iustitia walked in and saw a bed and a chair.

"You can have the bed," Tank said and Iustitia nodded quietly. She walked over to his bed and sat on it, feeling it beneath her. She seemed to savor the feeling.

"Haven't slept in a bed for a while?" Tank asked.

"The world isn't as simple as many of my kin believe," Iustitia said in answer. "A soft bed is a nice pleasantry... such things are still strange to me." She seemed deep in thought as she said this.

"Things, I'm guessin', weren't simple out there?" he asked and Iustitia looked to him.

"You already know the answer, yet you ask the question," she observed. "Why?"

"Sometimes it helps people if they're asked the right questions, helps them realize something they didn't already know. Or didn't know they already knew," Tank said. "It's not me that matters when I ask those questions. It's you."

"Or her," Iustitia said and Tank flinched slightly. Was she right? Was he only doing this because of who she resembled?

"You," Tank said, his voice more sure than his mind.

"The world isn't simple. There are things that shouldn't be out there. People are... complicated and the things they act on are never as logical as they should have been. The world is..." Iustitia seemed at a loss for words.

"Complicated?" Tank asked and Iustitia nodded, not realizing he'd done the same thing again.

"I don't understand it. Why do people do what they do?" her voice was less sure for a moment, "I was doing good and I was harrassed because I didn't do it the way they believed in. And because of this I was forced to fight for my freedom, to fight for my freedom even though I was ending those who hurt them, who forced them to feel fear."

"I have not slept in a bed in almost the time you call a year. Once a man, a kind man, took me into his wagon with him and allowed me to sleep in some hay. He seemed content to let me rest when he began to try and force himself on me. I killed him and yet, despite the fact that he was trying to do me harm, I felt something for him. My chest hurt and my thoughts went back to him for many weeks even though he was bad."

"It was like I was..." she was at a loss for words.

"Guilty?" he asked and Iustitia looked to curiously for a moment. Then she nodded.

"Guilty," she said. "Guilty."

"So you do feel human feelings," Tank surmised and when Iustitia didn't immediately shoot him down he realized he'd hit some truth. He looked up at her and saw something else in her. Doubt.

"Well..." Tank said, "The guilt will fade if he was truly being wrong. It's just your heart keeping your mind from getting too logical and not feeling anything. Gotta keep the logic in check somehow."

"A most disturbing system of balance," Iustitia remarked.

"Right," Tank muttered to himself. "I think I'm going to go to sleep," he said and Iustitia nodded.

"I think I will as well," she said and he nodded. He lay back in his chair while she lay on the bed. His eyes closed but he remained awake, unable to sleep with her in the room.

Many minutes passed. He was about to get up, to leave and head for a drink, when she stirred. He'd thought her asleep.

"Don't," Iustitia's voice was soft, so much so that Tank wouldn't have heard it had he not been listening. He paused, his heart beating as fast as if he were in combat.

"Don't leave me... If you'd... talk me to sleep..." her voice was quiet and Tank had to strain to hear the words. "Please." It seemed to Tank that it wasn't Iustitia at that moment. But her eyes were still blue and Maria was still dead.

"Okay," he said quietly, wondering why he was doing so. He walked back to his chair and began to speak softly, talking of good things, of things that he used to say to Maria. As he spoke she slipped in to sleep and her breathing became long and slow.

"Goodnight..." he said quietly. "Goodnight Iustitia." Then he left for the bar, to drink. He left the room disturbed.

Chapter Eight:

Dean sat in a small room, books surrounding him. Eliza sat to his left, Chelsey to his right. All three stared at the bowl in the middle of the table, their eyes narrowed in concentration. Water lay in

the plain wooden bowl but images formed in the liquid, magic produced by Dean's scrying. The three, all wizards, watched with stern expressions.

In the image Tank held his son, Ender, while Esmeralda held Catti. As Tank leaned over, to kiss his son on his forehead, Dean's expression darkened. Already a generally intense and troubled man, his unusually dark eyes seemed almost menacing as he'd narrowed them in concentration. Now the rest of his face, which was fair enough, matched him and it seemed as if he would destroy them all. He could, the others knew, for his abilities in the arcane arts were far beyond either of theirs but he was generally a peaceful man and the thought of him ever hurting them was almost impossible for them to consider.

"What is in your mind?" Chelsey asked and Dean looked up to her. The image in the bowl disappeared as his concentration faded.

"He loves them," Dean said. His and Chelsey's eyes made eye contact and her eyes were blue but a lighter shade of it. Plus her eyes were large and filled with some sort of innocence that had fooled many men into thinking her helpless. Chelsey sighed as she looked at Dean's face, at the brown beard that had taken over his face, at the signs of little sleep, of deep thought, that marked the skin around his eyes. She considered his hair, which was longer than normal. It matched the color of his dark brown beard.

"They are his children," Chelsey said. She brought a hand up to her own hair, which was a light shade of blonde. She looked up at Dean, who was a small man, and attempted a small smile. "At least we can give them a decent home."

No smile would crease Dean's face and no mirth would enter his frustrated eyes.

"She loves them too," Eliza said from the side. Blue hair ran down the sides of her head, reaching all the way down to her shoulders. She'd cut it recently. She had an elven look to her, with a pair of pointy ears reaching out of her hair and a pointy nose on her face. Her eyes, a bright but pale blue color, gave her a mischievous look that caused her to be the target of many investigations for little tricks around the Library of Ages. And, as her friends knew, more often than not she was the correct target for those searches, too.

But in this case in her eyes, where there was a sense of mirth so often, no joy could be found.

"We will treat them well. But you know the prophecy as well as I do," she said and Dean grunted in agreement. He was broad shouldered and could have been a strong man had he worked at it, but his power came from his mind so he never had, but even now after years of not using a weapon his demeanor was still that of a warrior somewhat. The grunt he'd given off, for example, was hardly that of a wizard of such power.

"Maverick himself interpreted it," Eliza stated and both Dean and Chelsey nodded. They referred to Maverick, who owned the structure they were currently in, which was called the Library of Ages. The Library of Ages was a small pocket plain off to the side of the normal realities, which was called the Multiverse, that could only be accessed by those who were given permission to by the higher beings in existence. The higher beings, the Unnamed, were often considered a legend but Maverick, who was often considered the most powerful being in the multiverse, aside from maybe the Gods and Goddesses, believed in them. So the others considered them to be a very likely legend.

"They play a key role in the battle for the continuation of the Multiverse. We cannot afford them to fall into the wrong hands. If they are as powerful as we think they will be then we can't let them be corrupted," Dean said quietly, "We are fighting a war against a force that is currently unknown to us but has tried to release forms into universes that would destroy them and leave them as just a fiery shell.

"I know you aren't idiots. All of the worlds we have saved or been forced to abandon have been part of some scheme, some plan that some enemy is playing on. And I fear that these two children, for good or bad, will determine the fate of our battle."

"Why are they so important? They're human, aren't they?" Eliza asked and both Chelsey and Dean gave her a quizzical look.

"What's that got to do with it?" Chelsey asked.

"Well... except for you and Dean... humans typically aren't that powerful," Eliza said.

"Well, their mother is very different than human," Chelsey said, "Maria was changing while they grew in her womb. They were born from a mixture of human and diety that had never before been seen. We have no idea what it did to the children."

"Plus you've seen the tests that we've run," Dean said, "They're barely even human. Maria's changing body must have had great effects on their bodies as she changed."

"Do we know that she was the only thing that makes them nonhuman?" Chelsey asked and all three sat in silence.

"I don't know of anything else that could have caused the children to be mixed race," Dean said.

"I'm just saying... the tests have shown little human in them. There's something else in them, something familiar..." Chelsey said but she had no real connection made in her mind. Her thoughts kept going back to her first adventures, to her first struggles, with the umbra Amos and Bert, a human who'd given up his life for their cause and been turned vampire because Chelsey couldn't handle him dying. She'd met Dean while there as well. The thought of Bert made her sad. He'd changed with vampirism.

Where was he now? She wondered quietly to herself but there would be no real answers given. He had choosen solitude on a realm of death and shadows, where he, as a vampire, could hunt and kill without hurting anyone who didn't deserve it. Instead, he was killing beasts that leaked into worlds that were helpless against their power.

But why her mind had gone there, she couldn't tell.

"Do you know something we don't?" Dean asked but Chelsey shook her head.

"No.. It was just a feeling. A stupid one," she said. Dean looked to her with true empathy.

"I'm sure he's fine," Dean said and Chelsey realized he knew where her concerns were.

"I hope so," Chelsey said. Eliza, who realized that their paths had crossed long before they'd met her, decided not to question the seemingly strange exchange.

"About the children, what do we do?" Eliza said finally. The room was filled with tension as Dean thought to himself. Chelsey knew where his mind would lead, for she'd known him long enough to guess, but she hoped that he wouldn't follow the expected line of reasoning.

"We have to take the children," Dean said.

"Iustitia is Tank's friend at this point," Eliza pointed out, "It is doubtful that Tank would just let you have them and it is likely that Iustitia would rise to fight us if he asked her to. She is not mortal like they are. Even if we hit her with our most powerful spells it wouldn't kill her in the sense that it would Tank. She has power far different than ours. We could very easily be defeated if our spells don't have the expected effect."

"It's worth the risk. And if things get too dirty... we know what we can do if we really must," as Dean spoke Chelsey shook her head.

"We can't erase their memories," Chelsey protested, "You are powerful, yes, but destroying a memory is just a step from destroying a person. You know as well as I do that there is no normal magic for doing this. And everytime a wizard tries to adapt the magic to the 'normal' type, it goes so severely wrong that the targeted person is left an empty shell!"

"If we destroy one memory we run the risk of destroying them all," as Chelsey finished Dean shook his head.

"We are fighting a war," he said softly. As he made eye contact with Chelsey she could see the pressure in his eyes, the frustration and caged rage, the kind that was being stored until the right time, until the enemy that was causing the struggle was in front of Dean.

"And these children are the deciding factor in it. We have to take action, or we are giving in to those who would destroy everything. But we won't do anything yet. So long as they are in control and in a safe place, in a stable place, we will wait. I will not steal his children unless a major change takes place."

Tank held Catti in his hand, his eyes matching hers. She had Maria's dark brown eyes. Upon eye contact Tank always felt his heart beat increase. He loved Maria still and the memory of her was all that it took to reawaken the grief he'd buried deep inside himself.

"Tank, can we talk please?" Esmeralda said off to the side and Tank nodded. He sat Catti back in her crib then walked over to her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"How long is Iustitia going to stay here?" Esmeralda asked and they made eye contact for several seconds. He raised an eye brow.

"What is it?" he asked and Esmeralda seemed to break for a moment, seemed to give into what was pushing her to do this.

"I... I can't keep doing this. I love you Tank, I always have. And I know, in my heart, that if you would just look at me and see me for all that I am that you would love me too. I know that you would if you could just... just look at me," she grabbed his jaw and forced him to make eye contact with her.

"We could be happy together, Tank, but I can't compete with her ghost. I can't possibly live up to the memory of Maria... she's dead, Tank. It's past time you accepted it and moved on to the present."

Tank stared at her for several seconds, deep in thought.

"I'm sorry," he said. Esmeralda's heart rose higher than it ever had before as he leaned forward. She felt his warm breath on her lips for a moment, "You're right," he said quietly. "I'm sorry."

She waited for the kiss but it never came. Instead, he turned her to the side and gave her a small peck on the cheek. Then he turned to walk away.

"I'm not the man you loved," he said, "And I never will be. We might have been happy in the past, years ago, but you love the memory of me, the idea of me, not who I actually am. Because if you actually knew the real me... then you'd know I could never move on from Maria."

"Tank, what're you doing?" Esmeralda said, her voice cracking with fear at that moment. He was walking towards the crib.

"I'm leaving," Tank said, "You're right. It's not fair to you and I won't force you to-"

"That's not what I meant! This isn't what was supposed... this... no, Tank, you can't-" Esmeralda seemed about to collapse when her words stopped.

"I'm leaving," Tank said, cutting her off, "Because this is no longer my home. I'm leaving because I need to. I'm leaving because you need me to."

"No!" Esmeralda shouted. She rushed forward and almost got to Tank when suddenly a bright flash appeared in the room. Both Catti and Ender cried out in fear and began to wail. Tank turned to see three figures, a frustrated and beaten looking Dean, a sad Chelsey and a third person that Tank didn't know but that seemed equally upset.

"Dean?" Tank asked.

"We're taking the children," Dean said and was about to continue, about to say something about the prophecy, when Tank cut him off.

"The hell you are," he said, "I'd die before I let you take them."

"I'm sure that's true," Dean said, his voice quiet and somber, "But you won't let us do anything. Please, Chelsey, silence the children. Don't hurt the humans, however."

"Humans?" Tank asked, "They are hum-" he stopped when Chelsey sent out her spell. Her eyes widened a small amount but she made no other action.

"Tank, we're going to make this as easy and painless as possible. You won't remember any of this," Dean said and Tank seemed about to say something when Eliza sent a spell forward, one that put a seal over Tank's lips. Tank's eyes widened and he brought a hand up to feel his lips closed by a magic force.

"Please, relax. By the end of this, you won't have to worry about anything." Dean paralyzed Tank with a spell a moment later.

"Help!" Esmeralda screamed then Chelsey silenced her with a spell.

"You let her yell out?" Eliza asked and Chelsey nodded.

"If we're going to do this, we have to do it to them all. No evidence of the children can remain," Chelsey said grimly. Wombly and Carser burst into the room. With two words from Eliza they fell limp to the ground. Denerick and Lidia came next, together, but neither could say a thing, could even cry out

in shock, before they lay limp on the ground. Deabla rushed in only to find himself on the ground almost immediately.

The last to come in was Iustitia. She burst into the room and seemed about to overwhelm Chelsey, who'd released a spell on her but wasn't strong enough to stop her. Iustitia almost got to the shocked wizard when Dean's spell hit her. Dean had spent days working on the spell, one that would be able to neutralize the power of the handmaiden and also paralyze her without doing any long lasting damage, and when it worked it was a great relief to Dean.

The companions were defeated. It was a cheap victory, one that wouldn't be gained a second time, but their advantage of surprise had been so much that they couldn't rally behind a single caused to fight. They couldn't agree on a plan and couldn't decide a course of action. Instead they'd fought alone and in isolation. Instead they'd fallen alone.

It was surprise more than anything that had given the wizards the victory. Then again Dean could have defeated them all on his own just as easily, only with more bloodshed and with far deadlier spells.

"Alright, do it," Chelsey said, "That's all of the people who really know about the children. We can get to Alron, Esmeralda's brothers, and any distant friends who might mention the children, later if we deem it necessary."

Dean nodded. He began to chant, to wield a spell that he'd spent weeks working on. This was his personal spell, one that he'd never used and one that he'd never wanted to use, but one that had bent the rules of traditional magic and allowed him to alter memories. This spell was potent but in its power it was also risky.

He chanted for close to two minutes before suddenly the entire group fell into sleep. They'd struggled mentally the entire time until they fell into their magically created slumber.

He reached into their minds, escaping reality as he did so, and found the memories that were associated with the children. It was as if he were looking at a giant tree, one that had branches growing off in all directions, growing not from the ground but from a central root that hovered in the air.

Every memory that was linked to the children, some of which were only linked by association of memory, which meant that they were only linked because the memories had inspired others to be remembered, was at risk when he was destroying the memory of the children. He knew that he couldn't truly destroy the memories.

Instead he could only numb them to the point that they faded over time. He brought a 'flame', as his mind built the metaphor of destroying the memories, to the branches that represented the children and he slowly burned them, one after another, until not a single memory of the children in Tank's head remained unscathed.

Dean, scowling at the task he'd been forced to do, moved on to the next mind, Iustitia. Then he moved on to Wombly's, then Deabla's, then Esmeralda's, then Denerick's, then Lidia's. Soon all of the memories were 'burnt' to the point that they would fade with a couple of years.

Dean came back into the real world, into the physical world, and he found the others putting the companions into their beds. They would awaken and not realize anything had happened. The crib had been destroyed already, as had any other object that might have been the children's. Maria was still dead and Iustitia was still in her place but instead of dying on the birth of her children, Maria had died on a random night.

In their minds Maria hadn't been pregnant for nine months before the day of. She'd simply existed then ceased to exist on a day of no true importance other than what would happen exactly that day. To the companions, the children never existed.

And, without ever having existed in the companions' memories, the trio teleported back to the Library of Ages with Ender and Catti in their arms.

Dean frowned the entire time. The babies cried the entire time.

Then the sun rose... and Tank awakened to see Iustitia sleeping in his bed while he sat in his chair.

Grief rose again but not for children who wouldn't have their birth mother but instead of a man who had lost the woman he loved.

Chapter Nine:

It was late at night and Esmeralda was the only one out aside from Denerick, who sat in his corner. The desert man's eyes were barely open as he slid in and out of sleep. The years had taken their toll and he was losing his ability to stay awake for long periods of time. But Esmeralda knew that if any trouble arose the aging man would be up and ready to fight in a moments notice.

Upstairs Tank slept in his room, or so she assumed, while Iustitia slept in hers. They weren't together, Esmeralda knew, but it still hurt her that she wasn't with him. Deabla was out somewhere in the city, likely finding a book on some wizardly topic or another. Lidia was also out, searching for any answers in regards to Iustitia and her fate on this world.

Wombly and Carser were in the room they'd together. Esmeralda smiled as she considered the fact that they had two beds. It made her happy to think that they hadn't simply become a relationship of lust. Instead they loved each other for what counted, their emotions and minds.

Esmeralda sighed.

None of them had any memory of the struggle from a few days before, or any memory of the children. None of them remembered the children. But in the back of their mind an itch remained, one that Esmeralda, at that moment, couldn't quite get rid of.

Deabla walked in from outside.

"Hello," Esmeralda said and Deabla returned the greeting. In the corner, Denerick's eyes opened as he became aware once again.

"How are you tonight?" Deabla asked.

"I'm fine, and you?" Esmeralda replied.

"I'm alright," Deabla said. Esmeralda sighed. He'd always been alright. She didn't know what was wrong with him but there was something that was always bothering him. She knew he had a sixth sense of some sort, an ability to guess when things were wrong, but she doubted that was what bothered him lately.

"Get what you were looking for?" Esmeralda asked and Deabla nodded. He smiled, "I'm going to bed," he said. Then he paused as he was walking, "Hey, Esmeralda, be... be careful tonight. I have a bad feeling. If anything starts to go wrong... you let me know, you let us all know."

Esmeralda smiled, "Alright." She appreciated the concern.

The sun had gone down hours ago and Esmeralda was ready to close up shop. Two men, sleeping in the main room, would be allowed to stay. They were Nose Breakers, who were paid to stay in her shop and make sure that she was safe. The inn served for meetings with agents outside the cities, who had business that Esmeralda purposely didn't hear.

She pulled her crossbow out and began to maintain it, as was her nightly routine. She finished and found it sound then nodded to Denerick, who was sleeping in the corner. She was about to step out from behind her desk when the door opened. Through it walked six men.

"This is Harold's Hill?" a man asked.

"Yes?" Esmeralda asked. Her hand fell to her crossbow. The man smiled.

"That won't help you now, darling."

The men unsheathed their swords and burst into action. Two of them pulled crossbows from their overcoats and immediately shot the men sleeping at the tables. Esmeralda lifted her crossbow and took aim a man holding a crossbow. She felt her finger on the trigger but hesitated. From the corner Denerick burst into action, unsheathing his scimitar.

The warrior, a giant of a man who was nearly six and a half feet tall, quickly cross the distance between himself and the first man. Denerick's blade slammed into the first man's and the force numbed

the man's hand. Denerick, knowing his advantage, pressed harder and ripped the blade from the man's shaking fingers.

"Oh no," the man gasped right before Denerick's blade slashed across the man's throat. Denerick let out a howl of rage and the entire building was up. Nearly two dozen more men, all wearing the same dark cloaks, burst through the door, all wielding their weapons.

Esmeralda saw a man lift a crossbow in her direction and she felt her finger tighten around the trigger. The bolt shot forward from her crossbow and imbedded itself in the man's throat. He gurgled as he fell to the ground, unable to breath.

Tank's eyes burst open as he heard the scream. Iustitia was sleeping in his bed while he was in his chair. She'd slept there every night, as she hadn't been able to sleep in her own room. The key was still broken and Tank hadn't cared to fix it.

He was up out of his chair and had his hammer in hand. The flail was by the door. He grabbed the handle of his second weapon as he passed the door. Iustitia, who was awakened by the sudden and unexpected motion, jumped out of her bed. She heard the sounds of fighting and realized why Tank had left.

She followed immediately.

Wombly and Carser had been staring at one another, playing some mental game or another. They heard Denerick's howl and jumped to their feet. Wombly had her crossbow ready and loaded in seconds. Carser's weapon, a musket-like weapon that could shoot multiple bullets without him needing to reload, took longer to load.

"Let's go," Wombly said. She rushed towards the door and had it opened. Carser followed close behind.

Esmeralda was hiding behind her bar while Denerick fought. She knew she was more of a liability in battle than a help. She heard a roar of rage and knew that Tank had entered the fray. A smile, one that contrasted the terrified nervousness that filled her at that moment, crossed her face as she knew he entered the combat.

She heard a man grunt in pain and heard Tank roar again. Another grunt and Esmeralda realized that they might not die at that moment.

Tank's flail slammed into a man's face. The man hadn't been ready for the attack and thus it blindsided him. The man's neck snapped and he fell to the ground, dead. Tank brought his hammer up and slammed it into another man, hitting him in the chest. The man cried out as the dull thud of blunt steel hitting flesh was followed by the crack of bone snapping.

Tank went into a chaotic battle mode, his arms and legs all working in concert despite the fact that his weapons seemed to fly about in a random fashion. And despite the weight of the weapons, Tank handled them with ease. It seemed that they weighed nothing as Tank slammed them into the men in black. As Tank moved through the room, enemies moved to get out of his path.

If Tank was scary then Iustitia was terrifying. A heavy broad-sword in hand, each cut a man's body in half through the middle. Every enemy Iustitia ran into met a swift and merciless end.

Wombly and Carser got into the room and immediately leveled their weapons. Wombly pulled the trigger, releasing a bolt into the crowd and downing a man, at the same time as Carser. For Wombly a second bolt slid into place almost immediately and she was able to fire again immediately. Carser had to put some more gun powder in his rifle then cocked it shut.

The two went for leg, arm and right-chest shots. They didn't want to kill, only to maim and injure. They would need a living person to get answers from.

Deabla stepped forward next to them and began to sing a song of healing on his allies. He saw Tank get punched across the face and knew that a bone must have been broken in the man's jaw. But if it slowed Tank, it didn't show. So Deabla healed him as best he could.

Tank's hammer slipped from his bloody grip. He'd dropped his flail when it'd gotten caught in a man's ribcage. So Tank's hand reached into his pockets. He grabbed two items he'd prepared for exactly this situation. The first thing he had in hand was a pair of bronze knuckles that he slid onto his right fist and the second was a glove that was a loose fit. It had metal on its palm and bent with his hand enough to be used in combat.

He slid his hand into the glove just in time to turn as a man swung his blade at Tank. The warrior lifted his left hand up and caught the blade at the middle. The man's eyes widened in fear as Tank, his face in a scowl, moved the turned the blade to the left. Tank stepped in closer and punched the man in the throat, the brass knuckles closing the man's wind pipe.

Another man lifted a crossbow to shoot at Tank but Wombly's bolt slammed into his chest, knocking the man onto his back.

The number of enemies was reduced to half a dozen when a final figure, dressed in all black, a mask covering his face and black gloves covering his hands, stepped in. No skin could be seen at all.

The figure, a woman, began to sing. She grinned as she saw victory and Tank's eyes widened.

"Stop her!" Tank shouted and both Wombly and Carser unloaded their weapon towards the woman. But a barrier, invisible to their eyes, blocked the missiles and the woman continued to sing, her energy building up. The men in black all went into a frenzy.

Iustitia seemed shocked by the woman.

"What are you?" Iustitia screamed as the woman continued. Tank's fist caved in a man's nose, killing him, but the woman didn't seem to care as the last of her people were murdered. The woman turned on Tank.

"You are the one who did all of this!" a voice could be said from behind, a deep and dark voice, "So now, I will put you in the ground! So now, I will destroy you. And there is nothing, nothing at all, that you can do to stop it! Nothing short of a miracle from a God or Goddess can save you now."

The woman released the blast and it rolled forward, an orb of dark purple and black energy. Tank's eyes widened as the orb got closer and closer, too quickly for him to dodge. Energy crackled around the orb and raised the hairs on the back of all their necks as the orb flew forward, towards Tank, and the figure who released the spell stared intently.

Time seemed to slow for a moment for Iustitia. She watched as the orb, which would destroy Tank not only physically but also destroy all that he was, his mind, body and soul. He would be cast to oblivion.

She didn't remember what would happen next.

Tank gasped when Iustitia stepped in front, allowing the spell to slam into her. The figure at the door screamed out as the orb of purple and black energy exploded into Iustitia and sent her flying back, into Tank, who yelled out in shock. He caught her and kept her off the ground as she shuddered, her eyes rolled up in the back of her head.

She screamed out in terror and agony and Tank leaned over her, trying to comfort her.

"No, no," he said, "No, please, Gods no!" Iustitia looked up at him and for a moment she was Maria and Tank was losing her again. He turned back to see the figure staring as his companions burst forward to get her. The figure, right before the group got to her, disappeared in a puff of purple and jet black smoke.

The group turned to look at Tank and Iustitia. He looked back at her to see her sitting calmly on her back, her eyes barely open.

"Tank," she said in a voice that was more like Maria's than Iustitia, "I... I love you."

"You're not dying," Tank said but she'd already fallen into unconsciousness. He cursed. Then he picked her up gently, brought her to his bed and looked up to Deabla, "Heal her. I'm going to find Lidia and figure out what to do."

Iustitia lay in bed for days, completely asleep. Lidia and Deabla cast spells on her. More than once Deabla considered going to Aenigma, going to the Library of Ages, but when he remembered his vow, he decided against it. He wouldn't give Eliza that satisfaction.

It was four days later that Iustitia's eyes opened. Tank was over her.

"Are you okay?" Tank asked and Iustitia, with her blue-brown eyes, now a mixture of Maria's and Iustitia's, made eye contact with him and shook her head.

"I don't know," she said quietly. Tank sat in his chair.

"You're awake and that's better. Lidia says you're not mortally injured in anyway, that you would have died had you been anything less than a handmaiden of Salvatore. Whatever it was that hit you was packing some serious heat. We don't even know what it was... because there's no way a human could have had that kind of power. But we'll find out. Lidia says that whatever it was will reveal itself again if it isn't destroyed already.. and it's likely that it is already destroyed because whatever it was that hit you would take more power than almost anything can afford to give up and not die.

"So you might have killed it just by accepting the attack... We've been checking on you and you're not going to die. She says that you are fine but that..." He hesitated, unsure of how she would react.

"That I am weaker than I was, that I have given up power for you," Iustitia said and Tank nodded.

"Why did you do it?" Tank asked and Iustitia shook her head. She began to sit up when her stomach burned.

She looked at him for several seconds, "I don't know. Quit bothering me, stupid mammal."

Tank almost smiled. Whenever he pushed too hard, tried to understand her too much, she would pull away from him and call him that. She was well enough, he knew, and that was what mattered. How she was emotionally and why she'd done what she did could be figured out later. She would live. And that was what really mattered.

Tank turned and left the room to leave Iustitia to heal. A prisoner had been kept and hidden from the soldiers that had come to check on the disturbance. The bodeis had been removed and the floors had been cleaned. There remained one more task that they knew in the near future.

Figure out what they could from the prisoner. And as Tank looked down to his hands, bloodied and calloused, he knew that today would be the day he found out.

"I'm leaving," Benny said to Synthia. She frowned.

"I thought you were going to stay," she said. Benny shook his head. They'd worked together for weeks now and she was no longer the butt of any jokes in Frival. Instead, she was considered the most skilled in the entire village. She had enjoyed her newfound ability and skills and the respect it'd given her but now her source was leaving.

"I did stay for a while. But I have business now," Benny said, "I have to go."

"Where?"

"Sprinkleberry," Benny answered as he walked. Synthia followed close behind.

"Why Sprinkleberry?" Synthia asked and Benny replied, "I have to talk to the King and to get some friends."

"You're going to talk to the King?" Synthia asked incredulously.

"Yep."

"I don't believe you."

"I don't care."

Synthia frowned and stopped for a moment. Benny continued. She rushed forward to catch up when he didn't turn around.

"Are you okay?" Cynthia asked and Benny ignored her for a few seconds. She rushed forward and grabbed Benny's hand. The young man almost pulled away. He didn't, though. Instead, he turned to look at the young girl.

"Benny," Cynthia said, "What is wrong?" at that moment she seemed very mature, so much more than she should have at her age. At that moment Benny saw dark brown eyes, innocent eyes.

"I'm going to go and destroy a greater evil. And I will destroy a lesser good in the process," the warrior made eye contact with Cynthia and she winced.

"Goodbye," Benny said. He turned and left. Cynthia watched as he left, not looking back once. It was about time that the Kingdom of Rust would be built up enough to make his point.

And for the sake of the friends he'd vowed to avenge, he couldn't get distracted now.

King Jev sat in his study, looking at the maps in front of him. Red dots, markings made by the other person in the room, Dean, covered the map.

"These are our expansions?" Jev asked, looking up at the powerful wizard.

"Yes. Collapsing realms have provided us with a steady population increase. One that will build you up for the oncoming struggles," Dean said. He and others, Chelsey included, had been traveling to other planets in the multiverse where humans and other human-like races had been in trouble. They had been saving the humans and bringing them to this world, where they could live in a less hostile world.

But they'd been brought for a reason, though. This world had oncoming struggles that would require armies and strong heroes. And as much as Dean wished he could, he couldn't simply destroy the problems without weakening this world's resistance. They would need to face their problems relatively independently.

"Is this safe?" King Jev asked, "Truly. I know that I can't understand this nearly as well as you do. I understand that I can't save this world all on my own... if you're right in that this is a struggle that could destroy the world... and I know that I need to trust you. So is this safe? Is there anything that I need to be wary of?"

Dean sighed.

"You have to trust me when I say that the possible consequences of doing this are high and dangerous but the consequences of doing nothing at this time are far, far higher. This world is what the Defenders call a Battleground world. These wars, your Chaos Wars, are going to be among the deciding factors that determine whether we, the Defenders, win or whether the other forces, those who are called evil in your tongue, win," Dean stopped for a moment, as if thinking.

"Everything is connected in this multiverse and if you fall then the rest will be effected in a bad way. So we, the Defenders, will help you as much as we can," Dean's voice stayed firm but as his mind went over the obstacles they would encounter he almost faltered. Tank and the others were mighty and skilled warriors but what they would be fighting for was paramount to the fate of the multiverse.

King Jev was quiet for several moments. He was about to speak when suddenly a servant rushed forward, from the door.

"M'lord, someone is to see you," the man said and King Jev shook his head.

"Later," he said.

"M'lord... this person is one of the eight," the servant seemed sheepish as he spoke, unable to make eye contact with King Jev as he went against his lord's wishes, "One of... the survivors."

"It isn't Tank or Wombly... then it must be... Benny?" King Jev asked and the man nodded. Dean winced slightly when he heard Tank's name.

"He says he is here to speak with you about something important," the servant said.

"Bring him in," King Jev said and Dean seemed about to protest but the king cut him off, "If this person believes that something is important then I think you should be aware of it. These are the original eight, the ones who fought Azeroth in the beginning. They saved the Kingdom from his rule."

Dean cocked his head to the side at the mention Azeroth.

"I will stay," the wizard said. The room they were in wasn't overly tall or greatly furnished with metals or jewels. It was the same study that the king always stayed in when he was seeking privacy. Books line the shelves around the two men. In the middle of the room was the great table, atop which the map they'd been inspecting laid. The map was a drawing, with great detail, of the kingdom. Cities and villages, walls and towers, lakes and rivers, oceans and mountains were all accounted for.

A door at the far end of the room opened and Benny stepped into the room. The young man walked forward confidently, looking only to King Jev as if Dean wasn't there at all. Finally, when the young warrior had crossed the distance, he made eye contact with Dean and nodded. Both the wizard and the warrior remembered one another from the Lightning Chain. Dean had teleported Benny into the room where the final battle, the battle between the Wraith and the companions, had occurred.

Had Dean not teleported Benny in then the battle would have been lost.

Both understood that they had helped one another and that they were, in a sense, allies. But, for a reason that neither could determine about the other, the two saw a darkness that was new and that was causing the two to hold themselves differently. In each other they saw something familiar, something they hated. In each other they saw a man driven to actions they hated, driven by necessity, driven by a greater good.

In each other they saw something they hated: Themselves.

"Are you well?" King Jev asked and both Benny and Dean were shaken out of their contemplations.

"I am. Are you?" Benny asked.

"It seems to me that if you pay any attention to the criers and the gossip then you know that answer well," Jev sighed, "But yes, I am fine."

"That is good," Benny said. The entire conversation seems tense as they stood in the room, silent.

"Why are you here?" Dean finally asked and Benny nodded, "I should get to that, huh?" Jev nodded.

"Alright," Benny said, "You are a wizard, so I assume you can scry?" Dean nodded, "Alright, now there is something I think you should see. Something that I think might be troubling your cities, the Boccs. Wizard, if you would, scry something near... a hundred and thirty miles from here, east, maybe, uh, six miles north. There's gonna be something hidden from our eyes.

"But, seeing that you're powerful enough to be in the company of our King, I'm guessing that a little cloaking spell won't be too much for you," Benny finished and the challenge was made. Without a word, Dean began to focus his magical energies. He moved his hand over a goblet and it was suddenly filled with water. Then he moved his hand over once again and the goblet, a rather large one, had an image in it.

Their view of the desert was very wide and far, from a high vantage point. They saw nothing but sand. The King was about to say something when Dean mumbled to himself and waved his hand over the goblet again. Suddenly, where there had been nothing, a giant castle could be seen.

Thirteen towers reached up from the regular castle. This was the same castle, the same towers, that Benny had seen in the company of Sama and Tanner. Now the castle, which was made of stone and metal, was active. Hundreds of figures stood in front. The majority of them were humanoids but there were several that had multiple arms and legs. Only Benny initially recognized that the figures weren't flesh and blood.

Rather they were metal, rusted metal.

"What is this?" Jev asked, his eyes wide.

The figures in the front, all in giant formations, began to march westwards.

"They're attacking," Benny said and Jev nodded.

"What do we do?" the King asked.

"Send an army there," Benny said, "Let Dean, Wombly and the others go with me and we'll get inside that castle. Aside from maybe this wizard here, who else do you trust to get inside and kill them?"

Nigel and Trina and a large group of your Hornet-Lancers are still missing, if the last rumors I've heard are true."

The King nodded in reluctant agreement. Once again these adventurers were the only group he could rightly look to to defend his Kingdom. He knew that to send his armies over there and simply try to destroy the enemy would cost more lives than people would accept if this castle wasn't vulnerable. If Tank and the others could get inside, led by Benny in this case, then they might be able to cut the head off of these enemies.

"M'lord, are you even sure that these are enemies?" Dean asked and the gave Jev pause.

"I have no proof," the man said and Benny shook his head.

"I encountered them and they attacked immediately, slaying several of my companions. I only made it out because of their sacrifice. I've seen this thing twice, once on accident, a second time to see if I could make certain its intent and both times it has met me with immediate hostility," Benny said.

"I will send General Stapem with soldiers. He will determine if they are hostile or not. But if you can get Tank and the others to go along then I ask you move in to destroy or make peace with this enemy," the King said, "If you have need of any supplies before leaving, the costs will be covered by my personal account."

Benny nodded. As one of the original eight he was given specific attention by the King. He could sway the man easier, could influence him easier. This image, a truthful depiction of an area, was enough to make any man nervous. This army would easily get to Bocc quicker than General Stapem and his forces could. The Kingdom of Rust's intentions would be clear at that point and Benny would have the Kingdom of Rust's army distracted. Then he and his allies could get in and destroy the enemy, the lich that was controlling it.

The lich that Benny had never seen but that he knew was in there, was leading this army.

And when he and the others defeated it, his revenge would be one step closer to being finished.

After Benny left King Jev looked around for a few moments. The aristocrats were still in the city and he knew that General Stapem was being overwhelmed by it. After just moments of thought, he decided to send the tired general out, hoping that the respite would make him feel better.

Benny stepped into Harold's Hill and saw a chair, covered in straps, that was coated in blood. He raised an eye brow and was about to ask something when Esmeralda stepped into his view.

"Benny," she said, shocked, "You're back."

"Yeah," Benny replied quietly, looking at the chair, "What is this?"

"House keeping," Esmeralda replied coolly. She was trying to read Benny.

"Is everything okay?" Benny asked.

"I was about to ask you the same thing," Tank replied and Benny smiled at his voice.

"So you're still alive... looks like I owe King Jev some money," Benny said and Tank nodded. The two shared a smile and a laugh, then embraced. Tank pulled back.

"Why're you here?" Tank asked and Benny laughed aloud again.

"You know me too well. I'm here... for some delicate business," Benny said, "Because there has been yet another threat against our Kingdom. And this one... looks like it could get very bad, very fast."

Tank sighed.

"Always threatening the Kingdom, huh?" Tank said and Benny nodded. "I'm afraid to tell you that we can't. We're dealing with some... in house problems right now. I'm sure that this thing will last a few months or years, as they all do, so we can deal with it when we're not fighting for our right to sleep but for now... we cannot leave."

Wombly and Carser walked in.

"Benny!" Wombly said, "You're back!"

"With bad news, unfortunately," Benny replied and Wombly nodded, a frown across her face.

"Unfortunately no one ever comes here to sell cookies or to invite us to parties," Wombly said and Benny smiled.

"I have a party in mind, but there will be no cookies," Benny replied and Wombly smiled.

"We are currently... preoccupied, though," Wombly said, "Has Tank told you?"

"Nothing specific, but I can guess that lives are at risk," Benny said.

"We were... attacked a few days ago. Assassins, all from a single source," Wombly said.

"And you know this because..." Benny motioned towards the chair and Wombly nodded grimly. There was no mirth anymore. The matters at hand were too critical and though they might all feel good in each others presence there must be seriousness.

"Small pockets of people in the Kingdom believe that Azeroth would have led them to the next stage in human evolution, a stage where they were half-human, half-demon. They think that had we not defeated Azeroth those years ago then they would have been blessed with powers and will have become better than human..."

"So they are trying to kill us so that we cannot stop them," Wombly said, "The process, we learned, will take close to ten years to finish, so we have time, but we'd like to nip this one in the bud."

Benny nodded, "Makes sense. But there are bigger fish to fry lately."

"Tell us," Wombly said, "We have time," she said to Tank, "And if this is that bad... and if you're here, then I know it is... we might need to pay attention."

Later that night, Benny spoke to Tank, Wombly, Deabla, Lidia, Carser, Iustitia, who refused to stay in her bed, and Denerick.

"It's called the Kingdom of Rust and it is getting bigger every year. When I first stumbled upon it and it was a small fort, at most. There were a few guards, all made of metal and that was rusted. But I returned a year later and I saw it grew and was expanding outwards. It was growing larger and larger. I was beginning to get worried when I learned what really made me worried."

Benny paused and looked at these people, the ones that he was trying to convince to do what many wouldn't even consider possible.

"The wraith that we fought used a back up spell, a bail out. We don't have a name for it but I did some research. Do you remember the black forms that flew out of it? Well, I figured out what they were and it isn't good. Wraiths, before they die, can explode into five new forms, five liches. Liches, undead beings of great magical power, are masters of the undead who will try to grow into wraiths in the future because wraiths are just... more powerful liches, who don't have a physical form."

"Why do we care about the liches?" Tank asked, "Even if they are trying to take over the world, they don't have the juice to."

"Because one of them is controlling the Kingdom of Rust and using its power to fuel itself. And to make things worse... if the liches ever come together, and they will one day, they can produce a spell to bring back their master, who summoned them in the first place."

"Don't tell me they'll try to resurrect him," Wombly said and Benny nodded.

"And if they are able to get together, to combine with one another, then their spell to bring him back will take far less time than ten years..." Benny said and Tank nodded.

"So if we take these guys out... Azeroth is gone for at least ten years?" Tank asked and Benny nodded.

"Is this Azeroth as terrible as you make him seem?" Iustitia asked. Tank, Wombly and Benny all nodded.

"He will burn this world. He is the Prince of Chaos, from the realm of fire... and if he is being resurrected then the entire world is in grave danger," Wombly said.

They sat in silence for several minutes, all thinking.

"If we defeat them... then the one who destroys the liches will receive a wish from the demon-plane... and it will be completed," Benny said, looking to his potential allies and hoping to find success.

Tank cocked his head to the side. He looked to Iustitia, who was in Maria's body, and thought for many minutes.

"Let's do this," Tank said quietly, determined.

The others nodded grimly, reluctantly.

Part Two: Finding The Face To Fight

Chapter Ten:

Alron sat in quiet thought. Nerves caused his fingers to twitch. He was close to eighteen years old now and this was his final evaluation. He would be in a soldier in the Nose Breakers or he would be rejected. This was the day he would find out.

He was tired. His arms and legs burned. His eyes were only open enough to view what was directly in front of him. This was the last day of the last week of the training. They hadn't slept for more than a few minutes at any time for the last seven days. They'd been moving and running and fighting in the forest, grasslands and mountains between Sprinkleberry and Walston.

Now they were back home, back in Sprinkleberry, and they were waiting for the results. His legs felt numb still and his feet ached. He sighed in frustration and hoped, almost prayed, that he would be accepted into the Nose Breakers, like Tank and Wombly and Ashe.had. As he thought of them a grin crossed his face.

He'd looked up to them since they day they'd met. Tank had been nice to him when he was younger and had taught him to work as a blacksmith, he'd made him stronger, made him tougher. And now he would show Tank that he had taken his lessons to heart and that he was going to be a successful warrior.

Or so he hoped, as he sat in silence.

The door opened and a man stepped through.

"Alron," the man's voice snapped him from his reverie. Alron nodded.

"Coming."

Alron sat in the same chair that Tank, close to six years before, had sat in. Wombly and Ashe would sit there only a few minutes after Tank. At that moment Alron felt nothing but anxious, unlike the trio that the young man, not even eighteen years old, idolized. At that moment Alron couldn't help but wonder if Ashe, who had barely acknowledged Alron's existence but had been less mean to him than most others when she did speak to him, was watching from above.

"I think he'll serve us well," one of the three leaders of the Nose Breakers said. Each of the leaders, Bear, Commander Aubrey and Seargent Robert, sat across from Alron at that moment. A desk, the same one that had been there in Tank's interview, held their papers and hid their legs from Alron.

The one who'd spoken was Seargent Robert, a man of advanced years. He had grey hair, once black, that was beginning to grow whiter. His eyes, grey colored, reflected a certain level of experience that intimidated most younger warriors and his thin and lithe body, still muscled despite his years, was still hardy enough to spar with the warriors. Alron himself had only barely lost to the man.

The second figure, to the left of Robert, who sat in the middle, was a rather large man. Standing nearly six and a half feet tall, Bear's broad shoulders and muscular frame was more than enough to hide his advancing years as well. On Bear's hip a giant mace lay. Hidden in his pockets were a pair of brass knuckles. A giant beard covered Bear's face, giving him a friendly look.

Bear was indeed a nice man but he had a dark side to him. In just moments he could become an intimidating and seemingly ruthless man.

The final person sat to Robert's right. Commander Aubrey, the highest ranking woman in the Kingdom's army, was growing a bit older but showed it little. Her hair, still dark red, reached slightly past her strong shoulders. Bright green eyes, still showing curiosity and also knowledge, stared out at those around her. The eyes, filled with a false innocence, often caused men to underestimate her. She was a little shorter than Robert.

"I agree with you Aubrey," Bear said, "He's got a fighter spirit in him."

"That's not the question though," Robert said, "We know that he has it in him. He was raised in the same establishment that Tank and Wombly and Ashe have been in for a long time... well, that Ashe

was in," a hint of sadness broke through the man's otherwise objective voice, "But the real question is why is he here? Is he here because he's ready to lay his life on the line for the fate of Sprinkle.. I mean, for the fate of the Kingdom? Or is he here because that's all he thought to do since Tank and the others did it?"

"Well, if he's here for the second reason then he's insane and that's exactly what we need in the Nose Breakers," Bear said with a chuckle but Aubrey stared at Alron, measuring the teenager's response as they talked about him. Alron's face was stone, however, and showed no reaction.

"I'm for letting him in," Bear said. Alron had one vote going his way. That was good and inside Alron was cheering. But on the outside his facade of objectivism remained intact.

"I don't think we should," Robert said after some thought, "He has a future ahead of him that will be good. Most Nose Breakers come here because they're desperate and have nowhere else to go or because they're hurt to the point that they'd rather die for Sprin... for the Kingdom.. than live wherever they came from."

One against and one for him. Alron's facade failed him for a moment and Aubrey caught it. Alron realized she'd seen his nerves and inwardly cursed. He wasn't supposed to be nervous. From the stories of Tank, Wombly and Ashe he'd learned that confidence was everything when dealing with those of higher ranks.

"I think he's good," Aubrey said and Robert gave a thin smile. He'd wanted Alron in but he wanted to see if the young man was so very determined to seem impassive that he'd give away his face and his feelings. Nose Breakers fought for emotional reasons as much for logical reasons and if this teenager was to survive in the Nose Breakers he would need to be able to hold onto his emotions.

Alron let out a sigh of relief, to the leaders' satisfaction, and nodded.

"Thank you," Alron said. He began to stand up but Bear stopped him.

"Where're you going?" Bear asked and Alron cocked his head to the side.

"To go and wait for my station," Alron said and Bear shook his head.

"Nah friend, we already know where we're sending you," Bear said and Alron raised an eye brow. Aubrey spoke.

"Your family has been put in danger recently from a group of people, the new Black Hoods, believe in resurrecting the demon prince Azeroth. Now, we could station you directly at Harold's Hill in order to protect your sister from future attacks or we could station you there in order to study those who come in and to find the bases of this new cult.

"Your mission," Aubrey said, "is to go there, protect your family, but more than anything else, we are going to ask that you and some others find out where these people are stationed. You are going to find them and destroy them. We cannot let Azeroth get resurrected and we cannot let them cripple the Kingdom anymore than it already has."

Alron wasn't sure how he felt. He'd joined the Nose Breakers to build up a reputation and to try and live up to the legacy of the trio but he'd also done it to get away. Harold's Hill was his home and he loved his sister but the memories of his father's death, of murder and death, of demon's and zombies, engulfed the inn for him and still scared him.

He wanted to learn to stand up to these things in a place where he wasn't fighting for his very home. He wanted to go out and fight for another's home and to defeat his own demons in the process. He wanted to see the world. But if this was his assignment then this was what he would do.

Robert spoke next.

"You may take with you your chosen group of companions, no more than four, and you will be given coin to spend at your sister's inn. You and the others are to begin investigating the Cult of Black Hoods."

Alron nodded. He turned and left, already aware of who he was going to get. He'd wait for the next day, for him to sleep and to see who had made the cut and who hadn't, but he planned to get them as quickly as possible.

The mess hall of the Nose Breakers was a modest room, with enough room for two hundred men and women to eat within comfortably but not so much so that anyone could run around recklessly. twenty tables, each large enough for ten people to sit at, filled the room. On the wall furthest from the entrance meals could be gotten at almost anytime during the day.

Alron walked in and immediately made his way for the furthest table. When he got there he saw his friends immediately.

"Alron!" a woman, barely older than Alron himself, said. She had short and curly black hair that stuck to her head a little bit. Her eyes, almond brown, matched his and he smiled. She was a few inches shorter than Alron, who was five feet ten inches tall, and her shoulders were just as broad as his. She was not a thin woman but she was still attractive enough to receive looks from men as she passed by.

"Danielle, how are you?" Alron asked and the girl, Danielle, smiled.

"I'm alright, and you?" she asked.

"I'm fine," he said. He actually felt great. He'd gotten a solid fourteen hours of sleep, which was nice after seven days with maybe seven hours of sleep, and in his hands he held a meal that smelled all but perfect to him. He sat down across from her and received pats on the back from his other friends.

"You made the cut, huh?" Danielle said and Alron nodded. Next to him another young man grinned and pretended to be disappointed.

"Damn," the man, Ajax, said with mock frustration. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a desert voucher, which would get goodies from the meal line. He handed the vouchers to Danielle, who had a broad grin as well. "You're always costing me money, you know that?" Ajax said to Alron with a chuckle. Daniella slid the desert vouchers into her pocket.

"Hey, gimme those back!" Ajax said and Danielle grinned.

"Arm wrestle me for 'em," Danielle said and Ajax scowled.

"Lost cause bro," a third man said from the side, "You got nothing on her."

"I could beat her if I wanted," Ajax protested, "I just... don't feel like it! You arm wrestle her Slim!" Slim, a pale white man with light blonde hair that was cut short, blushed a little as he thought of arm wrestling the larger woman.

"Still a lost cause," Slim said quietly, less bold now that the attention was on him.

"Ah give 'em a break!" Danielle said and Ajax nodded his head with a grin split.

"I still don't think Ajax could do it," the fifth person Alron had interest in at the table said. The young woman had bright pink hair that was cut at her ears and spiked upwards. She was just as pale as Slim was but her body demeanor was a stark contrast from his. She stood at five feet, five inches tall and weighed no more than a hundred and ten pounds but she was considered a very fear inspiring opponent by the rest of the Nose Breakers.

At her sides lay two blades, both of which were long and curved slightly, a scimitar and a katana. The hilts of both blades had some decorations but were generally plain, which was strange in comparison to the rest of her. Her eyes, almost jet black, contrasted her eyes as well.

"Well, if you think it's true then it *must* be true," Alron said sarcastically, a grin across his face, and the young woman, Aspilla, returned with a smile just as wide.

"Exactly," she said. The group sat in silence for a moment, all of them happy to be there.

"Well, my friends, I have something of a proposition for you," Alron said and the four others all turned to him, their attention on him fully.

"Now, I've been given a... mission that requires hard, hard work. Work that centers around a specific building, one that we all know well and one that we all know implies nothing but the hardest of training and the longest of days... this structure, this building, this trap for those brave enough, or stupid enough, to go within it," Alron grinned as he spoke and wondered what the others might be think of at that moment, "is called Harold's Hill."

"The inn?" Ajax asked and Alron nodded.

"Myself and four others would be stationed there to defend but for another mission as well," Alron paused, "one that I can't tell you about until you agree to-"

"I'm in," Aspilla said, "Now what is this mission?"

"I can't tell them-" Alron began to say when every other person in attendance vowed themselves to the mission. Alron looked at his companions and smiled. "We're going hunting."

Alron walked into the inn just in time to see Tank, in full battle armor, step out into the main room.

"Where are you going?" Alron asked.

"Kill someth'in," Tank muttered and Alron cocked his head to the side. Tank was typically bruting, especially since Maria had died, but he wasn't usually aggressive. And though the man'd taken to training when he wasn't working, bruting or sleeping, it was unusual to see him as active as this. His hammer hung on his hip and his flail was strapped to his back. Tank's armor, leather and metal mixed together in a heavy but still mobile style, was all dirty but highly functional.

The warrior, Alron figured, had neglected to keep it clean so long as it wasn't rusting. This was, in Alron's opinion, the result of grief and frustration mixed together. Tank and Alron made eye contact with Tank as his friends shuffled in from behind him. It scared Alron a little.

I could never beat him in a fight.. Alron knew. It was hard for him to explain, to himself most of all, but something had physically changed in Tank since Maria's death. He'd grown stronger and faster even though he did less work. His eyes seemed much older, as if he'd lived a thousand lives, and he had learned to fight in ways that they'd never seen before, in styles that seemed highly unusual but effective to the warriors.

"Something alive or undead?" Ajax asked and Tank shrugged.

"Don't know. But it'll be dead soon enough," Tank said. To the side, in the corner closest to the door, Benny nodded in admiration, and vendication as Nameless sat in silence on his hip, at the fire in Tank's eyes. This warrior would finish the job. In Tank he saw something that even he, who had lost so much, couldn't grasp. It was as if Tank had nothing to fight for other than to fight.

Benny silently wondered if, as Tank killed their enemies, he would feel as if he was hurting a world that had done so much to hurt him. Then he wondered if maybe he was possibly helping the hurt man with a mission like this.

"He's so awesome.." Slim whispered behind Ajax and the larger male nodded in agreement. Alron, who knew Tank well, watched in worry as the stocky man stepped out of Harold's Hill. Without talking to his friends, Alron walked up to the bar, to his older sister, and said, "What's going on?"

"They're going to save the Kingdom once again," Esmeralda said and Alron noticed something new in her voice. He was about to ask about it when Wombly walked into the room.

"Alron!" she said happily and Alron turned in time to get a hug from the woman, who was a good bit shorter than him. He smiled and returned the hug.

"How are you?" he asked and Wombly sighed.

"I'm tired," she said, "But no rest for the wicked. We're off to fight a lich."

"A lich?" Alron asked, his brow furrowing as he tried to connect a form to a name.

"Undead wizard thing," Carser said, walking down from his and Wombly's room. "Kinda like a wizard but it's a dead wizard. Like he's a man with magical powers and stuff but he's not alive, not like us. Not necessarily a guy, either, I don't know why I said that, but-"

"Thank you," Alron said and Carser just stopped and nodded. Wombly grinned. She loved the way that Carser spoke, a stream of consciousness that often left her smiling broadly at his thoughts as he laid them all out before her honestly.

"Why are you going after it?" Aspilla asked and Wombly shrugged.

"Threatening the world, as usual," she said theatrically and Alron smiled.

"And you, the Kingdom's Companions, are going to save us all," Alron said and Wombly shrugged modestly. The Kingdom's Companions was a title that had been bestowed upon them by the only 'newspaper' in the Kingdom, a paper called The Beholder, which was read by a suprisingly group of people in the Kingdom.

The newspaper was being printed through magical means mainly but a writing press had been invented by Carser and another man in Sprinkleberry, a genius named Talgo. It was spread and read all

over the Kingdom, even to the Northern cities and the Boccs, and the picture of the four companions, Tank, Ashe, Wombly and Deabla, was one that many people had memorized.

The entire room silenced slightly as Iustitia walked down the stairs. Alron turned around to see her and his jaw dropped open.

"Is... is that.. her?" Alron asked and Wombly sighed.

"Iustitia, not Maria," she said and Alron could empathize with Tank immediately. Her body walking around and talking couldn't be an easy thing to deal with.

"Well," Benny said as Lidia and Deabla followed behind Iustitia, "It's time we're off."

Esmeralda nodded and gave each leaving companion a hug as they prepared to depart. Each member of the group had a backpack filled with supplies that they might need on the road. Sheathed on their hips or strapped to their backs were their weapons. As they walked out of Harold's Hill, the blades and crossbows, rifle and mace, were a cruel reminder of the trials they would soon be facing.

Lidia, the last person to leave, looked back and smiled.

"We'll be back," she said and Esmeralda nodded, trying to look reassured. Then Lidia turned and left, not looking back.

Esmeralda sat on her stool and sighed. She looked down at her crossbow, within arm range and easily accessed, and hoped she wouldn't have to use it. She sighed and closed her eyes.

"They'll be okay. They're the Kingdom's Campanions, sis," Alron said, trying to comfort her but she didn't say anything.

In her mind, however, she thought, *I know, but they're human, not the legend your friends think they are.*

Chapter Eleven:

He climbed into the window and looked up. Maria was waiting in her bed, her eyes barely open.

"Hey girly," Tank said quietly and she smiled as she heard his voice.

"Tank.." she said, "I'm glad to see you." Her words were slightly slurred as she fought in vain against her sleepiness. He was here to talk to her sleep, they both knew, but he was her friend. She was going to at least give him a few moments.

"I'm glad to see you too," Tank said, "How.. are you?"

Maria considered the question for a few moments as if she were considering a matter of grave importance.

"Do you think they see us?" she asked him and Tank raised an eye brow.

"Who?"

"The Gods and Goddesses... d'you think they see us down here? We're so small to them... do you think they see us?" her words slurred more as she spoke and it was hard for Tank to understand her for a moment but when he decoded her words he smiled.

"I don't know," he said, "But if they see anyone on this world... it'd be you."

Maria smiled as she fell into slumber. Tank sat and watched for just a moment. Then he nodded and left. He wouldn't stare at her in her sleep. He closed her window as he left. The night was cold and she wasn't built like he was.

They traveled to Keell first, stopping for a few days, then moved on. The Boccs were a week or so's travel on their horses but they figured they'd go slower than normal. They'd need their strength and a hard week of traveling would rob them of it quicker than fighting. And no smoke in the sky was proof enough that they weren't missing the chaotic battle they expected to occur.

The entire time they walked in silence, Tank generally off on his own, Benny talking with Wombly and Carser, sharing information and Iustitia walking silently as Lidia and Deabla spoke about magic. Keell seemed quiet to them but in the city they saw shadows, people watching them, especially in the portion of the city called the Assassin's Quarter.

But they left without a problem and the city stay was uneventful. The group traveled in silence usually. The quiet ended, however, when they got to West Bocc.

"Ho there! Stop, and name yourself!" a guard said from atop the wall that was being built around the city. It wasn't complete yet but it had enough form for a gate to be recognized. So the group, deciding not to offend anyone by slipping in undetected, had walked up to the gate to be admitted.

The group looked around for someone to take the lead, to take initiative. But Benny didn't want to stand up and reveal himself, for reasons the others didn't understand, and Tank had no desire to talk to anyone. So Wombly stepped forward.

"My name is Wombly," she said, "I am from-"

"Sprinkleberry?" the guard asked from atop the wall, cutting Wombly off, and she responded slowly.

"Umm, yes," she said. There was a yelp of excitement and suddenly they heard curse words and a man yelled, "Open the damned gate!" More sounds of struggle and the gate in front of them, a twelve foot tall wooden obstacle that Lidia could easily have leveled with a spell or Iustitia could have leveled with a punch, opened slowly.

"The Kingdom's Companions are welcome in our city any day," the guard said with a smile.

"Alright.." Wombly said, more than a little shocked. But she had no cause to complain about the treatment. It was just unusual for them. Most of the time they were working more incognito and under the radar but it might be an advantage for them to use their newfound fame to get through the city faster and to prepare the city for the oncoming assault.

Once inside they decided to move through the city immediately. They figured it was far more important to get to East Bocc and warn them. On their way out of the city they heard mutterings of a dark creature, one that lived in the dark.

"Howler.." Iustitia heard someone mutter but she disregarded it. It was, after all, the superstition of a human, a lesser being that believed in false Gods and Goddesses.

Later that night, they walked, hoping to get to East Bocc as soon as possible. Tank was walking in front, alone as usual, his head down and brow furrowed in deep thought. His light blue eyes had long ago adapted to the dim light provided by the moon but his thoughts blinded him. Thirty feet behind him walked Benny, Wombly and Carser, then behind them walked Deabla and Lidia. In the back was Iustitia, who was also lost in thought as she walked.

Nobody spoke and the sounds of the night around them, the chirping of some crickets, the falling of leaves that were dying from dehydration as summer took its effect on the trees of this land. The green grasslands expanded every year, growing further and further over the desert that surrounded the Kingdom, and they were getting to the edge of it.

They were moving at a solid pace and knew that they'd get to East Bocc soon when they heard a howl in the distance. The howl, a mixture of a wolf's howl and an elk's bugle, was repeated more than a few times after the initial howl and the sound filled the groups ears. Immediately Benny's swords were unsheathed and the group tensed. Tank, who was the furthest from the regular group, looked back at the others.

"Get over here!" Wombly whispered loudly when suddenly a creature burst from the yellow-brown forest around Tank. The creature slammed into Tank and the warrior grunted in exertion as he and the beast wrestled for a moment.

"No!" Deabla shouted, for the creature was atop Tank. It was about the size of a bear with stocky legs, a thick body and black shaggy hair that served as armor to some degree. Wombly's bolt hit the beast in the side and it snarled, looking back at them. Atop its head, which was a mixture of a bear's and a wolf's, were two horns that reached up and ended in spikes. The tips of the spikes were coated in blood. Its mouth had large canines, which were still white in the moonlight, and its eyes glowed a dark yellow.

They heard a loud grunt and the creature suddenly jerked upwards, as if being lifted. Then it howled, the same wolf-howl-elk-bugle mix, as it jerked to the side. Tank, who'd kicked it as hard as he could, rolled to his feet and sprinted for his companions.

Another of the creatures burst from the woods, right in line to hit Tank, but Iustitia jumped forward, throwing herself into the enemy. She slammed into the creature's side and it was knocked to its side. The creature, the howler, jumped to its feet, snarled at Iustitia, then rushed back into the woods.

"What the hell are these things?" Tank asked and Benny spat at the ground.

"Howlers," he muttered as the group backed into a ring of defense. Wombly and Carser stood on the inside, their range weapons ready to fire. Over a dozen howler cries filled the air. Lidia stood next to Benny while Tank and Iustitia stood on the other side. Deabla began to sing a song, trying to give the group strength.

A howler jumped in at Lidia's side, its dark yellow eyes the only warning the priestess got, and she swatted at it with her mace. The weapon bounced off its pelt but the howler did yelp as electricity rushed through its body. Lidia had cast a spell of lightning on her weapon long ago and so if it landed on an enemy then it would sting and shock them.

The group squeezed into a tighter ring as the howlers howled again.

"We should attack them," Iustitia said and Tank snorted.

"You might have the juice to hit them and not get killed in the process but we don't," he said.

"You did kick one off of you, I mean, it had you..." Carser pointed out and Tank grumbled something unintelligible.

"What's our play?" Tank finally asked.

Benny looked around then looked at Lidia, "Cast a spell of light," he said and Lidia began to chant almost immediately. Within moments a bright light shined above them and suddenly they could see close to two dozen howlers rushing through the woods, circling them, at that moment. Their dark yellow eyes, which reflected light more than they glowed, bounced around as the howlers circled the companions.

"Damn," Tank grunted and Benny agreed with his own curse word.

"What do we do?" Wombly asked. She pulled the trigger on her crossbow and the bolt slammed into another howler's side, this time hitting its shoulder. The creature cried out in pain and it fell to the ground for a moment. To the companions' shock, two howlers stopped rushing around and picked up the fallen kin and helped it get away.

"Damn," Tank grunted again and Wombly sighed.

"They aren't going to turn on anything but us," Carser said and Benny nodded.

"Then we have to give them a reason to run," Benny said. He looked at Carser and his gun, "About how loud does that get?"

"Pretty loud if I don't have this one it," Carser said, gesturing towards a long cylinder at the end that served to muffle the sound a good bit.

"Take it off and shoot one," Benny ordered and Carser nodded.

"Alright, but you know this thing isn't the most accurate weapon, right?" he asked and Benny shook his head.

"Doesn't matter, just do it," Benny said. Carser already had the silencer off of the end of the rifle and had already taken aim. He narrowed his sights, breathed in, then breathed out and pulled the trigger with a twitch of his finger. A loud BANG! Filled their ears and the bullet hit a howler in the throat.

The beast cried out then fell to the ground, gurgling in the throes of death. The rest, all spooked by the sound, stopped rushing for a moment. Then, as if an order had been sent out, all turned on those in the ring. They all sprinted forward, attacking the companions at the same time.

Tank ducked one of them jumping at him while his flail slammed into its side. The howler snarled in pain as Wombly turned, shooting her second crossbow straight into the howler's eye. It fell to the ground, dead. But she and Tank had no time to celebrate their victory, for the entire force of twenty two howlers was falling down upon them at once.

Lidia's mace hit one straight on the head, killing it with the electrical burst more than anything else. She had to jump to the side a second later. The howler she dodged slammed into Carser, who was fumbling to reload his gun. The beast was about to turn on him when Iustitia reached over, grabbed it by the scruff of its neck, and smashed it to the ground.

She turned just in time to receive a bite on the arm, a howler's jaw snapping shut on her elbow. Shocked by pain, Iustitia cried out in pain... in Maria's voice.

Tank had been forced out on his own and was moving in a chaotically beautiful fashion, a managed chaos that resulted in several broken howlers. His flail spun with what seemed abandon as his left arm punched forward, his war hammer leading the punches and cracking howler ribs as they flew just past him.

He was moving the entire time, constantly chopping his feet in time to dodge when he needed. A howler slammed into him head on and the creature nearly knocked him to the ground. The howler, which weighed close to seven hundred pounds, faced up with Tank and the two fought strength against strength, muscle against muscle as the howler tried to force Tank to the ground.

But Tank, his face a mask of rage finally allowed some vent, fought back and his muscles bulged as he pushed back at the creature. Tank was pushing the creature back, overpowering it, when another tried to hit him. The warrior was forced to drop his weapons so he got closer to it, trying to outwait the enemy in this case. He had time, he could get to his weapons again.

Then he heard Maria cry out. Determined to win and win quickly, he reached around and bear hugged the creature and squeezed with all his might.

The howler cried out in pain for a few seconds then the howler's spine cracked. Enraged, Tank lifted the creature and launched it at another that was standing over his weapons. The dead howler body hit its kin in the side and the two tumbled away. Tank dove for his weapons and turned to see Iustitia... not Maria... trying to get her arm out of a howler's jaw.

He rushed forward, his flail spinning hard. A howler tried to hit him but he was moving too quickly for it to time its dive correctly and when he got to the creature he put both hands of the flail, his hammer falling to the ground, and raised the flail to a top position. Then he snapped his hips down, his shoulders following close behind, the flail following behind his shoulders, and the ball at the end of the chain hit the howler in the middle of its back.

Tank dropped to the ground, grabbing his hammer, and jumped to the side just in time to dodge a diving howler's attack. Suddenly above them a giant, dark cloud grew from nothing.

Lidia, between Benny and Deabla, who were moving around and trying to keep her safe while she chanted, was finishing up her spell when Deabla cried out in pain. She looked over at him, her lips still incanting, and slammed a howler that had knocked Deabla to the ground with her mace. The bear-like beast cried out and looked up at her.

But she'd finished her spell. A trio of lightning strikes hit three howlers. One of the strikes hit the one that had turned on Lidia and it fell to the ground, dead. Several more lightning strikes and the howlers seemed to get the message.

Howling all the way, many of them rushed away limping or being dragged.

Tank looked to Lidia.

"Nice," he said quietly and she nodded in thanks.

They decided to make camp where they'd won the battle for the howlers knew better than to come back and because there was meat already there, in the form of dead howlers. The blood that had been on the howler's horns had been Tank's and the wound had taken its toll on the stocky man. Lidia had taken almost an hour of healing to heal the wounds enough that they would stop bleeding.

"Well, I can't get the scar out and it'll be sore for a few days, so try not to tear the wound open again, but you should be fine," Lidia said. Tank nodded and grunted as his thanks. Soon a light drizzle

began to come down so Tank pitched a tent when. The others followed suite when the drizzle became a solid downpour.

Iustitia climbed into Tank's tent.

"Hello," she said as she got inside it and Tank grunted in response. "Thank you for.. helping me." Iustitia said, her voice awkward as she spoke.

"Sounded painful," Tank replied and Iustitia looked at her elbow, which was already healed a good bit from Lidia's spells.

"Not too much. But more than I have come to expect. The spell that hit me took more from my powers than I expected," Iustitia stated matter-of-factly and Tank shook his head.

"Not what I meant," he said and Iustitia cocked her head to the side, "The thanks seemed painful for you."

Iustitia stared at him for several moments.

"You miss these moments," she said and Tank looked back at her. He'd been in a stretching position, keeping his joints and his muscles loose, but she'd said something he hadn't expected and so he was turning to see what she meant.

"What moments?"

"These moments. With Maria. You two spoke at night, I understand. Even at a young age," Iustitia said, "And you two were good, close friends for it."

Tank looked away from her, getting back into his stretching positions, then nodded quietly. They sat in silence for many minutes.

"I do miss them. But they were much better for her, I think," Tank said and Iustitia cocked her head to the side.

"You loved this woman, did you not?" Iustitia asked and Tank turned to look back at her again, his eyes lit with a fire.

"More than anything," his words were a warning to tread lightly more so than anything else. But Iustitia, who wasn't human, didn't pick up on the warning.

"Then do you not miss every moment with her?"

Tank glared at her for several moments.

"I miss them. But they were better for her," he said. Iustitia seemed about to argue the point when Tank continued, "We didn't always have good talks. Sometimes she spoke of other guys she felt for, or of problems that I couldn't possibly help with. Often, before the last few years, she would speak of why it wasn't fair that those she felt for didn't feel back.

"More than once I remember her saying I couldn't possibly understand what it was like to love someone but not have the feelings returned."

Tank almost smiled at the memory, at the obvious lack of empathy in her. She'd changed so much in the later years, tried so hard.

"If she was callous in regards to your emotions... why would you feel anything for her then?" Iustitia asked. Tank considered the question for many moments.

"Because... it's not about what their flaws are. It's about what they make you feel and what it's good about them... it's not finding everything that's wrong with them. It's finding what you like about them, what makes them special..." Tank was slow in his answer, "Love, to me, isn't who you can least bad in... it's who you can see the most good in."

Iustitia stared at him and the two made eye contact for several moments.

"You see goodness in this?" Iustitia asked, refering to her body, and Tank shook his head.

"Saw," he said, "You aren't her."

Tank wondered what was happening behind her alien eyes, so blue and mysterious... so unfeeling, it seemed. She just nodded.

"I'm not her. You would do well to remember that. You endangered yourself in combat for no better reason than to impress Maria. She's dead. I'm here. And I don't need your help like she did," the words were cold and cruel but if Tank felt anything he made no response.

They sat in silence for many hours. Outside the sounds of nature filled the air.

"What did you two talk about?" Iustitia asked later as Tank was cleaning his hammer of the howler blood.

"We talked..." Tank started then paused. "We talked about our problems at first. She used to only talk to me because I was the only one that would listen, because I was the only one that cared, but then we spoke more and more and we became friends, really good friends. And I fell for her.

"Then we'd talk about... a lot of things. Usually joke around, I'd make her laugh as much as possible. A lot of times we'd not get to talk for a few days at a time. Her father didn't like me, as I was orphaned and in Keell it was considered bad luck to deal with people who have had loss such as that. It was hard because he'd put guards on her windows, trying to keep me out, but I usually found a way in or she'd come out to talk to me.

"I remember one time I was walking through the city, finding metal for my forge, when I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and there she was. Crying. I didn't know why and I didn't ask, I just hugged her. And she hugged me. I didn't really know what to do, how to feel, but I knew that I never wanted to see her unhappy like that again.

"I remember that when she told me what happened, that a boy had hurt her, I vowed to hurt him and I actually beat him up, hurt him pretty bad. I got in a lot of trouble... he was a pretty well placed kid and had a lot of friends who were determined to get pay back. So when I came back to talk to Maria I had a couple of bruises," Tank smiled as he considered the memory.

"She saw me and asked what had happened. So I told her... and I remember being so confused, so... shocked when she said she didn't want me to ever fight again, that she was mad at me for fighting him and that she wasn't going to keep talking to me if I kept fighting like that..." Tank smiled to himself.

"Of course, I kept fighting. I just didn't tell her. And I cleaned up a lot before I went over there so she wouldn't see the bruises and scars," Tank said. He looked over to see Iustitia staring at him, a bit of red in her eyes. She raised a hand up to her eye and considered the feeling for a moment. Then she nodded.

"Sleep, you... stupid mammal. I will go find food," Iustitia stood up and Tank raised an eye brow. They had plenty of food outside.

Before Iustitia left she turned and looked at him.

"I'm not her."

Chapter Twelve:

She cried, her eyes hidden behind her arms. Tank had his arm around her shoulders, keeping her close to his body. He couldn't really control his feelings, couldn't control his body, as her shoulders bobbed up and down.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Benji," she said, "Benji Tilon." Tank looked up.

He would spend the rest of the night comforting her, telling her of Benji's stupidity. Stupidity that Tank, who saw Maria for all her flaws but also for all her perfection, believed in more than anything else on the world.

The next day Maria would find Tank waiting outside her window, a swollen eye and with his lips broken.

"What happened?" Maria asked.

"Benji had friends," Tank replied quietly. "But he's going to walk with a limp for a long time." He smiled but Maria just shook her head. She closed the window and Tank frowned.

They sat on a small plain, just outside the city walls. The cold winds forced them closer together but to Tank it was a very hot moment. His heart thumped in his chest as she lay her head atop his chest. It was one of the few times she'd ever relaxed and told him everything. He sat, silently thanking the god that had allowed this to happen.

She was asleep. He gave her his blanket, wrapping her in it, and sat with just his clothes on. But even the cold wind couldn't remove the warmth from his heart as he watched her lay. He watched as she breathed and felt himself fall for her more and more every second.

Tank's eyes opened slowly. Light filtered through the tent.

Mar-... Iustitia slept in the tent as well, her head resting on a pillow. The rest of her body was covered only by her armor. She needed no blanket or sheets to sleep on. She wasn't Maria.

Wombly and Carser were already packing up their tent when Tank got out of it.

"You slept late," Wombly said with a smile, "Good dreams?" She was happy to see him sleeping late. It was unusual, for usually nightmares would wake him up before the morning light. This was the first time in a long time that it was the external world that had awakened him. She hoped that this was a change in the good direction.

Tank looked at her and considered the dream. It was a pleasant dream for sure... but waking up into reality had been all the less pleasant as a result. So, unsure as to how he felt about the whole thing, he elected to grunt in response.

"That means yes in Tank," Wombly said to Carser, who was helping her.

"I'm glad to hear you're getting better man. I know that it can be hard to lose someone like that. I remember that when my village got destroyed... my sister died in the first day. She was the first to get up and become one of those zombies," Carser was speaking straight from his mind, Tank and Wombly knew, "I just remember not being able to worry about it too much because we had to move and fight and stuff..."

He looked to Wombly, "Then I met her and she made the pain go away." He smiled and Wombly smiled back.

"Just glad I could help," Wombly said and Carser's face went sad again for a moment but he didn't press it. After a few moments of thought he looked up to Tank, "But I'm glad you're feeling better man. You're like... a really close friend now so it makes me happy."

Tank thought for a few seconds, looking from Carser to Wombly then back to Carser. Then he grunted again. He turned on the tent where Iustitia was sleeping.

"When are leaving?" he asked. His throat hurt with a hoarseness that he hadn't felt before this moment.

"Whenever we can," Benny said from behind. He was walking back from the forest, several dead animals in hand.

"You had a good hunt," Lidia said from her tent. She'd just awakened as well.

"I didn't do this. I found them like this," Benny said with a shrug, "Something heavy must have stepped on their heads or something because the skulls are all broken."

The entire group commented at the oddity while Tank looked back at the tent, his thoughts blocking out their idle conversation.

The group was moving less than fifteen minutes after Benny got back. They continued to walk for the rest of the day. By the time they got to East Bocc it was a few hours until darkness. They got in the city with only two questions: Where are you from and Who are you?

The second question, the answer given by Wombly, was recieved with an incredulous stare and an immediate welcome into the whelp of a city. The companions, once inside, immediately sought out an inn.

"We'll have to figure out what's going on around the Kingdom of Rust before we can figure out how to beat it," Benny said and the others deferred to his judgment. The city was loud with the bustle of people hurrying from one place to another. It struck Wombly and Tank, who had grown up in Keell and Sprinkleberry respectively, as a smaller version of their childhood memories.

Around the city the desert reigned supreme and the people were constantly on the watch for sand storms. Animals, all golden like the sand around them, snorted and defecated on the ground. Many

servants, usually children or indentured servants, scurried to pick up the waste. Merchants weren't as established in this city as they were in Keell and Sprinkleberry, or even in West Bocc, for this city was built on the ability to build and produce, not the ability to haggle.

In their judgment, merchants wouldn't become a large part of the cities natural order for several years. It wouldn't happen until the people who lived there weren't fighting for survival everyday, until the people could feel comfortable spending their hard earned copper on anything that wasn't a necessity at that time.

They found an inn and moved in. Once they had their room Benny turned and spoke to them all.

"Look around the city, trying to listen for any rumors about it. You'll hear little tid-bits all around but if you go to the right places you'll hear some truth, enough, hopefully, to clue us as to what is going on. I know I told you I knew what was happening but I only see the results and the reaction. I don't know the cause yet. I just know that the effect is bad."

Benny nodded at the finish and quickly left, presumably to look for informants of some sort.

The rest of the group sat in silence for several moments, resting their legs from the walk. The ground beneath them had steadily become more and more sandy so it took more energy to move around with the ground shifting below their feet.

"Well," Wombly said, "I think Carser and I are going to try the head office of the city. My name seems to be well regarded. Maybe I can get some information out of them." Carser stood up to follow and the two left Lidia, Tank and Iustitia in the room.

"I need to regain all of my spells," Lidia said, "I'm tired from healing you and the nine hours of walking didn't help." Tank nodded.

He turned to leave when Iustitia spoke up.

"You are going to find information?" she asked. Tank grunted a, "Yes."

"I will come too," Iustitia asserted, "You often find trouble. Should assassins attack you again, I believe I will be highly useful to you."

Tank turned on her and stared at her for a few seconds, thinking. Then he shrugged, grunted, and turned around to leave again, this time with Iustitia in tow.

Lidia watched Iustitia following the man and wondered if she could have saved him this pain by killing Maria before she changed. Then she sighed and wondered if it would have been any better if she had killed her.

"Damn," Lidia muttered as she thought about the no win situation.

Wombly and Carser assumed that the building in front of them was the home of the government in East Bocc. This seemed logical to them because it was the tallest, most ornate building in the city, although that wasn't saying much. So when Wombly stepped in to find several women laying, lying about in thin, nearly see-through clothes, she was more than a little shocked.

Carser, who walked in behind her, was doubly shocked.

"Oh, wow," he gasped as one of the women stood up and strode towards them.

"I'm sorry ma'am," the woman said with a strong desert accent, "We, as a policy, do not serve couples together.. but if de two you would bod like individual services, den you will find no where in dis city dat can compete with us."

"Uh..." Carser said as he looked down at the woman's all but naked body. She smiled at him and the smile was filled with a false sweetness that put Wombly on her heels with its lack of sincerety but rocked Carser back with its lewd possibilities.

"I... I'm sorry," Wombly said, "We didn't... didn't realize that this was..."

"Was what, ma'am?" the woman asked, turning back to her. The look in the woman's eyes threatened offense and Wombly quickly realized that while the women in front of her appeared to be just prostitutes they were far more than that. No weapon was visible on her body but as Wombly looked at her well defined body she knew that the woman likely needed no weapon. She was almost assuredly lethal with just her hands.

"Was unwilling to serve couples together," Wombly finished, "But we know now and we don't want to keep wasting your time... so we'll..." the woman touched Wombly's cheek. "We'll..."

"Be going," Carser sputtered and he turned, opened the door, grabbed a stunned Wombly and pulled her out.

As soon as the two were out of the building Wombly's brow furrowed in thought.

"What happened? She touched me and I just... forgot everything," she said.

"Magic?" Carser suggested but Wombly wasn't really listening. She was deep in thought. She looked up at the building again and studied it for a moment.

"Maybe," she said, confirming that she had heard her companion.

"Well," Carser said, "There's no reason to stay here. Let's move on, maybe?" Wombly nodded, still looking at the building in deep thought. When Carser moved her away from the building Wombly snapped back to the moment.

"Alright, yeah," Wombly said, "Let's find the government."

Inside the building the woman closed her eyes.

"I believe I just encountered Wombly," the woman said aloud, "And a friend of her." She paused, as if listening to someone speak, then she gasped and nodded frantically, "Yes. Yes, I'm sure it was her. I wouldn't lie... I..." she paused again. Then she breathed in and out, as if steadying herself, and spoke again. "Yes.. she's in East Bocc." She frowned as she paused. Slowly she nodded again and the next words came out reluctantly.

"I will relay the orders."

Wombly and Carser looked up in frustration. The Kingdom officials seemed to be absent in the city. They were told many locations that supposedly were home to the government but whenever they got to the buildings they were either empty, closed, abandoned or simply missing.

The sun was beginning to sink lower in the sky and it was getting darker.

"Well," Wombly said, "We should probably head back." Carser nodded. The two, feeling defeated, began to make their way back to the inn. They'd walked for several minutes before they were forced to admit that they were lost.

"Well.. this isn't good," Carser said as they found themselves in front of the ornate building once again. Wombly looked over at it and sighed.

"Here again?" she asked.

"I didn't know that alley would lead us here," Carser replied and Wombly just mumbled something to herself. Carser shrugged.

"Well, we can just ask someone, can't we?" Wombly asked and Carser shrugged. Carser started to move towards the ornate building when Wombly grabbed his shoulder.

"Not that building," she said and Carser smiled.

"Yeah, I knew that." The two smiled at each other, glad that neither was mad despite their current situation, when Carser noticed someone in the distance walking towards them with purpose. He raised an eye brow as he pondered them for a second. Then the figure lifted a crossbow up towards the two and he gasped.

Throwing Wombly to the side, Carser nearly jumped out of the bolt's way. It clipped him on the shoulder and he gasped in pain.

Wombly rolled to her feet as half a dozen men jumped out of the shadows around them. One of them slashed at her with his sword and she jumped back, barely avoiding a gash across her face.

The man, who'd thought she was too stunned to fight back, stepped forward with no defense. Muscle memory worked its magic as Wombly's hand grabbed her crossbow, brought it up and shot the man directly in the chest. He looked down at it, stunned, then up at her.

He fell to the ground but she wasn't given any time to sigh in relief for the other five men were attacking. Two lifted a crossbow and the other three came forward with a sword. Wombly's hand moved to her sheath and pulled her slider-blade out just in time to block an attack. She was put on her

heels by a man's violent attack, his sword flashing across and down at her several times in a only a few seconds, when suddenly a loud BAM! filled the air.

Carser's aim was true and the man that had pressured Wombly fell to the ground, the bullet embedded in his lung. The other four warriors approached more cautiously. Wombly leveled her sword towards one of them, readying herself for the inevitable attack. As Carser reloaded his gun, which took more time than he liked, he looked around to see if he could find any of his friends.

One of the men leveled a crossbow and was about to shoot when Wombly's left hand grabbed the second crossbow and pulled the trigger. She was more surprised by the movement than she was by the result. The man who'd leveled the crossbow fell to the ground, the bolt having crushed his wind pipe.

The two men with swords jumped forward immediately and Wombly knew she was in trouble. She got her sword up in time to block one attack but the other was going to cut deep into her. She knew she couldn't get away so she instead moved closer to the man, hoping to lower his power as she got too close to him.

But it didn't change anything. The blade hit her and would have cut deep into her if he hadn't suddenly gasped in pain and looked down at his hand. A scorpion viciously attacked his hand. Its dark black shell saved it from his first hit but the man smashed it within a few seconds. Wombly had moved to a better position, aware that the man's ally could easily defend him from any of her attacks.

Instead she was prepared to defend herself from both of them. But the man's hand grew numb and he couldn't grasp the sword. His cohort jumped forward to attack Wombly and his sword jabbed in but Wombly easily parried the attack. The man was growing worried. The pair of warriors had killed three of them already and one of them was all but useless at this point.

So the man's attack was somewhat reckless but he was in control. Their blades smashed for a second, a resounding ring filling the air everytime their blades hit, then Wombly lunged towards him. The man knew he had gotten out of reach of the blade as he threw his hips back.

In his mind he pictured himself landing, resetting and countering against her attack but he didn't have time to make the image a reality. Wombly's finger pressed the button on her blade and the blade's tip extended forward. It jabbed into his stomach, not breaking skin but bruising him. But the man's eyes widened with shock as she stepped forward, forcing the blade deeper into his stomach.

She'd done this maneuver many times before and he'd only done it once, just now.

"I'm sorry," Wombly said as she retracted her blade. The man stood for a few moments, staring at her.

"Just business, eh?" he said with half a shrug before he fell over, dying. Wombly looked up to see the man holding the crossbow level it towards her. Her eyes widened for a moment and she prayed that her armor would hold the attack.

BAM!

Wombly felt the bullet fly past her head and saw the man jerk as Carser's bullet hit him in the middle of his forehead. The man's knees wobbled for a few moments before he fell over, dead.

Wombly turned, "Thank you."

"Thank me?" Carser asked, "You took most of them out. I only took out a guy who was trying to attack you."

Wombly smiled at him and said, "We should get to the inn."

"You know the way?"

"No, but after this I think we can take on anyone," she said with her smile still intact. Her hand went to her hip, where the cut was, but she knew the wound was superficial. She looked to the building behind her, the hardly ornate but ornate nonetheless decorations on the door and wall, and wondered at the scorpion. The man who'd been bitten had fled and she'd been saved.

No time to think about it now.. Wombly thought to herself as she and Carser left.

Tank sat on his bed and looked out the window, at the desert around him. It was a nostalgic feel for him. He remembered many times being in a window with Maria, talking and considering.

Iustitia lay on the bed, her eyes closing.

"Tank," she said softly, her words slurring slightly.

"Yes?"

"Do you think they see us?"

Tank looked back at her, his eyes wide. She looked like Maria, not Iustitia. It was Maria. Was that possible?

"Who see us?" Tank asked, trying his best to sound soothing, to hold the moment. Was Maria returning to him?

"The Gods and Goddesses... d'you think they see us?" she asked and, just like he remembered, her words slurred together. Tank looked at her, his eyes wide as he silently calculated what could even be possible at the moment. Could she be returning?

"I don't know," Tank said, repeating himself, but still sincere as he said it. "But if they see anyone on this world... it'd be you.."

He stared at her for several moments. Then her eyes opened wide. Maria slowly climbed out of bed and walked forward, looking him in the eyes. Tank's blue orbs met her dark brown orbs and as she stepped forward Tank felt his knees wobble for a moment.

"Maria?" he asked. She said nothing, just leaned forward and kissed him. Tank was stunned. Too stunned to kiss back. She pulled back and looked at him. Tank's heart pumped faster than he had ever felt before.

"Is this form not pleasing to you?" she asked in Iustitia voice and Tank's eyes darkened almost immediately. The brown eyes and black hair all shifted back to the blue that was Iustitia. Tank felt his heart burn and could feel a deep feeling in his stomach.

"Bitch," Tank growled. He turned away from her, looking out the window, then turned back on her. "Why?"

"You speak of love. I wanted to see what it was like. Humans are so... strange. This emotion is interesting," Iustitia said and Tank's expression darkened even further. He was about to say something, about to yell or growl or shout or scream when he just stopped. He stared at her for a moment.

"Never again," he said quietly but strongly. Iustitia's eyes widened at the power and hardly veiled threat in the tone. Then he walked past her.

Wombly and Carser were walking into the inn, having finally found it, when Tank got down.

"Hello Tank," Wombly said as he walked over to the bar. Tank didn't respond, just stepped forward, handed the bar keeper a copper and got his drink. Wombly and Carser watched him down two flagons of alcohol in muted silence.

"Tank?" Wombly asked and he turned to look at her.

"Not right now," he said in the same voice that he'd spoken to Iustitia with and Wombly nodded. She and Carser left, heading up to Lidia's room to get her healed. Tank turned back and ordered another flagon.

Chapter Thirteen:

"They've left," a voice in the dark said. "Our scouts in East Bocc have seen them. They travel into the desert. We must act now, destroy their home. When your enemy flies too quickly to be smashed with brute force, destroy what they might land on."

"Leave them no quarter in which they might rest." A second, deeper and darker voice responded.

"Yes master." Dozens of voices spoke at once.

Alron sat at a table, his eyes staring downward.

"You ready?" Slim asked from the side. Alron looked up at his companion.

"We're Nose Breakers. We're always ready," he said and Slim nodded.

"I think we'll be good," he said, "Very good."

"Damn straight we will be," Ajax said from the side, a broad grin across his face. "We're gonna be the best."

"You think they're being truthful?" Slim asked, looking at both of his companions.

"I think so," Alron answered, "If they're right, then we might find ourselves at the cusp of a war within Sprinkleberry. If these fanatics exist, if they are really as powerful as we believe, then we must act. We might be the first to see and catch them.."

"We'll make sure they understand that the Nose Breakers' name isn't metaphorical," Ajax said again, his cocky nature giving comfort to his companions. But as they sat again, oiling and sharpening their weapons for the night, they couldn't deny one crucial fact: They were green, unexperienced, they were rookies.

Esmeralda watched from her bar, saw that uneasiness in her brother's presence. She had lived with him all his life, had practically raised him, and she could read his moods well. She couldn't guess what he was doing but she knew that if he was part of the Nose Breakers then it was important. And, to her dissatisfaction, it was inevitably dangerous.

"Be safe, my brother," she all but prayed silently. If any God or Goddess heard her prayer she hoped they would see her fit for a miracle. For him coming back the next morning, or that night, or the next day, or whenever he was able to, would be just that, a miracle.

"Come back to me."

Esmeralda looked up at the sun began to dip below the horizon. Alron stood up, looking around the room. Ajax, Aspilla, Danielle and Slim also stood. A quick nod to them and they began to head over to the door. Alron looked over at Esmeralda and easily read the concern on her face.

More for himself than for her, he walked over to her and grabbed her hand.

"We'll come back. We're just scouting," he said.

"Scouting?" Esmeralda asked.

"Kingdom business," Alron shrugged, "I can't explain much more... but we'll be back. Just like Tank and the others, we'll be back." He forced a weak smile and turned, leaving her at the bar. As soon as he was out of her sight she felt tears building in her eyes.

"God I hope not," she voice aloud. For the others had come back beaten and wounded, scarred and scared. They'd come back bitter and broken, hurt and bleeding. She hoped that her dear brother, her little Alron, never came back to her like that. For then he wouldn't be her little brother anymore. Maybe not even her brother.

Just a man with a sword.

"I hope not."

Sprinkleberry at night wasn't much different than it was during the day, at least in terms of business. But the people on the city changed dramatically. Hard working craftsmen, beggars and tradesmen were replaced by hard working thieves, prostitutes, mercenaries, guardsmen, movers and others of less noble professions.

Alron and Aspilla walked side by side, trying to look natural in the dark city. It was darker than they'd really expected. Because of the boozier attacks the light poles attracted, Sprinkleberry had almost completely stopped lighting the light poles that had been built only a few years before. Thus the only real light source were candles and few people out at that time had the money for candles or the desire for full light.

Only the movers, or porters as they were often called, kept candles with them consistently. It was hard for them to move their heavy loads when they couldn't see in front of them. And because they were the only source of light, people often waited for the porter groups to move past them before they continued on their way in the dark streets.

Each porter group, because of their light, had at least half a dozen people walking alongside them. The relationship was symbiotic in that the walkers often helped the porters if they were about to

lose control of their load and the light of the porters' candles would run off thieves from those who kept within the light.

But Alron and Aspillia, hiding their features under hoods, stayed to the darkness, looking for people who might have anything to do with these new fanatics, the Black Hoods. Aspillia, more so than Alron, made sure her hood stayed up. Her hair, bright pink and very unusual, would quickly mark her as a Nose Breakers if anyone recognized her, which wasn't hard to do in a crowd.

Slim, Ajax and Danielle paralled them on the other side of the street, their hoods drawn up as well. Rumors learned earlier had supplied them with a plan, one that had been considered for hours before the group had departed for their mission.

The main tell tale sign for the Black Hoods was that they wore their hoods at all times, their eyes and face hidden from view. More often than not, the members of the Black Hoods knew some sort of magic and hid their faces with a spell of darkness. Thus the group had determined to try and look like lost members of the cult.

They traveled the entire night, staying out until the sun was about to rise, but they either weren't seen by any Black Hoods or their disguises weren't enough. At one point, in desperation for any kind of result, Ajax suggested the two groups split up but Alron forbid it.

"On our own we're a bunch of rookies who can hold a sword and maybe fight with it. But together we're part of the Nose Breakers. We're all good at solo combat but we're better in a group," he said, "We're not splitting up until we're good and certain that it's not suicide to do so."

His loud whisper had drawn some attention and the group of five split up as they saw the tell-tale light of a porter group heading their way. Aspillia especially hurried to get away from the light. Any details that could be remembered about them could potentially be a weakness.

But they found nothing of note and by the time the sun was coming back up they had already returned to Harold's Hill, giving in to weariness. As they filed in, Esmeralda nodded Alron over.

"What is it?" he asked and Esmeralda quietly whispered.

"While you were gone some men came in. Asked if I had a brother. I told them yes and they asked where you went.. I told them I didn't know. I tried to put a tracker on them," she referred to a small, sticky button that Tank and Lidia had created together. It allowed anyone to be tracked through magical means, "but I couldn't.

"But if you stay home tonight, I imagine you'll be able to follow them after I say you're not here," Esmeralda said. Alron smiled and nodded.

"Thanks sister. Love you," he said, kissing her on the cheek, then walked up to his room at the inn. As he walked away Esmeralda almost laughed. The five people were taking up two of her rooms. She only had a few left. Tank and the others had cleared their rooms in order to free them up while the group was gone but even so she only had ten rooms in total. Two were taken up by these five and three were taken up by Tank and the others. Denerick had his own room and that was over half of her rooms.

The last four rooms were rarely up for use anyway. She and the others were building up and soon Harold's Hill would have twenty rooms instead of ten. But Esmeralda wasn't sure how she felt about it. She didn't like people staying there that she didn't know anymore. There were too many risks and her friends had too many enemies.

Plus Harold's Hill made more than enough money. People came in and drank, buying to hear stories from the companions or simply to look at the place where some of Sprinklberry's heroes' battles had been. Or simply because Esmeralda only bought, and made sometimes, the best liquor and made the best food in the city.

She sighed and smiled at her brother's back as he left.

"Be safe little brother."

Alron's eyes opened and he looked at Slim and Ajax, who both slept on the ground. Tonight was his night with the bed. The group had been watching those who came in and asked about where Alron was. It'd been three days and they'd finally gotten an identity for the man who was leading the group that came in.

The man, Carvile, led another eight in behind him. They all wore all black and had very ordinary faces, almost impossibly ordinary. It was easy to forget their features and they seemed slightly different everytime they came in. Only Carvile himself had the same face exactly.

"Maybe he has a bunch of different people with him?" Ajax had suggested but both Alron and Danielle were confident that they're the same people.

"I bet its magic," Danielle had replied after dismissing Ajax's simple theory.

"They are trying to resurrect a demon.. probably gotta know some spells," Slim said with little doubt in his voice. Magic would likely be a resource that their foes could call upon.

"Today we follow them," Alron said to himself in their bed. He looked up at the ceiling, then at the others again. "Time to get up!" He opened their window and smiled. It would be dark soon.

The group sat in the middle of Harold's Hill.

"Here's the plan. They come in, Esmeralda sends them out. Tells them we're going to the main gate. We follow them there, splitting into three groups: Danielle and me, Slim and Ajax and Aspilla, you go on your own. You stay the closest of us because you're the fastest and on your own you can out-run almost anyone." Alron looked at his companions, making sure they were paying attention, then continued.

"Anyway, we follow them there, then we capture whoever they leave behind to watch for us. They'll all be waiting nearby. So we'll have to do it quickly and be smart about it. They outnumber us and maybe they are more skilled individually but we are the best group fighters out here. Plus we can always get other Nose Breakers to join in."

Alron finished and looked at his companions, his fellow soldiers. Rookies, all of them. And it showed in their eyes. Even Aspilla, who was the most confident of the bunch, showed some nerves in her eyes.

"We can do this guys," Alron said with a forced smile.. then he paused, "If anyone gets surrounded or overwhelmed, shout out like a bird as loud as you can. If that's too loud, mention something about Walstonian pastries. Everyone, if you hear anything like a bird call or Walstonian pastries, then rush to the maker."

They all nodded and prepared for the oncoming struggle. Each ate their first meal of the day, which they hesitated to call breakfast, and sat in their places in the inn. They kept watch, other Nose Breakers in the room with them, and fought off their nerves as best they could. Alron stayed with his sister for some time.

Then the sun dropped below the horizon and within an hour the Black Hoods, led by Carvile, walked in. Each of the five companions felt their stomachs tighten slightly and they each gripped their weapons a little closer than before. They tried to relax, worried that their own performance would be the give away about their plan but if Carvile and his followers noticed anything they neither said nor did anything to indicate it.

Then, quicker than Alron thought was possible, Esmeralda informed the men that the Nose Breakers were heading to the main gate. It was a genius spot, for discovery was likely there. Plus with all the guards there, any discovery would aid the Nose Breakers more than anything.

Carvile, seeming to calculate for a moment, then nodded solemnly.

"Thank you, ma'am. You've been kind," he said, "I'm not hungry but your kindness doesn't go unnoticed." He reached into his pocket and pulled out four gold coins. "Be well tonight," he said with genuine emotion, it seemed, and placed the coins on the counter in front of Esmeralda, who looked at them with shock written obvious on her face.

"Th-thank you," Esmeralda said. Carvile looked at her for a few moments, as if thinking about the sadness that would fill her soon, and nodded.

"Be well tonight Miss Housekeep," he said then he turned and left quickly.

Soon after, but not too soon, five people got up in pairs or on their own. Aspilla got up first, her hood up before she left the door. Slim and Ajax followed her about fifty seconds afterwards. Then, last, Alron and Danielle got up and followed a minute afterwards.

All five looked relaxed as they left and had they not been worried about some sort of informer in the inn itself, Alron would have embraced his sister. But he'd done so throughout the day, embracing her with hugs and saying comforting words. They'd spent fifteen minutes before sun down speaking kind and comforting words to one another, pretending it was the same banter that they usually had.

Right before he'd walked back to his seat, Esmeralda had grabbed his arm.

"Come back to me as my little brother still. Don't die out there... and don't change too much," she said. Alron looked her in the eyes, his green orbs matching hers, and nodded.

"I will do my best." That was the best she would get.

Thus as Alron and Danielle left he didn't embrace her, he just looked at her and smiled like he usually did.

"Love ya sis," he said. And then he was gone. And Esmeralda looked at the door that he left and prayed desperately that her little brother, her last remaining family member, would return to her with at least some of the innocence, some childhood joy, that she'd known to be in him all his life.

"Love you."

Aspilla's eyes narrowed as she followed the men, at a distance. She was having a hard time seeing them in the darkness but she could see their outlines well enough. They traveled in a formation that allowed them to see all sides so following discreetly was her number one mission. Several times she jumped into the shadows where those who followed couldn't see her. But also where her trailing companions also couldn't see her.

At her disappearance the others began to rush forward but they all slowed when they saw men looking back behind them.

"Wait, be patient," Aspilla hissed from the shadows and the others made their best attempts at looking like drunken fools. When the group of Black Hoods continued on, Aspilla followed again and the others, who had 'passed out', regained their feet and continued behind once again.

Finally they got the gate and the companions watched as the Black Hoods spread out into positions for an ambush. Aspilla spent many minutes scouting around, her smart eyes searching for the positions and their strengths and weaknesses.

"They're good," Aspilla said when the others caught up to her. "They can see each other in the darkness where we can't and they can also see almost all of the view. We can't come in and take one of them without the others seeing."

"Well, what do we do?" Ajax asked.

"Leave and try to set them up again," Slim said but Alron shook his head.

"We can't. Esmeralda told them we'd be here and they believed her. That's an advantage we can afford to give up. If we don't show up, then they won't take her seriously. She'll just seem like a face for the building, not like anyone who actually knows anything," Alron said, "We have to do this with as little risk as possible."

"This?" Danielle asked skeptically, already putting together what he hadn't said yet. Alron looked to her and nodded.

"Wait," Slim said after a few moments. "You mean walking right into their trap?"

Alron nodded again and Ajax laughed aloud. He recovered it by making it sound like a drunken laughter but it was loud anyway.

"That's suicide. Might as well call in for the priest already," the largest of the group said and Alron sighed.

"Not if we do it right," Alron repeated, "Call in some guards. Make it look like something is going down.."

"How?" Danielle asked, "We'd have to be chasing someone or something."

"I have an idea..." Aspilla said with a grin. She waited for a few moments, her eyes seeing things that they couldn't yet. She'd spent time on the streets and knew enough about them to get by with no real strength backing her aside from her own skill with the blades at her sides. Finally, after many

minutes, she whistled. A low bird call came back and the others looked around, wondering where it came from.

Finally a small man came out of the shadows.

"May I be of service?" he asked, his words coming out in a hiss and his voice somewhat higher than they'd have expected.

"Run from us," Aspilla said, tossing him a coin. The man's hand snapped out and caught it, then he nodded. She pointed to the gate and past it.

"Now?"

"Now," Aspilla answered. He smiled then started to walk away slowly.

"Hey you! Stop there!" she shouted and he looked back at her, his eyes widening so much so that the others could see it even in the darkness.

"Get away!" The man shrieked, his voice filling the ears of those around them. The entire group of Nose Breakers took off after him. He was faster than them by far but everytime he seemed about to get away he either slowed, looking around for something desperately, or tripped on something. But he always regained his feet or abandoned his search just before they got to him and he inevitably got away once again.

"Nose Breaker business! Hold now!" Alron roared, catching on to her ploy. Guards all around awakened from their light sleep or snapped to attention from their dozing and began to chase as well. The group crashed through the gate too quickly for the Black Hoods to do anything but watch, shocked at the sudden change in the way the world was around them. Where there had been a dimly lit, all but empty street there was suddenly a small thief narrowly out running five Nose Breakers and half a dozen guards, who still seemed close to asleep.

Then the thief got away, out of the gate entrance area, barely dodging Slim. The young Nose Breaker didn't realize that the plan was fully completed and the need to act had finished, however. Almost a dozen guards were in the gate and some of them took off after the thief. Slim followed, still in character.

"Oh no," Aspilla muttered when she saw that the Black Hoods had disappeared into the streets around them.

"We have to go get him," Alron said, "Before they do."

They rushed through the streets, shouting his name, trying to find him. Slim shouted back sometimes, but it wasn't consistent. And by his voice it was obvious he was running.

"Slim!" Alron shouted and he got a weak, "Alron..." in return, loud enough to travel through a dark alleyway but not enough to give Alron any confidence on his well being.

"I think I found him, c'mon!" Alron said and his three companions followed close behind. They sprinted through the alleyway, one of them noticing that it was wet even though it hadn't been raining. Aspilla pulled a match out of her armor and lit it, looking at the liquid on the ground.

"Damn!" she muttered again when she recognized it was blood. "We have to find him."

They ran the entire night, never splitting up for fear of losing one another again. But as the sun came up, and Slim stopped responding, they were forced to accept the ugly truth: The Black Hoods had gotten Slim.

Chapter Fourteen:

Tank stepped into the inn and immediately knew he'd made a mistake. Those around him didn't look like the type to pass information along easily. But the realization of a mistake and being upset at a mistake were far different things. The fact that he'd get a good fight in almost made him smile.

He stepped forward and to the bar and pulled out a silver, which was worth at least a hundred flagons, "One, if ya will." The bar tender looked at him for a few moments, an eye brow raised.

"You looking to get mugged?" the man asked.

"I'm looking to beat the hell out of a mugger," Tank replied and the bar tender's eyes widened for a moment. He gave the faintest of looks to the side and Tank knew that the first attack would come from his left. It was very likely that bar tender knew and recognized the most aggressive patron in the room. So Tank decided use the man's judge of character to make his first move for him.

Tank ducked just a moment before the first punch came. Tank's left arm punched out, wearing his brass knuckles, and he hit the man square in his stomach. The gasp that erupted from his mouth was all that Tank needed to know that he'd done the damage he intended. Thus as Tank jumped upwards, a risky move, he knew he was fine.

Tank kicked the man in the thigh, taking him off his feet, and turned to see another man charging him from the side. Tank dodged another attack, barely moving his face so that the wild punch flew just past him, and responded with his own punch. Tank's fist slammed into the man's forehead and the brass knuckles knocked the man out cold.

Tank turned to see if anyone else was fighting.

"Now, I was going to pay for information but seeing as how these two attacked me, I think I'll just take it by force," Tank said. He looked around for several seconds, waiting for someone to object, hoping someone would object.

"Does anyone know about the Kingdom of Rust?" Tank asked. Nobody responded so Tank started walking towards another man. This one's face went pale and he shook his head.

"No, no, I've never heard o' the place!" the man sputtered and Tank paused.

"Nobody's ever heard of it?"

Silence answered his question.

"Then has anyone heard about any threats to the city?" Tank asked and one man's eyes lit up. Tank looked directly at him.

"I.. I only heard that some big castle is in the desert and that it's making soldiers or something. That's why there aren't many guards or soldiers in the city. They're all preparing defenses. I dunno what is going on but I do know that they brought in some clerics to do fighting," the man said. Tank glared at him for a few moments then nodded.

"Thanks." Then Tank left the inn, the silver coin still on the bar tender's counter.

Iustitia was following Tank from a distance, looking to see if anyone was sneaking up on him or tailing him. She saw nothing that resembled either. So she walked up to him.

Tank's eyes narrowed and his expression darkened when he saw her walking in Maria's form.

"What are you doing?" he asked and Iustitia gave him a quizzical look. "You know that this isn't... who you are."

Iustitia cocked her head, "Would we not want me to remain as inconspicuous as possible? My true form is far more noticable than this one is. If you really want me to find a sneak then wouldn't you wish me to be able to sneak as well?"

Tank's brow didn't unfurrow and his expression didn't lighten.

"Fine," Iustitia said. The features on her face didn't change but the color did and she was blue once again. "But you are letting your emotions cloud your judgment, stupid mammal." She turned in the direction of their inn and Tank hesitated for a moment. He watched her, deep in thought. Quickly he followed, though.

Iustitia stepped into the inn and walked up to her and Tank's room immediately. Tank lingered in the main room, looking to the bar. His mouth felt dry and he considered drinking for a few seconds. But the notion was wiped from his mind when Benny slapped him on the back.

"Friend," Benny said, "You should get away from the bottle before you fall in."

Tank turned and glared at him.

"I know your pain," Benny said and he quickly spoke again, not wanting Tank to get a moment to respond, "I do, more than you imagine. But there are no answers in that vile liquid. Besides, you are about to fight for the entire Kingdom. We're going to need you nice and sober."

Tank grabbed Benny's hand.

"Don't touch me," the stocky man said as he walked away. Benny looked at him as he left, more than a little worried.

Even in a drunken state he is far more able than those that you last called companions, Nameless said from his hip, *You need to keep him alive long enough to die at the right time, not keep him sober enough to realize he's dying at the right moment.*

Benny considered responding but just ignored the sword in the end.

Wombly and Carser walked in.

"Find anything out?" Wombly asked and Benny shook his head.

"Nothing substantial. Lidia's up in her room if you have anymore cuts that need attending," Benny said with a coy grin and Wombly shook her head.

"No such fights this time," she said as she walked by. Benny walked up to the bar and tossed the man a gold piece.

"No serving the stocky man anymore," Benny ordered. He was turning around to head to his room when the bartender said, "Hey."

Benny turned to see the coin flying back at him.

"No, friend," the bar tender said, "I see dat you are aware and dat you are stable. But he is not. And if he asks for drink, I will give him drink, else I dink I will find my skull split and my drinks being consumed anyway. Besides, gold mean noding here. Nobody can pay anyding dat is word as much as gold is."

Benny considered threatening the man but he knew that the bar tender was right. Of the two, Tank was more likely to hurt him. Benny really, in fact, didn't care to pursue the matter all that much further. He was only doing it to help a friend mentally, not to secure his mission.

Instead he just shrugged and turned away and walked up the stairs.

Close to sixty miles away a cloud raised up into the sky. The cloud of dust, accompanied by the steps of four thousand soldiers of rusted metal, could be seen by the soldiers of East Bocc but that was not the concern of Trendyne.

The lich looked out from the tallest tower of the Kingdom of Rust. His gaze fell upon the rusted units, all in battle formation for the near future. They would leave in just moments. Among the hordes of figures stood the occasional giant humanoid, the remains of a giant or large troll. The largest of his servants, they would serve as his eyes in the battle. With their immense strength they could throw giant stones and smash walls or other defenses.

His scouts, in rusted forms of elves and wolves, had already left. East Bocc, with its puny walls and hardly prepared forces, would hardly stand a chance.

Just as Tank got to the room Iustitia was leaving. She was in her form so Tank paid her little to no attention. He just stalked past her, back slightly hunched and head lowered to the ground, deep in his own thoughts.

Iustitia walked up to Wombly and Carser's door and knocked. The door opened and Wombly was startled for a moment. She caught herself, though, and only showed it for a moment.

"Yes?" Wombly asked and Iustitia responded, "I wish to ask your council."

"Oh, well, sure," Wombly said and Iustitia waited for a moment. "Oh," Wombly said, "Come in."

Iustitia stepped into the room to see Carser taking off the little armor he wore. He slid his shirt off to show a thin body. He wasn't muscular but he had enough to hold his weapons. Where other men might have had abs he just had a flat stomach. He wasn't a warrior, that much was obvious. Rather, he was a skinny inventor who went on adventures.

"Tank and I are working together on missions," Iustitia began and Carser immediately spoke.

"I know, I think it's a mistake," he said cutting her off, "I mean I can't imagine what it's like for him to have to see the image of his dead wife every day. Especially when that person is in the form of

a handmaiden that shows nothing but disdain for humans.." he looked at her for a moment, "Oh yeah. I'm sorry.."

"That is not what my... question is... but your opinion has been dully noted," Iustitia said. "But your opinion on this will be given more heed.

"Now, in our work I am often left back to watch and make sure that no one is trying to do damage to him. This is because I lack the social skills he has in dealing with people and the underlying since of what all is happening in people. This second thing is what he calls empathy. Anyway, my part, my mission, requires a certain amount of stealth and requires me to be as inconspicuous.

"My understanding is that my appearance is very unusual for humans, which most of your cities are made up of. So I ask if this form," she changed to looking more like Maria and Wombly winced, "is better in these missions."

Wombly looked at her for a moment. She and Maria had become better friends in the later years. The door behind Iustitia opened and Lidia walked in. She made eye contact with Iustitia, who looked like Maria, then paused.

"Oh," Lidia said, "Maria?" then Iustitia reverted back to her normal form.

"Aside from you, this form holds no special meaning," Iustitia said, "So would not this form be superior for my missions?"

Wombly and Lidia were dumbfounded, stunned by the image of their friend, but Carser was less effected. He looked at his friends for a moment then sighed.

"Well, logically it is correct. But the people who you are working with will be emotionally hurt by the appearance. So it'd make sense in different company but when you're working this this group of people then you'll compromise their ability," Carser said, "So... I don't think you should do it."

Iustitia stared at him for a moment, her eyes cutting through him with their alien gaze. He felt uncomfortable with it. Then she finally turned away.

"I will avoid the form so long as I can," Iustitia said.

A dark and brown cloud rose high an otherwise empty sky.

"What d'you dink dat is?" a Boccian Scout mused aloud and his companion shrugged.

"Can't say. You think it could be boozers?" the other scout, a Sprinkleberrian soldier, said. The Sprinkleberrian was the first wave of soldiers sent to Bocc. He and one hundred and ninety nine others were being followed by a larger, slower force of eight hundred soldiers perpared to defend against a big army.

"I don't know, friend. But dat wouldn't be good news if it was, exactly," the first Boccian scout said. The other nodded.

"Well we're to head back now, aren't we?" the Sprinkleberrian asked and said at the same time.

"Aye, let's get back now."

The two began to make their way back when they heard a shuffling behind them.

"What is it?" the Sprinkleberrian asked.

"Not sure," his companion replied. The two paused and slowly made their way back.

A metallic groan filled the air for a moment and the two turned around again to see three figures, two humanoids and a third that looked like a wolf, staring at them.

"Name yourselves," the Sprinkleberrian man ordered, his hand falling to the hilt of his blade. The Boccian followed suite when no answer seemed forthcoming.

"Dey mute?"

"Can't tell."

The two seemed to content to have their conversation for many minutes when the first figure, a tall and lithe figure with long limbs and a tall face, unsheathed its own blade. The other humanoid also unsheathed its blade and charged forward immediately. The canine figure began to move around as if to stalk around.

The first figured of rusted metal charged forward and slashed straight at the Boccian, who barely dodged the unusually fase attack. The other figure charged the Sprinkleberrian. It lashed out

with its blade and the Sprinkleberrian barely got his sword up in time to block the slash. When the two blades hit the man's hand numbed from the vibrations.

"What the hell are these things?" the Sprinkleberrian gasped. His companion tried to respond but his words were cut short as the figure in front of him lunged with its blade. The Boccian brought his blade across as fast as he could and parried the attack so that the rusted figure's sword slid past him.

"Are dey made of metal?" the Boccian asked incredulously.

"Looks like it," the Sprinkleberrian muttered as soon as he got a reprieve from the attacking figure.

The two tried to make their way towards one another but, right before the Sprinkleberrian got to his Boccian companion when the rusted wolf jumped at his back, the wolf's teeth tearing the flesh from the man's back. He gasped in pain as the beast crushed him down from behind.

"Run!" the Sprinkleberrian shouted, "Run!"

The Boccian looked at his friend in regret.

"I will run as fast as I can, my friend. Dank you," he turned to sprint away. The beasts behind him, made of rusted metal, turned to follow but the Sprinkleberrian, who they thought was defeated, slashed his blade across and lopped the wolf's leg off. The other two figures turned on him, their eyes alight with internal flames.

"Oh damn."

Chapter Fifteen:

It'd been a few days and the Black Hoods had made no major appearance. Alron, after many hours of consideration, finally nodded and grit his teeth for a moment. He looked to his companions, who were sitting at the table with him, and nodded again.

"We're going to go and get him," Alron said, "A direct attack."

Ajax, who'd been worrying and pacing whenever they weren't searching or sleeping for the last few days, turned to Alron and laughed aloud.

"A direct attack on what?" he asked, "We don't even know where they are."

"No," Alron said, "But she does." He looked to Aspillia. "Or can, very quickly."

"You do realize that whenever anyone looks for the Black Hoods, they don't come back, right?" she asked and Alron nodded.

"Slim is with them and we have a mission. For him or for the Kingdom, whichever one motivates you, we need to find them," Alron pleaded but Aspillia, who had grown up on the streets of Sprinkleberry and was well aware of the dangers of asking about the Black Hoods, wasn't convinced.

Her skills were better suited to climbing over obstacles and gathering information than to being in a direct fight or crossing blades with an opponent in a battle. She could fight better than anyone else when it came to a street fight or stealthy assassinations but if she and another were standing in a simple alleyway, their blades against hers, she knew that her lack of Ajax and Danielle's strength or Alron's skill and strategy could very easily lead towards her defeat.

But they were asking for her specialty, for what she'd grown up doing, and only her abilities could be used for a profit here. The enormity of the task, the target they were asking her to find secret information on, would require bringing others in on the mission and that wasn't something she felt at all comfortable with.

Both morally and logically it assaulted her standards. How could she ask others to snoop in on an enemy that had murdered more informers than she could count? How could she ask them to look in on these fanatics when she knew that they often also had families that depended on them? And further, logically, how could she trust that these people, both those with families to look out for and those who were looking out only for themselves, wouldn't sell her out in order to gain favor with the dreaded cult.

But Slim is with them.. she thought to herself. That fact alone complicated everything. If she'd been around for longer, she'd have had a normal route she usually took but being a rookie, being fresh from training, she didn't have a routine that she followed. But had she had one, it would have been to

work on her own and figure out all that she needed to solo and over long periods of time. This was the type of work she excelled at, the type she enjoyed. It required patience and an understanding of human nature, both of which she had an abundance of.

And because Slim was taken, she couldn't simply move around and gather information from all the different criers and informers, she couldn't fit together a large and detailed picture from valuable but hard to find scraps of information. She had to do this quick, in a few days at the longest, and she had to do it against one of the most fanatic, brutal and disturbingly cunning groups in the history of Sprinkle-berry.

"Aspilla?" Ajax asked more than said, "He'd do anything to get you back. We all would... And I get that you're hesitant. I know that you're afraid of them, whether you admit it or not. We are too. And we all know that what we're asking you to do is nothing short of a miracle. Nose Breakers and others of the Sprinkleberrian army have been trying to get information on them for the last year and still they've only got enough information to know that they're dangerous and that they're completely impervious to spies.

"We all know you want to procede with caution, that you want to take it slow and patiently against the Black Hoods," It blew Aspilla away that he was getting to her main fears almost exactly as he spoke, "and we know that there is risk, a lot of it, in what we're asking you to do... but we can't be slow about this, can't be patient or sneaky. We have to know when it's time to muddy up the waters and just *do* what we need to."

He forced a small smile, "You're the best for this among us. And of us all you're the only one who would know how to do this right, or if it's even possible. But right now, you just have to do as best you can, even if it leads to some conflicts, even if it blows Esmeralda's cover as a stupid face, even if it reveals what we're doing here at this inn.

"Only you know what to do and how to do it. And I know there's a proper way to do it and a faster but sloppier way to do it. We need the fast one now, we need you to go in there and do damage, to figure out what we need to know, even if it's ugly. Muddy up the waters if that's what it takes, scare away the fish. Whatever it takes to get Slim back."

Ajax looked to her for a few moments after finishing, as if waiting for a response, then nodded to her, as if to say, 'and that's all I've got.' Aspilla nodded back, though, and grit her teeth for a moment. It was going to be a long night. She stood up and looked at them all again, then silently mouthed, "For Slim," to herself.

"I'll be back by morning," Aspilla said, "Or I'll be dead. One of the two, don't wait up too long. If I die, I'll leave a trail for you to follow. Try not to die the same way but if you do, then there's nothing any of us can really do about it." With that she turned and left before anyone could say anything.

"Damn," Alron said aloud, "She's gonna muddy up the waters the hell up."

Sayrun grit his teeth as he considered the payment and the job. Aspilla looked him in the eyes and Sayrun knew immediately that she'd pay him exactly what she'd offered if he completed his job. To thieves and informers that was a powerful incentive and was a reason to ensure a job's completion. But sometimes, rarely, the job given was too risky for even the most sure deals to seem good.

He looked down at the money she was holding in front of him, enough for him to sleep and eat and drink for a week on without lifting a finger for work, and knew that it was exactly what she'd said it was: The first payment for this job. And he knew well that it was the payment required for this type of information. If he completed this he might not need to work for a full year. Tempting.. but the very real consequences of failure were repulsive at best.

"When do you need it by?" he asked for the second time that night. He didn't ask because he didn't remember or because he wasn't sure of it, he asked simply to show that he was unhappy about it and because he was trying to get it moved back further.

"Tomorrow morning at Harold's Hill. Be there or don't, this money is yours. But more, far more, is yours for the taking if you provide the information required," Aspilla said. She knew that she had his interest when he licked his lips at the mention of 'far more' money.

"What you're asking for is usually found over days, sometimes even weeks. Yet you wish me to conjure it from the air within just this night alone. Do you understand the plight you give me?" Sayrun said, his eyes matching hers perfectly for a moment. Immediately Sayrun knew the answer, knew that Aspilla was well aware of what she was asking and knew, with even more confidence, what it would take.

"The pay you will receive is fit for a few weeks work. You will have obtained it after a few hours if you play this correctly," Aspilla said, "This is a good deal. Are you bold enough to take it?"

The word bold struck Sayrun as ironic. No thief ever made it by being bold, at least not openly. But did this woman, this soldier by her posture and cleanliness, understand the complexity of the idea she alluded to? Once again a single moment of eye contact confirmed his question with an affirmative. She knew the code, knew that a thief who made too much too quick would find himself bleeding and dying. But she also knew that the very best thieves ignored this rule and that they considered only the next few weeks, not the months or years that followed, when they took a job.

If enough money and information were attained, then any threat could disappear with the slash of an assassin's dagger or the thud of an archer's arrow. And information on the Black Hoods could be very valuable. In finding answers for Aspilla he'd be finding answers for any other who could pay for it. And if they could pay for it with gold and with stature, then surely they could pay for it with the correct assassination or the correct displacement of a rival's status.

Sayrun grinned. If he found the information she was asking for, he could very easily use it to make the rest of his life very nice, especially if he told her just enough to embark on and fail her little mission. If the Black Hoods remained intact after she made her strike (he had no doubt that she was preparing for an armed assault based on the information she wanted) then he could use the same very information for more money in the future.

He nodded, "I'll do my best," he said and Aspilla turned and left without another word. He hadn't lied to her, of course. He would do his best. But it wouldn't be best for her.

"Give it to anyone who knows my phrase," Aspilla said before leaving.

Aspilla made eight other stops that night, each one to highly skilled informers, before moving on to her own part of the mission. She knew that at least two of informers, whether Sayrun, Darkeye or Snitch or any of the others, would tell the Black Hoods that she was asking. She was counting on it. For as she rushed along the buildings she saw figures in darkness slowly rushing towards the most logical entry point to the inner structure that made up the castle that King Jev and the others lived in.

She knew that her guess was correct as she saw them getting into position. They were going to try and stop her from getting into the castle. Which meant one of two things and she knew which it was going to be. Either they didn't want certain information getting into the king's ear or, and this was what she considered more likely, they had made camp somewhere within or beneath the castle.

As she looked down at them with eyes trained for small details she saw that even though they were disguised as drunks they were aware. Even the unconscious men opened their eyes in a repetitive pattern that was meant to seem irregular but Aspilla saw the pattern. In her youth she'd used similar techniques to hide her awareness of her surroundings.

They were defending from the outside and they were communicating through a series of hand gestures that seemed accidental and drunken but were, in truth, intricate. Occasionally Aspilla saw that the hand motions weren't complex or intricate enough to explain an idea so one of the men would spout a drunken slur that seemed random but had meaning behind it.

Aspilla was too far away to hear the words but she could see the men tense up or relax at the end of one of the slurs. The actions, small and all but invisible, were obvious to her experienced eyes.

Most people would have left when they saw the men standing guard and saw what they were guarding but she was waiting for more. She hoped dearly that she could obtain some more functional

information. So she'd wait. It was a dangerous task to do, for she knew that the Black Hoods had men moving around the roofs, making sure that no one could do exactly what it was she was doing. But she was skilled and she sat only when she could and moved only when she should.

It was eight hours of watching, moving slowly and carefully or quickly and even more carefully when she finally got what she was waiting for. It was nearly morning when two men walked forward, their faces hidden by dark hoods that kept their features from being seen, even up close. Aspilla grinned at this detail. Nothing could be seen.

The men stepped forward and walked past the 'drunks'. But they slowed down and she watched carefully to see if they did anything unusual. One walked with a limp where there'd been none before, a limp that was barely perceptible if one was watching, while the other touched their elbow. She raised an eye brow in thought. Why were they showing injury where there'd been none before?

Certainly they weren't a self-mutilation cult or else it'd be easier to recognize them. If a skilled warrior with missing fingers got into a fight then it'd be easier to find them in regular life. This cult, the Black Hoods, had made it obvious that they weren't interested in being recognized anywhere.

She looked with a start when she heard the sound of a sword being unsheathed. She turned around, launching one of her only weapons habitually. The dagger flew forward and took the man by surprise, slamming into the right side of his chest. He started to cry out but Aspilla, who realized that this man wasn't a warrior and didn't have the reflexes for fighting, had launched her second dagger already.

It hit him in the throat and his cry came out in a gurgle. Aspilla was on him in a second, pulling both her blades from his body and finishing him off quickly. She looked at him for a moment, her first kill. Then, looking around to make sure that she had not been noticed, she soon took off back towards Harold's Hill.

Alron sat around the table, his companions around him. Ajax, who had given the little speech in order to stir Aspilla into action, sat in silent tension. His eyes moved about, his jaw tight with stress. He was angry and anxious. Angry at himself for getting her to accept this mission and for not being able to help and anxious that she might never come back, that he'd convinced her to go on an impossible mission.

"She'll be back," Danielle said to him, grabbing hold of his hand. Alron looked up at the action and knew it was done only to comfort Ajax, but he still felt a stab of jealousy. He felt his arms wanting to reach across and grab Danielle's hand but he restrained himself. This was no time for internal strife.

Esmeralda walked over, drinks in hand. It was a warm brew, one that only Harold's Hill made. She handed it to them, her kind eyes offering support where words would be insufficient. Even with her extreme kindness she could offer little relief but it was the best she could do. Everytime the door would open the group looked up, hoping, needing, Aspilla to walk through the door.

They'd been up all night.

And finally the door opened and Aspilla walked through the door. The companions all but jumped out of their chairs at her sight but none ran towards her. They weren't supposed to make it too obvious that she'd been out on a dangerous mission or that they were even at the beginning of an underground battle with the Black Hoods.

The other Nose Breakers in the room, Navid, Dandi, Ilnos and Marqis, all looked at them and smiled. It was obvious that they were relieved and anyone watching could see it but they were younger soldiers and it was refreshing to see anything other than strict military code.

Aspilla smiled as she walked up to their table. She sat in the chair closest to the door and immediately got a drink from Esmeralda. It was potent liquor. She greedily gulped it, the warm liquid wakening her body. She felt her exhaustion and knew that had she been out for just an hour later when the man showed up she might not have been able to protect herself. The blood on her hands was hidden but when she pulled her gloves off the others grew grim as well as relieved.

"You fought?" Alron asked.

"I killed," Aspilla responded.

"The mission?" Alron asked again.

"We'll see today," Aspilla responded again. Alron nodded.

"You should sleep, is there anything we need to know for them to talk to us?" Alron asked and Aspilla nodded.

"My phrase," she said and Ajax laughed aloud. Danielle split a grin.

"Alright, alright, yeah," Alron said, "Go get some rest." Aspilla nodded gratefully then walked up to her and Danielle's room.

The first informer walked in a few minutes after Aspilla did. Only after saying Aspilla's phrase did the informer, a woman, open up. She informed them that the Black Hoods had no ties to the gangs on the outer reaches of the city and that these gangs were carrying no messages out with the intention of communicating for the Black Hoods.

The second informer came in and spoke quickly and quietly, uttering everything under his breath as if he were afraid the Black Hoods could hear him there and were going to punish him at that very moment for the betrayal. He gave information on the main underground trade routes used by smugglers. He informed them that nothing known to belong to the Black Hoods had been moved across it.

All throughout the day came more informers, each with information on the Black Hoods but it all seemed random. As they listened and wrote down every word said, they tried to connect it, tried to figure out what it all meant, but it was all too random, too far apart to be connected. So what the outer gangs weren't carrying messages out? So what if they had no black market routes in use? What did it matter if the Black Hoods weren't involved in drug or weapons trade? How could it be relevant that the Black Hoods had no warehouses in the outer reaches of the city?

All it really meant to them was that the Black Hoods were on the inside of the city, or underneath it. But that much had been fairly obvious from the beginning. Or at least that's how they felt after hearing all the information. They didn't remember the small connections building up, showing that the Black Hoods had no built up power on the outer parts of the city.

But even that realization wasn't all that could be gleaned from it. But they weren't the ones who could find it out.

"You don't see what this means, do you?" Aspilla said when she saw the looks on her companion's face. It was obvious they believed that all the information was unimportant and that it was simple enough to be fully interpreted in a single day. Alron and the others gave a collective shaking of their heads and Aspilla smiled.

"This is why you need me," she said. "It means a few things, first that they are a magical cult, not a physical violence cult. They're going to be using more magic than weapons. If they weren't, they'd be bringing weapons in or guiding people out. The easiest way for a new gang, for that's what they are, to make money and spread out.

"But they could be a physical gang. If they are a physical gang then it means they aren't stretched out. But I doubt they are. It also means that we won't have to deal with a lot of them, else they would have to have outposts throughout the city. Too many people in one area would invite unwanted attention.

"So there aren't that many. But everyone's afraid of them. What's that mean? It means that the few members they do have are probably worth their weight in salt and more. Meaning that even killing one of these guys will be hard, and capturing one impossible," Aspilla said.

The others all nodded, whether they understood or not.

"So we're either going up against a very strong magical cult or a very weak physical gang?" Alron asked and Aspilla nodded.

"Contrast is key," Ajax muttered.

"Well, what now?" Alron asked and Aspilla sighed.

"I guess we try to find and rescue Slim," she said.

Sayrun looked at the inn, his tired eyes watching for movement. He was tired because it'd been a day since he told them what he knew and he hadn't been able to sleep since. They hadn't let him sleep. Not a single hour, a single minute, a single second. Over his corner hovered a small, purple eyes skull, which had the power to end his life in a moment.

"Please, masters, just let me sleep, for even half an hour. I will serve better then," Sayrun said and the skull shook for a moment.

'You're going to stay with this mission. The information you gave them, the information you found, we didn't want known. Thus you'll repay your debt and if it's enough then we will free you. If not then... We will see.'

Sayrun looked back at the skull then looked forward again. He would have sighed if it didn't take so much energy. So instead he looked back at the inn, his fingers sliding over the hilt of his blade, wondering when the order to kill would be given. Hoping it would. For if he killed them then the threat that they supplied would be removed and he could go back to his life.

Or so he hoped. So he prayed.

Chapter Sixteen:

Benny looked up, his eyes adjusting to the light of the desert sky. Around him he could hear the foot steps of Tank and Iustitia. The others were too far behind for him to hear because of the wind that picked up the sand. The strength of the wind threatened a sand storm but the companions, who had all been raised in the desert, had little worry. A single sand storm would do little to hinder their health.

It would only slow them.

"We should keep moving for a few more hours then break for midday meal," Wombly said from behind and Benny nodded.

"While you all rest up and eat, I'll go scouting. I believe we're close to the Kingdom of Rust. I can't be too sure but..." Benny's words died off as he saw dust rising in the distance. "What the hell is that?"

None of the others had the slightest clue.

"My understanding is that these are the types of disturbances that we are here to take care of," Iustitia said and Benny nodded.

"I'll check it out while you all eat," Benny said. Iustitia seemed about to protest but she paused.

Generally she didn't need to eat very often. Her body, powered by divine force, needed next to no sustenance before she'd been hit by the spell that the woman, the mysterious figure, had cast at Tank. But since it she'd needed to eat more often and drink water more often. The woman still had a hard time accepting and remembering it. Eating was, in her opinion, a strange way to gain energy.

The group traveled for another hour, altering their course that it was angled more towards the cloud of sand, then stopped. They were unsure of how much food they'd be needing so Lidia'd decided to search for a bag of storing. Bags of storing could hold hundreds of pounds and hundreds of objects within them despite their small size.

From the small bag she pulled jerky for the group to eat on and water, in containers that held water even when tipped which Tank had made, for them to drink. Benny collected his jerky and water then carried on, this time in the direction of the smoke. He was quiet as he moved along, trying to sneak up on whatever it was.

Benny knew that if he kept for too long then the group would be in danger of boozier attack since they weren't moving. But he also knew that whatever was doing this was likely connected to the lich he wanted to destroy. He figured that the others would continue along the route if he didn't return that day. He knew he could catch up to them but he wasn't happy at the prospect of them seeing something without him there to interpret it in his favor.

But this information might be highly important to their mission. If the lich had marched out with his army then Benny wanted to be right behind it, ready to strike when the lich let its guard down.

A couple hours of travel and Benny found himself looking down on an army, four thousand strong, made of the same rusted metal that the warriors guarding the Kingdom of Rust were made of. Curious, Benny watched for close to an hour, looking for signs of the lich lord.

When he was sure he saw no sign of the actual lich itself he turned and left, heading back to the rest of the group. The fact that the army was marching towards East Bocc meant nothing to him. He did only what he felt he needed at the time. And that was hunting the lich, which could be used to destroy the wraith that had murdered his friends.

You're making the right decision, Nameless commented and Benny considered the sword's motivation for a moment. But Benny couldn't be too sure of the sword's nature. Thus he only responded with a mental grunt and continued on his way.

Iustitia stared at Tank as they settled down to make their tents. Benny had been away for far too long and they didn't feel comfortable leaving him that far behind. They'd made sure to make their tracks even more obvious than they already were, figuring it would help Benny to follow behind them.

Now they sat around a fire, each of them quiet with their thoughts. Above them a clear sky showed the stars above. The three moons were all three high in the sky, their surfaces reflecting light. It was this light, combined with that of the fire, that they used to look at one another. Wombly and Carser sat next to each other and Deabla sat with Lidia. Tank and Iustitia sat alone, across from each other, between the groups.

"I wish Ashe was here," Deabla said aloud and both Wombly and Carser winced at the mention of her name. Iustitia didn't know Ashe well and hadn't the memories that plagued Wombly at the mere mention of her name. Lidia rarely, if ever, showed emotion except for recently. But in the last few days she'd regained her stoic and ironic view on the world, as if the emotional scars in her were suddenly in the back of her mind instead of in the forefront.

Tank was too deep in thought to even hear the young woman's name. His blue eyes, light in color but not in mood, stared at the fire the entire time.

"She would have something to say right now," Wombly said quietly.

Lidia looked up, "Quit complaining and get off your asses. That wraith isn't going to kill itself," she said in her best imitation of Ashe. The first sentence had been spot on but the second wasn't something Ashe would have said. She would have ended with the first sentence and offered no explanation for her words.

But the falseness of the second sentence doesn't dull the refreshing truth of the first sentence. Only Ashe had ever been able to speak so bluntly and elicit no real anger in her direction. She forced the others to think, forced them to figure out why they should be moving, and when they finally came up with the reason they knew she had gotten them there, intentionally or not. In the end, they knew that she'd helped them in her own way.

"We should get some sleep," Carser said and he stood up.

"Got off your ass at least," Wombly said with a small smile, "Though I doubt that this would have been what she meant." Carser nodded in return, the shadow of a grin on his face. The two got up and walked over to their tent, which was tied in place. Once inside they might as well have disappeared in the minds of the others.

"Tank," Deabla said but still Tank stared at the flames, his eyes filled with a faraway look. Deabla repeated his friend's name twice before Tank looked up, whispering several words that Deabla could only make out a few of. The words he could make out were mainly names that had little to no meaning to Deabla. 'Chelsey, Bert,' and, 'Tenebris,' followed by, 'Vampire'.

"Are you okay?" Deabla asked but Tank just nodded his head mechanically, as if he were answering the question without thought. "Tank," Deabla said more forcefully and the man looked up at Deabla quizzically.

"Are you okay?" Deabla repeated his question and Tank nodded again, this time with the hesitation of a man's thought process. Deabla didn't believe his friend. He'd know Tank long enough to

see the signs of a lie but he didn't know how to speak in order to help Tank. He thought back to the past and sighed.

He used to be able to get into other peoples' minds so easily with empathy. He would be able to guess what to say and what the response would be to certain words. But now, with his newfound ability to actually influence the moods, bodies and minds of the others, he had lost this empathetic part of his mind.

"What are you thinking about?" Deabla asks and immediately he realizes that he's totally wrong. In times past he'd have been able to dissect Tank's mood and figure out what to say. But now, with Tank in front of him, he wasn't able to do anything like that. Instead he had to gauge the reaction of the other in order to see if he'd said the right thing.

The loss of empathy with the gain of power was frustrating. But maybe that was the cost of having real power. He was no longer dependent on his ability to learn the motives and desires of others. He no longer needed to guess what to do because he was no longer helpless. He could now make things happen with force, not just by influencing others.

Thus now, even though he was just as thoughtful and just as concerned, he couldn't dig into Tank's mind because even if he said the wrong thing and Tank exploded in a violent rage he would be able to defend himself. He didn't walk the fine line he used to. And, just as a spider that used to live on a weak and flimsy web but now lives on a stronger web doesn't notice the change in the wind and the hum of insects too big for a weaker web to capture, he now lacked the sensitivity he used to have.

"I'm not sure," Tank replies, to the Deabla's surprise. "I... keep having memories. Of things that aren't..." he sighed, "of things I didn't do."

"Dreams?" Lidia said more than asked but Tank just shrugged.

Deabla seemed about to say something again but he hesitated and the moment slipped away. They sat in silence for several seconds before Deabla finally gave up on trying to guess what was going on in Tank's head. Tired, Deabla stood up and looked over at his supplies. Grabbing water, contained in one of Tank's new metal water bottles, he walked over to his tent and climbed in, leaving Lidia with the company of Tank and Iustitia.

Silence reined strongest.

Finally Lidia stood up, "This is fun but... yeah." She turned and walked away to her tent, leaving Tank and Iustitia alone.

"You are lonely?" Iustitia said, shaking Tank from his reverie. He looked up at her then grunted in response. Only because of Iustitia's time with Tank did she understand what he meant. It was a very reluctantly given yes.

"If your frustrations are physical, I can easily revert back to her form, to," Tank didn't look up but he heard the sounds of her body changing, "this form." He didn't want to look up but he did. Inside, a battle raged between loyalty to Maria and his desire to see her again. Finally his eyes flickered up for just a moment, looking at the face of the woman he loved, then back at the ground immediately.

But the one look wasn't enough. His eyes raised again and he looked up at her, his eyes drinking in every detail, both big and small, her curly, black hair, her soft lips that looked so very appealing, her dark brown eyes that had captured his heart. He wanted her so badly... wanted to give himself to her, to accept the illusion in front of him.

He almost went to her, almost gave in, almost accepted the lie. Then he remembered who Maria was and who he was. He remembered what had happened and who the imposter in her skin was. Angry, his expression darkened.

"No," he said, his voice unusually deep with a gruff rage at the unfairness of the world.

"Why? I have her in front of you, ready to give her to you! Why won't you take her, you stupid mammal?" she asked loudly and around them the rhythmic breathing of their companions broke. They weren't sleeping anymore. They were listening.

"Her body isn't what I fell for. I didn't fall in love with her hair or breasts or legs or butt. I didn't fall for her soft lips or brown eyes. I fell for what was behind her eyes, for who she was. She's dead and you offer me her corpse. You are not her. You are in her body, where she was. She was not just a body."

Iustitia stared at Tank for several seconds, her eyes narrowed in thought. She seemed stunned by his words, by his outburst. But if it had any lasting effect she showed none.

"Interesting," was all she said before she walked over to the tent, leaving Tank sitting alone at the fire. He stared at the fire for many minutes before he finally looked back to see the tent flap open. She was waiting for him. He looked forward, ignoring the tent, and stared off into the distance. It was there that he found some solace as he lived out memories that had nothing to do with his life and it was there that he forgot his pain temporarily.

Benny walked up on the camp and saw the last remains of a fire that had died long ago. Tank still sat in front of it, his shoulders hunched, his brow furrowed, his eyes glazed as he sat staring into the distance.

"Ho Tank," Benny said as he came up, the formal greeting used by soldiers when approaching a distracted guard. Tank looked up at him, shaken from his thoughts, and nodded.

"Ho Benny," he said gruffly.

"I can take over watch. You should sleep," Benny said. Nameless had just suggested that if he needed Tank to be working at full strength then he should rest.

"No," Tank said gruffly once again and Benny was slightly shocked. In the past Tank might have given a reasonable argument, like 'you've been walking for hours, you rest', but now he was just dismissing Benny with a blunt denial to his offer.

Benny nodded and shut out Nameless, who suggested he try to be more forceful.

"I'll wake up in time to take the last watch," Benny but Tank shook his head.

"Don't bother."

Benny looked at his companion for a few moments then nodded again, knowing that he was fighting a losing battle if he was going to argue.

The group left before the sun rose over the horizon. Tank hadn't slept a second but he didn't complain. Iustitia, who had been the first to awaken but the last to leave her tent, silently went about cleaning up her tent and eating minimal breakfast.

They'd been walking for a few hours when Benny realized where they were.

"Only half a mile to go," he said and the others nodded. They all paused, collecting themselves, getting ready.

"Iustitia and Tank lead the way, ready to fight anything. The second they run into something they can't kill in a single hit, and they will, I want Wombly and Carser to open fire. Lidia, save your spells for as long as possible. I'll provide support for the sides. There are surely going to be traps of some sort and I won't let you be ambushed," Benny said. The group nodded, got all of their weapons in place for easy access, and followed Benny.

They saw the Kingdom of Rust and gasped. It was far bigger than anything they'd seen in the way of height. At the top of the giant towers there were archers and other ranged units. Rusted fingers lifted rusted bows and shot rusted arrows. The arrows flew through the air, cutting the wind, and their aim was true.

But the companions were prepared and the arrows were destroyed by a swinging weapon or dodged by a quick leap. They pushed forward, unwilling to break their formation as arrows rained down on them. Soon it became clear that they weren't going to get there without taking major injuries unless Lidia cast a spell.

She did, to her disappointment, and the arrows were bouncing off a magical barrier that reached about thirty feet around her. They ran as close together as they could and it seemed like they'd beaten the outer defenses of the Kingdom of Rust when suddenly figures burst from the ground around them.

Three of the figures, long and snake like beings that slithered under the sand as easily as it did atop the sand, circled them while the other five jumped forward to attack with their humanoid bodies and weapons.

One of the figures, with four arms, charged up on Tank while Benny and Iustitia stepped forward to guard his back. Wombly unsheathed her sword and stepped forward to stop two figures from getting to Carser and Lidia. She worked defensively in hopes of Carser ending one of the creatures with a well placed shot.

She ducked an attack and a loud BAM! filled the air. The figure she'd been fighting fell back. She had no time to celebrate, however, as the other figure slashed across with a rusted but somehow strong blade. Wombly's blade lifted up and she parried several attacks before she knew she was more talented than this rusted figure. She pushed it back a few steps before she stopped advancing, aware that she was reaching the ends of Lidia's spell of protection.

Tank jumped and ducked more times than most people thought were possible as the figure with four arms swung all four blades, constantly forcing Tank to dodge. He was waiting for his chance, for him to see some sort of pattern, and he wasn't tiring at all. He'd gotten a lot stronger and a lot faster as of late.

Behind him sounds of combat, of Benny and Iustitia fighting, filled his ears but he ignored them, focusing all of his mental power on the four armed warrior in front of him. He'd never fought any warrior like this but somehow he saw a pattern that only a trained eye for fighting four arms could find. He saw the pattern and saw the routine. It was a long pattern, one that seemed random and chaotic but was in reality just a bunch of moves made in the same order but sped up or slowed down so that the pattern was as camouflaged as possible.

But the pattern was there and Tank saw it. There was an opening every couple of seconds but he would have to take a hit to get it. His right hand gripped his hammer and he prepared to punch forward. The opening showed and he didn't hesitate, giving up a slash on his forearm in order to punch the four-armed figure's rusted chest.

The powerful metal of his hammer smashed through the rusted chest, destroying the figure. It fell backwards, still and quiet. Tank turned around and saw Iustitia punch forward, finally destroying the figure in front of him. Benny's blade cut gash after gash into the figure's body. Each gash leaked out some sort of black liquid but the figure didn't seem to mind. Then Tank's hammer ended the fight.

The three turned around just in time to hear BAM! And the last figure went down.

Then Lidia slipped, her foot caught by one of the snake-like figures. Her shield was disrupted and the arrows flew in, one of them taking Benny in the back. His armor stopped it but it still hurt. The group rushed to save Lidia but her mace quickly destroyed the snake's head. It writhed on the ground for a moment before it went still.

She raised the shield and the arrows thudded off the roof. Tank grimaced as he looked down at the gash on his forearm, which stung, but he ignored it. They were about to move forward again when Tank felt his leg get taken out from under him. The snakes were trying to pull him out into the opening.

Tank smashed one of the snakes' head but he couldn't get the other. The others tried to catch up and help him but the four armed figure had gotten up, its chest healed, and began to fight again.

"Oh no," Wombly mumbled. She turned and barely blocked an attack from the first figure she'd cut down. Carser turned, his weapon almost loaded and saw that Tank was nearly outside the limit of Lidia's spell of protection. He finished loading the gun and lowered it to aim at the rusted snake, which had turned to bite at Tank.

Sure fingers squeezed the trigger and the bullet hit the snake right in the head, which was only a few inches from Tank's face at that time. The creature writhed on the ground and Tank scrambled to his feet with surprisingly movements and sprinted back at the figures.

"We have to get inside," Lidia said and the others looked at her and realized that each arrow hitting the shield took energy from her. Deabla's singing was supplying them all with energy but he was mainly focused on Lidia, his pure voice sending out waves of rejuvenating magic.

"Alright," Benny muttered as he fought the figure in front of him. Iustitia punched through one of the four armed figure's blades and into its chest, destroying it. She turned and finished off Benny's enemy as well.

"Let's move!" Benny shouted and the group began to run forward as a group. They got to the draw bridge in front of the Kingdom of Rust and the rusted statues all jumped forward as they came to life. The group rushed forward, trying to keep their formation and trying to get inside so that Lidia no longer needed to cast her barrier spell.

The creatures were animating too late to really block the group but one of them slashed at Wombly, cutting into her shoulder. She grimaced but ignored the attack, knowing it to be a superficial wound more than anything. They held their formation admirably and got to the door.

"Open it!" Benny shouted.

"Just push?" Iustitia asked and she slammed into it, grinding the balls of her feet onto the ground as she tried to force it open. She put all her inhuman strength into it and grunted but it wouldn't budge. Benny, Tank and Wombly turned to fight and defend, Deabla trying to increase their energy level and general speed with an upbeat song, and Lidia held the shield above them.

Desperation was filling the group when Tank finally looked back, saw Iustitia struggling and grunted. Benny understood the grunt and stepped in to block the enemy trying to get through where the stocky warrior had just left.

Stalking forward, shoulders hunched, eyes filled with a rage that Iustitia didn't question when he shoved her out of the way against her will. He put both hands on the door and grunted as he put all his strength into the door, pushing with all he had. The door held strong for several seconds as he pushed. Then a roar escaped his lips and the door budged.

Tank's feet refused to stop as he forced the door forward and soon the door was open. Lidia rushed in, keeping her shield up just long enough for the rest of the group. Iustitia would have stared at Tank in disbelief had they not been in such a hurry. She turned and slammed the door shut before rusted figures followed them in.

They'd held their formation the entire time outside but once they were inside that collapsed as all hell broke loose. From all around them rushed rusted figures, attacking with all they had. The group didn't have time to take in their surroundings as combat was thrust upon them. If they had looked at the inside of the Kingdom of Rust they'd have surely gasped with wonder.

The roof above them was easily fifty feet high and four levels could be seen to their sides, shown by the hallways which could look down on the main room, which they were in. A giant, rusted hand reaching out of the ground sat in the middle of the main room, which was easily two hundred feet long. From the hallways above, which could look down on them, rusted figures either jumped down or shot arrows.

Tank and Iustitia found themselves in a corner with a smaller door that was already open. The two were separated from the rest of the group which was being forced into a doorway on the other side of the wide main room.

"Tank!" Wombly cried out but they were separated and the rusted figures, numbering nearly a hundred at this time, weren't giving them a chance to reunite.

"Run!" Tank shouted, "We'll find you!" Iustitia noted something in his voice that almost gave her a pause. But they were in combat and she had no time to consider stupid mammal friendships. She and Tank were forced further and further back as their weapons swung, taking the rust-red figures in the head, chest and limbs. Anytime one of their weapons hit the figures it burst into a thousand of red metal flakes. The figures' weapons were tougher, however, and didn't shatter on impact.

But everytime one rusted figure died, another stepped forward to take its place and the pair couldn't hold their ground even with their advanced strength. The door behind them was open but when they rushed through it, Tank slammed it shut. He leaned against it as the sound of pounding filled their ears.

He held it for many minutes. When the pounding finally stopped he slid down the door to a seated position, panting. He looked down at the cut on his forearm and sighed at the stinging in it. No doubt there was some sort of poison in it. If only Lidia were still with them, then she could likely heal it with a quick spell.

He looked up at Iustitia, who stared at him with an unreadable expression.

"Well," he muttered as he looked back to his arm, "Ashe would probably be yelling right now."

"Get moving! It's just a damned flesh wound!" Iustitia shouted, her voice sounding similar to the way Ashe's had been. Tank looked up at her for a few moments then nodded and forced a smile. He began to get up, his body not quite reacting to his mind the way he'd like it to.

Then the two began to move away from the door, ready to fight at any second, unsure of what they might encounter in the rusted metal and stone castle.

Chapter Eighteen:

Sayrun's eyes narrowed as Alron, Danielle and Ajax left the inn together. The skull had disappeared from sight but he could since it, still knew it was there. Those that forced him into this de-meaning servitude wouldn't leave him for a moment, wouldn't allow him a moments peace. Envy and anger built up in him as he saw them walking along, rested and young, their wounds and sorenesses all alleviated by a good night's sleep.

His own limbs burned as he'd held this same position the entire night, shifting only when it allowed him a better vision on the door or when the crowd got in his way. His eyes scanned them for weapons and immediately he knew they were armed for combat. It was daylight, but barely. The sun would dip below the horizon soon. This was a battle that would be won underground and at night, with no marching armies.

This would be an intricate chess game, not a checkers game where soldiers marched forward, were put into the best spots, and bashed their heads against each other until one side or the other came out. There would be no slug-matches, no haymakers thrown. This would be a carefully managed battle of wits and strategy, master mind versus master mind.

Or so he secretly hoped. Even in his exhausted state he felt a certain apathy towards field war but a love for strategy and underground warfare. Any war fought between guilds was more like a game of who could assassinate who, it was skilled duelists lunging, swiping and poking with their sharpened blades, each move measured and considered. Field war was, in his opinion, more akin to a pair of dumb boxers standing across from one another, trying to knock each other out through sheer force of will.

He saw a group of Nose Breakers move off in another direction, also armed for battle.

"They move on you," Sayrun whispered to the skull and it whispered in his ear.

'Follow them.'

Sayrun gulped and shuddered at the sound of the skull's whispered words. Its voice was terrifying to say the least. He turned around, ready to continue, and noticed a blade leveled in towards his face.

"Damn," he said softly as he made eye contact with Aspilla.

"You shouldn't have stayed in the same spot so long," she said, "You were obvious from even the windows."

"I figured you were more worried about Black Hoods than you were petty thieves," Sayrun responded.

"Not sure who is and isn't a Black Hood," Aspilla said with a shrug, "Still not."

"Well, you were burdened with an over abundance of schooling," Sayrun replied, forcing a grin.

"Nah, I'm all natural, self made bad ass," Aspilla responded and Sayrun's grin broadened into a real smile.

"We'll see," he started to say as he swept into action, his hand reaching for his blade while his other hand, this one gloved, slapped at her blade. But Aspilla retracted it and pumped her other hand just once. Her dagger flew and her aim was true. Sayrun slumped back, her knife deep in his eye, his smile still on his face.

"Still not too sure," Aspilla mumbled to herself. She looked at his body, at her second kill, and sighed with frustration. Then she turned and left, painfully aware that the life she had gotten involved with when she'd joined the Nose Breakers would lead her to more encounters like this, which would only end in fighting and death.

Such was the life of a soldier in these times.

Aspilla led, her dark hood draped over her head. Ajax, Danielle and Alron followed.

The group tried their best to look relaxed but they were still green and knew little of stealth. Aspilla, looking back occasionally, muttered, "We'll be caught before we ever get in there." But she felt the Black Hoods wouldn't be overly concerned with her and her group. To all eyes outside, she'd only made sure they were stuck within the city. They didn't know that she was aware of their proficiency with magic.

So she assumed they weren't going to be sensitive and worried about attacks on their strong hold. Or what she hoped was their strong hold.

When the companions got to the entrance that Aspilla had been watching, which was towards the back of the castle and hidden near a wall, the drunks that were laying about tensed up and looked up. Aspilla touched her hip and shifted so that she was walking with a limp. The drunks didn't respond as she walked forward, into the entrance, and she felt she'd accomplished her mission.

She slowed down as she entered, ready to spring back and attack if the others couldn't pull off their injuries. But they did. And after each one, faking a wound on their collar bone or a headache. Ajax coughed as he went through. The drunks didn't respond and they were moving deeper into the castle. The hallway they were moving along was sloping downwards with every step. Both ends of the hallway, ahead and behind them, were dark, unnaturally so. Aspilla knew there was some sort of magic involved. She and the others could feel their hearts beating in their chests and they worked hard to keep their breath calm as they slowly walked down the passage, which lasted for nearly a mile.

The group came into a large cavern and knew that they were no longer in the middle of the castle. They were below it. Around them were small structures, all built into the rock around them. Very few people moved about and all of them had their cloaks drawn up over their heads, hiding their facial features. The entire place was dark and there was very little light.

"Well," Aspilla whispered, "We're here. Time to find Slim."

"No need to," a voice said from behind. Aspilla's hand shot to her dagger because it wasn't one of her companion's voices. She and the rest of the group turned around. Alron's eyes widened as he saw Slim, hunched over with his hands strapped to a pole across his shoulders and behind his neck, stared at them with bloodshot eyes and a broken nose.

"H-hi guys," he said with a weak and forced smile.

Navid looked at the entrance that the others had gone in. He looked back at his companions, a woman named Dandi and two men named Ilnos and Marqis.

"Go get more men, I can't conjure a single good thought on this situation," Navid said and Marqis nodded. He rushed off. Navid, Dandi and Ilnos waited a few minutes before Navid's anxiety led him to a decision.

"We have to get in there," he said and Dandi nodded.

"A'ight," she said, lifting a bow. Two arrows flew before Navid and Ilnos, both wielding a sword and a shield, got to the ground. The arrows flew true, both for one man. Her next arrows were in the air and quickly, which was good because her two arrow rule was a solid one. The first arrow she released at the man slammed into a blue magical barrier and exploded. The second arrow embed itself in the man's chest.

Her third arrow destroyed another barrier and her fourth hit a man in the left part of his chest, puncturing his heart. By the time Navid and Ilnos got to the entrance, five of the eight men were dead or dying. The three that remained all cast spells immediately, two of which fled. The last man, who had expected his allies to stand with him, had reinforced his barrier and was casting an offensive spell.

He might have finished it had he not been shocked by the disappearance of the others and Navid, butting forward with his shield, knocked him back. An arrow flew over Navid's shoulder and exploded in the 'drunk's' face. Navid's sword hit the barrier again and this time the 'drunk' was forced to the ground. Navid's next slash split skin and spilled blood.

He looked back at his two fellow Nose Breakers and nodded.

"Let's move," he said. Marqis showed up right behind them, a dozen Nose Breakers in his wake.

Alron looked at the Black Hoods that surrounded them. There were close to a dozen of them.

"You made a mistake in coming here," Carvile said, "We don't take too well to people asking questions about us, much less to people coming into our home and disrupting our privacy."

"I'm not look'in for a fight," Alron said, "Or, well, I guess I am looking for a fight. But you got one of our people and we'd sure would like him back."

"Your man?" Carvile asked, "Man? This boy," he kicked Slim in the back of his hamstring, knocking him to the floor, "is not a man. He told us everything."

"He's our boy," Alron said without hesitation, "We're taking him back."

"Not your best time to start making threats," Ajax muttered and Alron looked back at him.

"Not when you're being all squeamish and skittish," Alron said.

"Sorry then," Ajax replied and Alron nodded.

"Damn straight," he said. He looked back at Carvile, then turned towards Ajax again, "And another thing-" he began right before Aspilla launched two daggers, both flying straight at the men around Slim. Alron and Ajax exploded into motion towards Slim and Danielle rushed towards Carvile. The two men around Slim groaned as the daggers bounced off their shield barriers with a burst of sparks that blinded them. When Alron and Ajax got to them their shields were depleted and the two companions made short work of them.

Neither Ajax nor Alron had killed a man before but they didn't have time to consider as their weapons, Alron's broad sword and Ajax's double sided ax, cut through the men. Carvile started to cast a spell at the two men but Danielle, her war hammer in hand, kept him from finishing it. The Black Hood jumped back and restarted his spell.

Green at combat or not, the companions had experience fighting with one another and knew everyone's moves before they did them. Thus Danielle turned away from Carvile, who was too far for her to hit, and slammed her hammer into one of the men's chest, destroying the barrier and still hitting him.

Aspilla's last two daggers flew at Carvile. One burst his shield and the other hit him on the right side of his chest. Carvile gasped then scowled. He glared at them for a moment then whispered a pair of already prepared words. The words left his mouth and he disappeared in a flash of dark red ash. He didn't seem afraid or angry as he left, just frustrated.

Alron cut the rope that bound Slim to the pole across his shoulders and the young man's arms fell limp to his side.

Alron and the others were still mid-fight with the remaining Black Hoods, some which had removed themselves from the fray enough to cast spells, when more rushed in from around. Small fiery peas flew forward and exploded around them, a radius of fire just barely not killing them, only because of the shields of the Black Hoods that were still among them.

Alron and Ajax grabbed Slim while Aspilla and Danielle started towards the way out. A giant creature appeared there, conjured by one of the Black Hoods. It stood at almost twelve feet tall and its shoulders were broader than Alron was tall. The creature, a cave giant, stepped forward and swung at Danielle.

The young woman jumped back, barely avoiding getting launched by the swipe, and Aspilla grabbed a sword from the ground. She slashed at the cave giant but it didn't seem to care much. Alron grunted as he shifted all of Slim's weight over to Ajax and rushed forward, sliding in too close for the cave giant to do any damage to him.

He cut at its thigh but couldn't stay in for it started to stomp its feet. Then an arrow, coated in poison, flew in. It hit the ground and disappeared. The Black Hoods were casting spells again. Small orbs of red energy slammed into him, burning his skin. The others shouted and gasped in pain as the magical missiles slammed into them.

A line of flame flew in and Ajax barely dodged it. Slim gasped in agony as the line of flame hit his shoulder. He slumped, unconscious, right after Ajax got him out of the flame's path. Aspilla grabbed a dagger and launched it at one of the Black Hoods but she couldn't tell if it hit or not. The cave giant stepped forward, swiping at her and she threw her weight back, barely escaping a smashing blow.

Navid heard the sounds of combat ahead and knew that he was right in coming.
"C'mon!" he shouted and he redoubled his sprint. The others sped up as well.

Danielle knew they were doomed. Close to three dozen Black Hoods stood too far away for them to get to and the cave giant was too strong and quick for them to get past. Spell after spell flew in towards them, few of them lethal but all of them doing some damage, and though not many of them hit, enough were doing damage that the companions knew they couldn't go much longer.

Then the cave giant lurched forward, a man on its back. Navid stabbed it in the neck multiple times and the giant roared. The Black Hoods all moved backwards, stunned, as fifteen more warriors burst through the entrance. The Nose Breakers rushed forward, all of them sprinting and yelling. They roared past the pain of the smaller spells and went down whenever one of the bigger spells hit them. But the Nose Breakers behind them jumped over their wounded body, determined to press the Black Hoods so that they couldn't cast a spell and finish off their wounded allies.

Almost all of the wizards disappeared with command words or preset spells but those that didn't were either killed or beaten to unconsciousness. Alron had surged forward with the press of the others, sprinting faster than the others just in time to get to the last wizard, one that had been aiming a wand at him. He realized he wasn't close enough to jump and hit the wizard before the command word could be said and on impulse, instinct, he lunged forward with his blade.

The feeling of pressure, then a lack of pressure, from the blade on his hand and the sound of cold metal splitting flesh and bone sickened him. The Black Hood looked at him, his dark eyes wide in shock, and Alron made eye contact with him. The wizard fell backwards, sliding off of Alron's blade, and the young warrior looked at the man in shock.

Navid nodded towards those who were wounded on the ground, "Get them, gently, now let's move. Who knows what they have lurking around-" a roar cut him off, a roar in the distance. "Alright, now, let's go!" Alron snapped back to attention just in time to join the rest of his Nose Breakers, still disturbed by the feeling of having murdered another human being.

Those who were wounded were picked up and the Nose Breakers ran on, trying to get back out. Behind them creatures that were held by some sort of magical ward struggled to catch up.

"All hells fit to be break'in loose," Navid muttered to Alron as they sprinted.

Alron looked over at him and nodded, "Might have something to do with it," he said numbly as he ran and Navid forced a grin, sensing that not all was well with the younger warrior but knowing that acknowledging it wouldn't help at this point.

"Might be part of the cause," the older Nose Breaker said. He looked to Marqis.

"Get ahead and tell them to send soldiers our way, we're bringing some shit behind us," Navid said and Marqis nodded. Marqis sped up and Alron wondered why he hadn't done that before the order.

"Nose Breakers don't leave each other behind," Navid said as if he was reading Alron's thoughts.

Marqis was fast. Very fast. And by the time the Nose Breakers got to the entrance he was nearly to their barracks. The Nose Breakers who were there had to turn around and defend, though. The beasts behind them were coming quick and they were determined to try and stop them from getting through. It seemed a small victory to destroy the Black Hood's main base in Sprinklberry if it released a series of beasts were released.

Alron turned with Navid and Danielle right next to him. Aspilla and Ajax were protecting Slim, who was barely conscious. The rest of the Nose Breakers helped to form a line of defense and began to

prepare for the oncoming fight. Alron's legs and arms burned, both from fatigue and from the spells that the Black Hoods had released towards them, and his fingers had a hard time gripping his blade.

But the growls in the entrance, which resembled a tunnel, kept his fingers strong enough to grip with adrenaline. He and the others were ready, their weapons in hand, their eyes staring into the dark in front of them.

A pair of red eyes, followed closely by several more, were their only warning before the creatures were on them. Alron felt the wind get knocked out of him and felt a giant paw slam into his chest. He heard Danielle shout something and heard Navid grunt.

Then he heard screams.

Chapter Nineteen:

Wombly's first reaction was extreme caution. Carser and Deabla, who were ultimately loyal to her, followed her lead. Benny saw the potential for her as a leader and Lidia was too exhausted to stand against Wombly's newfound unofficial position of leadership.

They'd prepared the room for an attack, securing themselves as best as they could. Many minutes went by and nothing happened. Then she grew nervous.

"We have to go get them," she said, "They're alone!"

"Tank and Iustitia are able warriors," Benny said, "We're here to kill the lich, not to rescue them." Wombly glared at him.

"They're our friends, our family," she argued and Benny nodded.

"And they're separate from us, probably fighting for their lives against a force that is being controlled by some higher power," Benny said, "A lich."

Wombly's eyes narrowed for a moment as she went deep into thought. She looked to Deabla, who shook his head, and to Carser, who looked at her doubtfully.

"We're going to find them if we can. But we don't know where they are... so if we come across the lich first, we'll make our try at it," Wombly said, "But if it's not looking easy, then we're going after them. They're powerful and we'll probably need their muscle to win."

Both Deabla and Carser were relieved to hear the way she answered. They were unsure about whether her solution was correct or not but the way she answered was her usual logical manner. It was a good indicator that she hadn't gone insane. They were going to follow her no matter what she did. It was a comfort, however, to know that she was still her capable self.

"But we are going to find them," Wombly said, "And if we come find them, dead or dying, and it seems like they'd still be alive if we'd been there a few moments earlier-"

"Spare your threats," Benny cut her off, "You're no good at them. Too many words. You'll kill me. Or try at least. That's all you gotta say." Wombly stared him down a few moments then nodded.

"Good."

The group started moving forward one room at a time. Wombly was in a hurry but she recognized that it wouldn't do anyone any good for her to lead Benny and Carser and the others into a death trap. Plus she and the others were tired and blindly rushing from one room to the others took a lot more energy than being careful. So as she moved into each room, Benny first then Deabla and herself, then Carser and Lidia, they were moving with the utmost of care.

Each room they moved into was old and dusty and looked as if it hadn't had a person in it in a hundred years. Most of the rooms were furnished only with the bare minimum. Most of the furniture in the rooms were made of stone and rusted metal and seemed on the verge of falling apart. In every room an aura of age and waste surrounded them, filling their stomachs with a certain dread for the future, as if every second they were in there they were growing older and falling apart. As if they were rusting away. A dull red light filled the rooms but had no obvious source. They didn't question it, though.

It was better than walking in the darkness.

"Alright," Lidia said finally, "I'm putting a defensive spell up. We're in some sort of trap, I can feel it." She lifted her hands up and began to chant. The spell took a few seconds to finish. As Lidia got closer and closer to the end of her spell, magic reached out of her and its defensive ability spread. As the magic began its effects they felt the dread in their stomachs beginning to fade.

By the time Lidia finished her spell they all felt better, realized that some magic had been draining them since they'd stepped in. Deabla looked to Lidia, a smile on his face, "Good job," he said, "That was a good call."

Lidia nodded, "Let's continue."

"Right," Wombly said. They continued forward, feeling better but still not good. The rusted age of the Kingdom engulfed them as they moved carefully from room to room.

The castle was bigger than seemed possible to those within it. Wombly and the others made their way through the castle for hours, moving from room to room with practiced care. They were tired, even Benny, who was known for his longevity, agreed when Wombly suggested a break.

Deabla smiled for a moment as they sat, "Do you remember when Ashe and Tank fought the first time?"

"I remember," Wombly said, "But why is that worth smiling over?"

"Neither wanted to lose, so they fought to a stalemate," Deabla said.

Wombly raised an eyebrow. She was nice but she couldn't figure out why he was reminiscing about a fight that had almost ended their friendship just as it was beginning. He seemed about to speak when Deabla's smile disappeared.

"What is it?" Carser asked.

"I haven't used my magic in a while..." Deabla mumbled, then his eyes widened, "Danger!" he shouted. Lidia looked up, Wombly lifted her crossbow and Carser dove to the side. Benny spun around, his blades unsheathed. Rusted figures, all humanoid and resembling humans, rushed in, weapons ready to strike.

A single figure, this one resembling something more akin to a dwarf, began to cast a spell. The figures rushed up on Wombly, who dropped her crossbow and unsheathed her sword. Her crossbow fell to her side and hung on a small rope that she'd designed just before leaving. The rope stretched when she pulled but it held the crossbow within easy reach for her.

But she didn't have time to marvel at her invention. She barely got her slider-blade up in time to block a slash from one of the figures. Benny rushed forward, heading to the dwarf, but the rusted mage finished its spell right before he got to him and a wave of invisible energy slammed into him. He felt his muscles all bunching. His jaw tightened until he was gritting his teeth and his arms and legs seemed about to explode with tightness. His throat was constricting and his heart began to slow down with its own stress.

The dwarf grinned, seeming less rusted at that moment, "Humans are so easy." Benny tried to fight, tried to do anything, but his muscles were too tensed for him to move, much less fight. His body crumpled to the floor and one of the figures turned on him, ready to finish him off, but Wombly jumped forward, exposing her flank but stabbing forward in order to hit the creatures over Benny.

BAM! A bullet flew pasted Wombly's side and hit the figure at her side in the face, knocking it to the ground. Carser started to reload immediately while Wombly's slider-blade extended, cutting deep into another figure's chest. The figure she hit was standing over Benny, about to stab him, but because of Wombly's blade it was knocked to the side.

Benny lay on the ground still, trying to regain control of his body, while the dwarf began to cast its spell again. The rusted mage seemed less and less rusty as it got further and further into the fight, as if it was becoming flesh and blood again, and Wombly turned on it just in time to get hit with another of its spells.

"Oh humans!" the dwarf cackled as Wombly fell to the ground, her muscles spasming like Benny's had been. Lidia and Deabla stepped next to Carser, who reloaded his weapon as quickly as he could, while the dwarf continued to cast his next spell.

Deabla was singing, sending his healing magic towards Benny and Wombly, and Lidia was chanting as well. Deabla's magical voice was trying to counteract the dwarf's spell but his own dynamic magic wasn't enough to match that of the dwarf's more solid magic. With time Deabla knew his spell could find a way around the stagnant magic of the spell but he didn't have time.

Carser barely had his gun reloaded when he leveled it, ready to aim. One eye closed, his sights leveled perfectly towards the dwarf. He breathed in, then out, and pulled the trigger. He felt himself get pushed back with the recoil of the weapon and he knew that his aim was true. The bullet would destroy the dwarf and his friends, he hoped, would be repaired.

But the bullet didn't kill the dwarf. It slammed into him and the dwarf gasped with shock. It'd never seen anything like Carser's weapon before. And though the dwarf had a ward up it was prepared to take on the energy put out by a crossbow bolt or an arrow fueled by a spring, not a bullet fueled by gunpowder. The dwarf was forced to put more energy into the ward than he'd like and the younger of his paralysis spells was disrupted.

Wombly felt her muscles uncramp and struggled to get her body moving again. She stayed still, though, only flexing her muscles, making sure they'll obey her mind's commands. The dwarf was still putting the spell on her but he was busy rebuilding the ward and keeping Benny's body immobilized. A good bit of his mental power was taken by his mind trying to comprehend the bullet and the device sent to it.

The dwarf, now angry, turned his magic on them. He shot three spells forward, each one a blast of invisible energy, and knocked Carser and the other two backwards into the wall behind them.

Feeling confident in his position, the dwarf stepped forward, over Wombly's still prone body.

"Oh humans," the dwarf said, "A fancy device have you but it does you no good. Oh easy humans, so very easy, so clever, but so easy." He grinned. Wombly stood up behind him.

"Easy huh?" she asked right before she slammed the hilt of her blade into the back of his head. The dwarf gasped in pain and fell to the ground, unconscious. The others fell to the ground, no longer held by the dwarf's magic.

"You didn't kill him?" Lidia asked when she recovered from the fall.

"He's not rust, he's flesh and bones," Wombly said and Lidia eyed her as if it didn't matter.

"Flesh and blood can change. He isn't a magical construct or undead. I won't kill someone, a person, a living being, if I don't have to." She sheathed her blade and looked at Lidia as if waiting for a counter-argument.

Lidia stared at Wombly impassively for a moment then nodded. Benny, on the other hand, scowled and crouched, unsheathing his blade, "We don't leave enemies behind us," and stabbed forward with his dirk. Nameless, sitting on his hip, sent him a pleased sensation.

Wombly's eyes widened for a moment and she felt her hand fall to her blade but Carser reached forward and grabbed her arm, "Now isn't the time," he said softly, "Later." Wombly's jaw tightened and she wanted to do something but she knew he was right.

"He's right," Deabla agreed, "Infighting can't help.. and I used more of my energies. I won't be able to see things before they come nearly as accurately now. We need to work together."

Wombly looked at Benny, who seemed to wait for her to take the initiative in some way, and said, "Let's go."

It took them many minutes to recover from the fight and when they finally did, they stayed longer just to rest. The fight had taken more energy than they cared to admit and Lidia needed to raise their ward again. To do that she needed to be more rested. So they stayed for close to eight hours, trying to get some rest.

When they did finally leave, Lidia having already cast the spell, it was at a slower pace than before. The last thing they needed was to stumble into another trap.

"I wonder how Tank and Iustitia are doing," Carser said in one secure room. Wombly looked to him sadly and hoped that they were still doing at all.

"You're dying," Iustitia said and Tank grunted, "No need to state the obvious," in response.

"We should slow," the maiden said but Tank kept moving. In his mind he knew that if he stopped it might be too hard to get back up again. The poison in his forearm, now two days old, was having its effect and he could tell it wasn't a kind one. His entire left arm was a darker red color, as if it were becoming the same as the rust. The arm was held close to his body by one of the straps on his half leather, half metal armor.

His steps were beginning to shorten as his balance began to fade.

"Can't," Tank grunted in reply, "Faster we find them, the faster this," he motioned towards his arm, "can be taken care of." Iustitia stared at him.

"If we find them at this pace then you'll be too close to dead by the time we see them," Iustitia argued back and Tank nodded. He continued forward, though, as if he hadn't heard her. "Tank," she said as she caught up, "You'll die."

He shook his head, stubbornly continuing, "We keep going." She grabbed his shoulder, pulling him so that he looked back at her. His eyes matched hers and they stared at one another for a moment.

"Are you trying to die?" she asked. Tank stared at her eyes but seemed to look a thousand miles past her, his mind beyond her, beyond the moment. He grunted and turned, "Let's just kill the damned thing." Iustitia thought for a moment, struggling to find the right words for the moment.

"You can't do that if you're dead," Iustitia said, hoping that his desire for violence would force him into safer actions. The reasoning did give him a pause.

"Fine," Tank said and they stopped. Tank pulled his water bottle out and sipped from it, carefully conserving the liquid. Neither had an idea of how long it'd take them to finish this job and the supplies they had with them weren't plentiful. They were prepared for a struggle but the exact duration of their mission was still unknown.

They rested for a few minutes, their minds far away, and Tank felt his eyelids becoming very heavy. He looked over at her and made sure she was aware and awake. He knew that there was something wrong and knew it was beyond his ability to fight. He felt himself slipping in and out of awareness and his senses all began to fade.

As he slipped in and out of consciousness he heard Iustitia snap to attention, heard her speaking and heard another voice, a familiar voice. It was a voice he hadn't heard for years, a voice that inspired feelings of anger in him. But the name that went with it was beyond him at that moment.

Wombly felt the sweat sliding down her brow. They were getting further into the complex and the temperature was steadily rising. It wasn't a comforting notion to them but many minions of Azeroth, who had summoned the wraith that had split into the liches they now hunt, were of the fire element. It wasn't entirely a bad thing, though, for it gave them an idea about the enemy they were fighting. If it was of the fire plane then it had a weakness for water and ice spells, which Lidia could supply.

But they still were alarmed by the knowledge that they were getting closer to whatever it was that they were hunting. Wombly opened the door to the next room and immediately jumped back as a blast of flames shot out of the opening. She hit the ground and rolled backwards in an acrobatic-type move. She rolled to her feet and unsheathed her blade.

Benny stepped forward, already frustrated that she'd broken their pattern by opening the door herself, and grabbed her. He pulled her back several more feet as the door exploded inwards. The flame from the explosion expanded out to where she'd been standing. Both Benny and Wombly were stunned even at the distance by the lack of air.

A creature stood in front of them, staring. Then it disappeared in a puff of flame and smoke.

"What was that?" Carser asked and Deabla, who had read many books on magical creatures, answered.

"Flame pixie," he said, "A big one. They're usually the spawn of something bigger."

"So the fire isn't from the powerful little creature we just saw?" Carser asked a moment later.

"Flame pixies aren't really that strong," Deabla replied and Benny snorted.

"Later you'll have to explain why that's comforting," he said and Carser couldn't help but grin.

"We'll see how it goes," Wombly said, "If they'd wanted to attack, they could have done it right then. That thing could have easily gotten me right there. Maybe there's more to this than just a fight to be fought."

"Hmm..." Deabla thought aloud, thinking about the truth of her statement. Was it true? He wondered, or had that pixie used almost all of its power in the initial blast? The answer, he knew, could prove critical, could provide them with information about their enemy. But the information could also paralyse them with indecision.

Then they heard a low rumbling that shook the ground beneath their feet and the roof above their head. Dust and rust fell from the ceiling onto them.

"That's unsettling," Benny muttered and the others all agreed silently in their minds. But they didn't have time to dwell on it. The door behind them burst into flames and a flame pixie stepped into the room. Benny turned to fight but it exploded, launching him backwards. When a pair of flame pixies appeared in the room with them, between them and the door that they'd come from, they rushed into the next room.

The room they'd just come from exploded and the door in front of them was already open. They all knew they were being herded but as the flame pixies appeared behind them it was apparent that they didn't have much they could do about it. Wombly looked at Benny, "Get ready to fight," she said and he nodded.

"Figured."

They continued to run, the doors behind them exploding, the doors in front of them already opened by explosion or less destructive means. They ran for many minutes, the heat growing more and more intense as they moved. The pixies looked at them with mindless eyes and they seemed to be in no pain as they exploded but the humans couldn't read the facial expressions of the pixies.

Then an especially large one appeared when they got into a larger room. It had multiple doors that they could move through. Pixies appeared at the front of all the doors but one and the largest of the pixies looked at them and seemed to struggle for a moment. It was moving its mouth, which was hard for the humans to see because it seemed nothing more than a humanoid made of flame.

But finally it seemed to master the ability to move its mouth and sounds began to come from it. The pixie seemed to be trying to convey some sort of meaning and Wombly raised an eye brow.

"Is it trying to speak?" she asked. The pixie was still making sounds as she spoke.

"I dunno but I don't know what it's saying," Deabla said. The pixie finished its string of sounds then looked at them as if waiting for an answer. When none seemed forth-coming it switched to another group of sounds.

"Think it switched to another language or something?" Carser asked and Wombly nodded. *That's probably exactly what it's doing*, she thought.

The pixie went through close to a dozen different languages before it paused, seeming genuinely frustrated. Then it disappeared with a puff of smoke and flame.

"Weird," Carser said aloud, "But then again it disappearing really isn't all that weird. This whole situation is pretty weird, but I guess that for you it's probably kinda normal. Not that anything is really *normal* but you know what I mean. Well, you might not know-" his stream of consciousness dialogue was cut off by more rumbling. Then three pixies appeared and exploded at the door.

Suddenly the whole room was shaking and the pixies were exploding all over, leaving one door untouched. Another pixie floated through each door that had already been destroyed and exploded.

"Guess this one," Benny sprinted forward as he spoke. He opened the door and rushed through, the others close behind. The process of running while the world seemed to explode around them began anew and it was filled with just as much excitement, and fear, as before. But this time the companions felt confident that they weren't being hunted, that they were being herded.

"Gods, I hope it ends well," Wombly mumbled to herself as they sprinted, barely keeping ahead of the pixies. Then the explosions stopped. The unusually large pixie appeared in front of them. It made

more noises, the first of which were completely lost on them. Then it switched and Wombly's mind put some meaning to sounds.

"I... me...n... youooo... n-o... h-arm," the voice that spoke was fiery, as if it were being made by the natural sounds of fire, but it was obvious that they were being directed that way.

"You're not making that very clear with all these explosions," Wombly responded to the words even though nobody else understood them to be words at all.

"Lee...ding... youooo.. here," the voice of fire said, "Hel-p, I... as-k. Hel-p. Plea-se."

"What do you need help with? And who are you?" Wombly asked and Deabla's eyes narrowed. He and Carser both seemed on the verge of understanding. Both Benny and Lidia watched in confusion at the exchange that seemed completely one sided to them.

"Free-dom... Plea-se... W-e... nee-d free-dom," the voice said. Towards the end it was becoming better at the sounds. It was obvious to Wombly that language wasn't something that these fire creatures had to deal with often so it made sense to her that they would struggle with it.

"Who are you?" Deabla asked, "And freedom from what?" Wombly smiled at his understanding.

"My... mas-ter... is, the... prin-ce... of fire," the word fire was easy for the pixie, "... el-emen-tals, h-e... is pow-er-ful."

"If he's powerful," Carser said, "Why does he need to be freed?"

"The... li-ch... su-mmoned the prin-ce... an-d... en-slave-d... him wi-th... his ma-gic."

"How do we free him?" Wombly asked.

"Woah woah! Free who?" Benny asked.

"Prince of Fire Elementals," Carser answered and Benny's eyes widened.

"Why would we free him?" Benny asked, "He could destroy us the second we free him."

"Way it sounds, he could destroy us now," Deabla deadpanned and Benny scowled.

"The li-ch... will... turn, my, mas-ter... on... youooo soo-n."

"The lich will make him kill us soon," Wombly said to Benny, then, ignoring the man's protest, she asked, "How do we free you?"

"A... fla-sk... is in... the low-est le-vel... if, youooo... get, there then... youooo... can... de-stroy it... and w-e... w-ill... b-e... fr-eeeeeeeeeee."

"How do we get there?" Wombly asked and the pixie pointed at a door at the far end of the room, where a pixie appeared and exploded.

"G-o."

"Let's go," Wombly said and the others followed her, some more reluctantly than others.

Iustitia stood watch over Tank's unconscious body. She'd seen his eyes start to close, seen him slipping away. She'd seen him look over to make sure she was aware and she made sure he knew she was. He needed to rest, as all humans did, that much she understood. She didn't know why she cared but she did. And if he needed her to be alert for him to rest then she'd be alert.

"Hello," a voice said from the side and Iustitia perked up. She looked over to Tank and saw that he was still switching in and out of consciousness. A figure stepped out of a room across from them, into the one they'd have walked into next had they continued.

He, the figure was male, had short blonde hair and dark brown eyes that made Iustitia feel strange, almost as if he were calculating every strength and weakness she had. He was handsome but it was obvious he'd been in the Kingdom of Rust for a long time.

"Who are you?" Iustitia asked and the man smiled.

"I haven't had a name for a long time. No need when you're alone... I used to be called Chance, though."

Chapter Twenty:

Alron twisted his body as quickly as possible and jumped to his feet, trying to get into a position to fight. Around him the grunts and bellows of combat filled the air and many windows around the fray were filled with curious faces. The curiosity was quickly replaced by, at the least, concern and, at the greatest, outright fear.

He looked around and almost gasped. The creatures were all different but all equally terrifying. One of the creatures, resembling a jet black mixture between a wolf and lion, fought with Ajax while Aspilla fought another creature that had the torso and head of an owl, also the wings, and the body of a giant man. Arms, deformed a bit, reached out at Aspilla but her blades cut into it everytime it got close to her.

In the sky above him and around him a few of the creatures got away, all of them in pairs, and he knew they'd have to be taken care of eventually. It didn't even occur to him that the creatures might be male and female. But Navid, who was less stunned, thought of it but couldn't do anything about it.

Alron continued to look around, trying to find where he'd be of most use.

Danielle was knocked to the floor, a lobster-like creature (he didn't know what a lobster was but the creature was terrifying anyway) standing over her, its claws reaching for her. He rushed forward, a roar escaping from his lips as he sprinted, and jumped into the creature's side. His sharp sword dug into its side, sliding in between the creature's natural armored plates, and the beast roared.

It shook so violently that his sword was ripped from his hands and he felt away from it. He landed roughly, heard a crack in his shoulder and felt agony shoot across his body like lightning, but he had adrenaline enough to jump to his feet before the lobster-like creature got to him. It snapped at him with its claws but he jumped backwards just in time to dodge it.

He felt his left shoulder protest against the sudden movement but he found a way to ignore it by realizing that he was in mortal danger. His right hand flashed to his belt where a long, slightly curved knife lay, and he unsheathed it. The dagger felt puny in his hands as he looked at the creature but it was better than nothing and he planned to use it.

The creature sprinted forward, snapping both its claws at him, but he jumped up and over the claws. Its own momentum put him atop the creature and he began to stab at it as best he could. But his left arm was all but useless and his right arm was too busy trying to find a crease to slide the knife into while the creature shook and he was launched off of it.

He landed roughly, once again on his left side, and the sheer pain he felt nearly knocked him unconscious. He tried to climb to his feet but his mind was numbed by the pain and he couldn't get his body under control. He did manage to roll over. He threw up from the pain then passed out, completely unconscious.

"Shit shit shit shit shit," Ajax growled to himself as he fought. The word was like a prayer to him and he continued to chant it the entire time he fought. His weapon, a heavy but wieldable double-sided axe, swung smoothly as he controlled it with the skill of a well trained warrior. His arms burned from the night's exertion but he ignored the pain as he fought for his and Slim's lives. In the back of his mind he realized he was fighting for all their lives, for if he fell, then another might be overwhelmed as the behemoth in front of him turned on them.

"Shit shit shit..." he growled, his metronome for combat not interrupted by the violence in the least, even more fiercely as the realization gave him another burst of adrenaline. He stepped forward on the creature, getting inside its paws, and swung his axe as hard as he could into the creature's shoulder. It roared with pain as he snapped his hips forward, the axe following closely behind with enough force to dig itself deep into the creature's flesh.

Its other front leg came around and slammed into him but Ajax was strong enough to hold onto his axe and when his body flew, the axe was torn from its shoulder. The lion wolf mix creature howled in agony and he knew that he'd done enough damage to kill it. But it wasn't enough for though it would die, it would take many seconds.

He got to his feet and rushed at it, axe high over head, and jumped as high as he could. Once again his hips snapped forward, followed by his powerful shoulders, which were followed by his strong

arms, which were followed by the razor sharp axe. His body was a coil and he snapped forward in perfectly timed segments. The blade of the axe dug deep into the middle of the creature's back and literally snapped its spine in half.

The creature fell to the ground, its back legs dead and its front legs dying. It moaned in agony. Few moments passed before it was silent with death. Ajax struggled to pull his axe out of it for many seconds.

Aspilla jumped back and forth, dodging the owl-man's arms. It flew to catch up but she was too quick and it overshot her. She stabbed it in the side but her blades weren't big enough to do any damage that wasn't superficial. She couldn't do any serious damage and it frustrated her. Her weapons were for fine movements, for skilled combat and precise cuts. Her finely crafted blades weren't Alron's heavy hand-and-a-half, or bastard, sword or Ajax's double bladed axe. She couldn't hurt this big thing, only sting it. And even if her blades were heavy, she didn't have the weight to throw behind the weapon to push it through the creature's thick hide.

But the creature wasn't fast enough to get to her and its lumbering strikes were an easy dodge for her. Neither made any direct progress on one another but the creature did have one major advantage on her. She could feel the sweat rolling down her face as she grew more and more weary. Her grip was firm and her ability to fight wasn't slipping but she knew that if she didn't finish the thing off very soon she would be in major trouble.

The owl man's left wing got closer to her and she grinned, knowing that the beast did have a weak point. Her left blade lashed out quicker than the owl wing could get back and the creature howled in pain. She tried to press her advantage but the creature was too big and its legs, which had sharp nails, talons, on the end of them, lashed out and scratched her across the shoulder, getting through her thin armor and tearing into her skin.

She gasped in pain and threw herself backwards before the creature could press its advantage. She lay on the ground, bleeding from her right shoulder, as the creature descended on her. Because of her jump it couldn't kill her with a single strike but it could certainly wound her, most likely mortally.

Then a screech came from behind them, from the tunnel. The owl lifted itself into the air, looking backwards, and another of it, this one a darker, less showy color, erupted from the darkness. It flew high and fast and the owl-creature that had been attacking Aspilla took off after it.

Marqis had just gotten back from the Nose Breakers HQ and behind him ran two dozen of the specially trained warriors. One lifted a bow and launched an arrow towards the leading bird. The other bird, the one who'd been fighting Aspilla, screeched and the lead one lurched backwards just before the arrow hit it. The man cursed as his arrow flew off into the city.

The owl that screeched turned on the man who'd shot at its mate and its razor sharp talons caught a hold of him in the split second it was low enough to be hit. The other Nose Breakers couldn't react fast enough to grab ahold of their comrades. He screamed as he was lifted higher and higher into the air by the owl-creature.

Then it let go of him and he hit the ground with a crunch.

The rest of the creatures fought the two dozen Nose Breakers while those who had already been in the fight and were wounded, for none of those involved had gone unscathed, left, both on their own and carried by others. The battle lasted for little longer and few of the creatures involved were killed.

The majority were wounded to the point that they could be pinned down or simply rushed off into the city, causing trouble somewhere else. But the Nose Breakers who had gotten involved in the fight had been wounded and needed to be tended to so they didn't chase after the creatures. And they had wounded them enough that the city guards should be able to finish them off or capture them.

"Go home and heal up," Navid said to Ajax, "We'll be there shortly." He nodded and motioned for others to help him get Alron, Aspilla, Danielle and Slim home.

Alron's eyes opened slowly and he saw Esmeralda standing over him, her big green eyes filled with concern. She smiled at him, though, and he knew that nothing too bad could have happened. He

looked around and saw that he was on a cot in the middle of her largest room. Slim sat on the other side. Slim was unconscious still.

"How'd I get here?" he asked.

"Carried ya," Ajax said with a grin. He had a bandage over his nose and a bloodied bandage on his arm. He'd been wounded but hadn't noticed it in the heat of battle. Aspilla sat with a bloodied bandage on her shoulder and her arm in a sling.

"Hey," Aspilla smiled. He nodded to her. Danielle looked at him, her head bandaged.

"Hurt my head a bit," she said with a smile. Alron nodded. Then the whole room shifted its focus from him to the side. Slim groaned in his sleep and they all realized he was having a nightmare.

"What'd they do to him?" Alron wondered aloud and Ajax sighed.

"Tortured, from what we saw on his body. Long cuts, all along his chest," the big man said.

"Well, we got him back," Alron said but he wondered if Slim would ever really be back with them.

They were sitting in the main room, Slim still asleep in their new room, when Navid, Dandi, Ilnos and Marqis walked in. They were wounded as well but they handled it better than their younger counterparts.

"How fare ya?" Navid asked and Alron shrugged, which hurt his arm. It was strapped to his side. The priest who had come in said that to heal it would take a large donation. Alron agreed but they would do it later. He had other matters to attend to.

"Little banged up," Danielle said.

"I can conjure a few images a little more banged up than you, but I reckon that's not too hard to do with most people," Dandi said from the side.

"Not Tank and the others. They always come back torn up," Alron said and Navid nodded.

"I imagine their wounds are a lot deeper than ours," Navid said, "But we're not here to complain or talk about the King's Companions." The older soldier stepped forward to sit at the table.

"We did what we were supposed to," Alron said before Navid could even sit.

"We're not here to give a lashing. Actually, we're here to get your thoughts on something, see what you think before we do what we're planning and figure out if you want to come along," the older soldier said. Alron cocked his head to the side.

"I thought we were the only ones working on the Black Hoods," he said it as more of a question than a statement.

"You were given the most freedom and the least pointed orders, yes, but you weren't the only ones working on it. I actually think that had you been your little plan would have gone a lot smoother and your informers wouldn't have been as easily hunted down," Navid said, "But you weren't and your plan didn't go smoothly and we're here now, 'all banged up'.

"If you would, though, give us a good report of what happened and we'll see about some answers for the both of us," Navid said and they all agreed. Each of the youngest Nose Breakers gave a report to the best of their knowledge, explaining the entire scene, from the feel of the ground beneath their feet to the smell of the air. They told the older Nose Breakers everything they knew and told them everything they thought.

The reports took nearly the whole day, the younger Nose Breakers speaking for most of it. The older ones only spoke to ask for a specific detail or to ask a question about why they did something or why they thought the enemy did something. No detail that could be seen or smelled or heard was missed or unaccounted for.

At the end of it, Navid cleared his throat, smiled and nodded.

"Thank you very much. That was informational. Now, I'm going to give you some information that people have died for, that agents have joined the Black Hoods to get and not been able to get out in time to avoid being caught or converted by magical means. What I'm about to tell you is known only by those who have been involved with the Nose Breakers for years. The problem with the Black Hoods is a big one..." he thought for a moment, then began.

"The thing is that the Black Hoods are a lot bigger than you or us would have guessed. And your plan wasn't as sneaky as either of us would have liked. The problem is that the base you attacked was already known to us. The good thing is that when you attacked it you revealed information to us. The bad thing is the information you revealed is not a good thing.

"That base wasn't a strong hold like we expected. Had we not been watching, you'd probably have been able to get in. Not even our best spies saw the injury thing that you guys did. We all knew they had a code but none of us saw it. Maybe you're good, maybe you're lucky, I'm not here to say either or which is even better," he looked to Aspilla as he spoke, "But you figured something out that we didn't and that did give you some surprise.

"But the problem is that the base you saw was what they wanted us to see. Our best agents, the guys who you didn't see looking at you, were watching the entire time. Based on your reports and our own, they were too prepared to leave. Those monsters they released? That had to be planned. How else would they have gone straight through the tunnel at us? How else would there have been a male and female one, both of which were trained to stay together, if not for them to release a little trap on us?

"Teleportation spells take a lot from a wizard. They all had them. Maybe they expected to hold out longer. Surely they weren't expecting to be attacked so blatantly or else you'd have been destroyed immediately. They almost certainly only realized you were on our side after you were inside or else those wizards on the outside would have signaled in some way. Yes, our agents were watching, no they didn't do anything. They're spies, not warriors. They did inform us of what you were doing, though, so they did save your lives technically."

Alron looked at him for a moment, then nodded.

"Alright, so what are we doing?"

Navid grinned. "I like this kid."

Slim's eyes were opening and he looked at them, at the world around him, for a few moments before he said anything. All of them, Alron, Ajax, Aspilla, Danielle, stood in the room. His eyes had a hard time adapting to the light and his vision was impaired for a few moments. Then he spoke, his voice barely operational due to the extreme conditions he'd come from.

"I'm.. back?" he asked and Alron smiled.

"You're back," he said.

"You guys came and got me?" Slim asked and Alron nodded.

"Yeah, we gotcha," Ajax said and Slim nodded.

"That's good," he said, about to pass out, "That's real good."

"You are safe now," Danielle said and Slim smiled and nodded.

"Thanks. I appreciate it."

"You'd do the same for us," Alron said with a smile and Slim nodded. His eyes started to close, "I think I'm gonna... drift.. off..."

His eyes snapped open as the images behind his eye lids began to bring his tortured moments back to him. He looked up at them, searching for one of the telltale signs of illusion, which had been used against him many times by the Black Hoods. "Hey, uh... you all still gonna be here when I wake?"

The whole group shared a collective smile, happy they'd gotten their friend back, "Yeah. We'll be here," Aspilla said, "We'll be here when you wake."

"O-kay... good," Slim said before he slipped away, hoping, praying that they were his real companions.

Part Three: Old Friends, New Enemies and a Face to Fight

Chapter Twenty One:

The army stood in front of the Boccian wall, a recently finished construction of both wood and stone. General Stapem stared across the field at the rusted force, close to four thousand figures. He cast

a nervous glance to his own forces. The enemies outnumbered his own current forces four to one. And the training of his enemy seemed to be superb where as easily three fourths of his own force were far from the training level required to march in formations like the enemy army was.

The Sprinkleberrian portion of his army consisted fully of scouts and trackers, the only soldiers close enough to the city to get to it in the last week. The Boccs were built on the remains of some long lost ancient city and thus hadn't been built for any reason other than the foundations already in place. It was an unfortunate side effect that for any army with two hundred and fifty soldiers or more would be slow in the process of moving between even Keell and the Boccs. He silently wished he'd brought more men with him. He'd originally come because King Jev wanted him to get away from the aristocrats in Sprinkleberry. But now he was here and well aware that they needed him to be there.

Thus the main army of Sprinkleberry, for Keell had yet to release soldiers towards the endangered cities. No doubt King Jev had sent the order but the leader of Keell, a general turncoat from the first Chaos War by name of Sevrin, wanted to keep Keell strong in the event of some sort of attack on the city. General Sevrin had been instrumental in the first Chaos War and because of this his opinion was taken seriously, even if he was biased.

Keell wasn't a generous city. When Limton was being overrun by boozers, a direct result of Keell's previous leadership, the city had to be given a direct order from King Jev in order for them to send the soldiers. The thought of a direct order from King Jev in the first few months of the Kingdom wasn't something that anyone, Keellian or Sprinkleberrian, thought was too healthy for the newly born Kingdom.

But now, with the Boccs threatened in the East, Keell was once again reluctant to send soldiers. And because of it, a full five days had been added to the already week and a half long trek between the main army of the Kingdom, which was based between Sprinkleberry and Keell, and the frontier cities.

"Damn dem if dey're not here soon," spat a young Captain off to the side. General Stapem looked over at the Boccian officer and realized that this man was young enough that he'd been raised in the city. The Boccs were older than Keell or Sprinkleberry gave them credit for but the cities hadn't had any population over a thousand until the larger cities had gotten involved.

"We're going to have to hold off as best we can," the General said. He wondered why the rusted figures hadn't attacked already but he was relieved for it. He had only nine hundred warriors to work with in total, close to a fourth of them completely green warriors when it came to combat between man and man. The Boccians knew their way around boozers but their enemy wouldn't be the flying demons.

He and the other officers stood on a tower that had been erected a few years before. It'd served as the city watch tower for the Boccs and now it was being used to observe and manipulate the battle in the defense of the Boccs. His personal spot, on a raised throne that allowed him to sit in some comfort while studying with a view afforded only by the slightly perilous instability of the seat, allowed him to look at the enemy with even more detail than just a few feet below.

The enemy army had no cavalry but in the case of siege that didn't mean much. The army had no siege engines, which was a great relief to the defenders, but their largest inhuman warriors carried in their arms giant scaling ladders in order to climb the half-wooden, half-stone wall, which curved around the entire city.

"Why haven't dey attacked?" another voice, a feminine voice, asked and General Stapem looked to the side to see a stunning dark skinned woman. She returned his look, undaunted, her far darker eyes matching his light. He looked around and saw that all of the other officers, all male, shied away from her, though whether from respect or fear he couldn't tell. Maybe it was both, he mused to himself.

"I can't tell," the general responded, deciding to ignore the unusual situation of the female officer. "If I knew, I'd be preparing for whatever it is they're bringing towards us."

"Do you dink dey'll start to attack soon?" she asked.

"I really don't."

"Den why are you here?" she asked, "If you don't know anyding we don't den what is de reason we have been moved to a secondary position?"

General Stapem looked at her, shocked by her boldness, but he wasn't angry over her blunt questions. Rather, he was intrigued by her. She was confident, that much was obvious, and she felt sure that her people could stand against anything. He looked back over the army in front of their wall then at the soldiers on the wall, all of them wielding weapons that had been forged for one purpose and put to the test a hundred times over in the last few years.

He wondered to himself if she was right. He saw their disorganized manner and knew that they wouldn't beat the Sprinkleberrian army on the field but if left to a war, to a battle without a single, well-defined battlefield, then could they win? He thought about it for a few moments. Not without taking a great many major losses and if the point was defending the Boccs then they couldn't stop the army from moving forward, only try to destroy it as it went along, trying to weaken its resolve until it either broke down or fled.

But neither really mattered. Their home was threatened and they were about to fight in a war with a single, well-defined battlefield and their ability to defeat the army over a long period of time in a hundred small battles didn't matter in this situation. So he answered the same way she'd asked, honestly and bluntly.

"Because when this comes down to it, it won't be your army against a couple dozen boozers or even a bunch of boozers. It will be your army on the field against another army. Your people, both your warriors and your officers, are used to fighting in the desert or woods, to slowly beating down a force over a long period to time.

"But this isn't the time for that," he said, "You are standing across from a well trained enemy that seems to have fought a thousand times and knows exactly what to do. You are going to fight this army with soldiers who don't know how to fight this type of battle and the least you or I can do now is let a general who does know how to fight this type of battle lead them.

"I'm not of your city and I'm not really here for your city. In truth, I'm here because if this army is just the front of another then maybe your city won't be the only one to fall if they're victorious. Keell and Sprinkleberry are both threatened and thus they sent me. I brought with me three dozen cavalry men and as many scouts, trackers, archers and other light soldiers as could be gathered.

"Maybe four days in my wake is an army of at least three thousand Sprinkleberrian Infantry and another half a thousand archers. Keellian warriors might be on their way as well. We can't tell as of yet. But even should you and yours have survived without me up to the point of the Sprinkleberrian and, or, Keellian forces' arrival, they wouldn't be given over to the command of a Boccian general who doesn't know how to wield the weapon they've been handed.

"I'm here because while you are all fierce warriors and well learned in the battles of man versus boozers or man versus man, I am well learned in the battles of army versus army and of legion against legion on a field," the general paused a moment, seeing that his answer had partially inflamed the proud woman but he didn't allow her the chance to respond.

"I'm here because your lands are threatened by a force that could threaten the entire Kingdom. And until this threat is neutralized I'm going to stay here. Or, were we to lose, die here. The Kingdom is a single country now and we recognize your ability. But you must recognize ours. Now, proud young Boccian, what is your name?"

The woman glared at him for a few moments, "I am called Nyota."

"Well, Nyota, I'm Stapem," the general said, "And you are my second in command."

The other officers, male all, blanched and gaffawed at the declaration. Seeing this, General Stapem decided to put them in line, "She's the only one without a pair and yet she's the only one with a pair big enough to come and question me why I'm here! This is the honesty, the confidence, or the madness that I need in an officer in the middle of a battle!"

The others all looked at Nyota with a glare. None of them said anything but they all had dark thoughts for a moment.

As Nyota left, with orders to move as many archers onto the wall as possible, another officer, a light skinned man named Narvk, muttered, "She'll be his widow by night or she'll be outta da job." The man he'd said his prediction to laughed aloud and General Stapem glared at the two for a moment.

"You two!" the older man barked, "Get over here." The two officers obeyed. "I'm needing men to build tents for wounded, for you'll be damned sure we're going to have some."

"We'll send me to work on it," Selvik, Narvk's companion, said with a nod but the General shook his head.

"Make sure you're heavily involved with it," Stapem said, "I know two fine officers such as yourselves will make sure the work is quality, especially since you'll be lifting hammers to add to the cause."

Narvk and Selvik both took the orders with stoicism that would do any Boccian proud but grumbled as they left, thinking they were out of the general's hearing range. They weren't and Stapem made a mental note of it.

A day passed and the rusted army stayed there, seemingly silent and watchful. The wall was being reinforced the entire time, tents for wounded built, arrows, swords, armor and more all repaired or forged and fletched in order for the soldiers on the walls to have ample replacements. The Boccian scouts were all motioning towards a cloud in the distance when suddenly a roar filled the air.

General Stapem looked from the scouts, who he'd sent an officer called Delik to send out for that very reason, to the outside and his eyes widened. Where there'd been four thousand soldiers, a full quarter of which standing nearly ten feet tall or with four arms or some other inhuman aspect, there was now half a dozen siege engines and just as many soldiers as before.

"Damn them, what the hell is this!" the General spat and swore for a moment. He looked to the officers around him. "Do any of you have any idea what we're up against?" None of the men had any answer to give and the General looked behind him, hoping to see some sort of sign that the reinforcements were within a days travel. He didn't and he looked back forward as the siege engines, all of them giant rams, began to roll forward with the march of soldiers. And the General's voice boomed, sending orders to every officer on the wall through other officers. One final order boomed, this one vague and broad but still ultimately helpful.

"Everyone get ready!"

Nyota unsheathed her blade, as did every other warrior on the wall.

"You ready?" asked a tall man, his dark skin glistening in the sun, named Silren. She nodded quickly but he saw the nerves in her. "We'll be fine."

Another man, Tillo, nodded as well.

"We'll defend our home," he said, his lighter skin already burned by the unrelenting sun over their head. The rolling of the battering rams was the only sound that filled the air from the enemy's side of the battlefield. It was unsettling as the rusted warriors charged forward with no battle cries or orders being given. From the Boccian side the cries of orders being given, the sound of arrows being released into the enemy, the grunts of men as they moved final touches of the wall into place all filled the air.

Nyota looked at the enemy, away from Tillo and Silren and the rest of the Boccian world, to their enemy and the desert. The largest creatures were charging in front, the smaller, more regular sized creatures behind them. The very largest of them carried shields that deflected the majority of the arrows that were flying from the wall. Those behind them carried the scaling ladders. Most of the arrows were misaimed from the flying group or deflected by the shields. But to Nyota it was most unsettling when the arrows did hit the enemy for the figures would simply fall to the ground without noise. There was no cry of pain or shriek of agony.

What are we fighting?.. she wondered to herself but she didn't have too much time to consider it. From a range that most humans struggled to fire from came a rain of arrows that forced the Boccians behind the raised parts of the wall. The arrows that missed hit the ground and sat for a moment before they simply disintegrated into nothing.

"Are dose dings made of rust?" Silren asked and Tillo grabbed his shoulder, motioning towards an arrow shaft in his thigh.

"Uh, yeah, I dink so," he said when he grasped it and pulled it out. He grunted in pain but, with Boccian stoicism, hid the pain for the most part. He dropped the arrow and showed them the remains of the arrow on his hand: a rusted stain.

"You okay?" another soldier asked as he ran forward, a bandage in hand.

"Didn't dig deep," Tillo said as the man wrapped his wound with a bandage, "Not enough weight behind it to dig deep."

"What's de point of dem den? If dey don't dig deep den-" Nyota wondered aloud but she lost her train of thought when the top half of a ladder, a rust-red figure clinging to it, slammed into the top of their wall. Nyota, and the other soldiers in her immediate proximity, all rushed forward, a different method but similar end in mind.

Silren stabbed forward with his long blade, taking the figure in the gut, but it didn't cry out, didn't groan in pain, or even flinch. It just crumbled, disintegrating into a thousand pieces of rust. Tillo and Nyota grabbed the sides of the ladder and tried to push it down but they were forced to dodge as another wave of arrows came in.

In the distance they could hear the cries of men being hit with arrows but it wasn't the type that indicated death or even mortal wound, only the kind that meant someone had been wounded or, if lucky like Tillo, startled more than anything.

Figures began to climb up the ladders in an efficient line and Nyota was forced away from her thoughts on the rusted arrows. The stream of rusted warriors was easy to halt initially but a second ladder, then a third, rose up and more and more figures started to pour in as the stream became a river. As the number of ladders increased the number of rusted warriors able to get in increased as well and the human warriors began to feel wearied by the constant fighting.

More than once a volley of rusted arrows flew in and hit the defenders while fighting. The arrows also hit the attackers and as often as not the arrows wounded mortally or outright killed the less aware warriors. The sun rose directly above their head and the enemy still came. What seemed to be a hundred warriors grew to be two hundred then three hundred and, eventually, had to be a thousand.

The entire wall was exhausted by the time the sun was half way between its high point and the horizon and General Stapem ordered the secondary soldiers onto the wall. Nyota, Tillo and Silren made their way to the ground level, off the wall, with little more grace than a drunken stumble. Exhaustion in their bones, they were quickly given food to eat, water to drink and a cot to sleep on.

"How long until we're up to go again?" Tillo wondered aloud and Nyota shrugged.

"I'll go find out," she said. She made her way to the watch tower, a stream of hurried officers rushing past her both to and from the water tower, and found General Stapem staring at the war, his old eyes observing each section of the wall personally.

"Your wall served better than most," the general said when Nyota walked up. She didn't know how he could have noticed her as he'd not even looked towards her so she assumed he didn't know who she was exactly. "I thought that you'd have used your position as second in command to avoid the real fighting. I see I was wrong. I'll have to elect a secondary second in command in case I fall. But I think you'll use your power well if you notice something wrong."

"Well.. danks," Nyota said but the general was lost in thought already, his eyes scanning the wall. She looked at it and gasped. He wasn't lying when he said that her section had held better than most. Atop the wall many sections were carrying away dead bodies. Her personal section, a fifty foot portion of the wall, hadn't lost a single soldier.

A few of the sections seemed about to fail but a group of soldiers rushed forward to bolster the defense. Nyota looked up at the general in wonder as he directed an officer to send reinforcements to another portion of the wall. She realized that for him to have given the order to bolster that portion of the wall just in time he must have predicted its failure minutes in advance, for the orders were traveling too slow for an immediate response to be given.

He pointed towards another section of the wall and an officer rushed away, making speed for that portion. He looked to another and pointed and more officers rushed. The battering rams weren't

being used yet, for a reason that Nyota didn't understand, but the general wasn't worried about it so she assumed he had a reason for neglecting that fact.

She was about to test her assumption, to ask him about it, when she saw the sections he'd pointed to minutes ago were suddenly put on their heels or experienced losses. Soldiers rushed forward just in time to keep the situation in hand and the rusted figures were repulsed. She looked at him with respect once again.

"Your section only needed aid once and I sent it there more to keep you rested than because you were about to be overwhelmed," the general said and Nyota remembered, vaguely, seeing soldiers rush forward to help at a particularly trying moment. She realized that with their aid she'd been able to rest a moment while they kept the situation in hold. Then, after they withdrew from the situation, she'd been able to fight effectively and efficiently once again.

"How long until the first soldiers go up again?" Nyota asked and the general looked to her for a few moments, as if deep in thought. He pointed to another section then said, "Four soldiers," then, with a look to Nyota that showed her that he was actually seeing her, he said, "Six hours. Then you're back up."

She nodded and turned to leave but he stopped her.

"Hey. This is why I'm here," he said and he looked back to the wall. She stared at him for a moment then laughed aloud.

She got back to the others and sat down on a cot, a bowl of stew in hand.

"How are dings?" Silren asked.

"Crazy," she replied, "We were one of the better sections of de walls."

"Obviously," Tillo said, "We had de prettiest girl to impress."

"Shut up," came Nyota's response and Silren grinned. "He's right, dough." Nyota looked at him for a moment before grinning, "Who's side are you on?"

"Mine," Silren replied and the three all sat in silence for a moment as the sounds of combat surrounded them. Then Tillo lay back and, within moments, was asleep. Silren did likewise, his tired mind happy to give in to exhaustion. Only Nyota sat awake. In her last moments of consciousness she looked to the wall, at the warriors fighting, and wondered how the enemy planned to sustain their numbers if they were losing so many without any real gains.

The thought faded with her sleep and a final comforting notion filled her head. Maybe, her subconscious hoped, they were just stupid.

She was shaken awake and a soldier looked her in the eyes for a few moments, speaking. But her ears couldn't hear sound and so she was trying to read his lips. It was still dark and the moon barely offered any light so she couldn't understand everything but she knew by his manner that she was being called to battle.

"Report to de general immediately," the man said at the last and Nyota nodded.

"I'll go now," she said. She climbed to her feet and grabbed her armor and weapons. She began to put it on as she moved. By the time she got to General Stapem she was fully armed and armored. A single look at his blood shot eyes and weary face showed that he'd been awake the entire night through.

"The scouts should be back within the hour," he said without turning to her, "We're anxious about that," he pointed out and she followed his finger to see a cloud of sand and dust. It was large and prophesized a second force of at least double this size. Or so the general told her and she had no cause to think he was wrong.

"Why did you call for me?" she asked.

"If they're right then we're about to fight a force of twelve thousand enemies. And we are still six days from reinforcements from the Sprinkleberrians," the general seemed to grow especially weary at this moment, "I need your wave to hold for twelve hours. Half a day. Then, if that cloud isn't here, you and yours will get a twelve hour rest period. I need my groups well rested and that means that one is being ridden until it breaks while the other rests."

Nyota nearly blanched at the time given to her wave but she still didn't know why she had to know what he'd just told her.

"I'm expecting you to help bolster. You're a good fighter and have a level head. The sections on your side isn't as evenly distributed as this second one, which I had more time to organize. I ask that you organize them, put your stronger soldiers with weaker ones and the mediocre spread around to help the stronger and make up for the weaker," he said.

Nyota nodded. He was right to give the task to her. She had been around as long as any of the other officers who were still alive and it was a good bet she knew every face in the army, their general skill level and their level headedness. She could do this better than the general, who knew no one, and he knew this.

With some pride, she nodded.

"De deed will be done," she said and she turned, ready to do exactly what he'd asked.

Chapter Twenty Two:

"And might I know your name?" Chance asked, trying hard to remain civil. He wasn't good with words, frankly he hadn't used them in a long while, but he hadn't seen anyone who didn't try to kill him at first sight in years and he didn't want to ruin his shot. Plus, aside from her unusually blue hair and eyes, she was attractive and Chance hadn't been with a woman for a long time.

"I'm Iustitia," the Handmaiden replied.

"And who is he?" Chance asked but when he looked at Tank his eyes widened.

"What is it?" Iustitia wondered aloud and Chance shook his head.

"It's just... he and I knew each other... a while back," Chance said and Iustitia raised an eye brow.

"You'll have to explain that later," Iustitia said, "You've been here for a while. Do you know how to survive a blade wound from one of the rusted creatures?"

Chance looked at Tank for a few moments, "How long ago was he cut?"

"A few days," came the answer.

"Days?" Chance asked and Iustitia nodded. "Hmm.." the man thought aloud, then he looked at her, "Are you here alone?"

"We have others here aside from myself," Iustitia answered and Chance winced a little. The small human emotion wasn't lost on Iustitia and she moved between Chance and her fallen comrade.

"Wombly, Ashe and-" Chance began but Iustitia cut him off, "Ashe is dead."

"Ah... well, I'm... sorry to hear that."

"You don't seem it," Iustitia said, "You and my companions didn't leave on the best of terms," she stated more than asked and Chance nodded.

"They exiled me," he said, "I was trying to assassinate..." his eyes widened as he looked more closely at her. "You..." his voice was weak for a moment and he took a step backwards before Iustitia shook her head.

"Maria is dead," Iustitia said, "I'm... not her."

"You look like her," Chance said and Iustitia nodded.

"So I'm told. But that is not the topic I wish to converse on right now. Can you help Tank?" she asked and Chance looked at him for a few moments, then considered his own abilities.

"I can, but not yet. I need to rest. If you can guard me in this room and let me rest myself, I can suppress the rust disease. I can't cure him, only a priestess can do that, but I can give him some to keep moving," Chance said.

"I will guard you and him," Iustitia said and Chance nodded. He sat down, across from Tank, and rested his hands on his blades. Years of worry, of restless sleep and breaks, had left him unable to fully relax but he did force his hand saway from the hilts of his blades a few seconds into sitting. He looked at Tank for a few moments, then up at Iustitia, who he knew by a different name.

"I deserved to be exiled," Chance said after a few moments of silence. Iustitia looked at him curiously. "I did terrible things to Maria. I poisoned Tank. I tried to kill both Ashe and Wombly with my swords and nearly succeeded in killing Tank that way as well.."

Iustitia stared at him, her expression completely impassive.

"I caused a man to die in an attack that was meant to end Maria. That was why this whole thing happened.." he laughed aloud, "She caused this. All of it. I mean, of course she might have saved us all with her antics but I'd never have met Tank, never would have fought with Ashe and Wombly, never would have killed that innkeeper, never would have done... so much.

"Never would have ended up here."

"Is that why you're unhappy about it?" Iustitia asked and Chance gave her a quizzical look.

"Are you unhappy because of what you did or the way it ended up? Are you remorseful for the things you did the Maria, to this body, or are you dissatisfied by the way it ended?" She looked to him for a few moments before he looked down in thought.

"I've had years to think. I've wondered if I was wrong or if they were, if there is wrong or not. I've wondered if I'm even the human I used to be. But everytime I think about it, I'm mad at them, at he and the rest," he pointed to Tank, who opened his unseeing eyes for a moment, "and myself. But they're the ones who changed the world. I was fine where I was, I was good even. I was happy and strong and powerful and good looking but they came along and destroyed it all.

"I should be thankful, if they hadn't come then Azeroth would have taken everything over and killed everyone, but I'm not. They murdered me. They tried their best to be merciful but they cast me out . I wandered the desert for a few years, for long enough that I was beginning to come back to the city, to try and find a new identity. Then... then some damned explosion on a mountain opened up a bunch of rifts and suddenly the Kingdom of Rust was right on top of me.

"I had no choice. I was stuck in. And a few minutes later this thing, this dark evil creature, appeared and the entire population inside was murdered by his minions. They all became rust, like the world around them, and now they're serving in his army. Hunting me. I've tried to get out, gotten real close a few times too, but it's impossible. Or if it's possible, I haven't found a way to get it done."

He scowled for a moment as he considered who he was with. He looked back at Tank, who had closed his eyes again, then at Maria.

"Did they ever.. get married?"

"Yes, they even had..." Iustitia hesitated. Her mouth had wanted to say something but he mind cut her off. She tried to think on it but couldn't find out where her body had wanted to go. Her brain, her mind, was blocked in some way. She started to really dig into it when Chance said something that shocked her out of her reverie.

"Had kids?" Chance asked and Iustitia almost laughed aloud.

"No, no. We... they didn't have kids," Iustitia said and Chance cocked his head at her mistake.

"How did she die?" he asked.

"I replaced her in this body. I was trapped here and took refuge in her. She lived just long enough to... she lived close to ten months before her subconscious finally took notice of me. It, or she, wanted to purge her body of me and I wouldn't leave. So I was forced to destroy her. Not her body, for I need her body, but her mind, her soul. It wouldn't stop attacking until I finally destroyed her..

"So then I came into this world. It was as much a shock for her as me. And for Tank and the others it was probably even more. Maria was worried for more than just herself. She had others she was caring for, who needed her. It was a shock to suddenly be a body, to have lungs and physical limbs. I'd never lived this way before.

"These things, these emotions, they shocked me into combat with Tank and the others, who looked at me as an intruder, not as a victim. They didn't realize that I was just as much in shock and just as hurt as they. They were aggressive and I left, trying to get away..." she stopped as she thought deeply for a few moments.

"I left for a year. I remember coming back because the world is... different than one might expect. The mortals who live are stupid and those who aren't have a hard life. They try to help, to save,

the stupid people just as I did but with less power. The stupid people get them into trouble and had I not been as powerful as I was I'd not have survived. Those who have less ability than I would have been destroyed. I'm confident that there were many before me who did perish.."

Chance looked at her for a few moments, "Who are you?"

"Iustitia, Handmaiden of Salvatore, the Goddess of Justice," the handmaiden said.

"Oh, damn. They really know how to live, huh?" Chance said, then he chuckled, "And one by one, they're learning how to die." Iustitia's eyes narrowed at this and she strode forward, grabbing him by the front of his worn armor. She lifted him into the air, grabbing his other arm before it grab a blade, and slammed him into the wall behind him.

"You will heal him or you will die," she stated forcefully, "If he learns to die today, your lesson will be a very similar in time if not in manner."

Chance stared at her for a few moments, looking into her eyes. "The same fire," he mouthed.

"What did you say?" Iustitia asked.

"I'll keep him alive," Chance said quickly and Iustitia glared at him suspiciously.

"You were an assassin?"

"A spellsword assassin."

"Then use your spell to heal him," she said, "Or I'll use my own magic to end you."

"How much further are we supposed to go?" Wombly asked but the pixies had long since disappeared. The others, some of which followed more willingly than others, were close behind her as they moved deeper and deeper into the Kingdom of Rust.

"No idea," Carser said, "But I hope we're getting closer to Tank and Iustitia as we're going down." Wombly nodded and they continued for many minutes before they came up on a door that one of the pixies stood at. Its eyes looked wide and it motioned inside before exploding, opening the door.

"I think it wants us to go there," Benny deadpanned and Carser agreed. "Let's go."

Benny unsheathed both his blades, deciding that if they were going to do something stupid then they might as well do it smart. He stepped forward slowly and looked into the darkness that was within and beyond the door in front of him.

He stepped forward and his eyes widened at the greenness around him. His mind's natural reaction was to think he was surrounded by plant life but upon second look he realized that he was in a room of metal. It was all copper but it was old, so old that its color had changed to the green that he now looked around.

Plants did grow, in the room. Grow seemed the wrong word, actually. It was more like they had been in the room and just hadn't died. They were brown and dying, waterless, covered in choking rust. A small pool rested behind him, next to the door. It didn't have much liquid in it, only a cupfull at most, and a cup sat next to it. The liquid seemed, to Benny's eyes, to be an acid of some sort.

"Come in, there doesn't seem to be anything in here-" he said but in the corner of his eye he noticed something right before it hit him. He jumped back, barely escaping a giant bear hug from an equally giant bear. It roared at him, as if defending something at the end of the room. Benny rolled to his feet and saw a pedestal with a black and red flask on it.

"I see the flask!" he shouted as the others charged in. The bear roared again and they saw rust puffing out of its mouth.

"It's a bear!" Deabla shouted, "Try not to kill it!" Chance stepped forward, responding to his companion in stride.

"If it tries to kill me, I try to kill it-" Chance said but he was cut off by a vicious swipe from the bear. He jumped backwards, barely getting away, but the bear didn't pursue. It roared and growled as Wombly stepped forward and rushed towards her. She jumped back and the bear seemed to relax a little more.

"Do we hurt it by moving forward?" Deabla asked aloud, his empathetic side taking over.

"Let's find out," Benny said, "Carser, step forward then jump back." Carser obeyed and the bear swiped at him. The second the bear left Benny's portion of the room, which was easily forty feet wide and at least twice that distance long, Benny burst forward and sprinted towards the flask.

The bear roared in agony and turned on him, sprinting faster than seemed possible. It caught up to Benny and threw him backwards, not hurting him. Benny nearly got to the flask, close enough to see the writing on the pedestal it stood on but not enough to read it.

"Hey! It's got writing on it. Maybe it'll tell us how to get past this thing!" Benny said.

"If you get that close then you should grab it, right?" Carser said and Deabla shook his head.

"I think something bad, really bad, will happen to you if you do that," he said and the others, who were used to taking his intuitions very seriously, decided against grabbing it.

"I'm going forward," Carser said and he bursted forward, sprinting. The bear turned on him and he managed to duck the first swipe of its giant paw but it stood up and literally hit him with its stomach and launched him backwards. He hit the ground hard and awkwardly and he cried out as the bear very quickly advanced on him.

Wombly threw herself at the bear, which roared and slapped at her. She took the hit for all its power but the sacrifice was enough for Carser to roll out. He sprinted while Benny turned back to get in the way of the bear. Benny wasn't overly good at reading and Carser was so Benny decided Carser was a better prospect for finishing it.

Carser got to the pedestal and was tempted to reach out to the flask but the ground around it was covered in rusted metal and dead plants and that made him think twice. That and Deabla's warning. Instead, Carser looked at the pedestal and started reading.

"A prize to be reached,
only the guardians great power might breach,
in this barrier of great stink,
this barrier which does leach,
by this incorporeal guardian out of sync,
in a rusted world and prisoner out of nature, without link,
with the beauty of the green bleached,
and, with unwanted physical being, teach,
In return, maybe, for a drink."

"What is it?" Wombly asked and Carser cursed.

"Nothing more than a crappy poem!" Carser shouted in frustration, "Nobody knows what it means!"

"Well, what does it say?" Wombly asked and Carser sprinted back from the bear. It seemed to relax as he got further away. They all stepped back to the door and looked forward towards the flask, the bear and the rusted, green world around them.

"What did it say?" Wombly asked again and Carser recited it from memory.

"Clearly the author of this was rushed and doesn't write poetry often," Lidia muttered and the others laughed.

"Maybe the writer just is on a different level than we are," Deabla defended the writer of the poem.

"Or maybe he's just a crappy poet," Lidia replied and Deabla shrugged in deference. He didn't really feel it was necessary to defend the poet. For all he knew it was the enemy they were trying to kill while doing this.

"Anyway, what's it mean by a drink?" Wombly asked and Carser shrugged.

"Do you think blood?" Benny asked. The bear stalked back and forth in front of them the entire time but when Benny suggested that the bear stared at him for a moment, shaking its head.

"Well, its intelligent," Deabla surmised.

"And it gets hurt whenever we step closer to the flask," Wombly said.

"So it must be the guardian that the poem talks about," Deabla said.

"Crappy poem, you mean," Lidia said and Deabla sighed.

"Yes, it must be the guardian that the crappy poem talks about."

"So what, we need to give it a drink?" Carser said and Wombly sighed. She looked around the room, for something that they could feed or give to the bear. She thought for many minutes, then just shook her head.

"I don't know," she said. Benny was equally perplexed. He felt the memory of something in the back of his head, something that was important. But he couldn't remember it. They all considered their dilemma for a few moments.

"Let's just kill it," Benny said finally, harshly.

"What?" Wombly protested, "How... I... how could you... it could have easily killed us... but... it... didn't... and you want to kill it?" she unsheathed her sword, "I'll die before I let you kill this bear. It could have killed us at any time but it didn't. Now you want to kill it?"

Benny shook his head, "We need to get this done. I'm not going to sit here for an entire day trying to figure out how to deal with this while Tank and the others are trying to-" he paused when he heard the click of a crossbow being pulled tight and aimed at him.

"You're not going to use my friends as an excuse to murder this creature," Wombly said.

"Guys, let's be calm," Carser said, "We're not going to gain anything in a fight. Not that gaining things is the point-"

"Not now, Carser," Lidia cut him off.

"She's right, this is no time for lengthy speeches," Wombly said and Carser nodded.

"Uh guys," Deabla said and they all looked at him for in his voice they heard the tell tale tone that marked he had something important to say. "Didn't it say something about a drink," he said, pointing to the pool.

"... Yeah," Benny said and Wombly smiled at him.

"Thank you very much," she said to Deabla, who nodded. He walked forward and grabbed the small goblet. He grabbed the goblet and turned it to fill with water. When the goblet was parallel with the ground the water flowed into it despite gravity.

Deabla turned, the now full goblet in his hand, and walked over to the bear, which winced and growled with increasing pain but didn't make any aggressive moves.

"Here you go," Deabla said, extending his hand with the goblet lifted for the bear to inspect. It looked up at him, its dark black eyes meeting his brown-black eyes and for a moment the bear seemed intelligent, more so than humans.

"Thank you," the eyes seemed to say and Deabla nodded. The bear took the goblet with its own paws and lifted it up to its lips. The bear drank and with every gulp it became less physical and seemed to become more and more incorporeal. Upon the final drink, the goblet fell to the ground at Deabla's feet. The bear turned around, looking more like a ghost from old stories than a living, physical being.

It turned and floated towards the flask. It reached in and pulled it out. It turned to Deabla, who had followed it, and handed the flask to him.

"Well," he said while turning to the others, "What now?"

"Break it," Benny said, "That's what the thing said, isn't it?"

"Yeah, break it I guess," Carser said.

"Alright," Deabla said. He looked at the flask and lifted it. Then he launched it to the ground, shattering the flask into a thousand pieces.

Chance's eyes opened and he looked at Tank's unconscious body. The magic took a few seconds to take effect but when it did the effects were obvious. His skin stopped burning and a wetness returned to his lips. His breathing became less shallow and his eyelids began to open slightly.

He looked upwards and Iustitia pushed Chance out of the way. He looked at her for a moment before nodded, smiling, "Hello there," he said. "I missed you."

"You stupid mammal," Iustitia said, her voice filled with obvious relief.

Tank's eyes closed and he slid back into unconsciousness.

Iustitia sat backwards, moving away from him for a moment, and Chance narrowed his eyes. "Maybe all of Maria didn't die," Chance said aloud and Iustitia turned on him, her eyes filled with rage. Chance lifted his hands defensively. They sat in silence for many minutes, the tension almost palpable. "Forget I said anything."

"Keep your thoughts to yourself," Iustitia said.

"Yes, do us all a favor," a voice said from beside and Iustitia looked sideways to see Tank climbing to his feet. His arm was still wounded but he was recovering quick.

"You're up awful quick," Chance stated and Tank glared at him.

"Thought we said something about you sharing your thoughts." Tank turned and looked at Iustitia. "How long was I out?"

"A few hours," Iustitia said, "We've stayed here."

"A few hours the others might have been running and fighting for their lives," Tank said, "We should get moving." He turned to Chance, "Thanks for your help but this changes nothing. You're not with me and mine. Goodbye."

"I'm on my own?" Chance asked, "Again? I just saved your life."

"He does have a point," Iustitia said, "It'd be wrong for us-"

"Wrong?" Tank growled, "Wrong? He crossed the line of right and wrong long ago. We're not going to keep this maniac, this murderer, around. He's an assassin. A killer. He's no better than the rusty figures we've been dealing with the last few days. In fact, he's worse. He's got a mind to think with and he's still doing what he does."

"I'm not going to fight my way through this damned castle with him at my back. I barely trust you but you're here with me. He's not with me. He'll never be with me. We're already fighting a battle with enemies in front of us. I don't need them behind me."

Iustitia and Chance both stared at Tank for a moment.

"He saved you," Iustitia said, "I can't leave him behind now." Chance stepped forward, staring down at Tank. He was nearly six feet tall and thus was at least five inches taller than Tank but even the height advantage Chance was intimidated.

"I can help you kill this thing," Chance said, "I'll help you kill him. Not because I'm good, not because I like you. I want to kill that son of a bitch and I'll help you only because you got as good of a shot at it as anyone I've seen. Afterwards I'll leave, disappear. If you let me go West, there are supposed to be people beyond there. My skills are-" Tank punched Chance in the face, sending him backwards and nearly knocking the man out.

Chance looked up at Tank, wondering if he was about to die.

"If you're coming, then keep quiet," Tank growled, "Or I will kill you."

Chapter Twenty Three:

Esmeralda watched as Alron and the others sat in their chairs. She looked over to the far side of her inn, where Denerick sat, and saw he was regarding them as well. He seemed to sense her attention for he turned and looked at her then gave an almost imperceptible nod. She breathed in, still not fully comfortable with confronting her brother, then let the breath out slowly.

She stepped out from behind her bar and walked over somewhat timidly.

"Alron," she said and he looked up to her from pieces of paper, all of it made unusually well and kept in unusually good condition, that he'd been focusing on for the last half an hour.

"Esmeralda," he said with a forced smile. She looked into his eyes and what was behind them only confirmed her feelings and vindicated her.

"I think you need to take a break," she said, "You were involved in your first blood shed... and I know well enough that fighting and.. killing.. can have lasting effects on someone. You need time, a bit at least, to recover and to think."

Alron's forced smile disappeared.

"I'm fine, sister," he said, "I'm fine."

"I don't believe you," Esmeralda argued and the others at the table all looked at Alron as well. Aside from Aspilla he was the only one who had actually killed another human being and they had all noticed changes in him since. He was a sensitive young man, barely more than a kid in the eyes of both Denerick and Esmeralda.

Alron looked at her for a few moments, "Tank and Ashe didn't flinch, didn't get phased. I'm fine as well." Alron's voice cracked slightly as he spoke, the internal guilt of having ended another human's life still with him. The fact that the man had been about to kill him didn't matter. Alron could have wounded him, could have done something that wasn't fatal.

"They didn't fight like we did," Ajax said softly, "They fought zombies and demons. They weren't forced to kill other men."

"They were," Esmeralda said, "And they had sleepless nights. They still do. Once a week Tank used to come into this room and spend the night in silent reverie. Tank and Wombly were honest in that they were internally wounded. You don't remember it because you weren't aware of it but they weren't just okay with killing.

"They had to recover, had to think, had to convince themselves that it wasn't the most evil thing in the world. I know because all of them, even Ashe, came to talk to me at night when their nightmares awoke them. Ashe didn't tell me but I could see it in her eyes. Tank rarely told me. Wombly did and she knew that the others were too.

"Ending another person's life... it's... it's hard. Nobody can just do it and get over it," Esmeralda looked at him for a few moments, then smiled, "But they can recover. I recovered."

Alron looked at her for a few moments and almost gave in, almost confronted what was inside him, but shook his head. He grabbed his blade and sheathed it, "No. I'm fine," he said, "There's nothing that I need to recover from because I was right and they were wrong."

His voice sounded strong and truthful but she saw through his vocal surety. He was hiding it, burying it, and she didn't like it. He stood up and started to leave. Esmeralda rushed to get in front of him and she stopped him by putting her hand on his chest.

"Alron," she said sharply, "You need to confront this. You can't just bury these emotions and hope to feel okay about it later. You need to talk-"

"Talking does nothing!" Alron shouted in her face, "Nothing! Talking is why Slim was tortured for a whole week before we found him! Talking is the reason that I had to kill him and talking sure as hell won't change any-damned-thing!" He glared at her for a moment after speaking, pausing as if to wait for some kind of response, but Esmeralda was too stunned to say anything. Denerick's hand had fallen to his scimitar and Ajax had taken a step forward but it seemed Alron was in control of himself.

"I'm leaving," he said quieter but still not softly. "Don't follow me." He stalked forward, leaving the shocked and hurt young woman behind. Large green and concerned eyes looked back at Danielle, at his other companions as well, as if looking for an answer but they had no answer to supply.

"Give him time," Denerick's deep voice sounded and they all looked at him and silently agreed, hoping, that he was right. He rarely spoke so when he did they took it very seriously. "Young men need to handle some things on their own."

The second part they all knew to be true but were unsure as to whether a first kill was an event to be handled only internally. But they didn't seem to have a choice as Alron was already taking it upon himself to handle it alone. Esmeralda looked back at the door which still swung from the push given to it by her angry not-so-little brother.

Alron's blade smashed into a training dummy and cut straight through it, splitting the leather on the outside and breaking the wood on the inside easily. He turned and sprinted forward to another of the dummies and took his sword in both hands, slashing downwards with all the strength he could muster on his second hour of brutal training.

His arms and legs burned as he'd been fighting, destroying the dummies, sparring with others and running, climbing and crawling through courses underneath Sprinkleberry in the main location of

the Nose Breakers. His chest also burned from the length of time at which he'd been breathing in and out quickly. He paused for a moment, looking at his blade and seeing red that wasn't there.

The sight of the imagined blood was enough to send him into a frenzy again and he quickly sheathed his blade as he rushed forward towards an obstacle course designed to train him how to run through the forest at high speeds without tripping or getting caught up.

Through magic he didn't understand plants were growing on the surface of the underground training course even with no sun light readily available. These plants were the hardest to ignore while sprinting, tall and thin but firm vines, thorns and roots sticking into the air. They littered the ground as well as small ditches and rocks that had been put in positions that were particularly hard to dodge or go over when sprinting in the woods.

He sprinted through the course, which was a hundred and fifty meters long, only stumbling on one portion of it. He was strong. He was fast. He was skilled. Why did he feel so.. beaten? He looked at his hands once he reached the finish and saw blood on his fingers, dripping off of them.

"Damn, damn damn!" he growled and he looked at the stairs to go another level down. He rushed down the steps to the giant roaring 'river' that was really an artificial river that was being spun by magical means. He jumped in, despite his armor, and felt his arms and legs burning as he swam for the surface.

Rarely did anyone practice swimming in armor but it was a main part of Nose Breaker training because, as rivers were growing in both quantity and size across the Kingdom, they were sure that the warriors would one day need to hurry across a river without a bridge or horses to get across. So those that were trained to be Nose Breakers swam with full armor, often nearly a hundred pounds of equipment, to get across, even if slowly.

Alron's entire body, lungs included, burned when he got to the surface of the water and he gasped for air. He continued to swim as hard as he could, putting his head under the water for nearly an entire minute of swimming to the other side of the river, which was about fifty meters wide. He came up gasping for air again and struggled to climb out of the river but when he did he felt the agony of two hours intensely hard work.

He looked down at the ground, which was made of dark stone that had been flattened, and all but threw himself to the ground. He was still recovering when he suddenly felt like the water on him wasn't water. It was suddenly warm and the water in his mouth suddenly had a metallic taste to it. He raised his hand and looked at it, his eyes widening as he saw crimson liquid rolling down his fingers.

He looked around, his eyes wide, as the world around him became bloody. He curled up in a ball as he heard a man crying out in agony in his mind's ears. Finally terror became rage and he jumped to his feet, unsheathing his blade. He looked around and saw more targets, who suddenly looked more like Black Hoods casting spells at him.

He rushed forward, ignoring the protests of his aching body, and threw himself into them with abandon. It was many minutes before all dozen of the dummies were laying in pieces on the ground. In the middle of them stood Alron, exhausted. He looked to the side, to the stairs to go down further into the complex and knew in his heart what he had to do.

Three levels down he would find the entrance into the deepest level, the one with access to the portal. The portal was a link to a realm of blood thirsty beasts that could be used to summon monsters in order to train Nose Breakers. The portal had been established by a wizard called Navok, who had warned that should Azeroth rise again or more of his demon kin come to their world the men would be well served to know how to fight the demonic warriors.

The portal had only two restrictions to it. It had to be activated by a switch that could only be opened by a Nose Breakers, all of which were known to be free of any fondness for Azeroth, and only a single demon could come out per person in the room. The number of demons could be changed by the main switch outside, which was produced and fueled by magic from the sun above, but it had a setting that looked at the number of trainees.

Agony in him, Alron marched forward, a bloodlust in him that he'd never imagined before. He needed to fight a demon, needed to kill one. But to do that, he needed to bring one into his world. It had

to be a strong one, too, or else it'd be too easy be too easy. He wanted a challenge. He thirsted for a struggle. He needed to be in danger.

He took off, sprinting for the portal.

Slim followed close behind, his normally brown eyes jet black. He watched him the entire time. It wasn't Slim, however, who was in the mind. Slim was still asleep in his bunk, or so he believed. The body moved with another in control. And through it a spell was being cast.

The body grinned.

Ajax and Aspilla were sitting in their normal positions, cards in front of them as they played some card game or another, when Danielle burst downstairs.

"Slim's not in his room!" she said and the others looked at her, eye brows raised in confusion.

"So?"

"He didn't leave this way. His windows opened and he's fully armed," Danielle said, "I think he's going to confront Alron."

"Ha!" Ajax snorted, "I doubt that. Slim's a loyal fellow but he's not overly brave when he doesn't have to be. I wouldn't even try to confront Alron right now and I'm not even afraid of him."

"Yes you are," Aspilla snickered but Danielle was disgusted with their lack of worry.

"You two need to shut your mouths and follow me," she said, "The last thing we need is for Alron to kill Slim."

"Hey, Slim might get lucky," Aspilla joked and Ajax looked at her, as if completely serious.

"Good one!" Ajax grinned and Danielle looked at them for a few moments, unsure of how they could be so uncaring. She looked at Esmeralda, who sat washing dishes completely contentedly. Then she looked to Denerick, who was asleep in the corner, snoring happily.

"What the hell happened in here?" Danielle wondered for a moment. She looked at the other patrons and saw that they were all just sitting with small talk and inconsequential conversations. Even those who were almost certainly using this bar to smuggle goods or to consider a business deal were sitting completely carefree.

She looked at them again then shook her head, "I don't have time for this." She turned and ran out the door, leaving the area that a spell of contentedness had been released in just an hour before. She was unaware of it but because she'd been up in the room where baths could be taken she'd been spared from said spell.

She got to the top level of the Nose Breakers and realized that whatever had hit her companions had also hit the main guards as well. She rushed past them, not bothering to try and include them in the chase, into the compound. She quickly ran to the stairs and rushed down the first level. It consisted of general work out gear. Throughout it men and women were working out, as was usual.

"Have you seen Alron? Is he here?" she asked one of the men and he shook his head.

"Nah girl," the man said, "He's not. But I can be for you," the man winked and Danielle rolled her eyes.

"Shut your mouth," she said, "Have you seen him?"

"Yeah," the man said, sounding a little hurt at the tactless rejection, "He's downstairs."

She was already running when she said thanks to him. He looked at her, slightly concerned, then looked at the rest of the women and men.

Danielle searched the next few floors, seeing the remains of practice dummies and each time the number of people in the rooms got smaller and smaller. All that she asked answered that he'd come in, worked hard for a long time, then gone deeper in. The last level she saw anyone on was the river level and the only person in there, a woman who was training to go to Limton to the South and join in their growing Navy.

"Have you seen Alron?" she asked and the woman cocked her head to the side. "He supposedly came down here and trained."

"Well, I've only seen two people come down here-" the woman started to answer but Danielle cut her off.

"Was one really skinny and kinda tall and the other about this tall? Broad shoulders?" she asked, raising her hand to a few inches above her head.

"Yeah, yeah," the woman said, "They went down to the next level. I dunno. The thicker one just jumped into the river, fully armed and armored. Crazy bastard," she said with a grin, "He's kinda cute though, now that I think about it."

A stab of jealousy rose up in Danielle but she didn't have time to address that particular change in her emotions.

"Thanks," she said as she turned and sprinted downwards. The woman looked at her for a few moments then decided that maybe she should see what's going.

Alron was inside the room, his sword unsheathed and held in both hands, staring at the portal as a beast came through. He'd called for a minor demon, a small boozier, and he was waiting for his 'warm-up' challenge. But as soon as he'd stepped in and closed the door, Slim had stepped in.

The thin figure, blade in hand, quickly manipulated the device in front of him with the skill only a powerful wizard might have and soon the beast coming through wasn't a small boozier. It was a beast far, far larger and far more powerful.

Then Slim took his sword, slashed himself across the chest, through his armor, and knocked himself out with a punch. The wizard inside of his mind released his control and Slim groaned, slowly beginning to regain consciousness while, inside the warded room, Alron stared at the creature coming through.

It was big. Bigger than Alron had expected. Bigger than he'd even thought was possible for a boozier. Because of the way the portal worked, Alron could only see the general size of the beast as it came through but, as it got further and further through the portal, the outline quickly gained clarity. It wasn't a boozier.

Danielle rushed into the room and heard groans from the side. She looked to see Slim laying on the ground and started to rush towards him when she saw through the glass, a new invention made up by the wizards of Sprinkleberry, that separated her from the demon fighting room. She gasped as she saw the beast and Alron standing in front of it.

Standing forty feet tall and nearly twice as wide, the demon forced the portal to expand as it finally got all the way through. It looked down at Alron, who stared up at it in shock. He stepped back, his blood lust lost with the knocking out of Slim, and looked the beast up and down.

The demon had the face of a giant lizard, with a body that resembled a spider's body and a man's body mixed together. Eight limbs, two legs and six arms, reached off and each of the arms ended in a spike or club or some other natural weapon. Only its middle arms ended with hands. The ones on top were spikes, two different types, but both designed to stab, and the ones on the bottom were a club and an axe.

The creature's mouth opened and it began to breath fire at Alron, who sprinted it backwards. The fire caught Alron as he got outside the door. He looked around, stunned at where he was at, and suddenly he heard his name being called. He looked to the side to Danielle standing in the room, her eyes wide as she looked from him to Slim's groaning body.

"Alron?" she asked and he shook his head, unable to think of a word that might explain anything of his confusion or answer hers.

"What is that?" a voice asked from the side and it was the woman that Danielle had been talking to. Her eyes widened quickly as the demon turned on the wall, studying the inscriptions and runes that

had been written and drawn on the wall. It looked for a few moments before its deep, thundering laughter began to shake the cavern.

"Never haveth thee seen anything of mine kind," the demon spoke in the Kingdom's language, "Never haveth thou kind defended thyself from mine kind." He suddenly punched forward with his bottom arms, his club arms, and the entire structure shook. The wall was breaking when Alron realized what they needed to do.

"Run!" he shouted and he sprinted to Slim, picking him up mid-stride, and continued. The woman who'd been training stood still and Danielle grabbed her, dragging her along as they sprinted away. An explosion behind them filled their ears with booming laughter and their stomachs with dread.

The man that Danielle had spoken to on the first floor came around the corner to the stairs up to the next level, a dozen and a half other Nose Breakers behind him, and he began to ask, "We're here to help, what exactly happened?" when he was cut off at 'what' by a flying stone. It hit him in the stomach with enough force to literally cut him in half.

He was dead before he hit the ground.

"What the hell did you do!?" Danielle screamed at Alron but he had no answers, barely remembering anything in the last day.

The demon's voice boomed behind them, "I cometh leetle mice."

Chapter Twenty Four:

It'd been four hours and Nyota saw that her configuration of soldiers was still holding well. She'd quickly realized that the Sprinkleberrian scouts and trackers were better served as the reinforcements than as static guards. They were more dynamic and had the ability to run from one area to the next with more ease than any of the Boccian warriors.

The rusted warriors on the other side seemed to be reduced to a fourth of their force when suddenly they stopped marching forward. The creatures that were holding the ladders all backed up, their larger shielding counterparts still with them. It was a relief to the soldiers that the enemy was finally withdrawing but they all sensed a plot in the making.

The cloud, which was still hours off, had been confirmed to be a force of eight thousand more rusted soldiers. Where they'd come from was a mystery still but the Sprinkleberrian scouts that had left, under the lead of the Boccian officer Delik, had confirmed that they were moving with the speed that was expected of a force their size.

"Don't worry dough," Delik had said when he joined Nyota's group after the withdraw of the enemy, "Dey're not boozers. Just de rusties."

"Later," Silren panted, "You'll have to explain how dat's a comfort."

"Dey won't be flying above and shitting on us?" Tillo offered and Silren's face split a crooked grin. It had been half a relief and half a disappointment. Boozers at this time would have been a curse more than a boon but another eight thousand of these rusted figures wasn't an idea well considered by the rest.

"Dat is something of a comfort," said Delik, "I see you put de Sprinkleberrian scouts to good use. Dey're not much for fighting on their own but in groups and on their own I doubt we could defeat a company of dem in the woods. In de forest, definitely, but even in wall fighting they've the edge in training."

Silren snorted, "Dey'd fall before my blade."

"If you could find dem," Delik said, "Deir trackers are just as skilled as any ranger we have. Deir scouts are about as trained and nearly as good with their slim blades as the trackers are wid deir long bows."

"Long bows?" Nyota mused aloud, "I thought they had dose fancy crossbows?"

"Good for chaotic, short range combat and reloading quick and easy but not for long ranges. De crossbow might pack as much a punch but at a distance it loses to a long bow everytime. Just can't

fly as true wild wind and the like. Plus long bows make less noise and the trackers are renowned for their stealth." Delik spoke with a certainty so that, despite his youth, they all believed him.

"Not like those new Walstonian Hunters," Tillo said, "They can walk up and pat a deer on its rump before it even hears them or so the story goes." The new Walstonian Hunters that Tillo referred to were offworlders that had been brought in by Dean and the like towards the beginning. They'd lived in a world that offered little more than terror and fear but had gained an uncanny ability to travel with stealth and to hunt creatures of darkness that couldn't be felled by normal means in return. These new Hunters, who spoke the Kingdom's language fairly roughly but had learned to communicate, were a boon to the Walstonians that made the other cities envious.

Each city had gained its fair share of outworlders, some more useful in combat while others were more useful for the working force. East Bocc had received her fair share of workers from another world. The workers had been instrumental in the conversion of desert land to grasslands and had skillfully expanded the Heat Flower business. The plant, which grew slow but had numerous medicinal uses rarely found in a numerous plants much less found all in one, was the staple of East Bocc's trading. The workers were useful in that they'd helped to supply the coin for more weapons and armor, which were being sold by certain Keellian profiteers who'd arrived in the town a few days before, but they didn't help in the fighting much more than to supply people with better weapons.

"Well, as much as we might think about these guys, they're not here," Silren said and the others all agreed. They turned to look at the enemy force. It stood in perfect formations. They all felt weary in their bones but the change of pace had forced their minds to alert on all levels again and though they could suddenly feel the pains in their body they could also think on a more advanced level.

"What do you think they're doing?" Nyota wondered aloud and Nelik shrugged.

"Who can know?" the scout said more than asked and the others agreed. Their enemy was a strange one. Suddenly a wind filled the air around them and it began to blow towards the rusted army. Some of the soldiers, those too tired or wounded to hold their weight well, were forced over the wall as the winds grew stronger and stronger. Then, suddenly, the rust at their feet and in the field in front of them suddenly began to fly towards their enemy.

The rust, all in a giant cloud above their heads, began to swirl around faster and faster. It encompassed the entire rusted army and the rust spun faster and faster. A tornado of red metal filled the air around them with a scream of metal scratching metal. The sound got so loud that Nyota and the others lifted their hands to cover their ears.

The rust swirled for nearly a minute, growing louder and louder and faster and faster and then suddenly, with a loud boom that knocked more than a few soldiers off their feet, the sound and wind all stopped.

And, to the horror of the defenders, where there'd been a tornado of rust there was now a force of four thousand rusted figures all standing in perfect formation. An order that was given in the form of neither sound nor physical change caused the rusted figures to march forward, once again rushing at the wall with their soundless charge.

"You've got to be kidding me," Tillo gasped to the side of Nyota. She felt her heart drop at the sight of the first wave of three thousand warriors they'd already defeated charging them. This time the battering rams remained behind. It seemed that their experiment, whatever it had been, had failed. The figures charged forward once again, the large ones carrying the scaling ladders, the largest carrying the shields.

Boccian arrows flew out and felled nearly a hundred of the enemy as they charged forward. Those in the rusted ranks that were hit made no noise other than that which was created when they hit the ground. The army charged through the volley once again undaunted by the death.

"Hurry up Sprinkleberry," Delik said to the side and Nyota couldn't agree more.

"Slow down our rusted warriors," Silren said quietly. Delik was called to the general's tower and he left them all with signs to the gods for their luck and survival. He rushed to the tower to see the general swearing up and down. He'd initially seemed a timid man to the officers of Bocc but now, after the war had started, that had changed.

"I want you, as many trackers and scouts as you need and my cavalry to go out there and see if you can distract that second force for a few days. We can't afford another eight thousand of these damn rusties coming at us at the same time as the waves of five hundred they're already sending," the suddenly older general said, "We need you to succeed. I'll call on whoever I can but I doubt it'll matter. By the time the King gets this message the force he sent here will be here already and the city will be in the control of whoever wins."

Delik turned to leave and the general stopped him with a word. After he had the officer's attention, General Stapem emphasized, "Take as many as you need. I don't care if it's half the army. We can defend the walls from four thousand a hell of a lot easier than from twelve thousand." Delik nodded to his commander and left.

It was half an hour later that Delik left with a hundred and thirty six men and women. All of the general's cavalry, thirty six men in total, had come after the original hundred trackers and scouts had been selected.

"We're better suited to fighting in the open than we are on the walls," the leader of the cavalry said. Delik was grateful for the Hornet-Lancers involvement. The Hornet-Lancers were reknown to be great warriors, more so on horseback than on the ground but they could hold their own when grounded as well.

"We're going to give dem a merry chase," Delik said as he left.

Delik quickly realized that the Sprinkleberrian scout leader had been given his position for a reason. A likeable man named Telrun the scout leader was also well respected for his prowess with his blades and his ability to sneak around in even the most obvious of places. It was a comfort that a few miles to the south the forest had grown unusually fast and the desert had been replaced by a forest.

The scouts, and especially trackers, from Sprinkleberry were more attuned to fighting in the woods and it allowed them to use their new abilities to their fullest potential. The scouts and trackers were able fighters anywhere but in the forest it was easier to ambush a company of enemies than in the open desert.

Quickly they found the enemy, only a few hours out from Bocc, and the trackers moved to the south, leaving their faster but less forest-able counterparts behind. The scouts could run further and just as fast, maybe even faster, than the trackers but their ability with weapons was less formidable and their understanding of environment was less thorough.

"We'll bring 'em to you," Telrun said to Garret, the Sprinkleberrian leader of the trackers. Delik, a younger officer, chose to follow the lead of the older men from Sprinkleberry and thus hadn't made an objection when the older men took control.

Fifty of the hundred men marched off in the opposite direction. The plan was simple. The scouts would rush forward, release their crossbows into the enemy, then, when the rusted warriors pursued the scouts, the Hornet-Lancers would rush them, killing as many as possible and giving the scouts time to get more distance between them. The leader of the thirty six Hornet-Lancers, a tough looking, dark skinned woman named Ryder, had come up with a few tactics to bring along more of the rusted force.

It was there goal to distract the army. They only had a hundred and thirty six warriors to do it with but if they could create enough of a scene then they could get maybe half the force to pursue them to the woods to the south.

The scouts, led by Telrun and Delik, rushed to the front of the rusted army and began to shoot bolts into the formations. Close to a dozen rusted warriors fell before they even realized from what direction the attack was coming from and the scouts managed to take down nearly three score of the mind-less enemies before they were being pursued with any real vigor.

Close to a hundred of the rusted figures were being led initially but with a few bolt shots from the scouts the force was destroyed. The mindless rusted figures continued their march despite the losses and the scouts knew they needed to do more.

"Maybe if we kill enough dey'll grow tired of us and follow," Delik suggested and Telrun nodded.

"Can't say we have much of a choice anyway," the older scout said and Delik nodded.

The scouts, Boccian and Sprinkleberrian alike, hit the rusted figures close to a dozen times and took down almost a hundred each time before finally a solid portion of the army turned off. Nearly one thousand and five hundred of the figures marched off to follow. The rest of the army paused for a few moments before they started to march again.

"We have to stop them," Telrun said, "Three thousand is not a large enough portion of their army to be stopped." Ryder looked at him for a few moments before nodding in agreement. She barked orders to her Hornet-Lancers and soon the group of thirty six was split into two. She told one half to remain with the scouts already leading the enemy. The other would go with her and double up, bringing a scout with them as they rode around.

"We'll do the same thing to them on the other side. They can run for a long time but we've got more speed than they do," Ryder said, "We'll get away. Maybe even run them across a patrol from our dear friends at North Bocc."

The northern city had no real army to offer and were having troubles of their own with goblin and orc raids so no aid could be offered by them. Western Bocc had dedicated its army to the cause but they were small as well. Southern Bocc hadn't responded to the call for aid at all. Some sort of small political trouble was rumored to be happening there and the Eastern Boccians couldn't afford enough men to go down there and do anything about it so they'd left the troubled cities around them alone for the most part.

Ryder, seventeen other Hornet-Lancers and eighteen scouts rode to the north side of the army. She and the scouts played the trick as well, dragging another thousand and a half from the force.

"Five thousands a pretty good number," she said to herself.

Delik and Telrun brought the thousand and five hundred rusted warriors along with them for the three hour run that it took to get to the forest to the south. They were about halfway there when the rust warriors caught one of the Hornet-Lancers as she weaved in and out of their ranks, her bow twanging with each shot. Two scouts had fallen in the initial strike and he was left with seventeen elite Hornet-Lancers and thirty scouts to work with. The fifty trackers to the south would be hard pressed to halt the flow of the rusted warriors but that didn't matter.

Delik, of course, wanted he and his companions to survive but their mission was to stop as many from the second army from moving forward as possible. He couldn't do much more than he had already and even should they die in this fight then they'd have accomplished their mission more than he or any of the others had expected.

The rusted figures followed them and another four scouts fell, one tripping and being trampled by the rusted figures, two being brought down by random arrows and another passing out from the heat and dehydration. By the time they saw the forest ahead the number of Hornet-Lancers was fifteen and the number of scouts was twenty seven.

Only a hundred and fifteen or so of the rusted figures had been killed so the enemy still numbered at one thousand and four hundred or so soldiers when they got to the woods.

"Everyone scramble! Kill them as you may but survival and distraction is your mission! By nightfall we will lead them to the ocean! If you can, lose them in the mountains then return to the main defense point, East Bocc, as you can!" Telrun shouted. They were about three hundred and thirty meters from the woods a volley of arrows flew into the sky and landed among the rusted figures behind them. The yard long shafts dug deep into rusted torsos, legs and heads and nearly every arrow hit its mark on its own enemy.

A second volley followed a few seconds later. By the time the scouts were in the forest the number of rusted warriors had been reduced to nine hundred or so. But that was still staggering odds when pitted against about a hundred warriors. The Hornet-Lancers split off, riding in formation for the East, and Delik wondered if they'd abandoned them.

But quickly he realized that they were right to abandon the main fight in the middle. Chaos erupted in the forest as figures sprinted through the woods to be taken down by an arrow from either

side and melee combat started in random spurts of two or three scouts against at least thrice but sometimes four or five times their number.

The fights lasted very shortly and the trackers and scouts split apart, scattering into the woods around them. The theme of the whole battle was chaos as orders were forgotten in the moment of fear and torment.

Nelik found himself surrounded by a dozen of the rusted warriors when suddenly three arrows flew in and all flew true, opening him a way out. He saw the trackers who had helped him and nodded his thanks as he sprinted away. He tried to follow them but they quickly disappeared into the woods. He sprinted for many minutes, trying to find a place to find some rest, but the woods seemed to be birthing the rusted warriors and everywhere he ran he found a group of enemies to fight or flee from.

He saw one scout turn and fight only to take a rusted arrow in the knee. He gasped and before Nelik could do anything he was killed by a trio of rusted warriors. They turned towards him and he saw arrows flying at him already. Too quick for the arrows to hit him, he rushed away. He found groups of scouts dead on the ground, hacked to pieces or arrows embedded in them, many times.

The scout didn't know what direction he was going in half the time and more than once he realized he was heading towards the main strength of the rusted army. When he was closest to their force he realized that the Hornet-Lancers hadn't abandoned them but had, in fact, lessened the press on the on-foot warriors. The Hornet-Lancers were rushing in and out of the enemies' flanks, their arrows flying in and killing half a dozen enemies at a time, for another few of the Hornet-Lancers had been killed in the initial chaos.

He found himself saved by the chaos offered by the Hornet-Lancers more than once and he jumped up, grabbing a branch and scrambling into a tree as the rusted figures were suddenly being put down by a pair of Hornet-Lancer horse's hooves. He found no rest there for the rusted figures turned their arrows towards him.

The Boccian scout jumped, trying to get to another tree, but mistimed the jump and landed on the ground roughly. He felt, and heard, his ankle crack and cried out in pain. He looked around as close to three dozen of the rusted figures rushed towards him, moving quickly despite the few hours fighting in the forest. Nelik knew he had to outrun them but couldn't imagine doing it for any length of time.

He hobbled away, somehow managing a forced jog on his damaged ankle, and barely kept ahead of the rusted figures, which seemed to top out at the same speed. He realized, with horror, that his enemy didn't tire as he did and, unless he figured something out, he'd been overwhelmed by wear and tear and slowed.

Looking back rarely, the scout always found them exactly where he didn't want them, right behind him. He thanked the gods they didn't have arrows, for they could have put him down, but hated the realization that their lack of arrows only delayed what seemed inevitable at that moment.

Sweat dripped down his face like a flowing river and his body shook with exhaustion and still they followed. His ankle seemed more and more broken everytime he stepped down on it. It was three hours of running when he put his foot down on a pile of leaves that turned out to be covering a small hole. The weight put on his ankle had already been almost too much but with the extra weight added by his weight shift to accommodate for his temporary loss of balance was too much and he collapsed on the ground.

Realizing that his death was at hand, Nelik unsheathed his blade. He turned on the enemies, hoping he could at least take one with him, when suddenly a volley of arrows flew over his head. The arrows each found their mark and half a dozen of the rusted warriors. A second volley followed seconds behind and the number of rusted figures was cut down by a third.

Only ten seconds later was the number an even dozen and half that time later the number was zero. Nelik lay on the ground for a few moments, panting for breath and wiping stinging sweat from his eyes.

Half a dozen Sprinkleberrian trackers rushed out of the woods, collecting the unbroken arrows. "Quickly," a man with a thick beard and dark eyes said, "Can you walk?"

Delik didn't answer as two of the men lifted him up to his feet. They let him go slowly and he almost collapsed again immediately.

"I... I don't dink so," Delik said and the bearded man looked at him for a few moments.

"They'll be here in moments, sire, they always know when their kin have been slayed," said one of the other trackers.

"We cannot carry him far," said another one, reading their leader's mind.

"You can leave me," Delik said softly, "I'm not for running anymore and I'll give dem a fight word many songs."

The man looked at him and grinned, "I'm sure you would, but we're not going to leave you behind. How many do you estimate are in this area?"

"One, two hundred?" one of the other trackers said hesitantly.

"Let's go ahead and kill them a bit," the man said. His followers groaned but didn't seem surprised in the least.

"Who are you?" Delik asked and the man grinned.

"Call me Garret," he said, "Now let's go ahead and give them something to think about."

Chapter Twenty Five:

Tank, Iustitia and Chance walked along silently. Or, more accurately, Tank and Chance walked silently and Iustitia did her best. Her abilities before had never given her a need to travel with even the smallest amount of stealth and even if she had needed to move silently he'd not had the time to perfect her silence as the other two.

They'd been moving for a few hours at a healthy pace, moving from room to room almost as if looking for a fight. While they did move with stealth they didn't have any major need not to fight. Thus as they moved into each room they moved in bluntly and quickly, weapons ready but not making sure that the room was clear before barging in.

All three warriors had conflicting emotions at the time and a fight, they felt, might distract them from their internal troubles. They knew it certainly wasn't the most efficient method of calming down but it certainly was the only one that they had the patience to go through with. They really didn't need to do much to accomplish it, either. All they had to do was walk into the next room without checking it.

So, in their reckless march forward, they actually moved faster than before. Soon they were deep in the Kingdom of Rust, in places that Chance had only gone to recently as his confidence rose, but they still took little care.

They'd thought they'd made a mistake when they stepped into a new room, a small, nondescript room with nothing remarkable about it whatsoever and the ground suddenly started to shake. They had no idea what Wombly and the others were doing but, when they weren't attacked almost immediately, it was their assumption that Wombly and the others had done something to something.

That or the Kingdom of Rust was changing, for Chance had never felt anything like that and had remarked as much.

"Then let's hurry," Tank replied, "They might be fighting what we came for."

The other two agreed and they started to rush forward, no longer as silent as before. But if Tank and Chance were a trickle of water disturbing a quiet night, Iustitia was a roaring rapid of flood water that was going over a waterfall a few meters forward.

After only a few minutes of their faster pace they got the fight they'd all be itching for internally. The fight lasted only a few seconds, for the rusted figures had spawned all at different times and all three of the warriors, none of which had any patience for or shock at the start of the fight, made quick work of the figures as they appeared.

Close to three dozen of the figures lay on the ground, their rusted remains slowly moving together, when Tank and the other two left the room at their previous fast pace. By the time the rusted figures were rebuilt the three warriors were too far gone for them to sense their presence and the mind-

less creatures climbed back into their walls, rebecoming statues and decorations or simply disappearing in the wall.

The three moved at that pace for an entire day, moving deeper and deeper into the Kingdom of Rust. By the end of the day, which they could only tell by how many hours had passed, they were far deeper in than Chance had ever been, deeper than they'd thought possible.

The walls around them were becoming less and less structured and were becoming more and more natural as they traveled. But they only had the energy to travel for another hour after the caverns and walls became more rounded and less square. Finally they gave in to weariness and sat down.

"I'll take first watch," Tank said and neither of the other two offered a protest. They'd chosen a small side passage in which they could sleep in while the other stood watch outside the same room, in a side passage. It was easier for the watcher to resist sleep if the rhythmic breathing and snores of their companions.

Tank sat outside while Iustitia and Chance sat inside.

"You seemed shocked when I said days," Iustitia stated and Chance looked at her curiously. "Earlier, when I told you he'd been wounded. You asked how long ago he'd been wounded and I said a few days. Why were you shocked?"

Chance looked at her thoughtfully for a few moments. "Because any other person I've seen get cut succumbed to death within a hours. Then they became the very things we're fighting. I have seen it over and over again, a little cut spreading across a man or woman's arm in just a few minutes, then, half a day later if they're lucky, they fall over and die. A few minutes later, they dissolve into rust. And then they get up and try to kill their allies."

Iustitia stared at him for a few moments, "Half a day later from a small cut?" she asked.

"Yes, which is why I was shocked. Especially because of the size of the wound," Chance said.

"What does that mean?" Iustitia asked and the spellsword shook his head.

"I've no idea."

They sat in silence for a few moments. Then Chance closed his eyes and drifted off into slumber. Iustitia remained awake a few minutes longer, thinking about the man that her body had loved for so many years, the man that Maria had loved, the man who'd loved Maria. The man she had taken Maria from.

Unexplainable frustration filled her chest and she felt restless. She forced herself to lay down, however, hoping that in sleep she might find relief from the unwanted and uncomfortable feelings that stirred inside her. She was just beginning to worry that she might not be able to sleep at all when her eyes drifted shut and she slipped into slumber.

Tank sat outside, his eyes awake as he sat. He was very aware of the outside world but he was also busied with thoughts inside. Memories played through his head. Certain ones, specific ones, ran in his mind. These were the ones he'd thought about for years and years. He'd never really understood the memories but he had always worried about them.

Still very aware, he drifted into his memories, some of them his own, some of them mixed with others.

She cried, her eyes hidden behind her arms. Tank had his arm around her shoulders, keeping her close to his body. He couldn't really control his feelings, couldn't control his body, as her shoulders bobbed up and down.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Benji," she said, "Benji Tilon." Tank looked up.

He would spend the rest of the night comforting her, telling her of Benji's stupidity. Stupidity that Tank, who saw Maria for all her flaws but also for all her perfection, believed in more than anything else on the world.

The next day Maria would find Tank waiting outside her window, a swollen eye and with his lips broken.

"What happened?" Maria asked.

"Benji had friends," Tank replied quietly. "But he's going to walk with a limp for a long time." He smiled but Maria just shook her head. She closed the window and Tank frowned...

They sat on a small plain, just outside the city walls. The cold winds forced them closer together but to Tank it was a very hot moment. His heart thumped in his chest as she lay her head atop his chest. It was one of the few times she'd ever relaxed and told him everything. He sat, silently thanking the god that had allowed this to happen.

She was asleep. He gave her his blanket, wrapping her in it, and sat with just his clothes on. But even the cold wind couldn't remove the warmth from his heart as he watched her lay. He watched as she breathed and felt himself grow more and more in love every second...

A study session of some sort commenced and he looked up at her big blue eyes as she read the book. He should have been reading too but he decided against it in favor of staring at her. He felt the smile spread across his face as she looked up at him.

"So are you going to do your work or stare at me all night?" she asked with a smile that melted his heart.

"It's a hard choice... but after several minutes of thinking it out," he felt the smile on his face broaden and watched as hers did as well, "I've decided I'll stare at you.." she started to object, a thin but genuine smile crossing her pretty lips, "On Second thought... I'll do this reading on the.." he felt himself look at the book that he was supposed to be studying in an effort to find the name of it.

"Art of Conjuration," he read, then said, "It shall be glorious."...

Tank snapped out of his reverie, aware that the last memory he'd had wasn't his own. He looked around, disturbed by the thought, worried by the thought of someone getting inside of his head. But he neither saw nor sensed anything that hinted that he was being messed with and he relaxed again. He let his thoughts fade away into his memories...

Maria looked up at him from her book. She'd learned how to read at a very young age and was trying to teach him as well. He already knew how to read for the most part but there were some things about it that he didn't quite have the knack of. He didn't really mind, though, as he was both learning valuable information and doing it in the presence of a girl that he loved.

"Are you even listening?" she asked and Tank smiled.

"I'm certainly paying attention," he said, "I don't think I've missed a single word your lips have said," and Maria rolled her eyes.

"You really have to get control of yourself. If my father knew you wanted me this bad, then he'd cast you out. I'm to be married to a rich and powerful man, not a rugged barbarian like you, who can't even read," she said and Tank's grin broadened.

"Hand me that book," he said and when she hesitated he reached forward and grabbed the book from her hand.

He looked down at the writing for a moment then read aloud, "The main flaw of Thinnocle's Argument for Slavery was that he considered the dark skinned race to be a lesser..." he looked up at her and smiled. "I've never read this book before."

"You liar!" Maria said a bit too loudly as she punched him in the arm and both of them looked up, waiting to see if her parents had heard. When it obvious they hadn't, Maria looked at him for a few moments.

"You are a barbarian and a scoundrel," she said and Tank grinned, thinking to himself: Yes, but I'm your barbarian and scoundrel...

Ashe glared at him from across the room. Her blades lifted, she rushed at him and slashed. He jumped backwards, barely dodging the sharp blades, and threw his hammer across in a feeble attempt

to back her off. She did, however, back off when his flail followed, for the swinging weapon had a far wider range.

All of their weapons had a ward on them that kept them from doing lethal damage but would allow them to hit the other pretty hard. Both warriors showed welts that were rather large, the product of their last few hours of sparring.

She and he crossed their weapons up more than once in the next few seconds, both scoring minor hits. But Tank knew he had the advantage. Even with her superior quickness and speed with her weapons he was the most explosive and had the better endurance of the two. She was tiring and he was still stronger and bigger than her.

Wombly walked and shook her head.

"Are you two at it again?" she asked and neither of the other two regarded her at all. Wombly sat down to watch as they attacked each other with a zeal for their competition. Wombly watched as they sparred for long enough that Deabla, who'd been waiting for her, finally felt that he should come down and investigate what was taking her so long.

He came down and saw Tank and Ashe fighting and Wombly watching the whole thing.

"Are they really fighting again?" Deabla grinned as he asked the same question he did every-time he saw the other two going at it.

"Looks like it," Wombly said. Deabla watched while standing up for a few moments then walked over to sit by Wombly. The two watched as the other two fought each other to exhaustion. After they both were too tired to even lift their weapons they sat down.

"Are you two done fighting?" Maria's voice called from above and Tank laughed aloud.

"Hardly," he called back.

"Well..." Maria started then she gave a frustrated noise that meant she was coming down but was against it. She and Lidia both came down at the same time and the group of six sat together, all of them sitting in silence and taking comfort in the others proximity.

Maria sat next to Tank but not as close as she'd like. He wasn't going to be with her, for fear of Azeroth's prophecy, but he wasn't going to reject her either. They all sat in a circle, content with life for the moment. Maria, Tank had known, was silently resolving to win him over later. This moment was for peace, however, and as they sat together, it was just that.

Peaceful...

Maria burst out of her room, panicked. She and Tank hadn't been close for about a year now, since he'd beat up another of her friends, but she knew she could depend on him. Tank knew, more than anything he hated, he knew that she was using him but he knew that this was his only chance.

"We need to leave the city," she said quietly and Tank's eyes widened slightly. He'd known she was going to ask something of him but he didn't know exactly what it could be and never would he have imagined her wanting to run away with him.

"Where to?" he asked.

"Sprinkleberry, I think, that'd be best," she replied.

"Do you have until morning?" Tank asked and she nodded...

Tank's eyes snapped open and he looked around again. He was sweating. The last memory wasn't one that he preferred to think about, the memory of his and Maria's last day of safety together. The last day she'd been a young girl ready to take on the world and he'd been a young boy ready to help her through anything.

He looked around for a few moments and realized that more time had passed than he thought. Chance was looking at him.

"Are you okay?" Chance asked. Tank looked up at him and the look he gave the spellsword was enough warning to shut him up.

"I'm guess'in I'm done," Tank said and Chance nodded. Tank stalked forward, to the room where he looked to see Iustitia sleeping on the floor. She slept just like Maria did and it gave him a pause for

a moment. It seemed almost as if the woman laying on the ground was the one who'd asked him to leave the city with her, who'd asked him to take care of her, who'd trusted him to keep her safe.

Who'd trusted the wrong person.

Deabla sat in silence, for they all still sat in the room with the bear. They didn't know what had happened from the breaking of the flask but they did feel like they'd accomplished something.

"Can it help us now?" Benny had asked initially but the others had ignored him more than content with the simplicity of doing a good deed.

"Let's just wait and see," Wombly had said and Benny nodded. They'd all sat down and waited. Now Deabla was meditating, trying to regain his strength. He felt a certain link to all his friends and he knew that Tank and Iustitia were well. Even at this distance he could tell that they were feeling turmoil, both physically and emotionally, and he hoped that they were okay.

Then he felt Tank's change, felt as if something bad was happening. Or something good. He couldn't tell. He could only tell it was big. And important to the world, to the entire universe. He looked around at the others, wondering if they sensed it as well. But they didn't.

"They're well," he said aloud and Wombly looked at him curiously. She couldn't sleep. All the others were asleep on the ground as it'd been Deabla's turn for the watch. But Wombly had stayed up, lost in her thoughts.

"Hm?" she asked.

"Tank and Iustitia, they're well," Deabla went back into meditation for a moment, "Tank is hurt but he's handling it well. He'll need to see Lidia within a week but he's going to survive most likely. Or at least whatever might kill him isn't in him right now.. but he's disturbed. He's changing. There's something in him that won't be silent, that won't leave him alone. It's something that we can't understand.." he looked up at her.

He'd been speaking in his meditation, which always comes out like Carser's stream of consciousness but down a more direct path. She looked concerned.

"He's okay though?" she asked more than said and Deabla nodded.

"For now."

The figure stared at the opposite one.

"Why?" The figure, which it was his perspective Tank saw from, in a language that Tank didn't know, didn't speak, but he knew it, though how he couldn't comprehend, "Why did you do it?"

"I had to," the other figure said, and Tank was disgusted. Tank was? Was Tank? No. The figure, whom he felt more connected to than any other, felt the connection, but that was the end of it.

Memories were blended, and Tank felt himself say, "You feel no remorse?"

"Nay."

"Then you I must slaughter, brother," Tank said, his voice filled with regret as he obligated to end his own kin. Both warriors unsheathed their weapons, and Tank stepped across. He wore gold and white armor, with a dragon etched across the front, while his enemy, his brother, his kin wore a dark green and dark blue colored armor with a sea beast on the front of his armor.

Tank's brother pulled a shield from his back, while Tank pulled out two blades. Tank... Tank? No. Tank watched from the point of view of the warrior as the two came together. The larger of the two, Tank's enemy... no. Not Tank. The enemy of the golden figure, the smaller of the two, watched as the larger, green colored warrior came forward.

Tank was once again a part of the two, both melded into one for the moment. Tank's memories were blended with those of the figure and Tank knew, for the first time, the name of his alter ego.

Tank and Revjek jumped back as the larger of the brothers came forward.

"We were supposed to save them!" Tank yelled out in Revjek's voice, "We were the heroes! And you destroyed it all!"

"They wouldn't pay their dues! We were becoming soft! Weak!" His brother screamed as he attacked again. Weapons rang out and steel clashed with steel. Tank and Revjek's twin swords fought against his... their? No. His brother's heavy sword and shield.

Both warriors grunted and fought hard, their weapons slamming into one another as the two titans of power fought. Tank and Revjek both grew tired and they were one once again. Tank fought hard to keep his brother backing up, using his agility and skill to overwhelm his brother.

"You ruined it!" Revjek yelled as Tank separated again. Tank became dizzy with the two minds clashing. Neither could gain any foothold and Revjek stopped fighting for a moment.

Then the two began, and Tank felt a new sense of connection. Both warriors attacked the larger man with one body, and soon they overwhelmed him.

Revjek cried his tears then he wiped them off. He stood over their brethren... no, his brethren.. His? Their? Neither could tell. He looked up at the sky.

Who are you? Revjek's mind asked and Tank was stunned by the reaction to his presence. There was another being, another one involved with this. Tank could feel him feeling equally disturbed by the sensation, that was just as unsure of it.

Tank's eyes burst open and he shouted out, his hand on his hammer and his body covered in a cold sweat.

He looked around, his eyes wide and looking for Revjek's brother, for Amos's brother for... Amos? He wondered. Who was Amos?

"Are you okay?" Iustitia asked and Tank looked over at her, his eyes taking in the sight of her and drinking in the familiarity of her.

"I'm.. fine," he said, "Just a.. bad dream."

"Good," Chance said from the side, "Good." The spellsword had been worried. He turned left, going back to his guard.

"You spoke in your sleep," Iustitia said, "Who is Revjek?"

"I don't know," Tank replied, disturbed by the world at that moment.

Chapter Twenty Six:

The Nose Breakers ran. They couldn't think of anything else to do. There was nothing else they could do.

Alron felt confused, he felt defeated and violated. Something had happened. That Slim was with him boded well for neither of them. It was pretty obvious that some sort of magical tampering had gone down for Alron remember nothing. He just hoped that the others were just as logical as he was. Or at least just as desperate for him not to be the guilty party.

The demon was forced to stop every time it hit one of the larger walls but that gave the Nose Breakers only a few extra moments to sprint from one level to the next. They all sprinted as fast as they could possibly go but for more than a few of the Nose Breakers that wasn't fast enough and the demon grabbed them with its giant arms.

"Tasty," the demon cackled from behind after one of the Nose Breakers tripped and fell, taking down the Nose Breaker behind him. They all sprinted for their lives.

An alarm went off, magically fueled, throughout the entire Nose Breaker complex. King Jev and his personal assistants were alerted and the king immediately made his summons to the most able wizards he could.

Dean sat in his room, reading a book. He immediately looked at the King's face and called to Chelsey and Eliza.

"We're going into something big, I'm sure," Dean said to them through the air and the other mages appeared. They all prepared to go forth when Maverick came into the room.

"Be wary with this one. Caution, I warn you," he said softly, "Stay attentive to this one battle. No other ones on this world. The next one is... important to say the least."

Alron and Danielle turned around to see the demon was gaining on them. Terror filled him and he turned around and redoubled his sprint. Danielle felt her heart freeze at the sight but she managed to keep her wits about her and she put one foot in front of the other. The demon cast another spell and despite the defensive enchantment set on the Nose Breaker HQ, which blunted magic cast within it, a man went down with a gasp of agony.

The demon quickly ate the man before he could begin to struggle once again.

"What have I done?" Alron gasped aloud.

A message went out from the king's main room to a small village only a few miles outside of Sprinkleberry's main city part. The messenger left on horse back and sped as quickly as he could to the small village, which was called Silenci, a collection of outworlders brought in by Dean. The new Kingdom citizens were capable wizards in their own way and could cast spells as well as anyone else in the Kingdom, minus a few stronger wizards that claimed no allegiance to any lord or lady in the Kingdom.

The messenger got to Silenci and rushed forward, the message on its lips. The leader of the town, a small and thin man with a small brown beard and similarly colored complexion, met the man and listened to him.

"M'lord calls you to the city. There has been a disaster," the messenger said, "M'lord is told that a demon is released."

Darli, the leader of Silenci, gasped and his eyes widened. "I vill return in moments," he said. The elderly man turned and quickly ran in the opposite direction moving with unusual vigor for his age. He got into a small hut and quickly shouted, "My friends! Ve have been called. Ve need to rise up to aid those who have given us haven!"

Darli's eldest son, a man that stood a foot taller than his father and had large muscles and a thick, dark beard that covered his face, stepped forward.

"I vill help," Darvin, the son, proclaimed. His father looked at him doubtfully for a moment then nodded.

"Ve leave at once. Time is of the essence," the village leader said.

By the time the Nose Breakers got to the top floor they had lost all but four of their original number. Alron still held Slim and Danielle ran beside them. Only one other Nose Breakers, a younger woman, still lived.

"I cometh, ever so close behind," the demon hissed and suddenly its spiked limb shot forward and the woman fell to the ground with a gasp.

"Damn this," Alron cursed as he sprinted as quickly as possible. They got to the final door and barely made it through before the demon was forced to stop by the barrier, heavily reinforced by magic, but it immediately set to throwing its body against the giant wooden and metal door. Everytime its body hit the door the entire complex shook and many Nose Breakers looked over at the door with a mixture of fear and curiosity.

"What the hell did you do?" asked one man. He came close enough to the door and saw the demon for what it was. He blanched and the blood drained from his face as the realization of what the beast was hit him. "The hell did you do?"

Alron looked at him and couldn't give him any kind of answer. The Nose Breakers, at a loss for any idea as to what they should do, quickly made plans to evacuate as many civilians as possible.

"The demon they called upon is no minor devil," Eliza said quietly. Dean opened his eyes at the disturbance of his contemplation over the exact matter she was referring to. He had to ready himself for the oncoming struggle for he knew exactly what they were to face. "Chelsey has left already to battle it."

"Battlefield Demons are rarely minor in any way," came his response. He closed his eyes again, assuming that she'd said everything she needed. He already knew where she stood on the issue. It took a few moments for her second group of words to register in his internally focused mind and he heard himself curse habitually that Chelsey was always leaving too early to prepare her spells properly. Even if showing up a little earlier saved lives it wouldn't do much good for them to die in the process and their enemy survives to continue ravaging the people they'd been trying to save.

"Their wall won't hold much longer," Eliza said, "We..." she paused, "You should hurry." Dean's opened once again and he looked back at her. A snap of his finger and he rose to his feet through means of magical nature. He was a small man, standing no taller than five feet eight inches tall and weighing no more than a hundred and fifty pounds. He was fit but not muscular. A brown beard was growing on his face, yet another sign of his recently normal pensive state.

"I know where you stand," Dean's voice held no accusation as he spoke, "You fear for your homeland and you are here only to gain power enough to free them." She nodded. He was right. Her homeworld was under the control of a very human-like race. She herself wasn't human, but was of a race that was more similar to elves than humans.

Blue hair ran down the sides of her head, reaching all the way down to her shoulders. True to her heritage, her ears were pointy and her nose was equally. Her eyes, a bright but pale blue color, had a seriousness to them that had only developed in the last few years. Before she'd met Deabla and been challenged to look beyond her own people's problems she'd grown less and less mirthful and more and more intense.

"I mean to free my people-" she began, starting the same argument she gave everytime she opted out of a mission that the others were going on. Dean stopped her with a raised hand.

"I understand," he said. He and she both knew her hands were tied in the case of her family. As a guardian of the realms Dean had long ago given up the ability to involve himself into whatever story or struggle he liked. He had abandoned trying to solve the small problems that could be handled by the less powerful beings of the universe and now focused only on the larger battles that threatened more than one realm at a time.

Part of the limitation was also the inability to involve himself in the makings of a hero beyond a point of teaching. Many times if he involved himself in some of the smaller battles like she was going to embark on he couldn't because those who were destined to take it on needed the experience of the battle and, even if he could smash it easily, there were certain struggles he wouldn't be able to handle all on his own. Thus he needed Eliza, Tank, Deabla, Chelsey and others fighting across the multiverse to handle their own problems and grow from them. He could help in places where heroes weren't meant to grow from or where the battle required his presence and he planned to do as much with Alron's battle in this realm.

"You will see in time that I do you a justice by giving you the opportunity to handle it," Dean said as he read her thoughts. She wanted him to free them at that moment. She wanted him to drop all the other problems of the multiverse and release his energies upon the captors of her kin. But he knew that to do so would rob her of experience she'd need to grow into the power that he needed to help in his later battles.

"And are those who die at the whip and at gun point done a justice by this as well?" she asked. She was from a realm where modernized weapons were being used as well as medieval weapons. She had found many spells that could counter either age group of weapons but she preferred to fight against those of the modern type. The older ones were simpler but harder to defend from as they required of her a different type of concentration.

She saw the pain in Dean's eyes and knew that she'd crossed a line.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I... lost myself for a moment." He looked at her wordlessly and she backed away. "I will.. see you when you get back." He nodded and turned, going back to his meditation and thoughts. Finally, almost fifteen minutes later, he felt he was ready to take on the enemy put forth in front of him.

Aspilla's eyes blinked open and she felt aware for the first time in the last few hours. She struggled to remember anything from the last few moments. She felt a certain dread in her stomach as the memories came back to her slowly and hazily. It was a few moments before she remembered Alron and Slim leaving, then Danielle following them.

Realizing that whatever had happened was directed to the Nose Breakers HQ, she started to make her way to it. Her body and mind both ached as she tried to shrug off the effects of the stunning spell cast upon her earlier. She couldn't remember the actual attack on Harold's Hill but she knew it had come, somehow, from within.

Ignoring the pain as best she could, she began to jog, then to sprint, speeding up as the feeling of dread in her stomach got more and more intense.

Darli, Darwin and the other spellcasters from Silenci were hitting the demon with everything that had but it wasn't enough. The demon was a battlefield demon and had been bred purely for war of both carnal and magical nature. It resisted their spells and continued to slam itself into the barrier. The cracks had grown into thick breakings and only the magical nature of the door and wall held it together.

Darli and Darwin both released several complex spells, sending bursts of water and ice into the demon's face at once. It laughed aloud at their attempts to hurt it.

"Ye do little but annoy me pestsss!" the battlefield demon hissed and then it punched the wall again. The door came off its hinges and the only barrier between the Nose Breakers, who all stood with their weapons unsheathed ready to die for Sprinkleberry, and the battlefield demon was an ever so faint discoloration of the air. It was the last remains of the defensive spell placed on the demon and it was more of a superficial shield than anything else now.

The demon stepped forward, its spike limbs slamming into and breaking the barrier in front of it, and hissed, "I'm here now leetle mice," it grinned. The spellcasters had been hitting this battlefield demon with everything they had but they could hardly even annoy the beast. It stepped forward, a wide maw about to snap at Darli, when suddenly a blast of wind hit it from the side, pushing it backwards and causing its snapping jaws to miss the old spellcaster by only a few inches.

"Halt," Chelsey's voice sounded from the side, "Or I'll destroy you."

The demon laughed aloud, "If that's all ye can do, then ye, leetle mouse, art stupid." It released a spell of fire towards her and she pushed forward with her hand and a blast of energy put out the fire. A look of defiance in her eyes, she squared off against it.

"I can either send you back to your realm in a single piece or a thousand, it's your call," she said. The battlefield demon, accustomed to only taking orders from baron demons or more powerful, and usually larger, creatures, stared her down for a moment. Then it laughed aloud again. With a blast of hot air, it bellowed forth words of a spell that sent a dark wave of energy towards her. One of the Nose Breakers was nearly caught in the wave of death but Chelsey punched him to the side with her own powers then erected a barrier of energy between herself and the wave of death. The wave hit her shield and she groaned at the exertion and felt her body being drained of its internal energy.

The demon, who hadn't expected her to defend from one of its more potent spells, was shocked when suddenly it was knocked back by an invisible fist of energy sent forth by Chelsey. It staggered a moment before it caught itself. Turning on her, enraged, it shot forth an orb of energy that was a color that none of the humans could actually identify. The impossibly colored orb flew at Chelsey too fast for her to erect a full barrier and she barely blocked the majority of its energy before it hit her last defenses.

She hit the ground, her insides suddenly burning more than she'd ever felt before, and gasped for air as the wind was stolen from her lungs by the spell. She knew that most wizards or spellcasters would have been defeated but she was something of an unique case and her magic didn't require she speak. She simply had to will for something to happen and if she had the energy in her to get it done she could make it so.

Aspilla sprinted at her full speed to the Nose Breakers HQ. She tried to ignore her body still hurting from the spell cast upon her but it was painful to even move so the act of an all out sprint was almost torture. But she endured, a dark feeling in her whispering that she had murdered her friends with her inaction.

Chelsey lay on the ground, writhing in agony, and struggled as she willed the painful and insidious spell out of her body, putting forth all of her energy towards the task, and she could feel the dark magic leaving her. The battlefield demon started to step on her as she lay on the ground stunned but several Nose Breakers rushed forward to defend her and instead of getting the wounded wizard it killed the brave soldiers.

By the time the demon was ready to attack her Chelsey was ready. She was on her feet and began to build up energy. The demon released a spell of dark energy towards her again, the spell taking more energy than it'd expected to lose in a battle with a single human enemy, but she was surrounding herself with the energy as well as building it up.

The spells hit and sparks flew across. A few of the Nose Breakers who'd been looking directly where the collision of light and dark energy were blinded by the sudden bright reaction. The sparks hit the ground and burned through the stone for a few moments. One of them hit a man his hand and cut through his flesh and bone like a warm knife through butter. He screamed as other Nose Breakers, male and female, rushed to grab him.

Chelsey looked up at the demon, which regarded her and her defensive shield warily, then grinned.

"Take this," she gasped as she released the energy towards the demon. Only she and the demon could see the energy at play as it shot forward like an arrow. The energy, resembling nothing more than a translucent sharpened crystal, hit the demon in its chest and it was knocked from its feet by the ensuing explosion.

Aspilla sprinted through the door to the Nose Breakers HQ, ignoring those who told her to stop. She knew something inside was happening, something she needed to be part of.

Chelsey slumped forward, physically and mentally exhausted, immediately after the spell left her body and threw herself to the ground when the explosion filled the room with energy that only she and the demon could see. The energy split stone and literally tore one of the Nose Breakers to pieces. The warrior woman hadn't even a moment to scream before her body was literally disintegrated by the energy.

The other Nose Breakers, who were further away, were knocked to the ground but not killed. Alron was forced to let Slim fall to the ground. Danielle crawled over to him as she gasped for breath, the fall having stolen the wind from her lungs, and she mouthed, "Are you okay?" It took Alron a few seconds to figure out what she was asking but when he figured it out he nodded.

"I'm fine," he said.

Chelsey lay on the floor, unsure of the effectiveness of her spell. Her insides hurt both from the spell cast on her earlier and the energy she'd just released. She slowly climbed to her feet and stared at the battlefield demon as he stepped up to her. It raised one of its spiked limbs and Chelsey knew that if the spiked limb hit her she'd die. She was simply too exhausted, too drained by the spell, to do anything to avoid it, though.

Her eyes filled with tears, the only response her body could give, as the realization that she was about to die filled her. The limb shot forward and she knew that she didn't have to wait for the spike to hit her for it'd be too fast for her to even understand it'd happened. But instead of simple darkness there was an explosion of pain in her side and a weight atop her body. A screaming filled her ears and she tried desperately to figure out what it could be from.

Chelsey looked to the side and saw a woman laying atop her.

Aspilla's face burned like nothing she'd ever felt before. The other Nose Breakers had been too stunned to do anything and hadn't reacted fast enough to save Chelsey, who was standing in front of the battlefield demon for a reason that Aspilla couldn't possibly comprehend. In her mind she hadn't understood why she was going to dive and risk her life to save the simpleton who'd been standing in the way of the demon but something in her gut told her too.

But she'd paid the price. The demon's spiked limbs were serrated and dripping with a poison that burned. The spiked limb had flown just between Aspilla's face and Chelsey's body. The points had, to the horror and agony of Aspilla, dug into her face and released its burning poison into her as well as tear into her.

She moaned and screamed as she writhed in such intense pain that she could feel her body trying to shut itself down, to simply die or at the very least pass out, instead of deal with the agonizing and excruciating burning. She felt as hands grabbed ahold her, a familiar voice shushed her, begging for her silence, but she couldn't shut out the pain and her body was reacting the most basic way it could handle the pain.

Her screams served as a beacon for Chelsey to fight and regain her consciousness. She could feel the dull ache of a body almost all used up but she knew it to be a good thing. For the dull ache was a good indication that she was, at least, still alive. The demon started to do something she couldn't comprehend and in her mind they were already dead. Whoever had saved her life had done so at great personal risk and, Chelsey hoped, if there were any real gods or goddesses out there then they'd take that into account in the next few moments as they died.

The screaming wasn't enough, however, and Chelsey slipped away into unconsciousness.

Chapter Twenty Seven:

Tillo groaned to Nyota's side and she looked to him in a panic as he fell to the ground, his face suddenly far more pale than it'd been. She turned, slashed at another of the rusted figures, then quickly got to Tillo's side.

"What hurts?" she asked and he pointed to his thigh. She reached down and moved the armor and fabric aside and gasped at the wound. It had the look of metal rusting, for the skin around the spot where the arrow had pierced was dark red and chipped away at her touch.

"Oh damn," slipped out of her mouth.

"What is it?" Tillo asked, "Tell me, I'm a man."

"You're... I don't even know," Nyota said then she sat back, "Healer! Get a healer over here!" Quickly a minor priest came to her call. "Cast a spell on dis. He is hurt," she said, motioning to the wound. The healer's eyes widened and he quickly began to incant a prayer to his god or goddess. A few moments passed and suddenly a healing ray went down on the rusted portion of his leg and Tillo began to moan in pain. Suddenly around them all of the wounded soldiers began to drop to the ground, clutching whatever had been hit.

"What is happening?" Silren asked but nobody had answers. Nearly half of the entire defensive force of West Bocc had been felled in a matter of moments. They groaned and lay on the ground crying out in agony or pain. The rust spell had finally taken its toll on those initially wounded. Dulled by the distance from the Kingdom of Rust, the spell had taken far longer to activate than inside the Kingdom itself.

"Fall back!" a shout went up and suddenly those who weren't wounded began grabbing those who were clutching various parts of their bodies. More than a few of the healthy soldiers who refused to leave their wounded companions behind were almost immediately overwhelmed by the suddenly unhindered rusted warriors.

Silren grabbed Tillo and easily lifted his smaller companion off the ground. Nyota and two others held off the rusted figures as best they could as Silren carried their friend and the priest cast his spells on Tillo's leg.

The retreat was hasty but General Stapem had prepared for their eventual push back. It was believed that Sprinkleberrian forces were only three days out now and the plans for the Easternmost Boccian city had been laid out so that they could read the map well. Already the civilians in the eastern-most section of the city had been evacuated and battlements prepared.

Because of the way East Bocc had been built it was a great city to retreat in. Several smaller walls had been built as the city expanded and though they were now compromised by doorways and windows that had been built for a more convenient travel from the far sides of the city but these new openings had been fixed so that a retreat could be made backwards efficiently.

As they ran more people dropped, the rust spell finally taking effect in those wounded later in the first day, and the warriors unwounded or wounded later in the fighting since were forced to put up a fight for their companions, who screamed for them to go, or turn and leave their companions behind for the death that was certain to come.

Nyota and the others ran for two long minutes before they finally got to the first wall. By the time they did the archers were atop the wall and picking off rusted warriors as they caught up to those carrying the wounded and those who were too slow to get away on their own. The retreat was covered well enough that the majority of those unaffected by the rust spell had gotten away, and a good portion of those who had been hit by it, but the retreat had cost them much.

Nyota turned and looked over the wall. She wondered at it as the rusted figures ignored those writhing on the ground. She looked back at Tillo, who was being tended by the priest, and wondered why he wasn't writhing in pain anymore. Maybe, she hoped, the priest was healing him too quickly for the rust to take him.

The internal wall was about half the height of the outside wall but was still too high for the rusted figures to simply climb over it. But because of the many windows, doors and other openings and changes added or taken from the wall in the last few years the rusted figures could climb up the wall. It wasn't too hard to defend, however, for when the rusted figures finally got to the top of the wall it was just their heads slightly above the side of the wall for a few moments. That gave Nyota and the others ample time to cut down the creatures. At some point she got a moment to rest.

"I can't save him indefinitely, but I can keep him alive for some time, hopefully long enough for a solution to be found," the priest said to Nyota and she nodded grimly.

"Please do all you can," she said before she went back to the wall.

She and the others defending the wall fell into something of a rhythm when suddenly the air was filled with arrows and no defender on the wall avoided some wound or another. Nyota looked at Silren, who had a suddenly grim look on his face, for a few moments.

"I guess we're dead," he said.

"Not for sure," she argued, "Dere's a chance we will be saved by de Sprinkleberrian priests when dey get here."

"Dat's dree days from now," Silren said bitterly, "De disease only take two days or so to wreak its havoc. We're defending dis city so dey can reclaim it after we're dead. We're already dead."

Nyota felt her eyes water. She'd accepted that she might die, expected it even, but to have it delivered in such an inevitable manner way was an injustice that she simply couldn't cope with. Had a host of enemies so big come in that she couldn't fight them off and was eventually overwhelmed that'd have been better. At least then she could do some damage to her enemy before she died off. But the fate delivered to her now was something she couldn't fight, she couldn't hurt, couldn't even look at. All she had to show for her efforts was a pile of rust, a small arrow that had barely broke skin on her hip and a certain death in her near future.

"We're going to kill as many as possible before we die," Silren said and she looked to him for a moment before she nodded.

"No mercy."

The chaos was complete when a second wave of the enemy hit the forest. None of them really understood their enemy but it was obvious they were being directed by some higher being that wasn't directly involved with the battle. The rusted figures weren't responding fast enough to their immediate changes but were responding to changes of skirmishes a mile over or that couldn't be seen by any eye in the actual battlefield.

Their enemies were hard in their own way. None of the rusted figures had any particular skill in combat nor did they show any initiative when a weakness was shown by the human fighters but if that was their disadvantage then their edge was found in their impossibly good tactics as a group. The rust warriors worked with one another perfectly, never getting in each others way and never moving in any way that might compromise the fighting of another group of rusties. They also moved in formations so tight that the trackers, scouts and Hornet-Lancers couldn't split them up as easily as before.

Garret and his trackers had killed close to two dozen before finally the press of rusted figures was too much and they were forced to retreat. But, fortunately for Delik, something to the west seemed to be a larger bounty for the rusted figures left them in a spot of relative peace. It was hard for Garret and the others to hear the sounds of battle and not charge in that direction for, as one of the trackers was quick to say, their arrows might be the tipping point in a battle that was in the balance. But, whether for the sake of their endurance, number of arrows or for Delik, Garret decided to retreat further south into the woods.

They traveled for several hours before finally they succumbed to exhaustion. It was dark and the moon was bright enough that they could see around so they elected to make camp in the trees. The climb was hard for Delik but once up he realized it was a relief to feel the security of the large branches between him and any possible enemies.

They slept the night, the trackers sharing the burden of night watch, and when Delik awoke he found his ankle had swollen but was more functional than it had been before. He and the others slowly climbed down to the ground. They looked around for a few minutes before finally deciding to travel back to the north in hopes of collecting more of their allies.

As they moved along they found the woods unusually silent. The enemy had sent a second thousand into the fray and it was a relief to know that they had served well enough to pull close to six thousand of their enemies, three fourths of the host they'd been sent to delay, but it was also a terrifying notion to know that four thousand enemies lurked in the woods around them.

The sound of combat was a rare one as they traveled but occasionally they heard sounds of a struggle of some sort. They'd rush to the scene to find piles of rust and a broken arrow or a hoof print but even when they chanced calling out they got no response. It was then decided that the others who had survived had split into groups that were moving around in the chaos, trying to keep their enemies from surrounding them.

"How do you think Bocc is fairing?" one of the trackers wondered aloud as they traveled along and Garret shrugged.

"Not our problem at this moment," he said.

"Do you think dey'll all regnerate again?" Delik asked and the entire group paused and internally groaned at the question they'd all wondered but none had been willing to actually ask.

"That is our problem," the tracker master said quietly, "But not one we can help." They continued forward in as much a silence as they could, which was a considerable amount. Then Garret said, "Yes, I think they will. But something is happening to the east. I can feel it. And when it's done, we might see an end to this."

"What is it?" asked Sampson, Garret's second in command, but the tracker master just shrugged. "Something big."

The second wall failed within the end of the day. Of the initial nine hundred defenders only four hundred survived. General Stapem had called them to retreat to the fourth wall, skipping the third one because it'd been butchered by merchants and farmers wanting to get wagons through it easier, and as if the world was trying to trick the defenders into relaxation there was silence. The silence seemed right,

for the city seemed dead as most of her people were gone, the merchants and civilians sent to West Bocc.

Many soldiers had been left behind in the struggle to get back and in the distance the defenders could hear battles in the distance, small skirmishes that ended with the silence of dead men and rusted victors. Nyota and Silren sat atop the wall with their blades in hand. Both felt their bodies ache and hurt from the battle of the night but they knew that with morning there would be more of an assault.

The enemy had regrouped only a few minutes ago, for a reason that none of the defenders liked, and the air was almost literally filled with a tension for the oncoming battle. In the distance they could hear the sound of the giant tornado of dust reoccurring. Their enemy was rebuilding their ranks and there was nothing they could do about it, so they ignored it as best they could.

"They'll be here soon," a voice said from behind and the two looked back to see General Stapem standing with them, a blade in hand. He, like they, was covered in rust for when the rusted figures were slain they exploded in a puff of rust as often as not.

"You've seen a share of de fight, den?" Silren said more than asked and the general gave a grin smile.

"When times become desperate the answers become even more so," he said, "And even the lowliest of warriors must rise."

"Based on de dust covering you, I'd say you're a pretty damn good warrior," said a soldier to the side and the general shrugged and sighed.

"I get by," he said, "But they don't seem to need to."

"Aye, dey don't, do dey?" Nyota mumbled and the general nodded. Then he looked past her and he seemed to deflate a little.

"More than I'd remembered," he said as they turned to see about five thousand, nine hundred rusted figures rushing forward all at once.

"Some of dem are wearing Boccian armor," Nyota observed and Silren sighed.

"Our kin did turn to rust," he said quietly.

The rusted warriors rushed forward, all five thousand nine hundred at once, and the battle joined as four hundred attempted to stop them.

The sun reached up into the sky and Nyota looked over at Silren and General Stapem. Tillo and the priest were in the room, as well as half a dozen other soldiers. They were in a large house, one that had been designed to withstand boozier attacks. They'd been forced to retreat into the house only a few minutes before.

The sheer number of rusties had forced the defenders off the wall in mere moments. The rest of the fighting had been retreat, turn, kill, retreat and repeat. Now, almost four hours later, they sat on the far side of the city in the most structured building while the last few fights outside died down. They'd seen others reach equally safe buildings before but they couldn't be sure that the rusted warriors hadn't broken in.

The door was solid metal and wood and had absorbed the hits of the rusted figures easily as it was far tougher a material than their rusted bodies were. But, to the horror of those within, the portion of the door that was metal had begun to rust.

"I don't dink we're going to be safe for very long," Silren mumbled. The priest looked over at them, his face pale and withdrawn, his eyes bloodshot and his face covered in sweat.

"I've expended all my arts on him. He'll survive an hour longer maybe," he said, "I'm... sorry. I can't... I don't have anymore spells to call upon." The soldiers looked at the priest with sympathy.

He, like they, had stuck to what he knew more than anything else. He'd been healing while they were killing and in both cases it was an exercise of futility. Their enemy would win. They could keep regenerating and the disease could keep growing even with their powerful strikes and even with his not-so-little powers being put into healing.

Tillo coughed and a little blood covered his hand, which he'd brought up to his mouth. He looked at it then at the others, "I, uh, dink I'm going to go soon."

Nyota and the others forced their bodies around him. General Stapem came as well even though he didn't know the soldier. In the general's mind the man served as a symbol of all those who had given their lives for the Kingdom this week. They'd given all they could be asked for and more and now he'd be there for one of their last moments, to try and comfort him.

"You did very well. The king would be proud. The gods will be proud. I am proud," the general said to Tillo, who looked at him for a moment.

"Later you'll have to explain why dat's a comfort," the man said, looking to Silren, then back to the general, who was stunned by the man's words, "No offense meant, sire, it's just... your respect is not the ding I'm dying for today. De gesture is appreciated but unless your pride can heal me, I'd have you stick it up your ass just as soon as I'd have you sticking it at me."

The general was stunned and Tillo grinned.

"A joke before I go," he said and Stapem realized that the man was desperately clinging to what he knew.

"We're all going to die," Silren said quietly. He looked to his companions, "I can't dink of many others I'd have be here, too."

"A good company to die in," the general agreed.

"Careful," Tillo mumbled, barely conscious, "he'll start talking about pride 'nd respect."

"Can't have that," the general muttered in response and the entire group, minus the general and Tillo, shared a small chuckle. Tillo passed out and they waited... and waited.. and waited.

They waited as the pounding at the door filled their ears. It seemed like hours but in reality only minutes passed before the pounding stopped.

"Dink dey gave up?" Tillo mumbled, for he'd come back once again at the change of their environment.

"I dunno," Nyota said, who wondered if there might be more to the stopping of the pounding. Then, suddenly, the general shouted for silence.

"What is it?": Silren asked but the general shushed him. Then his eyes widened and grin streteched across his tired face.

"Don't you hear it?" he said and the others strained their ears. For a moment they thought they heard a low horn in the distance. His grin broadened.

"You've never been to the West, have you?" he said more than asked and they all shook their heads. "Those aren't just horns. Those are the horns of the Keellian Copper Bulls and heavy infantry." A second horn sounded and his grin split even further, "And Hornet-Lancers.. they're here! We held out long enough!"

Tillo began to cough and the priest wondered if a fickle god or goddess had decided to prove the general wrong. Tillo's body began to shake and he began to writh in pain. The others circled around the man in pain and whispered words of encouragement, telling him help was coming, that he only need to hold out a little longer, that priests of mighty arts would be there soon. The priest, who they finally learned his name to be Henri, began to pry deep into his mind and body for some spells or another.

It was nearly a minute of intense concentration and pain for Henri before he finally found another spell of healing, one that would extend Tillo's life by maybe an hour. He cast it then fell to the side, nearly knocked unconscious. He begged the others to help him up. His lips were dried and began to crack and his eyes were almost fully red where they should have been white.

"I've one more... dis may... take me on..." he said, his voice barely more than a whisper. He began to incant for a few moments and felt the energy within himself. He felt the healing power and his body tempted him to take it into himself but he pushed it out and, instead, into Tillo's body lying on his side. Henri gasped as the energy left his body, putting the energy into Tillo's still but unconscious body.

The priest then fell to the side, his breath short and slow and his pulse shallow.

"Let dem hurry please!" Nyota softly said, a prayer more than anything.

Chapter Twenty Eight:

"You would have killed yourself had I not walked in," she said softly and Amos... Amos? Who was Amos? Tank wondered. But he didn't have time to consider it. He felt himself struggling to form some response or another but before he could she shouted, "No! Do not lie to me! I am a mage, I can tell when you lie!"

"Then you know I'm not lying!" Amos and Tank both shouted back. The girl, the love of his.. No. She wasn't. Whoever this girl was, she wasn't the love of his life, but of another's... the realization was short lived, however, for emotions welled up within him to the point that he forgot who he was and who he wasn't as she brought her left arm forward, wrist up. Eyes suddenly wide, Tank and Amos, the bearer of these memories, both started, "What are you-"

"Now you will know what I felt!" She screamed, tears dropping from her soft blue eyes, and both Tank and Amos lunged forward to stop her. He was too late, though, and the blade cut into her flesh, severing a vein and blood began to pump out.

"No!" They shouted and they grabbed her and started to run forward towards the door. She chanted and it closed right as he got there, and he slammed into it with a loud Bang! They looked at her as blood continued to flow down the side of her body and they found their white t-shirt red. Amos and Tank lowered their shoulder together, filled with the same emotions and filled with the same iron will, the same convictions. Summoning all of their strength, they sprinted forward.

The first door, which, Tank learned from Amos's mind, required thousands of pounds of pressure to break through, shattered upon their impact. They both fell backwards, stunned and dizzy, but in their hands their... no, Tank corrected himself, Amos's... love lay, bleeding to death in front of them.

They lowered their shoulder once again, making sure that she was kept out of harm's way, and ran forward. The second door, much like the first, shattered and both continued to run, desperately trying to move forward. It was a strange sensation for they both felt the same as Amos's original emotions were set in the memory but reacted to it differently. It was as if Amos and Tank were trying to work together in the same body, trying to figure things out. But it wasn't that way at all. Tank was just observing and feeling what Amos had felt and seen. He wasn't Amos. He wasn't the creature in front of him, the mind that he was within. He was just an observer.

They felt her body go limp in their hands but Tank and Amos both refused to give up. They continued to run when suddenly she opened her eyes.

"This... is... your... fault," she said then breathed out her last sigh of breath. Amos and Tank fell to Amos's knees, cradling her, screaming out at the falseness and the unfairness of it all. Students around them, which they hadn't seen before, looked at them in confusion as the teenager cradled empty air. But in Amos's mind he held his love, Elma, and in Tank's mind, for a moment, he cradled Maria on the ground. The eyes of the others, who he knew but didn't know at the same time, were upon him as he felt the teenager's emotions.

"Elma.." Tank and Amos said quietly, over and over again, "Elma.." his voice died. In Tank's mind, for a moment, he had whispered, "Maria.." with the same grief. Tank felt the rage, the raw and pure fury, raise up in Amos's chest and suddenly he knew that they, for a brief moment, had been the very same person.

Tank's eyes burst open and from his lips erupted the cry, "Maria!"

Iustitia and Chance both looked to him in confusion.

"What is it?" the spellsworn asked and Tank shook his head.

"A dream," was all the stocky warrior said. They sat in silence for a few moments, Iustitia studying him all the while, before, in the distance, they heard a call, "Tank?"

"Wombly?" Tank wondered aloud and Chance suppressed a groan. He immediately jumped to his feet, as did Iustitia and Chance, ignoring the soreness in their bodies. They'd been taking a food rest and Tank had drifted into a dream, as was usual when they stopped for a rest. More often than not he was waking up with a start or a distant look in his eyes. More than once they had to remind him, with a very small number of words before he remembered, where they were and what was happening.

They began to rush forward, from room to room, in search of their companions.

Wombly and the others ran as well. It'd been a shock to hear Tank's voice, shouting Maria's name no less, in the distance but they had been lead correctly. In exchange for the freedom of the flame pixie's master the master had promised to lead them to their companions, who the master assured were still alive, if not well.

It took them many minutes but finally, in one room, Wombly and Deabla burst through the door to find Tank and Iustitia burst through the other side. Wombly gasped when the third figure entered the room sheepishly from behind them.

"Chance?" she asked Tank and he shook his head.

"Long story, he's just going to be with us for a little while, then he's heading East to the other cities," the stocky warrior said and Wombly raised an eye brow. She decided to trust her friend, though, and didn't question it any further.

"So... you're alive, huh?" Benny said after they sat in silence for a few minutes.

"So it seems," Iustitia said.

It was quiet and the room was still for the most part. They looked around, for a few moments, and realized that the room they were in was different than most they'd been in. It was a hallway. And, to Tank's left and Wombly's right, a tunnel reached deep down into the earth.

As they looked down it their vision failed them by not seeing through the darkness that seemed to be a barrier at the end of the hallway. No noise reached them from the end of the tunnel but a certain feeling of dread, as if only death and destruction lay at the end of the tunnel, filled their stomachs. Both Carser and Deabla looked to Lidia, who shrugged.

"I still have my spell up," she said.

"Maybe you should cast another?" Carser suggested and Lidia sighed.

"Only have so much energy," she said right before she began to incant. By the end of it the feeling of dread was blunted but still prevalent in them. They decided to accept what she'd done as the most they'd get at that time. She'd made it abundantly clear that if she gave up too much energy to the spells like this one then she wouldn't have the energy for any combat. Tank, Iustitia and Chance all felt the effect of her spell, however, and realized that they had been getting drained by the Kingdom of Rust the whole time.

"That feels better," Chance said and Deabla glared at him for a moment. The small young man seemed to be studying the spellsword as he looked into his opposite's eyes. Chance, undaunted by any guilt, matched Deabla's stare. The others were trading information and recent histories while the spellsword and small young man stared at one another. Finally, after nearly thirty seconds of intense study, Deabla's expression softened and he nodded.

Then he got involved with the conversations of the others.

"That seems like a good place to go," Deabla heard Wombly say and Tank snorted.

"Good? If by good you mean dark, deadly and filled with danger, then yeah, it's good," the stocky warrior said and the others looked at him in shock. It was strange to hear him make a joke since Maria's death and his far away expressions began.

"I guess you're right but we've seen nothing that promises an angry lich to fight as much as this," Benny said and Tank shrugged.

"If you say so," he said.

"Let us rest before go, though," Wombly said, "No sense in attacking without feeling at least somewhat rested."

They sat in the hallway, Iustitia and Lidia taking first watch, and rested.

The women sat in awkward silence for many minutes. It was hard for Lidia because in Iustitia she saw Maria still. Lidia couldn't imagine what it was like for Tank but it hurt the priestess somewhat to see a being who wasn't her friend that resembled her in so many ways. It wasn't the dramatic changes in Iustitia that stunned Lidia but, rather, it was the similar things, like the look that Iustitia got when she was thinking or the way Iustitia toyed with her hair when looking at Tank, that shook her the

most. It was as if some part of Maria had survived and still lived in Iustitia, changing the woman to a degree in ways that seemed superficial but were, in fact, part of Maria's personality.

And the fact that Iustitia had been exactly what Lidia had tried to stop just a year and a few months ago. It burned Lidia to think that she had murdered Maria and tried to murder this beautiful, if highly unusual, being. At that moment, in though, Lidia felt as if she'd made every mistake she possibly could and that those she hadn't made had been prevented through no fault of her own.

They looked down the hallway, searching for something in the darkness, but there was nothing specific that marked this passage's walls or roof differently. In fact, had the passage not been so long, to the point that it formed a hallway, it'd have resembled all of the others in all ways other than its lack of furniture.

"It seems wrong to you, too," Iustitia said after a small while and Lidia looked up at her quizzically. "It strikes you as a fallacy that for me to exist in this form another had to be destroyed. And that for that other one to have been destroyed as completely as she was I had to be formed. It strikes me as a wrongness, as well. But I cannot regret it.

"I enjoy living."

"Living is nice," Lidia said quietly.

"I enjoy life. I enjoy being alive..." Iustitia said, looking off into the distance, "Does that not seem so trivial a matter to you?" Lidia considered the question but before she could even formulate any answer Iustitia continued, "We in the realm of the Gods and Goddesses had considered life to be a thing below us. Yes, we live, in a way, but what we do would better be described as existing.

"We cannot die the way you do and we cannot live the same way either. We are less dynamic, less changing, and too powerful for mere chance or luck to have any real effect. When we consider the struggles in front of us it's a purely stastical matter, nothing emotional or contextual about it. We cannot be hindered or boosted by our surroundings as you are, or at least when we are affected by it it is to a far smaller degree."

She paused a moment and looked to Lidia, "The very fact that luck and chance and environment and those around you is so important is so large a part of how you're alive that those who are above it, I speak from experience, cannot possibly comprehend it. Just as an Ant might seem alive in a similar but ultimately different way than we are, you were different. You are different... we, not you, are different."

"So you're saying that because of our lack of power we're more alive than your original people?" Lidia tried to surmise the meaning of Iustitia's short rant, mostly to help the unusual woman along and to make her feel she was being paid attention to, but the being didn't seem vindicated at all by Lidia's efforts.

Iustitia shook her head, then nodded, as if changing her mind.

"I have thought on this more than I like," Iustitia's blue eyes wandered around the hallway as she thought, "more than I'd thought possible.. but it is the unsureness, the lack of real control or even understanding that makes your lives so much more rich than ours. We create and control your kind and our surroundings, though of course humans and other sentient beings of the smaller realms are hard to truly control, to the point that it is a perfect routine, our lives. It is just a repititive existence, building and creating, watching and observing.

"But we never really *do* anything. All our actions include creating and controllng. We never embark on adventures, never fall in love, never weep at a lost one for we have no lost ones. Or didn't, I believe, since I could be considered lost. But even still, another Handmaiden has likely replaced me by this point and they have almost assuredly moved on. We never take chances or combat with each other because those who fought all died too long ago for any of us to really remember them or the conflicts it was over. We don't remember those who died because it was so long ago that they died that it would be a maddening experience to have all that information stored in our heads..."

Iustitia sighed.

"Even now I forget much of what I knew up there. I'm a smaller being down here, a weaker being, even more so because of the spell I stepped in front of for Tank. And because of that my... soul..."

I think that is what it is, my soul is rejecting knowledge that I used to have because it no longer has the power to handle the knowledge. Or that is my thought at least. But as I lose the knowledge I gain life, as you live it, because suddenly I know and control less."

"So with knowledge and control you find yourself..." Lidia was at a loss for words, "What?"

"Stagnating," Carser said from behind, "With no challenge beyond your ability, beyond your control or will, you stagnate."

"Is that what it was, then?" Iustitia wondered aloud, "Was it that we were so immensely powerful that we didn't move forward and grow, live and experience, like you do? Is it because we are beyond struggling for anything that we can comprehend that we no longer fall in love or act? Are we..." Iustitia searched for the word.

"Contented," Lidia supplied and Iustitia nodded.

"Are we contented to the point that we can no longer do anything beyond exist?" she asked and Carser shrugged.

"You were the one who lived it, not us, so you'd be the only one who could truly determine if that's truth or not," he said. He'd stopped his normal stream of consciousness rambling because he was genuinely interested in what she was saying.

"I don't believe you," Lidia said, "Or at least I don't agree with you. Your kind live. Just... differently than we do."

"What is living?" Iustitia wondered aloud and Lidia realized that the definition of living was far too undefined for her to truly give an opinion on whether the all powerful and all contented gods and goddesses were living or not.

"What is it," Carser wondered, "that got you to think and speak on this?"

Iustitia thought for a few moments, "It is because I'm forgetting who I was... and I think it's because who I was has no place on this realm and cannot possibly exist within any who exists here."

Iustitia and the others looked over to Tank as he turned in his sleep, mumbling something.

Tank, Amos, Ilunki, Tisol, Gnuoli, Esreal, Timon, Steven... and thousands more, millions more, all sat together in one body. He was vaguely aware that they all were different people but in this they were all the same, to a degree. They remained individuals but they were all together. He also had the vague understanding that the majority of those who were with him weren't alive in his timeline. He was aware almost all of them, in fact, had died before this moment and that some of them, a far smaller figure than those who had died before him, hadn't been born yet. But despite this, he knew they were all experiencing the same event, the awakening of the first, together.

The First? Tank wondered and suddenly all of the minds who weren't already told asked the same. The first of what? Awakening of what?

Those that had been told, that knew, simply watched in silence, absorbing the scene. Those that didn't already know did just the same as no other choice presented itself. They all felt each other and could feel the emotions and thoughts and intuitions of one another. The thoughts weren't cognitive and clear words, weren't letters that could be read, but instead were small flashes of information bared by the others mind.

Understanding was hard. They all watched as the first one stepped forward, lifting her club and regarding the creature that stood in front of her. As if sparked by the danger and fear, by her pure and total desperation, her potential was suddenly unleashed. She swelled with strength and speed and knew some power deep within her still begged to be released.

The beast stared at her, looked at her parents and siblings around her, and realized that she should have been the first destroyed, not the last. For by surprise she would have fallen far easier. But now this woman was prepared and had accidentally stumbled upon this new thing, this new threat.

Tank, Amos, Ilunki, Tisol, Gnuoli, Esreal, Timon, Steven... they all watched as it unfolded, the birth of-

Tank was shaken awake and he almost felt angry. He wondered at what he was dreaming, at what he and all the others were seeing, but his mind was taken away from the strange dreams as the business at hand was delivered. The dreams, which seemed so real to him, weren't what he needed to focus on and so, as he and the others started to walk down the hallway, towards what they believed to be the lich's lair but they didn't know for sure.

Towards the trap being laid.

Chapter Twenty Nine:

Aspilla's screams and Chelsey's unconscious moans filled Dean's ears as soon as he arrived in the Nose Breaker HQ. He looked around and assessed the damage. The battlefield demon had wounded at least three dozen Nose Breakers and killed however many more. Chelsey was being dragged across the ground by Alron and Danielle and another girl he didn't know was screaming in agony and covering her face.

"Damn it, I wish Eliza were here," he mumbled to himself. He wanted her to get Chelsey and the screaming girl, who he could see some sort of poison was eating at her face, not to actually fight. It was not his place to change who she was, however, only to let what was happening to change her occur undisturbed.

He looked to them, trying to focus his mind with all the carnage around himself, then quickly whispered a few words of power. Chelsey and Aspilla, though he didn't know the latter's name, simply vanished from the area. He knew that Eliza wouldn't object to helping out an injured ally and another that wasn't evil simply in the way they existed.

Then he turned to the demon. He had shields in place already, which stopped the demon from destroying him the instant he got there. During his inspection of the area the demon had released three insidious spells towards him. The spells had exploded on his shield and a shower of sparks filled his vision.

But Dean was used to these sparks and so they hadn't even registered in his mind. Now that he had his attention on the demon he began to go to work. Lifting several large chunks of stone with one outraised hand, he launched them at the demon. The chunks of stone slammed into the creature's face, exploding into a thousand pieces, just as he sent energy flowing forward.

The energy hit the stones, causing them to vibrate so rapidly that they became small pools of lava. Dean pushed the pools together and then willed it forward into the demon's face. The demon felt more pain than it'd expected to against any human and its shock showed in its delay. Dean took the time given to him by the demon's hesitation and sent forward three blasts of force, all slamming into the face of the demon.

It was rocked backwards and barely kept its feet as Dean advanced, putting more and more force blasts into its face. Dean pressed his advantage as far as possible, manipulating the air around him so that it formed clouds. He continued the manipulation until they were darker clouds, filled with water and lightning. The manipulation of the clouds took more of his concentration than he'd expected and the force blasts he sent forth towards the demon weakened.

The demon took the relief and launched a rolling wave of pure darkness towards Dean, who blocked it with one hand while the other continued to manipulate the air. The blocking of the wave took the hand he'd been using to send force into the demon and suddenly he was defending himself as much as he could while manipulating the air.

Men grunted as the life was stolen from their bodies by the wave of darkness but Dean couldn't focus on them. Battlefield demons were a powerful force and this one was particularly able in the way of combat, both carnal and magical. It pushed itself forward, releasing energy at Dean, but the unusually powerful wizard defended himself well enough. He tried to expand his defenses so that the spells did not hit those behind him but despite his efforts some of the energy got past him and into the city behind him.

He scanned the area around him, looking for life, and felt relief when he found none. He was glad that the Nose Breakers had had the sense to leave the spot and he was doubly glad to know that the area around had been evacuated. Then he turned all of his attention on the demon. The darkened clouds above him were literally exploding with electrical energy and he knew it was ready.

Bringing both hands above his head, he reached out and took hold of all of the energy in the clouds. He threw his hands downwards and a flash of lightning larger and more blue than any other he or those who could see the clouds had ever seen slammed into the demon, exploding on the impact. The clouds collapsed and flew into the demon, buffeting it as it practically vibrated from the lightning strike.

Dean immediately grabbed at the sand around him and rose it up, sending forth the sand to spin around the demon. Too stunned by the electrical attack, the demon couldn't even begin to form any response. It felt the sand digging at it, burning its sides and cracking it, as Dean released a burst of fire in-to it.

The sand hardened into glass around the demon and, even as it cried out in frustration and pain, froze the demon in place. Dean glared at it for a few moments, breathing heavily after the act of brutal and raw power, before focusing more power into himself. He built up the force, preparing to release it, for several moments. His insides were beginning to burn for the build up when, finally, he let it go in the demon's direction.

The glass and the demon both exploded into a thousand peices at the explosion and Dean gasped at the release. He looked to it for a few moments, at all the parts, then shook his head.

"Well.. that's that," he said quietly. Then, with a word, he disappeared and teleported back to the Library of Ages.

Eliza worked tirelessly over Aspilla's still body. She was still alive, still breathing, but barely. Dean showed up and he offered what aid he could to her. She was a better healer than he by far and he was only able to offer a small portion of his powers for most of them had been used in the battle with the demon. The attacks hadn't taken much energy but the defenses, the blocking of the wave of darkness and more, had taken much from him. He helped her with the 'heavy lifting' and sent forth waves of healing energy in bulk, keeping the girl from dying.

Dean reached into her mind for any helpful information and found her name among other things. He refused to peer into anything further than that and sought to help some other way.

Realizing he could be of little help to her now that she was involved in the more delicate process of saving her life, he decided to get her friends and bring them. Maybe they could help Eliza somehow or would simply be comforted by the knowledge that Eliza was working on her. But he knew he couldn't help directly anymore. He could only hit it with energy that was meant to heal in general. He lacked the finesse, the sensitivity to the more delicate points of healing magic, to heal her smaller vessals and other vital parts of her body. He could only send healing power force, not directly manipulate her body as well as Eliza could.

He teleported back to the world and, with a voice amplified by magic, shouted out, "Comrades and friends of Aspilla, come to me!"

Alron, Danielle, Ajax and Slim were there quickly. With a simple spell, Dean teleported them to the Library of Ages.

They sat in silence, all deep in thought, as they tried to undertand what had happened. The majority of it was just a blur of events that had happened without their minds being clear. The only one uneffected by some sort of magic or another was Danielle and she hadn't seen most of it. But now, as she considered what she had seen, even she couldn't understand most of it.

But the lack of understanding was only a small pain compared to what they felt for Aspilla. They couldn't do anything for their friend and that burned them more than anything else. It was hard for them to just sit around while their friend was being worked on. And even though they were surrounded by the most extensive library in all of the multiverse their thoughts were all internal.

"Eliza is a most gifted healer," a being said from the side. Alron looked to the side and saw a scaly creature, its eyes a dark shade of purple and its scales a lighter shade of the same purple color. All Alron could do was give the creature an awkward smile. "Am only trying to be comforting... but I tell you no lie. Of all the healers I've seen in my travels, she has been among the most able."

Alron give him another awkward smile, "I... thank you." The man nodded then turned away, leaving the brooding teenager to his own devices.

Nearly a day passed and Eliza walked out of the room where she'd been operating. She was exhausted and her eyes were red from sleep deprivation. Any shock at her inhuman appearance was covered up quickly and ignored as soon as they realized she was the healer of their friend.

She looked at the them and nodded her head, "She will live. But she... will not be the same." Their relief was palpable but Eliza's expression stopped them from being too happy.

"What is it?" Danielle asked and Eliza sighed.

"I wish... I wish things were different. I did what I could and saved her life, which is no small feat, but she took great damage to her face... I couldn't.. do much about that," Eliza said, "I managed to save her ability to breath through her nose and mouth and her ability to hear. I fear she'll have trouble tasting and..."

"Her eyes?" Ajax asked, realizing the one sense on her face that had not been addressed.

"We will give her means of seeing," Eliza said quietly.

"Oh god," Danielle blurt and Slim cursed aloud. Alron stared forward, the consequences of his actions weighing heavily on him.

"She will see... but.." Eliza sighed. "We will return her to you after we can heal her. But we know not whether she will be... whether she'll have the will to continue. Humans are vain creatures and the changes in her... are drastic."

The others were slow to nod or give any acknowledgment to Eliza but she took no offense to it. She understood their worries and their fears. She knew that they were hurting for their friend. The not-so-little sympathy that she felt for them shielded her from any lack of appreciation that they might have shown.

"We appreciate what you've done," Alron said quietly, "But we cannot possibly show it to you. The sadness in us... for our friend-"

"It is not for your friend," Eliza spat, glaring at him with sudden anger, though whether it was at them or not even she didn't know, "You are not saddened by what happened to her nor even the manner in which it happened to her. You are plagued by the guilt of your own inaction or your own actions that led to this moment.

"You're sad because you caused this.. because you.. didn't.." she paused a moment then looked downwards. "I am sorry. Please... leave."

The friends looked to her for a few moments, all of them wanting to say their own piece but none went through with it. They all turned and left, looking for Dean. He had promised to send them back to their home when they asked.

Chapter Thirty:

They slowly marched forward in the darkness. The darkness assaulted their senses at every moment and at every step they all but felt an attack coming in at them. But of them only Deabla really knew how much danger they were in. His mind was processing information and he was reaching out with his unnatural ability to tell things before they happened.

He kept moving, walking towards the middle so that he could move either way if he noted danger before it happened. They had moved perhaps three miles into the tunnel when he finally saw what was coming. He moved to the back of the group, unsure of when it would strike, but in his mind he knew that if he didn't play it perfectly then they all might die. And if they knew it was coming then, he knew, they would all die for sure.

So he moved in the back, hoping to see the exact danger before it came. Their footsteps echoed in the hall and the sound eerily filled their ears and seemed to steal their acute hearing. Then it happened and Deabla reacted without thinking.

He pushed forward immediately, knocking Lidia and Carser onto their faces just outside of the range of the trap, but couldn't get himself out. It was a simple trap, one that placed steel bars on both sides of him.

Tank and Benny both cursed while Chance prepared to hit the bars with a spell. Lidia, who had expended most of her energy on the spells of extended protection, figured she'd see how the assassin's spells went first before she attempted to break the bars. He hit them with a basic magic missile and the spell launched back at him, stinging his body.

The two warriors shared a curse yet again and they looked at the bars. Tank stepped forward, bringing his hammer to bear, and inspected the bars for a moment.

"Damn thing shouldn't take too much," he said more to himself than anyone else before he brought his hammer up and swung it at the bar. It hit the metal bars and it was as if the bars had hit him back, for the hammer shot upwards and nearly slipped from his grip. His hands, which were numbed by the force of the impact, burned for a moment and he realized that the bars had put off sparks as well.

"Just.. go on without me. We'll figure out how to undo this after you kill the lich," Deabla said after inspecting the bars personally as well. His time in the Library of Ages hadn't been idle and he had learned a good bit about magical constructs. He could see their fashioning that these bars were imbued with a powerful magic that might take his friends many hours to break down. And they didn't need to lose all of their energy trying to get him.

"We'll be back, I swear it," Wombly said after a few moments. She had a feeling that their final fight was only around the corner and the sound of the hammer strike might bring the entire army of the Kingdom of Rust down upon them in this narrow hallway with their backs to the magically reinforced bars. And she knew that would be a sorry situation indeed.

Besides in combat he wasn't a great enough asset for them to expend all of their energy on. He watched as they reluctantly walked away, quickly being swallowed up by the darkness.

The Copper Bulls and Hornet-Lancers pushed forward, forcing the waves of rusted warriors backwards. They hadn't known what to expect but the army had come prepared to fight a vicious force. Nearly nine thousand rusted figures fought against three hundred Hornet-Lancers and six hundred of the Keellian Copper Bulls. The vicious warriors managed to push the rusted warriors back far enough that the Boccians still alive in the easternmost part of the city could be accessed. Two score priests had marched with the copper bulls and they immediately set to attending the rusted warriors.

As the Copper Bulls pushed forward their leader, Sanse Chaddle, a tall and thin man with short cut hair and angry eyes, recognized that some of their rusted opponents were wearing the garb of their Boccian allies. A smart man, he looked back and noticed that many of the Boccians had cuts and gashes reaching across their faces, arms and other visible parts of their bodies. Every cut was accompanied by a growth of the rust.

"Damn them," Sanse said, his mind immediately coming to a conclusion. "I want all but fifty of my men moving forward," he said to his second in command, "Those fifty start rounding up the Boccian survivors. Anyone with a wound I want separated and put in their own area in the city." The man didn't think of the orders for a moment, didn't consider anything about them or their implications, before turning and hurrying to follow the orders through.

Standing next to the Sanse was the ambassador of the Hornet-Lancers to the Copper Bulls. The man regarded Sanse and the soldier who'd taken the orders without thought or question for a few moments. He thought about the implications and his eyes widened. He looked to the two Hornet-Lancers put with him with the assignment of keeping him safe and both nodded in recognition. They hadn't heard the order and hadn't thought about it but they readied themselves for some sort of struggle in case it began. The Keellian Copper Bulls and Sprinkleberrian Hornet-Lancers weren't the friendliest of allies and more often than not disliked each other in the extreme. The guards had been given

the mission of protecting the ambassador for his safety against possible enemies both Keellian and, in this case, rusted.

"What're you doing?" he asked, "Those are our people."

"If they are a threat," Sanse said as he turned on the man, "then they will be neutralized. I've made no decision yet but we will act decisively and efficiently. That you can be sure of." The man was about to turn and run to the Hornet-Lancers, who were pushing the rusted army back from another pair of buildings that held Boccians within, but Sanse hit him in the back of his head with the hilt of his blade. The two Hornet-Lancers, who were stunned by the escalation of the conflict, were knocked out by Keellian Copper Bulls who'd taken the lead from their leader. The three Hornet-Lancers were bound with rope.

"There can be deviance from the plan," Sanse said to himself as he turned back on the battle. The momentum of his men had paused but the Hornet-Lancers were still pushing the enemy back. He grinned. Not only were they serving him by hurting the enemy but they were also distancing their main force from his personal actions.

"Once we've a good portion of the city secured, round up all of our Boccian allies," he ordered. The others nodded.

Garret and Telrun nodded to one another when they ran into one another. The rusted enemies had finally decided to concentrate on Garret's group and as they'd run from the forces they'd stumbled into Telrun and six of his scouts.

"Any other survivors?" Garret asked and Telrun shook his head grimly.

"I saw none," the scout leader said. The tracker master nodded solemnly.

"The costs have been great," Garret said and Telrun grinned.

"And they did better than anyone could have asked for," he said, "They died for their country."

"A noble death," Garret said.

"You two gonna quit the foreplay and start making out?" Sampson the tracker mumbled and the entire party shared a laugh. Then, as rusted arrows started to fly into the area, they started to run in the opposite direction. They broke out of the northern border of the woods and in the distance they saw dust rising up.

"You think this is it?" Telrun asked and Garret shrugged.

"We shall see. If it is, we'll do them the honors of being good and ready for it to be the end by exhausting ourselves!"

Delik, who struggled to keep his foot from failing him, could only laugh at their insanity. The others all shared in the brutal mirth.

They'd walked for almost another hour before coming into a room at the end of the tunnel. It was a rather large room with plenty of furniture, all of which was dusty and rusty, filling the room. To the horror of the companions there were human bones, as well as bones of other creatures, some of which they recognized and others they didn't, scattered across the floor.

"You have found me," a raspy voice said from the side. Weapons unsheathed immediately and the entire group seemed to crouch in a single motion, "Your friend who stayed behind was very brave. I will enjoy experimenting on him after I kill you."

"You're not going to do that," came the only response the companions would give.

Iustitia immediately looked over at Wombly, who had just spoken, and Carser, who stood ready to shoot their weapons.

Benny and Chance had jumped forward and were already rushing forward, both of them determined, for their own reasons, to end the fight with as much brutality and brevity as possible. Their blades were unsheathed and while Benny rushed forward quicker, Chance was wording a spell.

The Lich, the King of Rust, lifted a staff and launched a bolt of energy at them. Benny dodged but didn't move quick enough and his shoulder stung with the energy that the bolt burst into him. Then

Chance released his own spell but it bounced off a shield that protected the lich. It growled, its all but skinless face showing an expression of anger somehow.

The lich released another spell at Chance but before it could aim perfectly a loud BAM! filled the throneroom that was their final battle place. The bullet slammed into the lich's shield and the sparks that burst off blinded Tank and Iustitia as they rushed, too, forward. The lich, suddenly both infuriated and afraid, called on its rusty servants.

They rushed forward from the walls at Wombly and Carser, who both struggled to grab their melee weapons. Benny, shoulder smoking from the spell, was still climbing to his feet, still stunned and hurt from the spell, when one of the figures got to him. He turned his numb eyes on the figure and, for a moment, realized that he was about to die.

In the Boccian city the enemy was pushed back and seemed to be regrouping. Sanse pulled his own men backwards and set two hundred of his Copper Bulls to delay the enemy when they attacked again. The Hornet-Lancers, seeing the enemy regrouping, did likewise and came back to consult the Copper Bulls on combining the armies. The two forces had run across each other when the Keellians were only a few miles out from the city.

Disgusted, the Hornet-Lancers found the Bulls setting up camp instead of marching at full pace and only through a threat to inform the King, and Duke Sevrin, who Sanse and his Bulls feared, did the Hornet-Lancers manage to get the Bulls to march through the night.

"What is the meaning of this?" Shouted Trina, the second in command of the Hornet-Lancers and the leader of her current outfit, when she saw her men bound. Nigel, the main leader of the Hornet-Lancers, was working with Epop in the North and hadn't been able to get down before Trina was forced by time to leave for the Boccian Cities.

"They were obstructing my methods," Sanse said, staring her in the eyes.

"Methods? To do what?" Trina roared, enraged at the treatment of her soldiers.

"They mean to kill the wounded Boccians, M'Cap'n," said the wounded ambassador, who'd just started to recover from the blow to his head. Sanse nodded to his soldiers and they quickly put knives to the throats of the bound Hornet-Lancers.

"Before you begin your pansy-ethical shit, listen," Sanse said as Trina and the others unsheathed their own blades. "Sheath your blades or they die," the Keellian commander ordered and Trina grit her teeth as she slid her blade into her sheath. She looked past him to see that a good portion of the Hornet-Lancers had seen the struggle, as had many Copper Bulls, and that the two groups were preparing for a fight that had seemed inevitable since the beginning of the 'partnership'.

"They are turning to the rusted warriors," Sanse said, "You saw their men in the enemies ranks. It comes from their wounds. Our priests can slow it down but they cannot stop it."

"You have proof of that last statement?" Trina asked and Sanse shook his head.

"None less than I need, though. Their priests were surely working on their behalf and still the wounds fester and the rust spreads," Sanse seemed to enjoy the brutal display of logic as an expression of disgust spread across Trina's face, "That is all the proof I need to act."

"If that is all that you have, then I will not let you do it," Trina challenged and Sanse grinned.

"You couldn't stop me if you tried," he declared, "You have three hundred Hornet-Lancers. I have six hundred Bulls. Mine are better rested and more prepared for man to man fighting than yours. You are a second rate commander where as I am among the best in the Kingdom. I have superior men and-" a bolt, shot by one of the Hornet-Lancers behind Trina, flew just past his head.

Sanse's eyes widened and his nostrils flared with rage, "You'll pay for that, bitch!" he shouted and he pointed to one of the men. Through some communication that Trina and her Hornet-Lancers did not understand the man knew not to kill the captured Hornet-Lancer but instead punched him across the face.

"You don't want to do this," Trina said.

"Sire," a Bull said from behind. The others, Hornet-Lancer and Copper Bull alike, looked to see the Boccian survivors, wounded and unwounded, all sitting on their knees with blades to their throats.

"At my command I could end them all," Sanse said softly, soaking up the power as he grinned.

"You'll die so soon after that those who go to hell can personally torture you down there," Trina promised and Sanse grinned.

The producers of the dust proved to be Ryder and her outfit. Of those who'd been with her only half a dozen of the Hornet-Lancers had survived and close to a dozen of the scouts that had gone with her ran alongside the horses, which traveled slowly enough that the others could keep up. All of the men were bloodied.

When they met at the middle they all stopped.

"What is behind you?" Garret asked and Ryder split a rugged grin.

"Another eight hundred. We did a good bit of damage but not enough to be safe," she said and Garret grinned as she asked him the same.

"I'd say two or three thousand but I can't be too sure. The battles in the woods were intense," he said. "But my trackers handled it as best as any could expect."

"Not many survivors?" Ryder asked.

"None that we could find other than ourselves," Telrun said and Ryder nodded.

"I thought as much," she said. She looked to her horse, which panted and was lathered with sweat, then at the men. They were all bloodied in one way or another. "Seems to me we're in no good condition to run."

"Seems to me we're in no good condition to do anything but sleep and eat," Sampson said and all of the men and women, for the majority of the remaining Hornet-Lancers were female, gave a salute or huzzah to that.

"Might be that fighting is the best option we got," Ryder said and the others, who all ached from the running, silently agreed. Finally Garret spoke.

"Seems we've hit a pretty bad situation when a suicidal fight is our only good decision," he said with a grin.

"Damn good day to die, I'd say," Telrun declared.

The rusted creature flew to the side, punched by Iustitia. She looked at Benny. "Get up," and she was moving again, towards the lich. It retreated backwards as more and more rusted figures flooded in to the room.

Tank and Chance found themselves fighting together. Chance's dirk, Furyflicker, cut into one of the figure's face while Duskspawn, his sword, cut deep into another's chest. The spellsword realized he was in trouble and activated Furyflicker's ability and suddenly his entire body sped up, allowing him to pull both his blades out of the figures and to get Duskspawn up in order to block a stride from another figure.

He realized he was overwhelmed a moment later when he felt the pressure of a blade pushing on his back. The pressure, which should have quickly become pain as the blade cut through his leather armor and into his skin, disappeared and he spun around as quick as possible. The second he was all the way around he began to slash but instead he found Tank standing there, his flail destroying one of the rusted figures while his hammer-wielding hand pulled his heavier weapon back from the body of the figure that had nearly killed Chance.

"Thanks," Chance blurted, for he didn't really have time to say it, as he turned around to parry four different attacks all at once. Furyflicker's spell had faded, and he was left at his normal speed and it was going to be a full minute and a half before the dirk could speed him up again, but it'd gotten him past a most dangerous moment and the time to recover. Tank gave him a grunt in response.

He jumped backwards, more than willing to give ground to the larger numbers of the rusted figures, but when he felt himself bump into Tank he realized he didn't have the space he was used to. The stocky warrior was keeping his back protected as best as he could ask for but Chance knew that the rusted figures would win out in a battle like this. He'd been in too many fights against these things to

know that he could win when against numbers like this. In his heart he knew if they couldn't hurry it up then they'd be overwhelmed.

"Are the always loyal Hornet-Lancers about to kill three of their own to save some desert rats?" Sanse asked and Trina spat at them.

"Were it switched I know you'd give up ten times as many for half as much," the woman spat and Sanse shook his head.

"I'd give no men up because I'd happily let you kill the rats," the Keellian said. "But you Sprinkleberrians are so sentimental, so emotional. So ethical," he said the last word like it was a curse of some sort, "You and your kind are so stupid."

Trina could feel the hatred her soldiers felt for the man as almost as clearly as she felt her own.

"Damn you to hell," Trina spat and the man grinned even broader.

"Go ahead and try to send me there."

The rusted warriors closed around the group of trackers, scouts and Hornet-Lancers. It was a desperate situation but none of the soldiers even flinched or shook as their enemies got closer or closer. They all had fought this enemy for a few days straight now and had seen every trick the rusted warriors could see.

"They got nothing to surprise us with," Garret said, "So when you hit 'em, hit 'em hard because you've seen all they can do."

"Aye aye!" came the entire group's response.

They fought and fought, Tank and Chance making their way over to Wombly and Carser, who were defending themselves and Lidia, while Benny and Iustitia fought in the middle. Tank felt Chance's spell wearing off and knew he was almost out of time before the Rust Plague began to hurt him again. He could feel the pain, the dull sense of dry death, within him again.

"I'm failing!" he shouted, "Rush the lich!"

The lich laughed aloud as all of the warriors, all of which had heard Tank's order, turned on him. They were all in a perfectly easy line to destroy.

The undead creature had been hoping for this exact moments. As Tank felt Chance's spell of defense fail he hit the ground, paralyzed while the lich called on the same spell that the his rust dwarf had been using. The lich mumbled to himself, "Humans." Then he released the blast of energy, a dark and red wave of magic rushing forward and slamming into each of them.

Benny and Iustitia felt the bunching of their muscles, the spasming of their bodies, as they were the closest. They hit the ground. Wombly and Carser, Lidia and Chance, all hit the ground. The lich grinned, looking at them all. It's defenses were still up but its enemies were all stopped...

The wave hit Tank, who still lay on the ground paralyzed, and the canceling magic, which was able to paralyze the others, killed the rusted plague. Tank jumped to his feet, glaring at the lich. All of the other figures in the room that were made of rust all collapsed at the power of the spell and it was just the companions and the lich.

Trina heard the sounds of combat in the distance and knew that the rusted force was returning. She also knew that if she turned away the Boccians were dead.

"They're coming," Sanse grinned, savoring her helplessness, "Are you going to be the cause of infighting right before a fight for the city?" Trina's jaw tightened and she wanted to explode for all her rage.

The rusted figures were only meters from the warriors. The trackers, scouts and Hornet-Lancers prepared, all of them starting to yell out in unison.

"Come on! Come on!" one tracker shouted among the yells, "Come on! Come on!" Garret was shouting, "No Shocks! No Surprises! C'mon!"

"Die now, humans," the lich grinned and cackled, then, as Tank exploded in a sprint forward, completely unaffected by the lich's human paralysing spell, a roar on his lips, the lich released a dark red bolt of energy that would have stopped any man mid-sprint. The lich's bolt slammed into Tank's chest but Tank growled, roaring through the agony of the burning magic burrowing into his chest instead of dissolving as the lich expected it to, as the bolt did to humans upon impact, and kept moving forward.

"What?" the lich asked as Tank, the bolt running out of energy after digging deep into his chest, jumped forward and up with all his might, still roaring.

He flew through the air, his eyes filled with tears of agony, his weapon high above his head. The lich, which had been too cocky to prepare a second spell, looked up at the enraged man with wide eyes as Tank came down.

The roar reaching a loudest, proudest and fiercest volume, Tank snapped down his hips, his powerful shoulders, his muscular arms, his strong hands, his sturdily built, battle proven weapon all in close pursuit. With a loud crunch, Tank's hammer slammed into the lich's face with enough force to shatter all of the lich's facial bones.

Tank stood over the lich's stunned body for a moment before the wound in his chest took its effect and he crumpled to the ground, the magical bolt having dug deep into his chest before it finally expired. The lich's energy no longer fueling the paralysis spell on the others, Benny and Chance rushed forward as quick as possible.

"It's almost impossible to kill a lich so we'll have to keep it beaten-" Chance started but Benny slashed at it with Nameless, which beckoned him to do so. The sword hit the lich's body and the lich's raspy voice filled the air with a loud shriek of agony. It cried out for many moments before Nameless completely absorbed it, destroying its body.

"Not too hard with this blade," Benny said and Chance nodded.

"Damn," Tank's voice sounded from behind as he looked down at his chest.

Trina and Sanse glared off against one another, the intensity of the moment rising to an all time high, when suddenly the sound of combat in the distance disappeared.

"Huh?" Sanse wondered, looking away, and a bolt flew forward, hitting him in the forehead. Were it not for Sanse's helmet then he'd have died but the helmet was powerfully crafted and instead knocked him unconscious.

Across the field Hornet-Lancers reacted before the stunned Bulls could and quickly they overwhelmed the Bulls around the Boccian hostages. Trina looked around, glad for the change turning of luck, as the Boccians were saved and her own Hornet-Lancers that had been taken hostage were also rescued.

"No, stupid mammal no, no!" Chance and Benny heard from behind them.

"No, Tank!" Wombly shouted as she stood over Tank, who looked up at her with half-opened eyes.

"That one hurt a bit," he said with a bloody cough.

"Tank, don't give in, we can save you, we can save you," Iustitia pleaded, "Please, Tank, we can save you. Lidia! Lidia! Get over here!"

Tank looked up at Iustitia for a few moments as he faded out of consciousness, his eyes closing.

The trackers, scouts and Hornet-Lancers remained in the circle of defense for many seconds after the entire army charging them disintegrated into small flecks of rust. Stunned, they all stared at their enemy.

"I gotta admit," Sampson said, "They shocked me with that one."

Chapter Thirty One:

Lidia managed to keep Tank alive long enough for them to East Bocc. With the death of the lich, which was absorbed by Nameless, the rust plague disappeared. The Copper Bulls, who were left leaderless, had given in to the Hornet-Lancers without a fight, especially when General Stapem showed himself to be in attendance and in favor of the Hornet-Lancers' decision. The city was slowly being rebuilt as her citizens came back from West Bocc.

Iustitia and Benny shared Tank's weight on a small stretcher that they made from the rusted furniture in the Kingdom of Rust as they walked into the town. Upon seeing the first of the soldiers, who were wounded, Wombly asked, "What happened here?" The soldier, a young woman, just shook her head, wondering if she'd ever be able to explain what had happened to anyone.

Wombly, a renown Nose Breaker and one of the Companions of the Kingdom, was quickly recognized and they were brought into conference with Trina and General Stapem, where they thought they might get some explanation.

"What is it?" Trina asked when she noticed Wombly and a grin split across her face. Wombly looked tired and beaten down by the past few days and it was obvious that she had been in a fight with the rusted figures. "I should've known you and yours were involved with this," the Hornet-Lancer said with a grin.

Wombly nodded, "Tank is wounded." Trina looked back to a priest in the background and he quickly followed Deabla to where Iustitia and Benny were waiting with Tank.

"You always seem to know what is going on in this stuff, so what exactly happened here? And where were you?" Trina asked and Wombly signed.

"It's... a long story," Wombly said, "What happened here?"

"Maybe a trading of histories is in order," the general said.

"We got a good one to tell," said Telrun from the corner. In the room, a small house in West Bocc that had been left pretty much unscathed by the battle, was Telrun, Garret, Trina, General Stapem, Nyota, Ryder, Delick and now Wombly and Carser. Each person in the room gave their own account of what happened and why. It took a couple of hours for them to finish their recounting and by the time Wombly had begun Tank and Benny joined them. Deabla, they explained, hadn't come because he was walking among the wounded Boccians and raising morale.

By the time Wombly, Tank and Benny finished their story, Carser adding in any details left out or forgotten by the three, the entire room was set back by personal thoughts.

"Well.. if you're right about the time your fight occurred, then we all were saved by your attack," Garret said and Trina agreed. "We were in the middle of their two armies."

"It was a bit shocking to us," Telrun said and Garret laughed aloud. The others looked to the scout master and tracker master and wondered at the joke between them.

"Well... we are glad to hear as much," Wombly said. "None of knew of the army heading towards you, however," she assured him, "Had we know that, we would have turn and warned you. But we weren't aware of what was coming..." Benny looked uncomfortable for a moment but only Tank noted the darkened expression.

"We hold you at no fault. You did just what we'd have expected with the knowledge you had," General Stapem assured them.

"Well..." Wombly said quietly, "I think there's not much left to go over."

"I feel you're right," Trina said, "I think we're all agreed in that we'd like you to go to King Jev and give him a general idea of what happened here.. For all of us. We're going to remain here in order to help rebuild Bocc."

"We will," Wombly said for the group.

They companions left that night.

For all of the deeds done, Sprinkleberry showed no obvious change in her behavior. The battlefield demon's arrival seemed a random, if terrible, event to most citizens and they dismissed it as

such. The underground war between the Nose Breakers and the Black Hoods remained unidentified and both sides, wounded for a time, stepped back to lick their wounds and regroup for future battles.

Alron, Ajax, Danielle and Slim returned to Harold's Hill for several days. The inn, which had been the center of the underground war's intrigue and sneaky movements, seemed as calm as ever and no noticeable change occurred. It was as if the entire event hadn't happened. Several times during the respite Esmeralda chanced a question or two about the events that had unfolded, about Aspilla's absence and the entire ordeal but she received no substantial answers and the struggle remained shrouded in shadow and mystery.

Then, almost a week later, a figure covered in a gray cloak walked in. The figure stood at just below average height and was slim at the hips. Two slim blades hung in sheaths and a pair of daggers were strapped to the figure's body. A mask, black in the face with white where the figure's nose, mouth and eyes were located. The spot at the eyes hinted at red.

"What," the figure said, "Not that happy to see me?" The voice was raspy and it was obvious that it'd taken some damage in the recent past. The friends realized the cloaked and masked figure was Aspilla. They all rushed forward and embraced her.

"Are you.. okay?" Danielle asked and Aspilla turned to her. She looked to her friend in silence for a few moments then nodded.

"I'm fine," she said quietly. They all sat in silence for a few moments.

"Well," Aspilla's raspy voice sounded, "I'm going to bed." Each of the friends wanted to say something, to comfort her in some way, but none could find the words and Aspilla walked away, her thoughts known only to her.

Esmeralda looked up as the door opened. She expected more customers but her eyes widened in shock when Wombly, Benny, Deabla, Lidia, Carser, Iustitia and Tank walked through the door. Without meaning to, she counted their number as they entered. With a sigh of relief she realized she wouldn't be mourning any of her friends. She was shocked to find Benny, who she'd not expected to see ever again, was with them.

"Well," Tank mumbled as he sat in his chair, "we survived." The relief for Esmeralda and Denerick, and Alron though his was muted by Aspilla's plight, was all but palpable and the companions celebrated long into the night.

It was dark outside and all but Tank and Esmeralda were asleep or out getting things for further celebration.

"So.. you survived," she said and Tank nodded. "Through no fault of my own," he said with a wry grin. Esmeralda was shocked by the grin but she didn't show it. It was a pleasant surprise but it was one that she wanted to consider before she came to any solutions.

"Any new scars?" she asked and Tank shrugged.

"A couple," he said as he showed her his forearm, a long and thin scar reaching from nearly his elbow to the back of his wrist, then lifted his heavy shirt to show her a scorched circle. Only the newest of the scars, the scorched circle, stood out among the rest of his scars.

"Oh.. fun," Esmeralda said softly but Tank shrugged again.

"Some would say." Then they sat in silence for a few moments, Esmeralda studying Tank and Tank allowing himself to be studied.

"Not much has changed," she said.

"Alron seems different," he responded.

"Some has changed."

"He's killed," the stocky and experienced warrior assessed, "And it doesn't agree with him."

"Does it agree with anyone?" Esmeralda asked and Tank bitterly responded, "It does." He thought back to Chance, who had parted with them at Keell. Chance had departed with the east in mind and he'd only said one word to Tank before he turned and rode off into the distance, his mount and he both prepared for a long and arduous journey. The word still echoed in Tank's mind occasionally, over and over again.

'Sorry'.

"Alron isn't one of those men, then," Esmeralda asserted and Tank nodded.

"Rightly so." Neither found any words to say and so Tank said goodnight and walked up to his room to be alone with his thoughts.

Alron, Ajax, Danielle and Slim sat in silence, their moods dark with thought.

"You all look like you'd lost your dog," Asphila's raspy voice said from the side. They all looked to her for a few moments. "I'm not dead yet," she said, "so let's celebrate. I'm still here and you are too. We pushed the Black Hoods back and saved the city from a demon. We're pretty much super heroes."

She sat with them and pulled out a deck of cards, "Now that I've got this amazing poker face..." she said and none of her companions could refuse a grin at that, "I think it's time you started paying me."

They all stood together, all against the same creature, all in defiance and for the revenge of their fallen family. And they all accepted what was the inevitable.

"I will destroy you," they all promised together, all at once, all with the same conviction and all with the same reasons for it. And, as she threw herself forward, they did so as well. As she ducked and weaved, dodging attacks and strikes, giving out her own and bloodying the creature, they all knew that they were doing the same. They all felt the exhaust and fatigue, they all ached at the wounds they took, and they all felt a deep sense of primal satisfaction when they wounded the creature.

And when, finally, the creature fell they all stood over it together, all looking down through their original mother's eyes, feeling her rage, experiencing her revenge.

They felt the awe and fear of the others, those who weren't the same as her, those who hadn't found the power within, those who hadn't had the power within, as they regarded her and the garb that she had fashioned from the creature's corpse.

With a crude language the proto-humans spoke, asking her what she was, in the crudest sense. But for those who weren't her but were, at that moment, her the language was adapted to what they had experienced.

"Who are you?"

"I've a simple name."

"What are you?"

"The name is what I and my children will be called.

"And that is?"

"Umbra."

Tank's eyes burst open and he felt power surge within him. Suddenly he was aware. He looked around, regarding objects with knowledge he'd never learned and memories he hadn't earned. Then he looked to Iustitia, who sat across from him.

"Umbra?" she asked and Tank stared her in the eyes, "You mumble in your sleep."

"So I've been told," Tank said quietly, stunned by the information that he suddenly had access to. Knowledge gained didn't mean knowledge accepted and the understanding of what had just then learned was still unsure.

"Are we going to address this issue?" asked Wombly from the door and she and Deabla stepped in.

"Esmeralda is asleep," Deabla assured him, "she feels very well, knowing you're back." Tank realized he'd been wondering exactly that without actually realizing it. "Why is it an issue?" the young man asked. Tank, Wombly and Iustitia all wondered if it would be an issue.

"Excuse my misuse of vocab," Wombly said, "But still, if it isn't addressed then it will be an issue."

"So why didn't that spell work on you?" Wombly asked, "The lich itself proclaimed that it worked on humans and even Iustitia, who is vaguely human, was paralyzed by it."

Tank nodded, "Aye, I'd noticed that as he put a spell into my chest." The others shifted from foot to foot or in their seats uncomfortably.

"You've been having strange dreams," Iustitia said, "And they're not the kind that any human, to my understanding, has ever had. You overpowered a door that I couldn't open. You've gotten stronger, I see it, to the point that you're stronger and faster than any human you've ever seen before. You cannot deny this. You're not human."

"I'm not," Tank agreed.

"Did you know before?" Wombly asked.

"Before what?"

"Before you met us," she supplied and Tank shook his head.

"I hadn't a clue. I didn't even begin to suspect until last year. And even then I just assumed it was because I've had an unusual upbringing and the unusual events we've had to deal with in the last couple of years. I didn't have any idea that it would be so drastic a change until a few days after we'd entered the Kingdom of Rust."

"Well," Wombly said, "What are you? Do you know?"

"Umbra," he said, "I don't know much of my race but... we have communal knowledge that is shared through means that I've yet to understand. I believe the dreams serve as a way to bring in a new umbra. And there is no set age for it, the awakening, as I now know it to be called, it occurs when the umbra is ready.

"And it is my understanding that the process of awakening, and some times after it, are considered to be a dangerous period of turmoil, where the umbra that is awakening is at risk of going mad. I believe that because of our troubles with the lich and the spells that were acting upon us served in blunting the effects of the awakening."

"Are you still with us?" Wombly asked and Deabla nodded as Tank did.

"Still here, aren't I?" Tank asked and they all nodded. Contented, they all sat in silence for many minutes before, finally, Carser's head popped in.

"Wombly?" he asked and she smiled. Bidding them goodbye, she left. Deabla looked at Iustitia for a moment before leaving. Iustitia and Tank sat in silence for a few moments.

"May I ask something?" Iustitia looked at Tank and he looked to her, suddenly feeling something in his stomach. He nodded and Iustitia seemed to think for many seconds. "Is.. there anything?"

He knew what she meant and hated the question for it. It was a thought he didn't want to address and had hoped quietly that he would never have to. But she had, nonetheless, asked and he knew it was imperative that he answer.

"I don't know," was all he could say honestly. She looked to him for a moment, disappointed by the answer initially, then realized that he hadn't said, 'no,' either.

A small smile crossed her face, inspired by his lack of denial, and she laid upon the bed.

"Thank you," she said quietly and Tank regarded her curiously for a moment. "For the bed," she said as she rolled over to go to sleep and Tank grinned, more than content to sleep in his chair.

A Monster's Job: Kingdom of Rust

By Roderick Trujillo