

Crusaders

A Beginning

Crusaders

by
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Crusaders

For Cynthia, Daniel, Molly, William, and his Father.
It was Fun.

We begin our story five years past the decimation of a once proud people, a civilization on the brink of greatness which promised innovation and prosperity for decades to come. This civilization, though it had no name beside that of the land which it occupied, was governed by a singular woman whose power and glory was worshipped by all. When that power became corrupted, tainted by an evil which bore no name, this ruler sent her people into a state of plague and anarchy, effectively eradicating the entirety of what had made her dominion great. In the five years following, chaos and horrors sprouted up at an alarming rate, resulting in a broken continent where individual cities struggled to defend against brigands, monsters, and other evils. Sometimes, this defense would take the form of city patrols and watches, and other times, bands of heroes would form together and serve as guardians for whichever town could offer the highest rewards. This story tells the tale of one such band of heroes, who, in their later years, would come to be known by the moniker of the Miracle Crusaders.

Illuminated by a gaping hole high above in the cavern's ceiling, I searched the unfamiliar landscape of my surroundings with confusion. Pain seared in my body from the impact of falling three stories to the hard ground, but it seemed I had fared better than those I landed with. I knew

none of them by name, but three people besides myself had managed to possess such terrible luck as to have found their way into a dank and chilly cave underground. Laying on the floor as I did, they seemed to be trying to assess each other and me, perhaps wary of an imminent threat.

We were not all the same. That much I could tell immediately. Unlike my own skin, which was a well-tanned color, the large man who landed nearest me was an off-grey with almost pinkish hues. His face bore two small tusks at the end of a well-defined jawline, and he had no hair to be seen. Scar tissue covered practically every exposed part of his body, which was an incredibly chiseled and muscular shape, making it obvious that he had seen his fair share of combat. He was an orc, to be certain, but something slightly unusual in the way his nose was shaped indicated an almost human quality. *Surely no woman would have bred with an orc*, I thought as the man began to stir, lifting his torso off the ground and opening large eyes. *At least... not willingly.*

Having never seen an orc until that fateful day five years ago, when all of Ria shone with a garish white aura and life changed forever, humanity was still becoming used to living side-by-side such unnatural beasts. Previously home to regular folk alone, Ria became a land filled with monsters and creatures of all shapes and sizes. Goblins and gnomes, halflings and harpies, and at least a dozen other horrifying and disturbing fantasies emerged from whatever miserable plane of existence had previously held them. No one knew why they had arrived in Ria, nor where exactly they came from, but a clear majority of people wished them gone. Orcs and goblins were at the top of most everyone's list when asked which species they believed was worst, and it was simple to ascertain why. Five years of orc raids on small villages and frequent attacks by goblins did not generate a positive opinion within the community. I myself had met a few orcs two years back, and they had been decent enough fellows, able to drink themselves into oblivion and wake up the next morning feeling right as rain. If this man who lay beside me was anything like them, then perhaps we would get along.

Behind the orc, the other two strangers who were trapped with us looked much plainer. One, a man of middling height and a decent age, lay on his side struggling to keep down the contents of his stomach. He seemed human from what I could tell, bearing attractive features and dirty brown hair. I too felt a touch queasy, likely from the fall or whatever substance we had all been given that caused paralysis, yet I didn't share his struggle against hurling. As for the final person who I could see, she was a woman of incredible beauty, long brown hair flowing just past her shoulders and a delicate complexion making her seem like much more than a simple peasant. A green streak of what might have been paint ran down

both of her cheeks, making it appear as though she had been preparing for combat. Strangely, her ears bore a sharp point at the ends, a genetic trait I had never seen so defined in a human, but I quickly wrote it off as just a minor peculiarity.

After taking a minute to assess these strangers, I shakily forced myself to stand up and evaluate my surroundings. Besides us, the only other thing inside our cold, moist cavern was a crashed and splintered wagon. *The one which we had been riding in*, I recalled. Out of the fog in my head, memories flooded back to me of a grimy little city on the edge of the Aposian Coast. I had been there searching for a man, the man who killed my family so many years ago, but instead ran into a well-to-do gentleman who boasted knowledge about anything one might wish to know. Naturally, I asked him the question which had haunted me for the past four years. What is the name of the man who slew my parents? I knew a face, grinning and evil, yet had no name to match it. The well-to-do gentleman directed me to a small building on the far side of town where two hooded figures jumped me and forced a vile substance down my throat. Before I passed out from the drug, I helplessly watched as the hooded figures picked me up and took me to their wagon, tossing me inside. There were three other people there, unconscious and tied up, but I was too tired to try and wake them. That was the last thing I recalled prior to waking, and it seemed my companions were equally perplexed.

Across the cave, the pointy-eared girl had gotten up, and she stared at me now with a chilling glare, brown eyes filled by suspicion. “Who are you?” she asked me, a hint of an accent I did not recognize in her voice. “Why did you drug me? Why was I brought here?”

“My name is Telos,” I told her slowly, trying to avoid unnecessary confrontation with someone who had clearly suffered a similar ordeal to my own. “I took no part in drugging you nor do I know where it is we’ve been brought to. I believe that we were in that wagon, but the ground gave way and we fell into this cave. I promise you, I mean no harm.”

Frowning, the pointy-eared woman stepped closer towards me, exiting a darker portion of the cavern and coming fully under the light. She was a decently tall person, closer to the other man’s height than my own, and her shape was fit yet slender. “I am called Astrid,” she replied, extending a hand to me. “I apologize for any alarm I might have caused you.”

Amused that this thin and beautiful woman would ever have thought she frightened me, I shook my head while restraining a chuckle. “Think nothing of it,” I managed to say without cracking up. “We’re all in the same situation here. Isn’t that right my large friend?”

I had directed my question to the orc, the massive man who stood nearly a head taller than anyone else. He was staring at the pointy-eared

woman and I with a frown, clearly attempting to puzzle out the situation. “Elf and human taken here like Gäree?” he asked us, voice booming loud enough that it would wake the deepest sleeper. Though he did not bother to name himself as Gäree, it was obvious that was what he meant.

“Yes,” I answered him. “It seems that we were being transported across Ria in that wagon for some reason. It’s beyond me what the reason was.” The name which he called Astrid was also beyond my knowledge, as I had never heard the term “elf” before. *Perhaps another creature from the Otherplace.* The Otherplace was what humanity had dubbed whatever world or realm these beings hailed from, where they had lived up until the disastrous events of five years ago. Hardly anyone knew what went down that day, when the world had shaken and the capital was destroyed, but it had left behind changes that would never go away. Namely, these other species of people.

Still frowning, the orc’s nostrils flared as he let out a huff. “That wagon?” he asked, pointing to the wooden carriage which lay on its side in splinters. I nodded in affirmation, and he smiled a wide, toothy grin. In massive, heavy strides, the orc made his way over to the wagon and gripped its underside with his hands. Astrid and I watched as the muscles of Gäree’s body tensed, straining to lift the broken heap of wood. Quivering with the effort, the orc let out a shout of rage as he exhausted every inch of his strength to complete the task. Stunned into silence from his achievement, we stared as the cart began to rise from the cave floor, debris and dust falling off as it moved. Underneath, two more people’s unmoving bodies were uncovered as the orc set the wagon down a few feet away. Turning back to us, he looked at our awestruck expressions, and a proud glow highlighted his grey features. “Gäree strong,” he boasted, and neither Astrid nor I could deny it, not after witnessing possibly the most impressive show of might I had ever seen.

Walking over and searching the two bodies which had been revealed by Gäree’s feat, it was simple to assess that one of them was dead and the other still breathed faintly. The dead man, flattened in the middle by the weight of the carriage he drove, had on his person a thin knife, a meager ration of food, and a pouch of what I instantly recognized as the drug used to subdue me back near the Aposian Coast. As I searched that man, Astrid had decided to search the other, rummaging through his pockets in search of useful items. She found a vial of pinkish liquid labeled “curative” on the side in black ink and pocketed it.

“Help... me...,” whined the man who Astrid stood over, lifting his head to plea to us. He was a middle-aged man with creases on his forehead, garbed in common clothing any regular person might wear. His dirty blonde hair had specks of wood sprinkled along it, and his back bent oddly.

Probably from where the wagon struck it. Clearly, the man was in a fragile state. “My name... is Ollie. Please help... help me.” His desperation came through alongside pain in his tone, obviously fighting against his injuries. I looked to Astrid to see what she thought of helping this man, a man who may have been responsible for our current whereabouts, but it appeared our orc friend had ideas of his own.

Bending, Gäree grasped the injured man by the torso and lifted him up into the air, making Ollie begin squirming and groaning in agony. “Tell Gäree why you take him here,” commanded the orc. “Only if you tell us truth then we help Ollie.”

“Gäree,” I said, putting my hand on the man’s bicep, “maybe we should ask him questions while he’s on the ground. It will be easier for all of us.”

Thinking about what I said, Gäree stared at Ollie in his grasp. The man’s face scrunched up in pain and his back twisted grotesquely from the wreck. For a moment, I believed the orc was going to listen to me, letting Ollie go and allowing Astrid to utilize the curative she had found, but no such thing happened. Instead, the sound of our final companion’s voice rang out into the cavern for the first time, soft, but bearing a charming quality. It was the voice of someone who knew how to get what they wanted through manipulation, a voice I recognized from many years of dealing with such individuals. “Gäree is it?” he asked gently, moving right up beside the orc. “My name is Malzahar. You’re a strong man Gäree, I can tell from how you moved aside that pesky wagon and how you hold this man with such ease. You can use that strength to make our friend here talk. Make him spill the reasons he had for taking me... us prisoner and bringing us here. You want that, don’t you Gäree?” Nodding, the orc licked his lips and grunted. “Then make him talk for us Gäree.”

Clearly taking this Malzahar’s opinion over mine, Gäree began gently shaking Ollie, causing the suffering man to yelp in discomfort. “Tell Gäree the truth puny man,” ordered the orc, rocking his prisoner back and forth violently. “Why bring us here?”

Tears streaming down his cheeks, Ollie did his best to speak through the apparent pain. “I had no... no part in that!” he cried desperately. “All I did was... drive the wagon here from the coast. They... they’ve been threatening my family. My wife and daughters.”

“Gäree, that is enough,” said Astrid delicately, hoping not to provoke him while he held onto the fragile Ollie. “He seems to be speaking truly. I believe the man.”

“Don’t listen to her, Gäree,” chided Malzahar louder, making sure to seem more confident than Astrid or me. “This man took us away from

loved ones and homes, from where we wanted to be. Don't trust him so quickly as you would an innocent man."

Snarling, the orc glared daggers at Ollie in his arms, getting angrier by the second. "Tell Gäree why you bring us here!" he shouted, forcibly jostling his captive back and forth as the wounded man shed gleaming tears. "Tell Gäree the truth!!" Still, he rocked him back and forth, up and down so violently that, in my eyes, Ollie began to blur. The man offered no other answers than what he had given, though it seemed he tried to and found his voice muted by the agony of his situation. "Speak little man!!!" Gäree roared this final command as Astrid, Malzahar, and I merely stood back and watched him, shaking Ollie until a sickening *snap* rang out within the cavern. In Gäree's arms, the wagon driver fell still, and his head lolled sideways to leave empty eyes staring down at the floor. For a moment, none of us spoke, each looking at what Gäree had done. The man was dead, that was to be certain, and not one of us had really bothered act to prevent it.

"Great work," Malzahar frowned angrily, kicking a rock on the floor toward the somewhat peculiar-looking orc. "I told you to ask him questions, not kill the bastard."

Shrugging, Gäree dropped Ollie's lifeless corpse from his hands, his still warm body colliding with cave dirt and splaying out limply. "Gäree not try to kill weak human. Human too weak to survive gentle shaking? How Gäree supposed to know that?" Seeing the completely honest demeanor which the brutish man possessed, I realized that he truly had not realized his captive's life had been in danger, never having considered his strength would prove fatal in such a way. Astrid too seemed to understand the complexities of our situation, and she stared at me questioningly to see how I might respond.

"It's okay, my friend," I said calmly, placing a gloved hand onto the orc's forearm. He had yet to lower his appendages from the position they had been holding Ollie in, and Gäree looked at the crumpled corpse with disdain. "Even if he spoke truly, the man still helped take us prisoner. He likely had dozens of opportunities to do something, anything which might have prevented him from ending up with us in this cave, but he did not. He's just as much at fault in all of this as we are, and you did nothing but ask him a few simple questions. It was his injuries from the fall that did him in, and there's nothing we could have done to stop that."

Huffing, the odd-looking orc nodded and dropped those brutish biceps to his side. Tension drained from Astrid, Malzahar, and I as we all relaxed and took a breath ourselves, three simultaneous inhales sounding as Gäree plopped down on the cave floor. For a moment, everything was relatively okay, with the four of us quietly taking in the predicament. Oh, while some

truth laid in the words I had spoken, about the captured wagon driver and his plight, we all knew that Gäree had done much more than merely shake Ollie. He had killed a man, and we were all witnesses. As witnesses who failed to help the man, most would likely deem us liable for the crime as well. If anyone found out and chose to let a mayor, or worse, the Devote, know what we did, then it would be straight to the gallows.

Thinking on it for a moment, I came to the belief that whatever punishment some mayor or governor deemed necessary would truly be a minor annoyance compared to that of the Devote. Known for their unflinching sense of loyalty to Ria's most corrupt figures, as well as an unsavory reliance on violence, the Devote would no doubt end our lives for what Gäree had done, and no one in their right mind would dare try to intervene. Though they favored punishments which were enforced against Otherplace criminals, those fiends who were caught doing vile acts and happened to be something else than Rian, there were still hundreds of instances in which their swords, whips, and knives tore into human flesh, hacking at it until the offender passed out from pain, died, or completed their sentence. Should a third party intervene at all, by either trying to fend off the Devote or convince them to cease punishment, that party typically became next to receive discipline. I shuddered to think of being subjected to the Devote's brutalization, and the fear which struck at me meant there was no chance I would report Ollie's death to any authorities. *Hopefully*, I thought anxiously, as Astrid stared upwards to where light shone from the cavern's broken ceiling and Malzahar searched the rest of the room angrily, *my companions also see the reasons not to share details of this... accident.*

"Now what do we do?"

The sudden sound of Malzahar's voice, no longer as charming as he had been to Gäree, surprised me as I pondered that exact same question. Devoid of anything save us four, three bodies, and a broken wagon, the setting of Ollie's murder provided little in the way of interest. It was dim, as caves are, yet gleaming light from a wagon-sized fissure above illuminated most the central region. Beyond that lit up zone, I could glimpse no other passages, natural or man-made, and I was not particularly interested in remaining down beneath the surface. Dark and terrible things had begun to claim the underground as home ever since the Otherplace came to Ria and infested it with monsters. Compared to orcs like Gäree and those ever-irksome goblins, the Terrors which burrowed beneath land were far, far worse.

"Gäree not want stay here any longer," answered the hulking man, squinting at the bright fissure with perplexment. "We need way to reach surface. Maybe build ladder from wagon or climb out with hands?" I was

legitimately shocked to hear such a reasonable train of thought come from the orc's mouth, having already dubbed him an unintelligent oaf. Sure, there was no way the plan to build a ladder could succeed, given our lack of nails or building equipment, but it was creative and utilized a resource I had yet to think of. As for scaling the wall, there was certainly no chance of that.

"Perhaps I could manage the distance," Astrid offered, moving lightly to stand at Gäree's side. "If you threw me, then maybe I might have a chance at grasping an edge."

"No way," cut in Malzahar, frowning at them both. "Though I appreciate the initiative, you'll surely get yourself killed by trying that. Elf or no elf, a leap that large would find you as fit as poor Ollie."

Glad to not be the only sane person among us, and disappointed to be alone in not knowing what an "elf" was, I fiddled with my pockets to see if anything had been left inside. Before being taken, I had carried a trifle or two which mattered to me, one a ring of my mother's, and another a wrinkled, old letter, but everything was gone. *Must've been stashed somewhere else while we were under.* Their loss was a significant loss for my happiness, but neither would have been useful to escape the cave, so I did not fret about it for long. "What do we all have on us? Anything that might serve a use?" I presented to them the slim knife, food pouch, and drugs that I had pillaged from our dead captor as a gesture of goodwill. They did not seem like they wished to hurt me, but all three remained strangers, and they likely held reservations about trusting me as I did them.

"Gäree has nothing," replied the man, a dissatisfied frown contorting his scarred face. Once again, despite his uncouth and seemingly simple demeanor, I found myself unable to dislike the pinkish-grey orc. He truly did remind me of the two I drank with back in Rivlenheim, and there were plenty of humans worse than them. I liked to call myself an open-minded sort, though like practically any Rian I did harbor prejudices against beings from the Otherplace. If forced to choose between two completely unfamiliar figures, with one being a human like me, and the other being like Gäree, I would choose the human every time. Was it right? Probably not, yet five years of hearing about orcish raids on villages and towns built a certain mistrust not easily shaken. Until Gäree did something wrong though, I supposed trusting him was not that hard. He had killed a man, unfortunately, but most people I met nowadays had. Some, like me, had killed several. It would take something worse than an accidental murder to make me completely distrust the odd-faced orc.

Removing the vile of curative from her pocket, Astrid shrugged and tossed it in the air. "All I have is this mixture. It was likewise removed from the wreckage down here. It may not be helpful for leaving, but I think

that it might prove invaluable to me down the road.” As she spoke, the vile had soared high above even Gäree’s impressive height, and it fell back down quickly. Barely glancing, Astrid snatched the bottle back from the air and returned it to her pocket.

“Impressive,” admitted Malzahar, “though nothing I could not do with a knife or ball.” Not bothering to check or show proof, he too announced a lack of valuable items or tools. “We need a different strategy for escaping this pit,” he frowned, stroking his well-trimmed beard absentmindedly. “I read once that caverns such as these, hidden mere feet beneath the surface, are particularly easy to break through. If we could manage to find another point in this place that’s near enough to reach the ceiling, Gäree might be able to just bust through.”

“Gäree strong!” grinned the orc, affirming his approval of this new plan. I was less enthused, but there was no need to debate.

From above, beyond the cave, a voice called down to us. “Good sirs and madam, it appears you’ve found yourself in quite a spot of trouble.” Peering over the side of the cavern’s open ceiling, a man’s face smiled broadly. “If you’d like some assistance in escaping this dreadful predicament, I am more than happy to offer mine.” When none of us objected to his suggestion, the grinning stranger disappeared, only for a thick rope to slide into the cave and fall toward the floor. “Climb on up,” the man called, and we listened.

Astrid went first, scaling the rope gracefully. There was no fumbling or uncertainty in her movements, and in a swift minute, the elf was out of sight. I had never seen anyone move so perfectly before. Comparatively, Malzahar’s assent was a clumsy thing, though, if he had not been preceded by Astrid, it would not have seemed so. My turn climbing was much worse, nearly resulting in a deadly fall back to where Gäree waited. Luckily, I slipped at the top and not halfway, so Astrid was quick to grab my flailing arm and pull me to safety. It was a moment or two after catching my breath that I finally set eyes upon our savior, and how he looked shocked me. Stout, bearded, and dressed in fine clothing, it was obvious that he was not human. Though I was a tall man, short only compared to the orcish Gäree, this fellow barely stood above my hip. Dwarves were not uncommon in Ria, at least not anymore, but my experience with their kind was minimal. As Gäree clambered out of the cave and stood beside the rest of us, the dwarf spoke again.

Never letting his broad grin drop, our fortunate savior gestured with his arm at himself as he gave a loud introduction. “My name is Dagen Stonehammer, of the Stoneborn Dwarves who hail from the Laydlin Mountains.” My lack of knowledge when it came to Otherplace society showed as both Gäree and Astrid nodded, clearly understanding the

importance of this Dagen's statement. Whether Malzahar knew or not, he pretended to. "It seems you four found yourselves in a terrible spot of trouble. Were you traveling to a nearby town and simply had the misfortune of driving your wagon over an unstable part of the countryside?"

"Gäree got kidnapped!" said the orc sadly, rubbing his massive arm with a callused hand. I had not planned on sharing anything about my journey here with this dwarf, but once Gäree began speaking, the rest of us followed suit. One at a time we shared the paths that brought us to waking up together at the bottom of that cave, and a common thread arose. Over the past month, all of us had traveled to the Aposian Coast searching for answers. What questions we sought to have resolved, well, that was not something we were about to share. I certainly did not intend on telling these people too much about me or where I came from. At least, not yet. It was Malzahar who realized all of us had been captured after talking to the same man, a man who offered every answer we could dream of.

While discussing this, Dagen merely stood by and listened, nodding along and smiling. "I figured you were not simply trying to visit any of the nearby villages," he chortled once we all quieted. "The closest one is this place called Meathaven, and, despite its name, that place really isn't the paradise you might think it is." Something about how bizarrely friendly this dwarf was made me want to distrust him, but I had no real reason to. After all, he had saved our lives. "It is a great thing that I found you four, heroic-looking youths," continued the dwarf. "I have a job that needs doing, and I would wager you all could get it done. There is a place called Fandren, and I seek strong men and women to defend a shipment of supplies I am bringing there."

"I am not looking for any such work," Astrid told him. "There are places I need to go and people who need to be found." Her sentiment was one I related to, and it appeared the others did as well.

Before any of us could walk away, separating and continuing the individual quests that brought us together in the first place, Dagen spoke one final sentence in hopes of convincing us to assist him. "There will be profit for those who agree to aid me." Spinning on his heels, Malzahar was the first to take up the noble cause of assisting Dagen in transporting his wares to Fandren, a city none of us had ever even heard of. Gäree and I were next, with the peculiar orc enthusiastic about earning gold. Astrid took more time, walking several steps into the distance as she muttered to herself. When she turned back around and joined the rest of us, there was a look of uncertainty in her eyes I knew well, but she voiced no complaints as Dagen shared the details of our contract.

Thusly, my tale begins; a tale of danger, heroics, and a great deal of wealth. We were four strangers, each of vastly different backgrounds, united by a common desire for riches, power, and maybe a small wish to play the savior of a helpless town. On the route to Fandren, a medium-sized settlement that, at the time, suffered from the cruel control of a dangerous militia, I learned about my companions. Among us, there was the brutish half-orc, Gäree, the icy elf, Astrid, the selfish and arrogant thief, Malzahar, and me, a rugged and lonely mercenary who sought vengeance for his family. I knew not that I had just met my dearest friends, nor that we would someday become legends in the pages of history, but I did know one thing at the time of this beginning. Being a hero is dangerous work, and sometimes, you don't live to tell your own story.

Riding into Fandren, Dagen at the reins and the rest of us jammed into a small storage area in the back of the wagon, smells of warm bread and delicious mead washed through the air. Compared to the fishy and unpleasant aromas of the Aposian Coast, this was a very nice change, and I delighted in each lingering scent. "Gäree hungry!" insisted the jolly, grey giant for the fifth time in as many minutes, but he had a point. It had been a day since we took our last meal, and emptied stomachs rumbled loudly for fresh food.

Knocking on the wooden surface of the cart between us to get Dagen's attention, I informed him of the group's wish to find an inn and feast for an hour or so. The dwarf, typically cheery, seemed burdened by something he did not share, yet he conceded the necessity of my request. "Go on," he told us, "get a snack in your bellies and hurry back to me. I shall await you in the town center alongside Mayor Heron and my partner. We'll have your payment all sorted out."

Happily, I hopped out of the wagon and landed in the dirt road, Astrid, Malzahar, and Gäree dismounting beside me. Ignoring a few surprised looks from the townspeople, mostly toward Gäree and Astrid, we strode to the entrance of a building labeled *Lion's Den*. Through the creaky, brown door wafted even better smells than those outside, including honey roasted hams, succulent sausages, steaming flagons of ale, and more. A serving wench politely greeted us, with some reservations about our two companions from the Otherplace, and we were promptly placed at a table in the far back corner of the inn's main hall. "What'll ye be having?" she asked, drawing out a note pad to take our orders. Malzahar desired a simple meal of steak and wine, I requested ale and a lamb chop, Astrid ate a plain

bowl of salad, and Gäree... well, he demanded almost every item on the menu. Ribs, lamb, chicken, steaks, and all the different forms of meat a man might consume were brought to the table, and Gäree devoured each like it was nothing.

At several other places around the room, bands of mercenaries and travelers were eating, chatting, and gambling the night away. Malzahar took an immediate interest in the games of dice, eyeballing lesser players who he thought might be unable to notice a bit of sleight of hand. "Hey Gäree," he said cheerfully, stomach filled with booze and mind a tad bit skewed. "How would you like to make some extra money?"

Frowning, the half-orc stared at Malzahar questioningly. "How much money is Malzahar talking?"

"A *lot* of money, my friend," Malzahar answered, clapping a hand onto Gäree's shoulder. Due to their height difference, his arm made an upward angle to the other man's. A frown shifted into a wolfish grin as the pink-hued orc stretched his legs and stood from the bench, and the two men went walking off to gamble. They would not return for an hour or so, coming back richer than they had begun, but I am getting ahead of myself. At this point in my story, Astrid and I had our first real conversation, and that conversation would someday mean a lot to me.

"So," I said to her, elbow resting casually on the table as I leaned across. "Care to enlighten me about yourself?"

Straight in her seat, and not looking amused, the woman arched an eyebrow. "Enlighten you about what? I do not see why we need to discuss anything other than the contract Dagen has given to us." An unfriendly sort of person Astrid was, more ice than fire in most situations. That coldness might be useful in deadly or serious situations, but it did not make her the most delightful conversationalist.

Trying not to seem stupid or rude, I stated what I wanted to know plainly. "What is an elf?" Dwarves, goblins, orcs, and even Terrors were familiar to me, but not elves. "You look human, but Gäree and Malzahar call you something else. I have never heard of an elf."

Brown gaze fixed squarely upon me, Astrid was unfazed by my revelation. "We are like you, as far as I can tell, only more advanced in nearly every way. Agility, strength, stamina. All three are naturally superior in my blood. Most Rians do not know of my people," she responded, "because my people are few in this world."

"Why is that?" I asked her, shifting so that I had an arm stretched across the booth's back. "What happened to the rest of you?"

Never changing expressions, Astrid replied calmly. Her eyes, however, wept with unspoken sorrow. "They did not come to this place when I did." Gesturing to the inn and everyone inside, she shook her head.

“None of this is my home, Telos of Ria. When the darkness brought me here, I was alone and afraid. We, those who you say are from the Otherplace, are a mere fragment of the peoples in our own world. Many of us lost families and friends by being dragged here, into a civilization where we are feared and hated.” Across the room, Gäree celebrated a successful hand in cards alongside Malzahar, and the intelligent thief pocketed several bags of gold. “The orc was a soldier,” Astrid continued. “He has not shared this with me, but I can tell from his scars. Likely, he had brothers and sisters in arms who fought beside him in great battles. Those people would have been like family to him, but now, he is alone. Like I am.”

In five years, I had never considered what it would be like for someone such as Astrid to be forced to live in this land. Forcibly separated from their past, the people from their world were likely terrified of this new reality. As Gäree and Malzahar returned from their distractions, I pondered the implications of what my ally had said. The words would stick with me for years, though I did not appreciate them fully for some time. If not for the commotion that began outside, I might have asked further questions of Astrid, but it was not to be. An angry shout roared from the streets, drawing everyone’s attention to the doors of the *Lion’s Den*. Without any words, all four of us hurried to exit, with Malzahar first in line.

A setting sun illuminated the grim sight in the city center, where five red-cloaked men dragged a pair of bloodied and maimed figures across the dirt road. I recognized the Vermillion immediately, and it seemed as though my companions did too. Dagen had shared with us all he knew about the militant group that claimed dominion over Fandren, and from his tales, they were a nasty lot. Tossing the bodies they held aside, the Vermillion soldiers stopped in place and turned to address a growing crowd of citizens. “Good people of Fandren,” shouted one of them. “These young men attempted to interfere with Lord Earno’s work here in this nasty little village you call home.” Bending down, the speaker threaded his fingers into an unconscious man’s hair, forcing his face up off the ground so the audience could see it. Where his skin should have been was only blood, and it was clear that his flesh had been peeled away in many places. “This is what happens to traitors who think Fandren does not need our help to stay safe.” A sick slap sounded as the Vermillion shoved the dying man’s head back into the dirt. “The goblin hoard outside of town is becoming bolder, and without Lord Earno, you will all suffer. Only an hour ago, two travelers were taken captive by those disgusting wretches, probably so they might be used as food.”

Pushing past several other citizens, a ragged-looking old man made his way to the front of the audience. In his hand, he held an array of maps,

some which looked old and others new, and he leaned upon a cane of solid oak. "It wasn't goblins who took Dagen and Sildar!" the man cried. "I saw you grab them, Tiz. It was you and your men who handed them over. And they aren't the first people to go missing from these parts."

Snarling, the leader of the group, Tiz, stalked over to the peculiar man and grasped him by his suspenders. The Vermillion soldier was a red-haired fellow of fair height, distinct only for the jeweled patch which covered his right eye. "You saw nothing of the sort, Daren." Shoving the man, Tiz made his maps go flying all over, catching in the slight breeze and fluttering away. "None of what this pathetic, has-been hero said was true, fair townspeople," Tiz insisted, "and any disappearances are surely the work of that nasty group of goblins."

Fists clenched tight enough to bring white to my knuckles, I was just about to pitch in my opinion of this brutish thug when Malzahar did it for me. "Step away from the man," demanded our resident trickster. "If you seek a fight, then perhaps you will be satisfied with a younger opponent."

Laughing, Tiz rolled his eye. "And you think you can slay all of us?" The five Vermillion all seemed equally amused, but Malzahar was not backing down. Seeing that this was not going to be resolved any other way, I took a step forward to stand beside him. Astrid and Gäree's steps were the only sound which followed, and then all four of us stood ready to do battle. When Tiz gave the order to his men, and the robed warriors rushed into combat with their swords drawn, we each reacted swiftly.

Drawing out the weapons Dagen bestowed upon us during our ride to Fandren, the fight commenced. Astrid fell back a bit to make use of her long-ranged skills, knocking an arrow as Gäree, Malzahar, and I met the Vermillion blade for blade. My sword danced against several partners, spinning fast to keep up with multiple assailants. Beside me, my orcish friend swung heavily with his great axe, almost cutting off an enemy's arm in a single chop. Just as an arcing shimmer of steel was about to tear my chest in two, an arrow soared by and lodged into the attacker's head. He was the first to fall. Another death came moments later as Gäree managed to sink his axe in a man's back, flattening the miserable soul against the road in the process. "Gäree strong!" yelled the orc as Tiz struck at him with a pair of short swords. One of the small weapons sliced Gäree slightly, and the muscular man lashed out angrily with his axe's handle, slamming it under Tiz's ribs and launching the Vermillion soldier several yards away.

Forgetting his discarded opponent, Gäree assisted in killing the remaining two foes. Astrid had struck one of them with an arrow in each knee, leaving him mostly immobile as I sliced my blade under his chin, and Malzahar handled the other, throwing a knife hard and fast so that it

lodged firmly in the man's sternum. Truthfully, the Vermillion were disposed of easily in that particular battle, barely wounding my companions and me. During the excitement, none of us gave a thought to Tiz as he scurried off back to wherever he and his lord hid, but we would deal with him eventually. For now, attention turned to Daren and worries over Dagen.

"Thank you, thank you," the older man said as Astrid helped him onto his feet. "Back in my hay day, I would've lent a hand to that tussle. Alas, weary bones aren't much good for fighting." Reaching into his pocket, Daren withdrew a crisp, red apple and handed it to Malzahar. "Here lad," he smiled. "I grow hundreds of them at my farm on the edge of town. You lot are welcome there any time."

"Gäree also deserve reward for helping," grumbled Gäree to my right, not quite quiet enough to not be heard. Chuckling, Daren withdrew a second apple from his clothing and gave it away.

Inspecting the ripe fruit, Malzahar opened a pouch at his belt and dropped it inside. "Thanks for the apple," he said, somewhat sarcastically, "but it's information I believe we could really use. The four of us were hired by the dwarf, Dagen, to help him with transporting his cargo. It seems like we ought to go and rescue him and his partner from those goblins you mentioned earlier, but I don't believe any of us know the way." He was correct in that assumption, as nobody in our merry band had ever set foot in this region of the continent. Luckily, Daren was more than capable of providing the necessary knowledge.

Rummaging through a few of his maps, most of which he had retrieved after the battle, the apple farmer plucked a wrinkled parchment out and handed it to Malzahar. "Here you go," he said. "This map will show you the surrounding area, and I marked the goblins' lair on it. The little buggers are a sizable group, even if they are weak, so be careful." Nudging me in the side, Daren laughed at himself. "If you all do come back after beating those creatures, then you might be on your way to becoming local heroes."

Disregarding his jokes, Malzahar thanked the apple-man, as we would come to call him amongst ourselves later on, and addressed the group. "Are you all ready to go?" he asked us. Head nods all around confirmed it, and we departed from the city we had only hours ago entered, now searching for the man who brought us there. Checking the map Daren gifted us every few minutes, getting to the goblins' lair turned out to be a simple task. Distinct and well-tred paths led through the woods where our destination lay, so the journey was peaceful. Yet, when we arrived, the adventure started to immediately turn more dangerous, and it began with a rustling in a bush.

“Stop,” said Malzahar in a hushed tone as we strolled along the trail to the mouth of the goblin’s lair. Listening to his surroundings, the thief held his hand up to caution us. A gentle rustle within the bramble to my left momentarily alarmed me, yet nothing else occurred, and I asserted my belief that he was wrong. Malzahar was unconvinced. “There is someone else here,” he insisted, and that was the only warning we had before a black-cloaked figure dropped from the treetops.

Flames, brilliant and burning, erupted from this assailant’s fingertips, barely missing my body as I rolled to the side. “Why are you following me,” they asked, voice a peculiar and spectral sound. With the cloak covering this person’s entire body, it was hard to know what they were, but I guessed it was a female.

“We were not following anyone,” I assured her, considering pulling my sword free from its sheath. “My companions and I are here in search of our employer, a dwarf named Dagen. He was taken by the goblins who reside in this area.”

Some tension drained from our attacker’s shoulders, and she drew back her cloak’s hood to look at me more plainly. Beneath the cowl, this woman was inhuman, her crimson skin and sharp horns making that abundantly clear. A *Pywraith*, I thought, my heart skipping a beat as fear flooded through me. I had encountered her kind once over the past five years, and in the ensuing battle nearly lost an arm to its flames. Creatures imbued with living fire, the *Pywraith* were rumored to be children of a dark god, sent to the mortal plane in hopes of ushering in their father’s arrival. I still have the scars on my body from the scalding magics of the last *Pywraith* I happened across. “My name is Void, and I too seek something from the goblins,” this woman said, otherworldly voice hanging in the air long after her lips stopped moving. It was an uncomfortable thing to listen to.

“Why should we trust someone who just tried to incinerate me?” I demanded, gesturing to where the forest floor was blackened and charred from her spell.

“Mayhap you should not,” she agreed, “but I would provide a valuable resource.” Snapping her fingers, a thin lick of flame spouted into the air. “My magic could prove quite useful when aimed at your enemies.”

Hoping someone else might have an issue with recruiting this “Void”, I kept my mouth shut tight. Alas, none did, and the *Pywraith* smiled faintly as we all returned to the beaten path. It seemed as though Astrid and Malzahar took an immediate liking to the suspicious woman, chatting with her as if she hadn’t tried to kill me. Thankfully, Gäreë did not seem as enthusiastic, but I was mostly certain he was just disappointed the fight with Void had not lasted longer. Either way, it was he who I talked to

during the final minutes of the journey, sticking with boring topics. As the cavernous entrance to the goblin's lair came into view, he and I were sharing our favorite ways to kill a man with minimal effort.

"There it is," Astrid whispered, hunkering down behind a medium-sized bolder to the right of the entrance. A river ran out of the cavern's mouth, likely stemming from a subterranean lake of some kind deep inside. By the mouth of the river, where it turned into a waterfall and continued off toward the distant sea, a lone goblin patrolled as a lookout. "Allow me," our resident archer said, knocking an arrow and taking aim. One eye closed and fixed on the target, she released her string. A strangled yelp announced the goblin's demise as the arrow burrowed into his pale green flesh, and, after freezing for a moment, he tumbled backwards and fell over into the river.

Led by Malzahar, the five of us scurried around the rock and snuck closer to the lair's entry. Peering around the side, we checked to make sure there weren't any more scouts waiting in the darkness. When the coast was sufficiently clear, we headed onward. At this point in the story, my own inefficiencies started to show. My three companions from the Otherplace were all blessed with the power of improved sight, meaning that pitch black tunnels did not bother them. Even Malzahar, who at the time I believed was wholly human, possessed superior vision than I, leaving me to fumble about for a wall to steady myself. Frankly, it was an embarrassment, and it was certainly a disadvantage my companions were not shy about mocking me for upon occasion.

Bumbling at the back of our procession, using Gäree as a guide by holding onto the back of his ragged and torn shirt, I hoped desperately that wherever these goblins were keeping Dagen and his partner would have more illumination. As it happened, a faint light did begin to flicker at the far end of the tunnel as we walked, the small river still flowing at our side. Approaching the light, we found ourselves at a fork in the cave, two sloppily carved tunnels leading in either direction. Noises, like the distant sound of an unrecognizable dialect, echoed from one of the tunnels, while the second was silent. "Which way?" Malzahar mouthed. Astrid pointed to the louder path, and the rest of us took her direction.

Trying hard to maintain some level of stealth, even with the heavy footsteps of Gäree, we snuck along, entering a slightly darker area. My miserable vision again proved a detriment as my comrades halted in place without warning, leaving me to stumble forward until I collided with Gäree. "There are goblins in the adjacent chamber," Void's voice suddenly sounded in my head. Temporary surprise faded as I recalled learning about the Pywraith ability to form telepathic links, and I listened to what she had to offer. "Eight goblins in total, each armed with rudimentary weapons." I

was not sure when the horned woman had overtaken Malzahar to stand at the front of our little line, but I supposed it was good she did. Being able to communicate without alerting the enemy was a useful advantage.

“What we do now?” asked Gäree, his words much deeper and louder in my mind than Void’s. I had not figured the telepathic link would allow all of us to speak, but that was certainly better. Part of me was shocked that our orcish friend had not been alarmed by a sudden voice in his head, but I suppose I had misjudged him. Again.

Shifting my weight, I gripped the handle of my sword. “If we rush in and catch them off guard, then the battle should be over quickly.” Goblins were notoriously poor fighters, and with the combined strength of our party, eight would not prove a challenge. “Give the signal, Void, and I am ready.”

An eerie silence fell over my mind as everybody considered the plan. “Ready?” Void inquired as I slid my blade partially out of its sheath. Her signal was more of a mental feeling than a verbal command, but there was no doubt when she wished for us to attack. Ahead of me, I heard my companions run forward, Gäree shouting his battle cries, Malzahar clinging two daggers together, Astrid a noiseless assassin, and Void lighting her hands ablaze. It was then I realized how useless I would be in this skirmish, with the room only somewhat illuminated by Void’s fire. Flashes of combat flashed in front of me, with my contribution being little more than a few pointless slashes at nothing. Settling down and trying to avoid getting skewered by a stray goblin attack, I listened to the fight go on without me. Shrieks of agony and anger made me wince, most of them inhuman. At one point, a feminine voice cried out in surprise, and I thought it must have belonged to Astrid. Another set of yells accompanied by the clang of metal hitting stone reached my ears, and a few seconds later, a bright light engulfed the entire room.

The aftermath of our goblin battle was a bloody, horrid scene. Severed limbs, all belonging to the little monsters, were scattered around everywhere. Gäree’s great axe was coated in chunks of gore and insides, but the mighty warrior smiled proudly over his slain opponents. Malzahar was standing over a tied-up man, a figure I did not recognize, and trying his best to undo knots which bound him. Beyond those though, what frightened me most was Astrid and Void. Kneeling over the elf, Void was frantically trying to bandage a bloody tear in the elf’s side. Putting my sword away, which was slick with a taint of red, I rushed to her aid and dropped to sit beside them. “She’s dying,” Void told me, fear lacing her voice. That much was obvious, and the glaze which was covering Astrid’s eyes did not do anything to boost confidence.

“What happened to her?” I did not really expect an answer, yet I asked anyway, fumbling at my belt for a roll of bandages.

“The wound appears to be from a sword,” Void replied, accepting my bandages and starting the process of wrapping Astrid’s side. “How one of those goblins managed to cut her so high-up, I do not know.”

Something inside me paused for a moment, digesting the logic behind Void’s assessment. Goblins, known for their diminutive stature, would never have had the strength or height to hurt Astrid so badly. My sword was covered in blood though. Combining those two facts in my mind, and realizing the truth about what happened, I wanted to scream. With a gauntleted hand, I cupped Astrid’s cheek, looking into her weakening stare. Her lips trembled, and I noticed again how beautiful she was, brown gaze finding mine so that we might see each other fully. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, stroking my hand from her cheek to her hair, pushing the brown locks back behind a pointed ear.

“Tel... Telos...” She struggled to say my name, and hearing her strain made my heart ache harder. I had killed so many people in my life, all brigands and murderers themselves. Never had I taken the life of a friend. “Te... Telos... my pock... pocket.” Forcing the words from her throat, the intentions behind Astrid’s strangled speech became clear, and I quickly acted to do as she said.

Withdrawing a vial of liquid from her pocket, I handed it to Void as Astrid smiled faintly. I had rarely seen the elf’s face bear anything but stoic determination, so the curve of her grin was a nice surprise. Uncorking the pinkish substance, which I recognized as the curative she had taken off poor, forgotten Ollie, Void forced those happy lips apart again to pour the potion inside Astrid’s mouth. Its effects were not immediate, but, after a minute of watching and hoping for some change, the color did slowly seep back into the elf’s complexion. “She will survive,” Void breathed, setting the now emptied bottle aside. “Thankfully.”

Guilt still ate at me as I looked at the mistake I made and the woman I almost killed. Years later, I would come to think back on this moment as one of the worst in my life, an action that nearly cost me my future and my friends. At the time, however, there were other pressing matters to attend to as Malzahar, Gäree, and the now-freed prisoner made their way to my side.

“Is she going to be alright?” inquired Malzahar. His concern was visible, but, after being told that Astrid would be just fine, it faded. “This man is Dagen’s partner,” he explained to Void and me, though the former was focused on checking Astrid’s vitals for the fifth time. “He claims that the dwarf was never given over to the goblins. Says those fiends back in the city kept him for their own purposes.”

"It's true," the freedman said, his voice stoic and proud despite his battered and bruised body. The goblins must have been beating him before we arrived, yet he acted as if nothing was wrong. I could not decide if that was brave or stupid. "Earno wishes to get information out of him. He'll be kept alive until he breaks."

Beside Malzahar, Gäree snorted in amusement. "Gäree would never break," he said. "Only weak warrior breaks."

Ignoring his remarks, I rose from the rocky floor and brushed off my pants. "I suppose we must make haste to save him then. What is your name?" For all the talking he did about his various jobs and friends, Dagen had never actually told us his partner's name on the long ride to Fandren.

Standing tall, the man gave the appearance of a nobleman. His beard was shaved close, and his eyes were a striking blue. In height, he stood about the same as Malzahar, meaning a few inches below myself who was, in turn, a few beneath Gäree. "My name is Sildar Autumnbrooke, son of Gilroy Autumnbrooke and a lord of the Wintertide Valley. I am grateful that you rescued me, and more so that you would risk your lives to help me save my friend."

"Think nothing of it," I said. "Though, you will still be expected to pay my companions and me for our services. I assume Dagen made you aware of our arrangement?"

"Of course," returned Sildar. "I would never presume to cheat you all. In fact, I may pay you extra for the added burden of my rescue and that of the dwarf."

The promise of additional gold made Malzahar and Gäree perk up, shooting a quick glance at one another. I was certainly pleased too, yet my guilt continued to outweigh any enthusiasm. "We should get going," I said. "Astrid will be healed by the time we make it back to Fandren, but who knows how long Dagen will last under this 'Lord Earno's' questioning." I had experienced the sort of questioning men like that did, using the most brutal and horrifying forms of torture they could conceive to extract intelligence, and I had my doubts about the cheerful dwarf's ability to withstand it.

Searching around the room, Sildar frowned. "Do any of you have a spare weapon I might borrow? A sword or knife perhaps? Even a war hammer would do." Neither Gäree nor Malzahar had anything to offer, with the great axe being enough for the orc and the thief not willing to simply forfeit one of his many knives. I likewise had no additional weapons, having only been given the single sword by Dagen.

"What about a bow?" suggested Void, pointing to the discarded possession of Astrid. Made from a sturdy oak tree, her bow was a fine piece of equipment.

Shaking his head, Sildar denied that choice. “I have never been particularly good at archery,” he admitted. “I need solid steel in hand to truly unleash my fury upon the battlefield.”

With a sigh, I unbelted my own sword from my waist and tossed it to the man. “Here, I can use the bow, and you can take my sword.” Though I was more comfortable swinging a blade, I had trained for several years in the art of archery and knew my way around the weapon. I would never reach Astrid’s level of ability, but I could be of some use. “We need to leave now.”

Accepting my sword, Sildar thanked me in more words than necessary. Void helped Astrid to her feet, the elf being semi-conscious and capable of minimal speech, and we began to exit the goblins’ lair. As usual, we used Malzahar as the leader of our party, trusting his adept sense of danger and eyesight to guide us. If I had not known better, I would almost have guessed there was something inhuman about the man. He would tell me a few months later that he was, in fact, of two different worlds, but at the time I had no clue.

Very little discussion was had as we hurried to depart, moving as fast as possible down the tunnel we had come from. Our wounded ally made it a slower process, but, in minutes, we emerged into the room with the forked paths. A stomping noise made us stop, standing still in the center of an emptied chamber. Footsteps heavier than Gäree’s were shaking the floor, originating from the second tunnel. “Did you not already defeat the goblins’ leader?” asked Sildar, his noble voice entering my mind through Void’s reinstated telepathic link. Something more than words poked at my brain coming from the bruised man, a feeling along the psychic connection that was not my own. Fear.

“Void, get Astrid outside,” Malzahar said as the footsteps pounded louder. She put forth no arguments and turned to hurry away, supporting the elf as they headed for the forest. The rest of us watched for a second or two, likely wishing we could run with them. Well... I wished that. I seriously doubted that Gäree did. Either way, there was no chance left to flee as a gnarled and large head came into view from the tunnel, bearing an even more ugly face. Attached to this monstrous head was a hulking torso, arms as thick as tree trunks, and legs that were even bigger. Not even Gäree was quite as tall and bulky as this creature, which I recognized as a cave-dwelling troll, and I shuddered to imagine what the club it held would do to a person if swung full-force.

“Who are puny critters in Klark’s home?” asked the troll, peering down at us like insects. Only Gäree was able to look it in the eyes without having to turn his head upward, and the troll seemed to hate him most. “Orc!” it shouted, voice like rolling thunder. “And my snack?” this

statement was directed at Sildar, and that made me realize why the goblins had been beating him. Tenderized meat tastes better after all. “Orcs is not allowed to come inside my home! And snack should not be here!” Pausing to consider the situation, the troll smiled. His teeth were like yellow stalagmites, jagged and uneven in size. “I suppose just killing intruders is easy fix. Make four tasty snacks instead of one.”

I was frozen in horror as the massive beast lifted its club, preparing to smite us and feast on our warm corpses. An arrow from my bow would have little effect on the thick hide of a troll, and I greatly missed the weight of my sword. Sildar, thankfully, seemed to not be as frightened as I. Brandishing my blade, the lord of the Wintertide Valley took a running leap at our enemy, shouting “For the Rian Alliance!” as he raised the sword overhead. Despite the beast’s size, it lumbered to the side just before Sildar reached his target, and the weak and battered warrior went careening into the nearby wall with a painful-sounding thud. As my sword dropped limply from his hand, clattering to the floor, Klark the cave troll let loose a bout of laughter over the failed assault. I myself had a hard time keeping a straight face and saw the same struggle on Malzahar’s.

Speaking of the thief, he had busied himself by collecting an assortment of daggers from the many secret slits and hiding places within his clothing, holding three in each hand now. Dodging a slow swing of the troll’s burly arm, Malzahar threw the knives straight at his foe’s chest, burying them deep in pale-blue flesh. The shock of the daggers piercing him confused Klark, leaving him open to another attack from Gäree. “Gäree strong!” the orc yelled, competing in volume with the thunderous bellows of the troll. Swinging his axe in a diagonal slash, he cut Klark’s arm to the bone. The agony which the troll felt was released in a blood-curdling scream, and, from then on, his focus shifted solely to a battle against Gäree.

Turning into single combat, orc versus troll, brawn versus brawn, Gäree and Klark struck at one another again and again. Every time the club flew at his body, Gäree would perform a last-minute duck or merely parry with the thick handle of his axe. A second strike with his weapon on Klark’s arm separated the troll’s limb from his torso, taking the club with it. A rain of blood poured to the floor as he used his remaining hand to clutch at the wound, and I knew Gäree had won. Gritting his teeth, the troll fought against his pain to retrieve his club, yet there was no point. Invigorated by the thrill of combat, Gäree kicked Klark from behind as the troll bent to grab his weapon. “Gäree and friends not be snacks for you,” he said as he stood over a helpless opponent. The squelch of his axe entering the troll’s back signaled complete victory, and Malzahar and I were left to stand in pride, disgust, and horror over his success.

“Are you alright?” I asked Sildar, providing a hand in helping him up from the floor. The man looked even worse than he had when we found him now, a brand-new bruise forming on his forehead and grime covering his torn clothes.

Trying to seem strong, the man affirmed his health. “There’s nothing hurt but my pride,” he replied to me, and, despite his protests, I made him lean against my shoulder as we departed the goblin’s lair. Gäree had claimed the troll’s club as a souvenir, though, like Gäree himself, it was covered in wet blood. Malzahar had made sure to collect the thrown knives, wiping them off on his pant-leg before hiding them again. Together, we were quite a mess, and that was not including our final two companions who waited in the forest. Void asked no questions when we reunited, and Astrid could not, but that did not stop us from sharing the story of our battle. Specifically, details about a certain unsuccessful lunging strike were joked about as we headed for the city.

Our beginnings are a humble tale. We faced no terrible conquerors nor ancient terrors. Like most classic adventurers who gain outrageous fame, we began in a relatively remote town and saved a person or two. One of us almost died, which would surely have altered the entire course of this story, and another proved his strength. We gained an ally in a man named Sildar, who, for a multitude of reasons, never managed to become very popular within our merry band, and we were given a new mission. Technically it was the same mission- find Dagen and get the payment we had earned- but there was a difference. Instead of fighting savage goblins, we were going off to fight savage men. Lord Earno Drakandy was certainly a savage man, and, unbeknownst to most of us at the time, he had connections to our company which proved to complicate matters further. It was a cold, dark night as the six of us prepared to sneak into the abandoned mansion where the Vermillion resided on the edge of town, and it could prove to get darker still.

“I’m still not entirely convinced that these robes are going to fool anyone inside,” worried Sildar, tugging at the red cloak he wore. It had been a group decision that he, Malzahar, and I would don the clothing of the Vermillion, making it seem as if we belonged within their hideout. Gäree, Void, and Astrid, whose wounds had healed nicely thanks to the curative, were bound by a hempen rope at their wrists. They were to be our prisoners, three Otherplace species dragged into captivity like animals.

Not everyone liked the plan, specifically Sildar and Void, one of whom was opposed to wearing the garments of his enemy, and the other who disliked being constricted by the tight ropes, but all went along with it.

Upon returning to Fandren, Sildar had gotten to work immediately, sharing every detail he knew about Lord Earno's operation in the city. Originally a group of mercenaries, the Vermillion had worked for several minor towns and figures all along the continent until coming under the authority of Earno Drakandy. Formerly a man of honor and prestige, it seemed that he had taken a dark turn during the last five years, enraged by the sudden appearance of the Otherplace peoples. With the Vermillion to support him, he began a conquest in the Wintertide Valley, slaying those who had taken residence there from the other world. However, being only a small force, the Vermillion were outmatched by a band of orcs they tried to eradicate. Following that loss, an alliance of people from both Ria and the Otherplace was formed in defense of all lives, driving Lord Earno and his supporters away from the valley. That, Sildar said, was how the man came to call Fandren his dominion, cowering in a small, secluded city far removed from the lands where his name and face were well known. Apparently, Sildar had taken up his partnership with Dagen, another member of the alliance who moonlighted as a merchant, to hunt down Earno and return him to the Wintertide Valley so that he might be punished for his crimes. It was a mission I could respect, having spent years of my life pursuing my own demons, and by the end of his tale, my opinion of the warrior had improved.

"Do not worry too much," Astrid said to him, standing a few steps ahead of me. "At least you are able to defend yourself." We had tried to tie the bindings around their arms as loosely as possible, but it was true that they would not be prepared for a fight. Well, except for Gäree who likely could simply snap the ropes by sheer force. As for weapons themselves, Astrid's bow and Gäree's axe were carried by me and Malzahar respectively. The thief struggled at first with the hefty weight of an orcish great axe, but, after a bit of balance practice, he adjusted.

Shifting her weight as we descended the stairwell on the side of the mansion, Void tried her best to seem like a captive. None of our supposed prisoners were particularly good at playing the role, and it worried me. Getting caught in our scheme might result in dire consequences, so their performances were crucial. A mistake inside the compound, at least before we revealed the real reason we were there, meant certain death. I, for one, was not ready to die just yet. Hopefully, the gags we were now slipping over their mouths would reduce the risk.

Knocking on the entrance to the Vermillion's hideout, we waited silently in darkness. Lord Earno was clever enough to not use the

mansion's main building as his base but instead use the basement and catacombs which ran under the area. If not for the helpful tip given to us by Daren, we would never have known to not bother searching the mansion proper. A gentle series of knocks, a cleaned set of red cloaks taken from the bodies of the earlier slain Vermillion soldiers, and a bit of luck was all we needed to enter the lair of our enemy.

Two guards stood armed on the opposite side of the entrance when the metal doors opened outward. On the right, a man of modest height and stocky build scowled at the six of us. He had a scruffy and tangled beard which matched the look of his messy, blonde hair. His companion, a woman of angry eyes and a tall frame, leaned against a long stick which bore a curling blade at the bottom end. "What's this?" she asked, directing the question to Malzahar who stood at the front with Void. Peering closer, the woman grimaced. "Is that a demon or something? Ugly as hell I'll tell you." Glancing at Astrid and Gäree, she snorted. "An ugly lot all around. Where'd you three find them?"

"Aw come now," the man grinned, stepping a touch closer to Astrid. "They're not all so hard on the eyes." Taking an even nearer look at her, he backed off in surprise. "That's a wood elf I reckon. Not common to find. Where *did* you pick these creatures up?"

Trying to push the conversation along, Malzahar did his best to answer the question. Astrid and Gäree appeared on the verge of snapping at the guards, especially Gäree, and I prayed they could restrain themselves. "We found them trying to join up with the goblins in the woods. The Pywraith is some sort of hired muscle, as is the orc, and we think the elf is their leader. Hard to know though."

Nodding, the male guard frowned. "Wood elves are trickier than your common monster. I saw one manage to blend into a city full of decent folks once. She slipped into the lord of the area's chambers at night and slit his throat straight open. Nasty business. I haven't seen a 'pyrath' before. Is that what you called it? Are they too dangerous?"

"They can be rather formidable when they wish to be," Malzahar confided, gesturing to the bruise on Sildar's head from where he had crashed into the wall.

"Brutish beasts, all of them," said the woman. "Especially orcs." Building up a bit of bile, she spat at Gäree's feet. "A group of those horrid things tore through my home town like it was paper. Claimed they were paying us back for killing one of theirs, but we were simply defending our homes." Gäree was practically growling with rage as the woman went on, droning endlessly about the terrors that orcs had brought to the continent. When she finally let up, I thought it was lucky he did not rip free from his bindings and smash her skull in. "I suppose you three did a good job. Lord

Earno will be proud. We can bring you and the prisoners down to Tiz, and he'll sort the rest out."

"Thank you," Sildar said as we headed down deeper into the catacombs beneath the manor, the male guard gently closing the doors behind us. Down and down we went as they continued to speak and ask questions about our capture of Astrid, Gäree, and Void until we finally arrived at the bottom. We stood in a medium-sized room then, carved neatly into the ground and lit by brightly burning torches. A large fountain, filled to the brim, shimmered and rippled at the far end. I was surprised to see such a good-looking structure after trekking through goblin tunnels, but it was a refreshing change.

Only a single door led away from the fountain room, plain and made of solid wood. Guiding Astrid in front of me, I made to head through it as the female Vermillion spoke a question I dreaded. "How long have you been working for the lord?" she asked. "I don't recognize you from around here, but I know he has a few men out and about the countryside."

Freezing, I was at a loss. Sildar too seemed unsure of how to proceed, eyeballing the door, his sword, and the door again. Among us, only Malzahar managed to think quick enough to provide a possible explanation. "We only joined a week or so back," he shared. "The three of us came here from Everwinter in hopes of making a name as adventurers, but we found a calling instead. You understand how that is."

Stopping beside the fountain, the woman chuckled. "Yes, yes I do know how that is. Somedays, I reflect on my life before Lord Earno showed me this righteous path, and I laugh at how foolish I was." Pausing, she aimed the pointed end of her stick at Malzahar, never losing her triumphant grin. "But, I am no fool now. There have been no new recruits in the last two months, and I know this with certainty. Who are you?"

Shocked that he had been caught in his lies, Malzahar tried to find some loophole around his mistake. "There's no point!" shouted Void, restarting the link between our minds. "We must kill them now!"

That statement was more than enough to stir Gäree into action. Pulling free of Sildar's grasp, the orc flexed his arms with all his might to break free of the ropes. One by one the hemp strands snapped, splitting apart until he was entirely unrestrained. The male Vermillion watched in surprise as Gäree strode forward and grabbed his friend by her throat, lifting her into the air. His mouth still blindfolded, it was impossible to understand what he yelled as Gäree began to choke the woman, squeezing thick fingers into soft flesh. She did her best to swing her staff, managing to cut him lightly. All that did was enrage him more, and, instead of strangling her, he pushed her face down into the fountain's waters and growled as she started to drown.

“Mariah!” shouted the man, brandishing his weapon and running to her rescue. A dagger from Malzahar’s cloak flew and buried into his chest as he did so, sending him to his knees as the bubbles of air began to stop in the water. When they faded completely, and Gäre released his hold on the woman’s head, she did not get up.

Removing the blindfolds and ropes from our friends, we tried to sort out the mess we had made. Bodies were dragged behind the staircase, blood from the man mixing with the pool of water dripping off the woman, and weapons were returned to their rightful owners. It had not been ideal, as we had hoped to reach wherever Dagen was being held before revealing ourselves as enemies, but there was nothing we could change now. On the other side of the door, voices were chattering softly about incoherent things. At one point, as I listened with my ear pressed against the wall, I thought I heard them mention plans for taking a castle as their new headquarters whenever Earno was done with Fandren, but the details were inaudible.

“What do we want to do?” Astrid questioned, speaking with her mind and not her lips. “There is no telling how many Vermillion scum lie in the next room.”

“I can handle it,” said Void, stretching her neck and arms. “I think it’s time I show these pathetic thugs just how powerful my people can be.” She did not offer any hints to her plan nor ask if anyone else had an idea, yet the glowing red which suddenly lit her eyes told me she did not need assistance. “I call upon you, lord of flames, fiend of the otherworld and master of manipulation.” She was chanting in an entirely different language now, unrecognizable to me but for a few words. From those, I gathered that she was gathering magical power to her body, channeling whatever connection she had to the arcane arts. As she stopped speaking, her entire body flickered with an orangey-yellow light, and the room had grown significantly hotter. “I will only be a moment,” she announced, moving forward and throwing open the door. Shouts of shock, horror, and anger rose in the adjacent room as they looked upon death, but their cries ended momentarily. A minute passed, and Void stumbled back into the fountain chamber, looking tired and sick. “It is done.”

What lay beyond the door was a sickening and terrible scene. Ash floated in the air and settled on the stone floors, forcing us to cover our mouths and noses with rags. The stench was surprisingly tolerable, more akin to that of roasted game than a decaying body, and there was smoldering furniture and decorations everywhere. No matter how many Vermillion soldiers had occupied the room previously, there were none now. Instead, several skeletal masses were strewn about, and even those were hard to distinguish as human due to their high level of dilapidation.

The heat required to do something on this scale, through sheer force of will and magic, had to have been incredible, yet the entire room was now cold. After performing such a massive spell and still managing to walk out on her own two feet, it was clear that Void was a powerful being. I had not witnessed a feat of arcana that strong in my entire life. The rest of my companions seemed just as surprised by Void's deeds, yet none was about to complain. She had done as she said, killing the Vermillion and giving us an easy path onward into the depths of the catacombs.

Crossing the ash-filled common room, we threw open another door and boldly dashed into the next chamber. Nobody was there. Three hallways led off in various directions, each lit by torches hanging every few feet, and signs hung describing what they connected to. The signs read "Barracks", "Meeting Hall", and "Prison Cells", letting us know quickly which one we wished to take. Though finding and stopping Lord Earno was important, our greatest concern was freeing Dagen, so, without dissent, all six of us hurried toward the rightmost hallway.

Footsteps and breathing filled my ears as we trotted along, swords swinging at hips and arrows jostling in their quivers. We were an intimidating lot, that I knew, and, as we emerged into the makeshift prison, the expressions of our enemies reflected that. It was a small space, consisting of a few poorly made beds, two buckets, and a gate separating those things from the rest of the room. Four people were shackled to the beds, their eyes staring incredulously at us as we stood there in the entryway. From the looks of them, they had been there for weeks, with the men having unkept beards and the women faring only slightly better. Their terrified gaze's focused on Gäree and Void among our party, likely fearing the orc and Pywraith meant them harm. Dagen was not among the prisoners, a disheartening discovery, yet three Vermillion were. They had been crowded around the final occupant of this dreadful room, a malnourished and curled-up goblin, kicking at him and saying foul things. This stopped upon our arrival, of course, but the goblin did not cease his quivering, remaining right where he was at the feet of the Vermillion, weeping in pain.

Focusing on us, the Vermillion soldiers ignored their previous entertainment. Of them, there was one whose face was unfortunately familiar, jeweled eyepatch and all. Tiz, who had assaulted and humiliated Daren the apple farmer, glowered at us with hatred. "You guys just don't know when to keep your noses out of other people's business do ya?" Pulling a set of gleaming daggers from his belt, the man shook his head. "I'm surprised you made it this far down here, but you'll go no further. I'm going to take your heads and bring them to the lord as a gift."

Yanking my sword free, I smiled at the thought of ending this vile man. “The battlefield is too small for us all,” Astrid said, her slight accent stronger in my head than if she had spoken aloud. “I believe it would be smarter to divide ourselves.”

Agreeing with her, I gestured behind me, back down the hall we came from. “Gäree and I can handle these three, you guys go find Earno.” As I thought it, the first of the Vermillion swiped at me with his blade, barely missing his mark. “Go!” I shouted in the link, side-stepping another strike and countering with my own. When I checked again, Astrid and the others had left, leaving only the orc and me to deal with Tiz and his cronies. Kicking off the wall, I spun in a semi-circle and lashed out at the one-eyed man with my foot. The heel of my boot connected with his chin hard, knocking him down to the ground where he nearly landed atop the still-cowering goblin. During this, Gäree seized his chance to attack the other two men and slashed sideways with the dull side of his axe. One of the men ducked, barely avoiding Gäree’s heavy blow, but the other was less fortunate. Taking the full force of a blunt metal object to the gut, he lifted from the floor and slammed into the jailcell’s bars, bones audibly cracking as he hit. The limp body slid to the ground as prisoners screamed in horror, their fear of Gäree doubled. Behind Tiz, the goblin’s shaking slowed a bit as he peered questioningly at the orc who slew one of his abusers.

“You cannot do this to us!” whined Tiz, rising to his feet and standing back to back with his remaining ally. “We are righteous in our actions! Lord Earno promised me a place at his side when order is restored to the lands.” Twirling his daggers, he thrust at me as his companion swung a rapier at Gäree. Both failed to wound us terribly, but the knife’s tip did tear a rip in my clothing, cutting a thin line in my chest. “He said we would rebuild Ria into what it was five years ago, before these monsters arrived and everything became so twisted.” Raising his axe into the air, Gäree brought it down in the middle of the two men, separating them and allowing me to overpower the man with the rapier. His eyes went blank as steel pierced his heart, and Tiz’s ranting turned to a fervor. “Those beasts aren’t meant for this world of ours. Everything went wrong. The capital was destroyed, the famines and diseases spread worse than ever, and these monsters showed up. They’re a plague just as terrible as any other, even if some don’t realize it.” Cutting at me with his knives, the man stumbled when I dodged under his arms, pivoting and slicing my sword across his hamstrings. “Argh!” he cried as he collapsed to the floor, and there was true fear in his expression as he looked upon Gäree who loomed over him. “Hail Lord Earno, the destined ruler of this world.” That pathetic declaration of faith and loyalty was the final thing he said in life. Terrified

eyes bulged as he felt my sword slide between his ribs, and he clutched at the protruding tip in desperation. Then, he fell still.

Bending down to stare into the empty gaze of his enemy, Gäree spat in the face of Tiz. “Weak man not better than Gäree.” Grabbing the jeweled eyepatch, he tore it from the dead man’s head with a frown. “Weak man not better than any of friends.” Ignoring the fact that it had been on the corpse of a wretched person, covering the hollow socket where an eye should have been, Gäree placed the patch over his own right eye and tied it on tightly. “Gäree strong,” he said solemnly. “Will remember your weakness. Always.”

Scurrying out from under a bed, the battered and starving goblin slunk his way to Gäree’s side. He was an ugly creature, all skin and bone, with droopy ears that hung oddly and a lopsided mouth. “Qik not want be weak,” said the goblin in the common tongue, though his pronunciation was not perfect. “Qik want be strong like Gäree strong.”

Considering the minuscule goblin by his side, the orcish warrior seemed to think hard on the statement. In fact, I would say it might have been the hardest I ever saw him think up until that point in our time together. “Qik no longer be weak,” he agreed, picking up one of Tiz’s discarded daggers and offering it to the goblin. “Qik will be strong.”

Eyes blazing with excitement and anticipation, the little goblin reached his boney hand forward and wrapped thin fingers around the dagger’s hilt. For a moment after Gäree released it, it seemed like the goblin would not be able to hold the weapon on his own, being too malnourished to wield it, but, after some effort, he raised it in the air. “Strong!” he squealed, in what he probably imagined was a ferocious roar. Gäree smiled in satisfaction as he looked upon the goblin who he would now take under his protection, and I too could not help but smile as I took a break from unlocking the cell door. That goblin, who was once named Qik of the Fandren goblins, would henceforth be called by the name Ströngue, and he would travel with us through the darkest and brightest moments in our lives.

Undoing the shackles which restrained the remaining prisoners, I expected them to praise us for giving them their freedom. Instead, the four dirty, smelly people thanked me alone before hurrying to flee the catacombs, never sparing a glance for Gäree and his new friend. “Ungrateful,” I muttered, kicking at one of the undone chains. Gäree did not seem to mind though, he was too busy explaining to Ströngue how to swing and thrust his dagger, so I did not linger upon it. “We best go and find the others,” I said to the orc. “They may have already faced this Lord Earno, or they could need our help.” Picking the goblin up and letting him sit atop his shoulders, Gäree nodded and we set out down the hall. Behind

us, Tiz and his fellow Vermillion would not be buried or moved, rotting over the course of time until they were nothing but bones.

Running rather fast, we made it to the chamber where three signs had instructed us to the jail cells initially, but this time, we took the center. Along that hall was two more rooms, both occupied by a handful of dead or dying Vermillion soldiers. Arrows stuck into arms, legs, and various other body parts were an obvious indication of Astrid's involvement. Some of the corpses were burned while others were bleeding from smaller wounds, and a few had entire limbs chopped off. Based on the evidence, it appeared that Sildar had contributed least to both battles, but I attributed that to his still precarious health following the beatings he already endured.

When we arrived at the final room in the hallway, the one which resided at the furthest possible distance from the manor above, Gäree and I entered Lord Earno's chambers to discover that our friends did not need help after all. Bound, gagged, and blindfolded, a familiar looking man in his late forties sat on his knees in the center of an elegantly decorated bedchamber. Portraits, of women, scenery, and a glass staff, hung on the walls, and candles illuminated everything in a pleasantly soft glow. It was pristine still, which was odd considering the absolute mess left behind by our friends in the previous few rooms. "What happened?" I asked them, standing in the doorway with Gäree. "Is this him? Did you find Dagen?" Everyone who had already been in the bedchamber turned to look at Gäree and me with weary frowns. Malzahar and Sildar momentarily went wide-eyed at the sight of a goblin sitting atop Gäree's shoulders, but the said nothing. Something troubled them, all of them, and they appeared reluctant to share what. "Come on, tell us."

It was Astrid who stepped forward and shared the news, putting a hand on my arm as she spoke. "Dagen is dead. Lord Earno claims they killed him after getting the information they wanted. He was tossed into a river nearby."

My surprise was likely evident on my face, but it did not matter. The dwarf couldn't be dead... if he was dead, then we did this for nothing. That was my initial thought, despite the good we had accomplished in freeing the humans and Ströngue. "And you trust this man?" I asked them, refusing to believe the cheerful, energetic employer who I had seen only a short time ago was gone. "He is nothing but filth and scum. I would wager all my gold that he lied."

"That's what I said too," agreed Malzahar. His cloak had been torn in half by what looked like a sword's slash, yet he was otherwise unscathed. "Ask *him* why that is not possible." He gestured to Sildar when he spoke, and the older warrior's face went red.

Releasing a long breath, Sildar Autumnbrooke met my eyes as he revealed the secret which he had been keeping from us. “Earno is my uncle,” he confessed, never breaking his gaze. Even in his most shameful moment, the nobleman refused to show cowardice. “He is the sibling of my mother, Lady Meera. Though I hate him with all my heart, I do not think him a craven or a liar. You can be certain of that.”

“Let me talk to him,” I insisted, not trusting Sildar’s promises. I liked the man, at least to a degree, but he should have shared the connection he bore with Earno Drakandy. Familial ties carry strong emotions, and that could have proven a liability in battle. By not telling us the truth, Sildar had endangered us and our mission. A mission which was a failure now, I supposed, considering poor Dagen’s fate.

Though it seemed Sildar was going to decline my request at first, he reluctantly did as he was told, unwrapping the blindfold from Earno’s face and removing the gag. As the linen covering him fell away, I ripped my sword from its sheath and raised it in fury, swinging it back down with more force and aggression than I ever had. If not for Malzahar, whose nimble reflexes acted quickly and blocked my blow just in time, Earno’s entire upper half would have been cleaved in two. Trying with all my strength to push through Malzahar’s dagger and carve into the man I stared at, I wanted to scream. Void and Astrid rushed to my side, latching onto my arms and pulling me backwards, and Gäree assisted them after a moment by brushing my sword away and completing my restraint. “Let me go!” I shouted, thrashing against my captors as my weapon clanged against stone. “That bastard murdered my family! He killed them. He... he slaughtered the whole town.” I would never forget those slanted, hazel eyes, nor the pointed chin and sneering lips which accompanied it. I had known there was something familiar about him as soon as I stepped inside, but, with the blindfold and gag hiding his most memorable features, I had not connected the dots.

Stepping in between me and my prey, Sildar tried to talk me out of my rage. “There must be some mistake, Telos,” he insisted. “My uncle is a blackened soul who has committed many atrocities, yet I cannot believe he would kill an entire town of Rian people. I cannot.”

“Then you’d believe incorrectly, nephew,” drawled the deep, arrogant voice of a madman. Moving aside, Sildar gave me an unrestricted view of my hated enemy as he smiled at us all. “Perhaps I would not have destroyed an innocent town, but I would raze any settlement which deemed it right to allow monsters to live amongst them. There have been a few cities like that, those who claimed beasts deserved to live in Ria, and I have burned them to the ground.” When he said ‘beasts’, Earno glared at Gäree, Astrid, and Void, unbridled disgust lacing his tone. Facing his

nephew, he shrugged and said one final thing. “Did I kill this man’s family? Maybe. I killed a lot of traitorous families. If I did, I certainly would not remember it.”

“Earno, no...” moaned Sildar, anguish and disappointment washing over him. “How could you?”

Perhaps the villain would have replied to him, but Malzahar did not give him the chance. As fast as his fingers could tie them, he secured the gag and blindfold back on our captive. “I say we let Telos kill him,” the thief said, speaking mostly to Astrid, Void, and Gäree while completely disregarding Sildar. “My parents were taken from me as a boy too, though I have not been fortunate enough to locate their killer. If I did find him, I would not hesitate to end his miserable life as he did theirs.”

Listening to him, I felt Astrid and Void loosen their grip on me, but Gäree did not change. “No!” Sildar pleaded. “Earno surrendered to us when given the chance. There is no honor in murdering an unarmed man. If you kill him now, you are no better than he was when he took your parents! No better than a common criminal.”

Turning, I looked into Astrid’s eyes. She stared back at me with obvious confliction, sadness and uncertainty plaguing her. “Please, Astrid,” I begged her. “Let me do what I have to do.” Shaking her head, the wood elf sighed as she released my arm, casting looks to both Void and Gäree that they should let go as well. Void hesitated, yet set me free, and Gäree stepped away immediately. “Thank you,” I said to her, smiling faintly. “All of you.” Sildar still stood there gaping as I reached to the floor and retrieved my sword, but I did not care. My mind had calmed since the initial sight of my parents’ killer, yet my resolve had hardened. “Malzahar, my friend, would you grab his hands for me?” The fair-featured thief did not ask questions as he carried out my request, holding the bound hands of Earno Drakandy out in front of the man’s kneeling body.

“Telos, stop this right now!” Sildar commanded as I lifted my sword above the Vermillion’s leader again. Gäree ensured no interference would come from the lord of the Wintertide Valley by shoving him against the wall. “Lord Earno Drakandy,” I said, addressing the man who had haunted my dreams for the past three years, “you have committed countless murders and terrorized this continent for the final time.” Bringing down my blade, I felt as it cut into flesh and came out the other end, screams of agony echoing in the chamber as it did. “You will remember me and my face as I have remembered you, and never again will your foul touch ruin a life.” The growing pool of blood at Earno’s knees stained his severed hands, their palms facing upwards toward the ceiling. Muffled cries were contained by the linen in his mouth, and the agony which he must have felt made me laugh. It would not make up for my pain, but it was

something. “Void, could you cauterize those?” I asked, nudging my head toward the leaking stumps where Earno’s hands used to be. As her hands lit aflame, and the fires kissed his exposed wounds, more shouts of agony erupted from him.

“You did not kill him,” said Sildar, staring in relief at the still breathing body of his uncle. “Why?”

Cleaning the blood from my sword on the edge of my red cloak, I sheathed the steel. “Just as you said it, Sildar. Killing this man would make me a criminal, just like he is.” When she was done, Void stepped away from Earno, and Malzahar released his hold on him as well, letting the broken monster crash against the wet ground and continue writhing. “Pick him up so that we can get back to the town,” I frowned. “This man deserves to rot in a cell for as long as possible.”

Returning to Fandren with the leader of the Vermillion as our prisoner made waves amongst the populace. Those who already liked us for intervening in the abuse of Daren were even bigger fans now, and those who had doubted us did not any longer. Within this rural city, we became heroes in a night. Not only had we ended the goblin problem that had caused trouble for farmers, but we had stopped the cruel reign of Lord Earno and his red-cloaked band of criminals. Rewards were bestowed upon us from the mayor and the people, including free meals, armor, and rooms at the inn. Of course, we took advantage of all their generosity and decided to stay several days longer before presumably going our separate ways. Dagen was gone, and with him, the proof of our contracts, yet Sildar had promised to pay in full. It was a shame what happened to the dwarf, I had grown fond of him in the brief time we were acquainted, yet the journey was not for nothing. The man who I sought had happened to be here. That was a stroke of sheer luck which I gleefully celebrated. Now, as we relaxed in the comfortable commons of the *Lion’s Den*, I wondered where life would take me next.

Setting five flagons of ale on the table, the tavern maid winked at the five of us as she turned to set off. Any people who had been wary of having an orc, elf, and Pywraith in their city before, had expressed absolutely no complaints anymore. Not now that we were heroes. Ströngue still raised a few issues, especially with the farmers who hated all goblins, but Gäree did not seem to care. He proudly let the little guy follow him around everywhere, including into the already crowded bench which we sat at.

“So,” Malzahar said, sipping from the glass before him and setting it back down. “Do you fine people have any plans now?” Focusing his attention on Astrid, he smiled. “What comes next for brave, young Astrid, our expert archer?”

Leaning back in her seat, the wood elf bit her lip. “I do not know just yet where I am headed. For some time now I have been drifting, going from city to city searching for an answer to a question I do not have. I think I may not know where I am going until I get there. Does that make sense?” None of us replied to this, so she deflected the question onto Void.

“A tricky thing to say for certain,” the Pywraith said, heating the ale in front of her using a touch of fire. “Typically, I go to whichever place a customer wants me to go, I kill whoever needs to be killed, I leave, and repeat.” It had been something of a surprise when Void revealed to us that she was an assassin by trade, hired to eliminate the enemies of her customers. It had been Mayor Heron who hired her for this most recent job of clearing out the goblins’ lair, and now she was out of work. “I’m sure finding a new client who wants someone dead won’t be too difficult. What about you, Gäree?”

Distracted by his companion, Gäree had not been listening to the conversation thus far, so we had to restate the question. “Gäree will take Ströngue and become stronger,” he stated as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Then, Gäree will prove he is the strongest in the land.”

Everyone at the table laughed at that, including Gäree. There was a certain somber quality about the conversation, almost as though we were mourning this peculiar group we had founded. They looked to me expectantly to continue the discussion, and I nearly suggested that we stay together. Luckily, Sildar’s voice interrupted my chance to make a fool of myself, asking me if we could speak in private.

Apologizing to my friends, I shuffled out of the booth and followed after Sildar. He had been uncomfortable around us the past few days, regretting his mistake of not sharing the relationship between himself and Lord Earno, so I was uncertain of what he wished to discuss. “Well,” he began, sitting down at a table in an isolated corner of the inn, “Telos. I wanted to talk to you today before I lose the chance. I understand you and the others are planning on departing tomorrow.”

“Indeed,” I confirmed, “though none of us are quite certain where we want to go and what we want to do.” Shaking my head, I admitted something which I had not wanted to ever since Earno Drakandy was put behind bars. “Now that I’ve avenged my parents, I don’t even know who I am supposed to be anymore.”

The emotionless quality of Sildar was at times rather annoying, but at that moment, I was glad for it. I did not want him to try and sympathize

with me. He did, however, make me an offer. “Telos,” he said, drawing a cloth-wrapped bundle from his purse that was about the size of my fist, “I would like you to join the Rian Alliance. You’ve shown me that you are the sort of man who defends the innocent and punishes the guilty, but you do not simply take life without necessity. This, Telos, protecting the continent and the peoples who live here, can be your purpose.”

Smiling, I accepted the bundle which he held in his hands as well as the title which he offered. We spoke for several more minutes, mostly about the details and implications of this arrangement, and then Sildar Autumnbrooke departed from the *Lion’s Den*. Watching him leave, I squeezed the bundle that now resided in my coat pocket and returned to the booth where my friends continued to chatter. “Hey,” Malzahar grinned as I took my seat again and grasped the handle of my flagon, “would you be interested in a more... long-term arrangement with the rest of us? There’s a city just a few dozen miles from here that we think might have some interesting opportunities for a mercenary band like ours.” Unable to hide the emotions I felt, I drank deeply from my glass before responding to his suggestion.

Though we began as strangers, trapped at the bottom of a dreadful cavern and unsure of who to trust, we became friends unlike any I had ever had before. Saving Fandren would not be known as our greatest achievement, in fact, few would ever even hear of it, but that was where we found our beginning. Among us, there was the noble and mighty half-orc, Gäre, the graceful and deadly elf, Astrid, the quick and nimble thief, Malzahar, the mysterious and otherworldly sorceress, Void, the persistent and loyal goblin, Ströngue, and me, a man who found a new family and a purpose greater than himself. We would not earn our name for another few months after first setting out together, but, at our core, we were always the heroes which everyone in Ria knows today. We were always the Miracle Crusaders.

The End

