

The background of the cover is a dark, moody photograph of a forest. It shows several tree trunks of varying thicknesses, some with rough bark. In the center-right, there is a small, bright green light source, possibly a firefly or a small fire, which casts a soft glow on the surrounding foliage and tree trunks. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and somewhat eerie.

# The Forest of Fenhaven

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Nortantis (Map Tool) can be found at

<https://jandjheydorn.com/nortantis>

# Chapter 1

## *The Burnt Barrel*

A hooded figure in a weathered gray cloak sat alone in a dark corner of a dimly lit tavern. Flames from rusted braziers bathed the cracked stone walls of the establishment—The Burnt Barrel—decorated with fraying banners and wild game, in warm light; eerie were the dancing shadows and unfocused eyes of the deceased. A great cauldron, large enough to boil a man, lay within a lit hearth. The wooden table where the hooded figure sat was old and covered in grime and scratches; on it, an untouched flagon of ale and a bowl with three tall burning candles. An empty cup was before him, another across.

To any in the tavern, he looked like a vagabond. Dust covered his cloak and boots, and he wore fingerless, fraying cloth gloves. His dirtied fingers were covered in rings or faded, inked runes—some were on his knuckles, some on sides of his fingers, some on his finger pads.

He drummed his fingers as he waited. As he drummed, he found that if he stared into the haze that hid the rafters, he could see pairs of beady yellow eyes staring back at him.

For the first hour his worry grew in tandem with the surrounding revelry, for Sen was late.

After the second hour, he pulled from his cloak a long, thin pipe made from the bone of a dragon. He began muttering to himself as he pressed a thumb in the bowl of the pipe. A rune on his forefinger darkened, as if it had been freshly inked. A small flame leapt from his forefinger to the pipe, and at once, the rune faded. Smoke curled from his nostrils and the corners of his mouth as murmured to himself with worry.

A church bell tolled the passing of the third hour, and then the fourth, and he looked through a dirty window to see the burning sky when he had arrived had cooled into darkness; faint glimmers now dotted the night. He took the pipe from his mouth, and stashed the warm bone within his cloak, blowing the last bit of smoke through tight lips.

The candles were low, and Sen was *very* late.

He pulled a letter from a fold of his cloak and stared at the faded yellow parchment, his thumb tracing the edge of the broken wax seal bearing the Braytown crest—a crow resting on the head of an ox. With his thumb, he flicked the edge of the paper, opening it. Black ink shone in the firelight. He reread the disturbing words that had brought him to such a hovel; and as the letter read on, the more illegible the handwriting became.

*Sílas Irving,*

*Journey to Havel at once. I'm told you are in Agora. I shall wait for you at The Burnt Barrel in two-weeks time. Something is amiss in the Forest of Fenhaven, the great woods south of Havel.*

*I dare not go into that place. Cursed fools. I warned them!*

*I went looking for them. I went to the forest. Coward that I was, I could not go in.*

*The shadows. They move. I swear to you, the shadows in that accursed place move. Two of my scouts have not returned from there, deaf to my warnings that they were. Do not delay.*

*- Sen*

*P.S. Forgive my foolishness. A week has passed since I gazed into the woods, and I faltered in getting my message to you.*

*I ventured but a step inside that place. The forest, foolish as it may be, speaks. The wind whispered to me. I have returned there every day since, listening.*

*A week I sat outside the forest without food or drink. From dawn until nightfall, they told me great horrible tales I cannot fathom to repeat in writing. I will listen longer.*

*P.P.S.*

*I have made a terrible mistake.*

*I hear them now in my dreams.*

*Ride fast, old friend. Take my folly as a warning. I cannot stop. Help me before desire overcomes reason and I join the damned.*

*Help me.*

The final dot trailed downwards in a dark, crooked line towards the bottom of the parchment. Silas folded the letter and tucked it into his cloak, his mind clouded with concern. Sen never wrote troubling words like this before. Tall, handsome, with dark skin and amber eyes, Silas could not recall a time the humble man was not smiling.

At the thought of Sen's smile, fond memories of his tales returned to Silas. Sen often talked about adventures in the hills and pastures near his home—Braytown, just north-west of Havel—once making the claim he knew every lake and stream east of Agoris, and wagered with Silas he could walk

through forests east of Braytown without disturbing a thicket or shrub.

“We never got the chance to settle that wager, old friend,” he murmured to himself. “The war—”

The fond thoughts vanished as a pale, sunken face wearing a crude iron crown studded with green stones surfaced. Wisps of dark smoke trailed from every movement of cruel, plated armor; many of the elves claimed it was blacker than any night they had ever seen. Bright purple light glowed from hollow eye sockets. Ivory bone grew from its back to form a pair of terrible wings, like a scaleless dragon’s, as tall and as wide as the nightmare they belonged to. Shards of bone protruded from the back of its skull, curling into foot-long horns, and wore a cape made from sinews and flesh. It wore no gloves or gauntlets, and its hands were as black as its armor. So black and dark they were, that they contrasted with the pale skin on the rest of its body, and the darkness crept up its arms, as if it had plunged its hands into a river of ink. With long, bony fingers adorned in rings and iron, it carried no physical weapon, but could pull a pair of sickles made from living shadow from thin air. Standing at thirteen feet, it was taller than any living thing with two legs. Rallied behind it were phantoms, goblins, dragons, horrors, and a legion of demons known as the Carrak that the terror created.

The name alone sent hate coursing through Silas’ veins.

Carthak, the tyrant necromancer of the southern continent Allioth, waged a five-year war to conquer Relios. A third of the continent felt Carthak’s wrath. The west fell quickly: Trelthenax enslaved, Froyren reduced to cinders, and the Red Hills—his home—reduced to cinders. The worst tales came from the wyvern lords in Alathmar, about horrors in the mountains that slaughtered clans.

Annodine, Fethen, the two elven lands—rallied the Varir—in the common tongue, “Men”—of Athog and the remainder

of the Red Hills, Morselyn dwarves, and the Wrexalites that lorded the volcanoes in Blackburn. Carthak's forces were crushed after a forty-day siege on the Plains of Klithe, when the mountain crumbled atop the necromancer. Carthak's corpse had never been recovered—only its most prized possession: the crown. Outlandish whispers in the west detailed fate, with some dismissing that the necromancer death, as no one had seen the fatal blow. Soon after, Carthak's crown disappeared.

Silas believed Carthak was still alive. *A man who sold his soul to Death, blessed with such immense power, cannot be felled so easily. No...Carthak's out there, rallying his demons and summoning horrors. Where...where have you fled? Five years have passed, and still no sign of you. Cruel, twisted fate that I had not been there to slay you,* he thought, squeezing his eyes shut. *What of the mystery of your crown? Who stole it for you?*

A faint whine built in his ears, his chest tightening as memories flooded of that terrible day. There had been a tower, a boat, the smell of the sea air, and a ball of bright purple light that blotted out the sun. Burning, so much burning. The whining built to a crescendo.

*"Siiiiiiilaaaaas,"* a cold, disembodied voice whispered.

Bawdy laughter echoed off the ceiling, and Silas' eyes flew open. The ringing ceased and the pain in his chest returned to a familiar hollow feeling, and his hands shook. His mind went numb. He looked around, trying to find the owner of the strange voice, but the tavern was quiet, and no one was next to him. He shook his head, mumbling how his exhaustion was beginning to drive him to madness.

He surveyed the tavern to see many bore emblems of a large, white owl wearing a white crown on a blue canvas.

*There's no way she could be here.*

Leaning forward, he pulled back a sleeve of his cloak to look at his wrist. Firelight illuminated inked skulls

surrounded by waves, and the runes in the ancient language that surrounded it. He had many runes or images on his body. *Vathintung*—or, in the common tongue, “Magical prowess,” colloquially known as “Prowess”—were inked runes linked with extraordinary capabilities. The Council—great wizards from each country—kept record on who had runes, and the Enspere—the Froryen monks who lived high in the mountains—brewed the ink.

*What is keeping him?* He thought, pulling down his sleeve and gazing out a dirty window toward the stars. *The man is never late.*

His thoughts drifted towards Sen’s words. “Hurry, before desire overcomes reason,” he mumbled to himself. “And I... join...the lost...” he muttered each word slower and quieter than the last before he trailed off into silence.

The sound of light footsteps interrupted his thoughts. He turned his head to see that someone in a red dress had stopped beside his table. He peered up from beneath his hood to see a fair-skinned woman smiling at him. A long, dark braid hung casually over her shoulder, and brown eyes shone in the firelight. Hands were on hips, gripping the folds of a too tight dress, her red lips parted in mock confusion. “Now, I’ve never seen *you* before,” she said with a slight drawl.

Silas said nothing.

“Brooding?” she pouted, batting her long eyelashes at him. “I’ve been watching you this whole time. I thought you were a statue,” she laughed, light and friendly. “Or with the amount of smoke coming from that hood, perhaps a dragon.”

“Must have been quite boring for you,” he said. His mind was elsewhere, to a place he had never set foot in, wondering what lurked in the Forest of Fenhaven—and what had enticed Sen.

The door opened, and Silas straightened. He peered around the woman to glimpse the newcomer. Dejected at the sight of a young couple, he leaned back, and sighed.

Her eyes twinkled in response, emboldened as if he had issued a challenge. She seemed to study him. “Who are you?” she asked, sliding into the other side of the booth. Now across from him, she rested her chin in the palms of her hands and propped both elbows on the table. She closed her eyes, her nostrils flared, and she took a deep inhale. She smiled. “I know that blend of herbs—a strain from North Fork? You a northerner, then?” She asked. “I’ve gone so far as Balloras, but never farther.”

Silas sighed and raised his head to look at her, lifting his chin slightly so she could see his eyes. “No,” he put plainly. “Near the border of The Red Hills and Annodine.”

“You an elf, then?”

He shook his head. “Varir, but an orphan one. Annodine elves took me in and raised me in their settlement in Red Hills.”

“You *are* strange and foreign,” she whispered, and her eyes went wide. She blinked her shock away, then began to trace lazy circles on the table with a forefinger. “I’m Shyvera,” she said. When he did not respond, her brows narrowed. “I am certain the elves taught you manners,” she said.

Silas sighed. *She is just being pleasant*, he told himself. *I have been sitting for almost four-and-a-half hours. Some company would do well for me.*

He longed, though he could not muster the strength, to see *her* again. There are many things he could do as an elemntalist from the Red Hills—conjure lightning, summon golems, pyromancy, have water at any given moment—but extending his lifespan was impossible. As an elf, she would outlive him by several lifetimes, and thus, in his mind, his love was folly. Though the last five years he had spent

running away from everything, he had never forgotten her—he could never—but he could not face her again.

“Forgive me. I am weary,” he said. Begrudgingly he took off his hood. His wavy hair hung neatly by his shoulders. Smooth, pale skin made his square jaw stand out, and no beard had ever graced his face. “Two weeks I have spent riding to this town, and I fear I am...not company that worth entertaining tonight.”

“Nonsense,” she scoffed. “You have not eaten nor drank anything. You have sat longer than one would normally would in this place. The cup across from you remains untouched. That means...” she trailed off and raised her eyebrows. “You are waiting for someone. What was that about desire...being lost?”

His eyes narrowed, unease now creeping into his mind. He began to suspect that Shyvera may have a hand in Sen’s ill fortune. Had she been eavesdropping, or had he been careless with his muttering?

“How about I keep you company until your friend arrives,” Shyvera went on, as if reading his mind. She gestured to the empty cup in front of him. “It’s late enough as it is. Oh, I *hope* someone didn’t stand you up, that would be so sad,” she tutted and leaned in. “Are you traveling...alone?”

“Has someone by the name of Sen come this way?” He asked urgently. He then described what Sen looked like, how—based on the letter—he would have been seen around a month ago, and that he had gone south to the forest. To his disappointment, she shook her head.

“Don’t know him—quite sounds like he’s very lost if he went that far south,” she said with a shrug. “I don’t go near there. Don’t suppose you got the wrong place to meet him?”

It was Silas’ turn to shake his head. “No. I am certain I am where I’m supposed to be.”

She walked her fingers across the table towards his cloak. “I’d say so. Lucky for you I’m here...maybe I can turn this

night around for you,” she purred, her voice a breathless whisper as she stressed every word. “I’ve never seen it before...you don’t look like the regulars we get. No...I should not think you’re from here, and the runes on your hands... someone with Prowess...I’ve never seen that before. Why don’t you tell me more about it?”

His jaw tightened. He began to suspect there was more to her kind tone than she let on, and that another desire that swam in her eyes. She winked at him. An idea there was a slim—if any—chance she was involved with Sen, and that she was eavesdropping for other means, crossed his mind.

She jerked her head to a corner. Silas cast a quick glance in that direction, where it was clear that some decided to transform the tavern into the beginnings of a brothel, though the restraint was fading quickly on some.

“If it is pleasure you seek, then you shall not find it from me,” he spat, indignant. It was well past midnight now, and Sen’s absence was beyond worrisome. He needed to rest. “Be gone, and leave me to my troubles!”

The door to the Burnt Barrel burst open with such force that the hinges screamed. All eyes turned. Silas’ blood ran cold as he took in the newcomer standing in the doorway, for she was no stranger to him. She did not look a day older, nor had an hour had marred her face. She had seen two-hundred-and-eighty winters, yet her face was young and beautiful.

Taller than most Varir men—and taller than him by half a head, though even he was considered tall amongst Varir standards—she glimmered in silver. Long white hair stopped just above her ribcage, the brightness complimenting her fair—almost shining—skin. Her plated armor was the color of moonlight, and she glowed with divine radiance. A mantle of long black feathers flowed to her elbows. One hand rested on the pommel of a sleek sword, the tanzanite hilt glinting in the firelight.

Her eyes—a mix of purple, blue and white, like the color of shooting stars—swept the room, and fixed upon him.

Soldiers—sober and otherwise—scrambled to their feet to salute, and locals with their back to the door cast skeptical looks over their shoulders. Depraved corners awoke from their trances, abandoning their dirty deeds with flushed faces.

Elara Crowlane: Moon-elf of Fethen, The Falcon of Agora, and one of eleven commanders to the King of Agoris, stepped into the Burnt Barrel.

# Chapter 2

## *The Falcon of Agora*

Silas had been on many battlefields. Demons, dragons, giants, and legions of unfortunate creatures who sided with the wrong throne had crossed paths with him. He would rather face three-hundred dragons, and several witches, than endure the look Elara was boring into his soul.

A disregarded salute was all she gave to those in the tavern. A night breeze drifted in, floating loose strands of her silver hair, and ruffling her feathered mantle. Yet her eyes never left Silas'. He could have sworn her mouth twitched into a faint, savage smile, but when he blinked, her lips were a tight, thin line. Her eyes glanced at Shyvera, and her brows narrowed.

“What is it, dear?” Shyvera asked with disdain, no doubt noticing that he had gone rigid. Her smile turned puzzled, then infuriated that his attention was elsewhere. She turned and scoffed. “Who is *she*?” she pouted, and her voice lacked any allure. The drawl was gone, the friendly tone now cold. Now hearing her complain, her words were a whine that made Silas' skin crawl.

“That,” he smiled, admiring Elara's grand entrance. The invisible power she held over these soldiers, the grace and beauty she carried with each step. Silas had seen her disembowel demons and giants, bark orders from trenches that would rally the fearful, and outwit the most devious of imps. She was magnificent the way she glowed in the dim space. *What...is she doing here?* he thought, his heart racing. What must she think of him now, now that so much time has passed? Well, so much time for *him*, as five years was but a week for her. He frowned at what she was to him now—what he must have been to her. “Is...was...” he trailed off, unable to

ignore the pang of sadness that washed over him. He had hoped that after all this time, he could glimpse her without crumbling into dust—he could not. “An old friend,” he said sadly.

From the doorway, Elara raised an eyebrow, and Silas thought she had heard his words. Her pointed ears studded with emeralds twitched. Closing his eyes and trying his best not to groan, he suddenly remembered how excellent the hearing was for elves that dwelled in Fethen.

She began to make her way over to him, her black mantle of feathers ruffling, silver armor whispering as she moved.

Her voice was light, like a breeze that blew in the beginning of spring. “Hello, Silas,” Elara said to him.

A dormant inferno long forgotten, locked away in the recesses of his heart, sparked at her words. The words washed over him, seeping into the cracks of his mind. He remembered when they all danced beneath the faerie lights in the forest, and the way the music swelled when he spun her. Oh, how fast they spun, her white hair a blur, her laughter a symphony to his ears. How he, a man of twenty-five, had captured the attention of one who had lived two lifetimes, was beyond comprehension. How just a month later, everything would change for the both of them at Stonewater.

Now at thirty, he wished he would never have left that forest. “Lady El—”

Shyvera’s words were out before he could finish.

“If you don’t mind, we were having a pleasant conversation, and about to handle some unfinished—”

Elara’s eyes shimmered, flashing as if an angry wind ripped over the surface of waters that would drown coasts in beams of white light. She placed both hands on the table and leaned toward, inches from her face—a falcon about to dive on a field mouse. “While I admire your commitment to being completely daft, all things must come to an end,” she began,

her tone so quiet that Silas strained his ears to catch every word, for he was not blessed with ears like hers.

Shyvera smirked and rolled her eyes. She moved her face closer to Elara's, her red lips pulled into a savage smile. "He's busy," she whispered, sticking her chin out, planting a hand on the table to rise.

There are hundreds of thousands of words in the Common tongue, and millions more in languages remembered and forgotten. Silas felt she chose the worst two.

Silas made a noise, a warning and a plea to Elara for mercy, but snapped his mouth shut when Elara held up a hand in his direction, her eyes never leaving the woman.

"Run along now, don't you have some mutts to attend to?" Shyvera tutted as she finished rising, a triumphant expression on her face, but the same hand that silenced Silas shot towards the exposed shoulder. Elara wrapped a hand around the woman's waist, and with the hand still on the exposed shoulder, pulled her into an embrace. The woman cried out, her eyes full of genuine confusion, but her cry halted. She went rigid, and Silas soon saw why.

Elara's lips were brushing her ear, forming words with haste that Silas could not hear, and he saw her armored fingers dig into the woman's garments. Though Shyvera struggled, Elara refused to release her, and spoke faster.

Shyvera's confusion first turned to shock, then to fear, and her mouth hung open as her eyes grew wider with every word.

Elara pulled away and gestured with a hand to usher her from the booth.

Shyvera nodded, and without another word, fled.

"Charmed!" Elara called without looking behind her. She sat where the other woman had been, her jaw set.

The tavern was still for a moment longer, then the sounds of hushed conversations steadily came from each table, all trying their best to avoid staring at the Silas and Elara.

The words she uttered could have crumbled a mountain. “*Where have you **been?***” She cried out in the language of Fethen elves. They looked about the same age, as most of the Fethen elves lived to be well over eight-hundred years, yet though they looked the same, there was something deeper in her eyes, something that Silas would see in men approaching death’s door: a long life filled with experience and tragedy. Her voice bit like a sword sharpened with long years of wisdom, and she spoke in the Common tongue again. “Five years without a letter or whisper of your whereabouts. By fate, we end up in this hovel, and I find you hear talking to...the local *talent*.”

“Lady Elara, it’s been...too long,” he said quietly. His hand went instinctively to his neck. “I am...weary...to see you... when I...” he trailed off. He avoided her gaze, for how could he admit that the dreams of her face could not compare to this moment?

Her eyes narrowed at his words. “Silas, you are wasting away,” she said sternly. “The shadows under your eyes have grown, and look like a husk of yourself. Are you not eating? When have you last slept? What *do* you do with your days? What reason could you give for your sudden disappearance?”

The candles gave a final pop, and one final trail of smoke curled away from the table.

He could not admit what he felt, as it would be sudden and foolish to profess that he ran from her because of his fears. He had abandoned their friendship, and he knew that grievance would not be so easily forgiven. “I have slept alone these long years, for I dare not look anywhere but to the sky, and wonder if they are staring down at me. Every ghost from that day...over those five years...they haunt me. I find strange

comfort that you are here with me...as if they sent you to me.”

Her eyes softened at his words, and she considered them.

“I thought you were dead,” she said quietly.

“*Not dead, Lady...I am lost,*” he finally admitted in her language.

Her nostrils flared, and wrath filled her eyes.

“*Lost by your own hand!*” she seethed. “*For years I have searched, and I find that I am chasing a ghost!*”

Shame held him, and he dropped his head. “*Forgive me,*” he croaked. He felt pathetic that this, after all this time, *this* is how their reunion would go. What had he been expecting, what was he hoping for?

Elara, however, scoffed. “*You are a fool, Silas. Whatever offense have I committed that you would hide, I will never understand nor ask, but I will not forgive you.*”

“*Nor should you,*” he said, and tears welled his eyes. “*For I have no worthy penance.*” He blinked away the tears and looked up to meet her eyes. He began through gritted teeth, trying to keep his voice steady. “*I ran, and I ran far from what I did that day. I carry a weight, Lady. I feel like I have lost a decade, a third of my life, to results of war.*” He began to shake as he prepped for the truth to come out.

But before he did, she slid a hand across the table with her palm facing the ceiling. He took it, and she squeezed his hand.

In a gentle tone, she began in the Common tongue. “The days are short for you, Silas, and my years will stretch longer and longer. Do not wound me like this again and steal precious time from the both of us. Your homeland is in ruin, do not flee from a home that has been searching for you. Though I am hurt beyond reconcile...return with me.”

“Why, when I have wronged you so?” He asked quietly.

“That...is something I will not answer this night,” she answered. “Selfish as it is, I think it is a better fate to live

with my wrath than vanish into the wild, and I never know what became of you,” she said, squeezing his hand again.

He nodded. She let go, and he and cleared his throat, the lump in it refusing to flee.

“You are wise. Your forgiveness—”

“All is not forgiven, and this is the second time I have stated so,” she said sternly. “You have much to do to gain favor in my eyes again, do not think that all is well.”

He bowed his head, and touched two fingers to his forehead, and made a small, clockwise circle. This was in the way of the elves that meant deep humility, as the gesture suggested a potential target for an arrow, and thus, meant Silas resigned his fate to Elara’s words. “Of course.”

She was right, every word of it. They had both lost many during the wary. He had known her but eight years, a raindrop in a lake compared to Elara’s life. How deep was the well of her grief when she had lost those who had been alive for four or five hundred years?

*She is right. A cursed fool I am.*

He cleared his throat, trying his best to steer the conversation elsewhere. “Are these your men?” He asked, jutting his chin to tables that cast too-long glances in their direction.

A muscle in her face twitched, and her gaze left him. She looked around, as if preparing to tell a secret, and leaned in. “We’re moving a large company from Agoris to Bilgeport. King’s Orders. They are but animals: untrained, rowdy... fearful, cowering like the old days are upon us again since we left. We’re staying in Havel for the night to restock before we go the rest of the way.”

Silas’ brow furrowed. *A port city?* “You’re fortifying Bilgeport? Why?”

Shaking her head, she leaned in and whispered, “Strange tales from the west,” she grimaced as if the words pained her. “Gormmoths in Froyren are restless, Wyvern migration

patterns are—off. Even the Trelthenax wrote to us—strange sightings in the night. Something walks in their scorched lands...they claim their shadows carry a weight. They say something moves in the Red Hills.”

Silas’ blood ran cold. Gormmoths were descendants from mammoths and serpents, often called “Land Dragons,” for their large, wingless appearance. The question erupted in a whisper. “Is it—is it him?”

She shook her head. “Truth or rumor, who can tell? I thought this would all end when the war was over.” She paused, a distant look in her eyes, “I just want to get away from it; the bloodshed—the lack of it, the marching towards it, the preparations, the negotiations and...fostering relationships...with those who wronged us,” a hard expression came over her, and Silas knew why: of all the regions in Relios to answer Fethen’s plea, two remained silent: the witches and ruinous tinkerers within Rax, and the horse-lords and mountain-folk of Lhun. “I hate them,” she whispered. “I cannot bear to go into their cities, when our people have lost so many.”

“Fethen is a mighty land, it’s people are stronger than any in Relios,” he said.

Her eyes shone, and she smiled. A dreamy expression crossed her features, and she closed her eyes. “I want to go see the continent, to discover all of what Relios has to offer. See what Varith has to offer! We are but children to our people, and yet I have only known Fethen and Agora. I read there are beautiful springs outside of the North Fork. I hear they have meadows that stretch for miles, meadows you could get lost in. There are parts of the world that are still *good*.” She opened her eyes, a longing look filled them. She sighed. “Perhaps I’ll go after this journey,” she said slowly.

Suddenly, two soldiers appeared at their table and saluted, albeit as best as they could when they were several

pints in. The one who was delivering the message swayed, each movement brought him closer to teetering over.

“B-beggin your pardon, Co-Commander Crowlane!” he hiccuped.

“Speak,” she snapped. Silas guessed if they didn’t make this worth the interruption—like half of Relios was now underwater—her wrath would level Havel.

“Sorr’ ma’am. H-hate to interrupt, being improper with—” He hiccuped.

“Spit. It. Out.” Elara said through gritted teeth, her eyes drilled into the man. Silas saw a vein flicker in her temple. “Now.”

The man nodded and had to balance on the shoulder of the soldier next to him. “We just got word from our transport—and—” The soldier belched. “Sor’ Commander, truly sor’, apologies. Can’ say enough—” The soldier was elbowed by the trembling soldier next to him. “Right. Gerald says to me, ‘where are our hammers?’ And I says to him, ‘what for?’ And he pulls me aside you see, pulls me away from the others, gets in *real* close to me, he does! Says he can’t find any tools to fix one of the carts that got stuck near Braytown, says effort to get it unstuck cracked the frame. So I says to him, ‘I was not the one responsible to carry the tools, that was Henrick.’ And he shakes his head, he does, and says ‘Henrick it was you!’ But I know that to not be true, ma’am. So I says to him, ‘What about the others? Can we not move the weight?’ And he laughs and says ‘Stannin, we can’t move another pound. Every cart is—”

Elara snapped her fingers at him. “Finish your tale quickly, or you’ll never tell another.”

Stannin nodded. “Our carts won’t be able to hold the supplies we need for transport, we’re three days short, and word reached me that a storm’s coming from the east.”

Elara narrowed her eyes to look at the other soldier. The woman shuddered, her face also red. “Commander—one also

broke down when we got to Braytown...we thought we could fix it before telling you—honest when we got here. But...we seem to have—made it worse. When we removed...parts... they...got...”

“Got...what?”

“Lost, Commander. We left them in Braytown.”

“What is your name?”

“Roslyn, Commander.”

“Well, Roslyn,” Elara’s tone was quiet. “Use the smith’s in Havel...” She flared her nostrils and squinted at the woman. “You are withholding something. Tell me.”

“I...I did...it will take them a week—”

Elara slammed a metal glove on the table. The tavern fell silent. Silas saw the crack appear in the table from where she had struck.

She rose, feathers of her mantle ruffling as she drew herself up to her full height. She spoke loudly to the room as her tone darkened “Curse you Varir and your quest for my misery. Because of your *errors*,” she forced the word out through gritted teeth. “We are to stay here for a few days.” Some foot soldiers began to grumble, though a group of captains in the corner were staring at their Commander in reverence as they awaited orders.

Elara held up a hand, and the rumbling ceased. “If one—*one*—complaint reaches my ears. I will skin you myself and ship your remains to Agoris in a soggy boot.”

She focused on the captains in the corner, “Keep everyone in line. Sober up. Officers are forbidden to drink until we get to Bilgeport.” One began to grumble—only to be elbowed on both sides. Elara continued, “Blame your incompetence. Dismissed.”

The corner of officers stood with such haste they knocked a few chairs over as they ran for the door. Silas could hear the lieutenants relaying her orders to soldiers outside. One of the officers came over to grab the two men who were still

standing in front of their table. He barked a quick order at the pair, scolding them with ferocity—paired with a few glances to Elara to show how good of a job he was doing—before bowing, “At once Commander, right away. Right away.” He turned, dragging the two soldiers behind him.

Elara hesitated for a moment as she watched the new chaos ensue—soldiers paid tabs, then fled from the tavern to go tell others—before sitting back down in the booth, exhaling a shaky breath as she took off her metal gloves, tossing them on the table.

Setting them aside she massaged her temple, her slender fingers pressing firm into her skin. “How long I can take this, I do not know. I should have checked the caravans numbers, but that was Vellkil’s responsibility. The tools—who was that? I can’t remember. One of them. Ollis? Rekhar? What am I supposed to do, babysit *everyone*? Jathel and Pratt, they were—ugh. I cannot recall who it was supposed to be. I am overrun. Leading a few squads—that’s one thing. But an entire army? I long for the days to Captain again.” She looked longingly toward the empty captains table.

She swore loudly and snatched the flagon of ale. Looking at the empty cup in front of her, she looked to the flagon, then back to the cup, before tossing the cup to the side, where it clattered and rolled to the edge of the table. She drank deeply from the flagon, but suddenly, she shuddered and sputtered. “Stale, cheap ale!” she coughed and cursed at it. “I shall never drink from this place again!” Despite her protest, she drank again. She coughed and set the flagon down, sliding it away as she went into another coughing fit. “Vetoi above where is Moonwine when you need it!?”

Silas, for the first time in many years, laughed, surprising both Elara and himself at his spontaneous joy.

Elara coughed and laughed, her eyes watery from her hacking fit.

She shuddered once more, and the laughter from them ceased. She wiped away the tears, and braced her arms on the table. “So...what brings you to this ‘glorious’ establishment?”

“If only I were that fortunate. No...I was to meet Sen tonight.”

Elara’s alarm was palpable. “What? Sen? Your scout from Braytown? I didn’t know you still were in contact with your old people. You came all this way for—why were you meeting—why here of all places?” she asked, dumbfounded.

It was as if they had seen each other yesterday, and not one miserable day for five years had passed while he had been away from her. How he cursed himself for thinking that was a good idea.

Silas retrieved the folded note and slid across the table

Squinting at the note, she unfolded it. He watched as her eyes scanned the text. She shook her head, scanned it again, and put the note down. “Why Fenhaven? It’s one of the largest forests west of Bilgeport. Nothing dwells in there. Our best came to look through the forest during the war. We thought Carthak hid forces there. We found nothing. No roads, no signs of life—nothing. What did Sen find out?”

He shook his head, “No idea.”

She looked at the paper again, “This part of the continent has been quiet long before the rebellion, strange I wouldn’t have heard anything from my own scouts. Stonewater made certain this side didn’t see any of the war—” She stopped abruptly.

Images flashed in his mind: the burning, the death—her body floating by.

He tried to brush past the topic. “I’ve been talking with his family and other contacts the past couple of days, they haven’t seen him. I don’t know—I’m worried about him. Fenhaven doesn’t seem natural to these people.”

She looked up and her expression seemed to soften. “You look strange when you’re worried,” she said gently. She looked through the window at the night sky. “What are you going to do first?”

Since arriving at Havel just a few days prior, Silas had fished for information, but only gleaned rumors from locals. The Forest of Fenhaven—more colloquially known as Fenhaven—was almost two day’s ride south of Havel. The rumors were consistent in one aspect: Fifty years ago, a strange man arrived, claiming to have fled Fenhaven. He spoke in a frenzy about rituals that modified human senses with metal, and those murdered by magic stones. When the militia of Havel rode to Fenhaven to seek the village—even though the man was with them—they could not find it. The militia had searched far and wide underneath the ancient canopies, but found nothing. They turned to the man, demanding he tell them the truth, but when they did, the man had vanished. When they had returned, those who had gone into the forest had strange and terrible dreams. Silas understood why no one had visited Fenhaven since. He tapped on the word *Fenhaven*. “I think I’m going to go and see if he’s still there. Avoiding scary and cursed places hasn’t been my thing,” he said, shrugging as he did.

Her eyes twinkled and she clapped her hands, which sounded like thunder in the small and quiet tavern.

The sound awoke a couple of passed out drunks near the door. One sputtered in his confusion, saluting before passing back out.

She beamed at Silas. “Splendid. I’ll accompany you.”

It was Silas’s turn now to sputter. “What, why?”

“You think I am going to let him slip from my fingers?” she laughed. “I should think not!” She looked at a passed-out soldier who was snoring at the bar, “I could use a break. I’ve had my fill of managing these animals. It’s no spring at North Fork but...” she trailed off, a look of hope in her eyes,

“This’ll be faster if it’s the both of us. Plus, battlefields and sieges are your sort of thing.” He raised his eyebrows. She continued as she stretched. “Intuition for the mysterious, on the other hand, isn’t your sort of thing. Leave that to the professionals—a woman’s touch perhaps.” She pretended to toss her hair over her shoulder. “You can conjure lightning and make rocks move, but do you have a flair for the unanswerable? I think not.”

Silas smiled, putting his hand over his heart and bowed, “You honor me with kind words. I can’t wait to see what this professional has in store.”

She rolled her eyes. “Watch it.”

It was his turn to grin. “We depart at noon tomorrow then!”

Silas arose. He was tall for a Varian man, roughly six and a half feet. She rose with him, and she towered over him, closer to seven feet.

He began to walk towards the door. As he did, Silas eyed Shyvera in a corner sitting next to another man. She glanced at him, then turned back to her conversation, leaning in and running her hand through the hair of a drunken man. As they made their way to the door they passed a whispering group of young locals, far beyond reason and surrounded by empty flagons. As Elara passed by, one of the drunkards shot out a hand to touch a feather from her mantle. His friends hooted in excitement.

The excitement died as Elara twisted, a silver knife in hand and—with speed like an arrow shot from a bow—brought the knife down on the arm of the man. The man screamed, and Silas heard a sickening crunch.

Silas formed his left hand into a claw, and a rune of forked lightning blazed across the back of his hand. The drunkard’s eyes were wide as the rest of his friends jumped to their feet with shrieks, the sweaty barkeep coming from around the counter screaming how fighting was not allowed

and was to be punished by local authorities. “*THE SIGN! THE SIGN!*” the barkeep shouted to deaf ears, pointing at a window near the door. Silas’s eyes went to where the knife had gone. Not in the man’s arm, but had pinned the loose fabric of his shirt to the table. Had Elara moved a fraction of an inch, she would have punctured his wrist. To miss that intentionally with such little fabric at that speed took calculated precision.

Elara smiled, freeing the knife from the shirt and the table before spinning it in her hand and sheathing it. “I know you have more manners than to grab a lady,” she snarled. Looking down her nose, she sniffed the air, “Forgive me, I mistook you for a man, though clearly you must be an infant,” she tutted as Silas saw the dark stain that was spreading down the man’s leg.

Without another word, she exited the tavern. Silas followed. A slow frost spread in his veins, it was a new and strange feeling.

When Silas got to the end he murmured a few words. From his the pads of his fingers, a flash of forked lightning hit the table, singeing a spot in front of each of the men. They all leapt from backwards in shock drunks leapt back, one fell over their chair, breaking it as he crashed to the ground. The barkeep cried out . The cold inside dissipated as he saw the pathetic men failing to collect themselves. When he was at the door, he turned to the barkeep who stared at the singed spot, the crack in the table from Elara, and the broken chair. The barkeeps face was purple with contorted rage. Silas fished out a few gold coins, tossing them to the poor man before exiting the Burnt Barrel and into the crisp night.

# Chapter 3

## *Dreams, Wonder, and Fortune*

*From the day the warnings came until the gate was barred, the evacuation of Stonewater took just four days. Whispers and murmurs, careful planning and fortifications beheld those tasked to defend it. Everyone within believed the rumors that the oncoming assault on Stonewater was a ruse—a dirty trick by Carthak. There were much more desirable harbors both east and west, and there was rumor of an attack Brill, a stronghold just north of Stonewater.*

*Thirty days the harbor and one-thousand soldiers sat silent; the once-jovial air now anxious and eerie.*

*On the morning of the thirty-first day, an unusual fog blanketed the harbor, slowly crawling towards the shore. By the time everyone saw the purpose of the fog, the black ships had made landfall, and it was too late as an army three-thousand strong laid waste to the shore.*

*The Siege of Stonewater began and ended in five hours. Only the crashing tide and the whimpering of the dying remained. Goblins, Carrak, men, and turncoats—all sounded the same.*

*Splintered wood and broken stone covered all but his face, forcing him to stare into the bleak sky. Ash stung his cheeks as it fell on him like snow, and black smoke billowed around him, hiding the beautiful afternoon. Fowl that feasted on the damned and dying circled above the haze and smock, black silhouettes in the blinding sun. The rubble that pinned him to the shore shook as his body trembled. When he tried to free himself, blinding pain radiated from his chest down as he thrashed, and his strength failed him. He tried to call upon the runes, but his body burned as if he had been set on fire, and he felt his vision fade as he tried. He*

*must have used every ounce of energy that he had. The struggle quickly ceased. He choked on his own breath as the stone pressed into his aching chest, and he felt the sand beneath him sink with every passing minute. When he tried to cry for help, a pitiful groan came from his lips.*

*He heard gurgling. Groaning with fleeting strength, he tilted his head to gaze into the hateful, dying eyes of a Carrak.*

*It looked like a tortured hobgoblin, a failed attempt to recreate a man with all their primal qualities magnified, with none of the wit. Its skin was gray and taugth, its stature greater than a common man, but skinnier and sickly. It had pointed ears, with two black eyes that were unusually odd for such a shrunken head, with fangs and yellow teeth too large for its lipless mouth. A gray mane surrounded its neck and head, hiding terrible horns, now broken. Crude armor—now wrought and dented—protected lean, clawed arms. A large, singed, bleeding hole was in the middle of its chest—a work of Silas’ fireball—and gnarled fingers clutched a bloodstained, steel blade as ugly and as vile as the owner. Muscled legs, bent and bowed like a canine, ended in enormous clawed feet with bone protruding from the calf and heel. With a low, long rattle, it went still, and its gaze shifted, then went unfocused.*

*Thinking made his brain throb, and every question felt like a blow to the back of his head. Where was everyone? He had to get out of this rubble. He stirred and struggled, but he sank deeper in the sand. He struggled to breathe, when the frost within him disappeared after a battle like this, he couldn’t think straight. He began to panic, and he closed his eyes.*

*The view changed. He was a crow looking down on himself entombed in the rubble. His pale-face looked terrified, covered in dark blood, fear, and agony. As a bird, he flapped his wings and flew higher, trying to get away*

*from the choking smoke. As he flew, he looked down, and he could not count the destroyed, charred, and mutilated bodies that littered the shore and the ruined harbor that stretched inland for miles. The beautiful blue water of the bay was now full of floating debris, its waters a dark red.*

*The bay began to lurch as the tide came in, indifferent from carrying away the bodies of friend and foe, alive or dead. The bloodied water rose as it came inland, each tide that came in crept a little closer to his body trapped far below. Why wasn't he dead yet? When he screamed for someone below to help his body, he heard himself cawing, over and over. Someone had to hear him, why had no one come?*

*He looked down once more to see his body open its mouth to scream, but the blood tide covered him, and he disappeared beneath the water.*

*A disembodied voice began to whisper in a language he did not understand as he cawed. He flapped his wings as he circled in a panic.*

*Mist began to fill the dream and his vision. From within the mist, a golden skull with its jaw missing flashed in his vision.*

*“Siiiiiiiiilaaaaas,” an ethereal voice called.*

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Silas awoke with a shout, finding himself thrashing against his sheets, and his body burned. Untangling himself, he flung the sheets off him and sat up, his body shivering from cold sweat. His mouth was dry, his throat hoarse, and his lean chest heaved as he gasped for air. The skin over his heart ached, and he looked down to see his pale, bony hand clutching the spot above his heart. His nails punctured his skin.

Silas quickly removed his hand, seeing the cuts left behind. He looked down at himself. His chest was covered in the face of a large, savage bear with its mouth open, a murder of crows surrounded the face, and two spinning tornadoes ran down his sides. Runes for throwing molten boulders were on his left shoulder, and on his right, runes for a thunderstorm. The image on his back—a large, fire elemental bursting from the ground—burned, and the image of the sword that ran down his spine prickled. Various runes in that ancient language of *Vathintung* surrounded the images, each rune apart of both giving the image power, and the ability for Silas to bring that into the waking world.

His ragged breath was the only noise disturbing the otherwise quiet of the room. He had dreamt that same dream for months after the war, always ending when the blood tide rose. This time it felt so...real. It was the first time he had been in the sky. What was that skull? Who was that voice?

“I need air,” he said to no one, unable to endure the stuffy air in the small room. He went to the window and opened it as quietly as he could, closing his eyes as he felt dewy and chilled morning air. He took a deep breath. A floorboard creaked outside his room, and his ears perked. For a moment he was still, trying to listen to see if anyone was in the hallway. When no more sounds from the hallway came, he shook his head, trying to focus on the sounds outside to quiet the blood pounding in his ears.

It was early enough that everything had a blue hue as the horizon had just begun to burn. Wooden windows on stone buildings with thatch roofs were flung open. Distant crowing and barking dogs reached his ears. Wisps of smoke curled from chimneys, smells of fresh bread from a bakery next door wafted up to him, and oxen-led wooden carts lumbered down the dirt path that would take them to the town square. Each cart was driven or led by a local farmer, and every square foot of their cart that was not hauling produce, hay, or

salted meats was occupied by a farmhand—some of who were still sleeping. Shops-owners yelled their greetings to any who passed by their open windows. Many farmers tipped their hats or stopped for a quick chat before lumbering on towards the road that would take them north, to the fields that surrounded Havel.

*I wonder if Sen ever rode one of those carts.*

Silas frowned. His haggard breathing slowed, as the worry about his friend squashed his nightmare. As the minutes went on, the details of that nightmare faded, and he almost could not remember why he had awoken with a fright. He stretched his neck and rolled it, went to the water basin next to his armor and splashed his face, welcoming the cool and refreshing water. He had taken a long bath last night, and he wondered if he might need another before he set out.

He looked to the rings in the bowl by the basin. Carefully, he put each ring on his finger—in total, he wore fourteen rings

Some runes, like the rune he used in the Burnt Barrel, were simple words like “tiny flame,” but images like the bear and elemental, even having the sword persist in the world until he did not need it, took immense power. Even the ink that was used proved to have an effect, and there was a standard ink the Council allowed to be used. The rings he wore, like most with Prowess, were simple conduits, for they were gems with power that the Ensperc mined and blessed. If one overexerted themselves, the runes would bleed not ink, but blood, and if the user *still* pushed, eventually the rune itself may rip and tear from the person—or turn them to ash. Silas had heard of some—like the Ensperc—inking runes on organs, though that process was considered forbidden.

After a moment, he went to his bag and retrieved a fresh set of clothes. He closed his eyes and began murmuring some words. At once, the image of the sword down his spine began to prickle, and a ring on his hand began to glow. He reached

an arm behind him, and drew from the air—as if his spine were the sheath—a sleek longsword that glowed with white light.

Gracefully, he began to move around the room as if in a dance. Turning and twisting this way and that, he moved as if the weapon were another limb. He felt bliss in the way it guided him—moved him—whispering suggestions to him as it cut the air. Suddenly, he turned and slashed the air behind him before spinning back around, cutting across the air in front. For several long, beautiful minutes he danced and practiced until he was drenched in sweat. He pulled it close into a guard before crouching, shifting his weight to each of his hips. Like a coiled snake, he spun out of his stance with a heavy slash that would have severed the knees from several men, he sprang to his feet, preparing to bring the sword once more over his shoulder for a killing blow. He moved against his invisible prey, bringing the sword over his shoulder—

In the mirror he saw seven decaying figures clad in shredded black armor. Arrows protruded from one's back like a giant porcupine, another was nearly cut in half, his right shoulder down to his left hip. Only a small amount of sinew and flesh had held the two halves of his body together. The smallest one had a giant sword through his gut, and every last figure in that mirror shared a horrible, grotesque fate.

The sword splintered the wooden floor with a heavy thud and he let go of it. At once, the sword vanished, and the rune on his back faded. A dull throb radiated down his spine, and the light from a ring on his finger went out. He whirled around, yet nothing was behind him. Cold sweat ran down his back, and he peered at the space before him.

Slowly, he turned back to the mirror, the hairs on his neck standing up, fearful that he would see the horrible image again.

He stared at only himself.

In the stables just outside of Havel, Silas put the last saddlebag on a beautiful, brown horse. Beams of morning sunlight came through an open window, and the horse's black mane shone like wet ink. Kind, hazel eyes, fixed upon him as he patted its neck. He gave it a light scratch behind an ear. The ear twitched, and it tossed its head, sighing as it did so.

“Hello, friend,” he chuckled, stroking its mane. The horse whinnied and leaned into his touch. It was an impressive beast, about sixteen-and-a-half hands, and had been a loyal steed for over six months. “Time for another journey.”

The horse shifted, adjusting to the weight of the bags that Silas had carefully strapped onto it. Content with his provisions and gear, soft hay crunched under his boots as he guided the horse out of the stable. He looked up to the sky and put a forearm over his eyes as they adjusted to the bright sunlight. He looked south to see clouds gathering.

“Hopefully, they stay friendly,” he said.

The horse whinnied in agreement.

With great effort, he mounted the horse. It took a few tries to swing a leg over—much to the annoyance of his steed—before he succeeded. Adjusting in the saddle, he grabbed the reins, wrapping them once around his left wrist, leaving his right hand free. He turned the horse a handful of times, watching the animal move with grace, impressed by the rippling beneath the powerful haunches. He shook shoulder-length hair, welcoming the breeze that moved strands of loose hair.

The stable across from him opened, and he looked up.

Elara guided out of the stables a beautiful white steed with beady black eyes and a snow-colored mane. She pulled a knot tight, pulled it again, then effortlessly swung a leg over her saddle and mounted it. She was wearing her full armor,

yet even in her armor she was graceful, and the saddle did not utter a sound as she settled into it. She glowed as the sunlight hit her moon-colored armor. She tucked an armored hand underneath the feathered-mantle, the other grabbed the reins. She tilted her head back, closing her eyes breathing deeply, unaware that Silas was staring at her. She smiled.

“Ready?” he called, a grin splitting across his face.

Elara gave a nod, her smile vanishing. “Let us go,” she called, her face now neutral.

“Something troubling you?” He asked.

She shook her head. “Strange dreams. I rose earlier than intended to ensure we do not return to ruin on account of my men.”

“Let us be off, then,” he said, setting off toward the open road. “We follow the main road, these rivers will take us to the Rhunuin. We shall camp just beyond the river, and make for the forest at dawn. From there, east. It would be unwise to traverse the forest in the dark, so we must camp before we enter. Thus, on the third day, I am sure we shall will find Sen.”

The morning sounds and smells of Havel and all its residents faded behind them as they began their journey in silence. By horse, they would reach the Forest of Fenhaven in two days, a straight shot south and east of Havel by the main road. For fifteen miles they rode side-by-side through the winding countryside, passing low, stone walls fencing off pastures. They passed caravans in meadows lounging beneath the cloudless sky, campsites of vagabonds and adventurers, as every step took them closer towards the great river Rhunuin.

Silas and Elara halted as the road fell and opened into a massive valley. It was not deep—Silas guessed a quarter-of-a-mile—though how far it stretched was unknown to him. A great, wide river—about a mile across—snaked through the valley towards places unseen, twisting and winding in either

direction. Deep and so clear was its water that Silas could see the bottom, even from the cliff where they stood, and tiny flashes of color swam and darted against the rapids. Silas' vision was not like Elara, whose race he knew could see a great distance, and she could—if he asked—describe the fish in great detail. No, it was the beauty and majesty of the river that allowed him to see the bottom. What made the water perfect, or even what springs fed, were such wonders to him. He stood amazed that there was still beauty to behold in this world, that the Rhunuin had been spared from the horrors of the west.

Silas started, for he saw beneath the shimmering surface, buried in the underwater grass and rock, a great, stone head covered in moss and algae. So large it was, that it nearly stretched from bank to bank, and even Silas could see the magnitude and detail of it. It was neither Varir nor any of the races that wandered Varith, but stranger. He could see an ear, and the likeness of a man, but the rest of its face flat like a serpents with features of a spider. Three stone eyes stared blankly into the sky, and he could see half of its fangs in its mouth, where fish and weeds now made their home. He guessed there were more eyes and fangs that he could not see.

“Is there a terribly body that belongs to such a creature? Can such a creature thing even be real?” He cast a sidelong look to Elara, who seemed to be considering his words.

After a moment, she spoke. “My people have stories when the world was young, about Vathinar's Garden and the first seasons. Our people were scribes to the great Goddess who walked in that garden, and she blessed our blood so that we live for many, *many*, centuries. Yet...” she trailed off, staring at the effigy in the river. “'Tis a horror that even we do not speak of, and I know even less. When the Garden was lost to history, it is said that great serpents came from darkness, tunneling well into the earth to try and find its roots, but to

no avail. The stone you see before you is recreation of that beast, for no monster has been seen in generations, and we have been vigilant with our ears to the ground.”

“Are there any known tunnels?”

“None. Not even with fifty-thousand elves and equal amount of sorcerers would I dare go looking for them,” she said softly.

The sat in silence, and Silas’ steed swished its tail. He stared at the stone.

Suddenly, his pulse quickened as guilt began to consume him. *How foolish am I to have been away from her for so long. I don’t know drove me to such madness—but I am a fool for it.*

“There is a crossing ahead,” she said. “We must hasten if we do not want to journey by night. There is a settlement with a crossing not far from here. There we shall stay for the night.”

She urged her horse forward.

Silas stared at the back of her head, and remorse filled his heart at the damage he knew he had caused.

*What have I done?*

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They made their way down into the valley, and as the sun began to dip, they traveled east, leaving the great stone behind them. They had gone nearly half-of-an-hour when Silas saw there, upon the calmer part of the river, a small settlement stood. From bank to bank it stretched, and large platforms stood on wooden pillars that sunk deep into the bed of the river. Small, wooden huts and shacks littered platforms, fishing lines disappeared into the water, and tethered boats bobbed aimlessly. Varir and Varites—that is, “smaller Varir,” though the uncultured used terms like

“halflings” or “small folk”—could be seen watching the water from the platforms.

What surprised Silas above all was that there, in a boat with a fishing line in the water, a dwarf from Morselyn snored loudly. It was just taller than a Varite with a large, round—almost cylindrical body—with a squat face and small, narrow eyes protected by goggles. Velvety grey fur covered the skin, brightly shining in the afternoon sun, and its spade-like hands the size of small shields were folded across its chest.

They stopped their horses in front of the gate.

“What is this place?” He asked, wearily looking at the wooden platforms. “Can we even cross?”

“I can answer that for you!” Trilled a small voice. “Both, I may add!”

Elara and Silas looked down to see a Varite woman with curly brown hair with so many leaves and twigs that it looked like a birds nest. So short she was, that she looked like a child. Standing at an inch above four-feet, she had short bowed legs, and her small hand clutched a basket of brightly colored fish—some as large as her arm. She handled the heavy weight with surprising strength.

She beamed up at them. “Welcome to East Rhuni!” She said with clipped, sharp articulation. “I’m Celene, daughter of Gharlan! Goodness, you two are a beautiful sight, an elf and a Varir, oh how *lovely*! You and your steeds are well more than welcome to cross.”

“This is the Lady Elara,” Silas said. He put a hand over his heart. “I am Silas Irving. We are heading to the Forest of Fenhaven.”

Celene squeaked and shook her head. “Terrible, *nasty* name, do not speak of that here! Horrible, *awful* place!” She cried.

“Forgive us, Madame Celene! We are looking for a friend of ours. Has a man named Sen come this way?” Elara asked.

Silas quickly described her in the same manner he described him to Shyvera.

Celene, to his astonishment, nodded.

“Of course! He stayed with us while before he crossed, said he had some business south. We tried and tried to get him to avoid that awful place...but he insisted,” she said, and her eyes fell. She shook her head solemnly. “Very...*very*... sweet man, much prettier than any of the Varir we have here, *oooooh*, what a treat,” she said dreamily. She sighed. “He has not returned to us,” she said somberly.

*Not returned?!*

Silas hopped off his horse, his aching knees relieved to move again. He approached Celene, and saw that she came up to his waist. He looked down and asked. “Can you tell us more?” He asked urgently. “Please, it is a manner of great importance to us. He has gone missing.”

She nodded eagerly. “Of course, anything to help! We river-folk don’t get much visitors nowadays, and my loves and I will keep you for the night, and we will speak about this, though I am sure you will not like what tale I have to tell.”

“Madame, anything that will help us is more than enough, you have already offered so much,” praised Elara.

She bowed her head. “Such kind words, some of the men could learn a thing or two from you Lady Elara! Oh, how I have never met an elf...pardon my staring m’lady.” She straightened. “I’ll make sure we have space in our stables. Permitting your permission of course. I’ll have my brothers—they run the stable, don’tcha know—tend to them, they’ll be across the bank, we keep those beautiful creatures away from the water,” she said, hoisting the basket of fish higher. “They can cross, but they can’t stay on! That’s what I always say. Stable is *juuuust* outside the village, but they will be safe! I promise, or the Rhunuin can have me for dinner!”

They followed the odd woman, and she cackled with glee as she escorted them to the other side of the river. Soon, their horses were tended to, and their belongings brought to a large, wooden dwelling while Celene raved how she was so tickled for making new friends.

Before they both knew it, the sun was setting, and they seated at a table. Elara and Silas had changed into linen shirts and clothes they could lounge in, and Celene insisted they wash before eating. It was a cramped space, and Elara had to crouch to move through, for she had seen Silas hit his head on one of the door frames.

On the table was a large spread of baked pastries, fresh fruit, steaming bread, and cooked fish. Elara and Silas were surrounded by jovial, talkative Varites: Celene, her two wives — Fran and Tevi—and her three husbands—Gharene, Illi, and Port. Port had invited his Varir friend Arath—a “fishing friend”, though Tevi made it clear they drank more than the fish did—and fifteen children, though who they belonged to did not matter to Celene or any, as they belonged to everyone in the house.

Celene and Tevi toasted the dinner, and Gharene and Illi dished out food.

They ate and drank. Most of the Varites had never seen an elf before, though those with the loudest and most persistent questions came from Tevi, Fran and several children. Elara began with a few tales, and soon, she had the room wrapped around her finger as she sang a few songs. This prompted the Varites to break out a few wooden and string instruments, and soon, the very house shook with the entertainment—Silas was sure they would fall into the river below. When Silas pulled out his long pipe, Port, Arath, and Gharene whipped out theirs, and the four began to smoke and laugh by the window as Port.

The party stretched on for hours, and late into the evening, Silas found himself sitting on the floor. Enchanted,

he watched Elara sing and sway to the music as the Varite children danced around her. Elara laughed as one of the younger boys grabbed her hand and tried to dance with her, though in the cramped space, the best she could do was spin him awkwardly to his delight. When she stopped singing, the Varites took over, and she began to clap along with the others. Arath and Port snored loudly from a corner, each held an empty bottle, a few more were at their feet.

He felt a tug on his sleeve, and turned his head to see a small Varite girl holding a stuffed bear. She stared at him. He smiled at her, and she pointed to his hands. He flexed his fingers and turned his hands over a handful of times, for he thought he had something on them.

She inched closer, her eyes never leaving his hands.

“Hello there,” he said softly. “What’s your name?”

“Jani,” she said with a toothless smile.

It was then he noticed she was staring at his rings and runes. He smiled. He often forgot what a sight his hands would be to someone else, much less a child who spent their whole life on the river.

“Ah,” he said, as the music carried on. He gestured to his side. “Come here, little one,” he said, opening up an arm so she could get closer.

She snuggled in with her bear, and he put an arm around her. He turned his hands so she could see them better in the light.

Small hands reached for his, and her fingers were like small, cold, raindrops on his skin. He began to tell her what each one was.

“This one helps me feel things that move in the earth, this one helps me pull water from air so, so I’m never really thirsty,” he said. He pointed to the side of his finger where he summoned the flame in The Burnt Barrel. “This one gives me a little spark, and this one...” he trailed off, for suddenly, he had an idea. “Jani, let me see your bear,” he said quietly.

Jani's eyes went wide, and she gave him the bear.

He moved the bear so that it was laying down in front of her.

"Watch," he whispered.

He began murmuring, and a series of runes around his middle finger began to darken. The rune allowed him to manipulate a tiny bit of the air, but with a lightweight bear full of stuffing...

A tiny gust of air shot towards the bear. He heard Jani's breath catch. He began to move his fingers like a puppeteer. The bear, to the child's surprise, suddenly began to move.

It pushed itself off the ground and rubbed the back of its head like it had taken a long nap, and began to dance to the music in front of them.

Jani shrieked in delight as the bear clumsily leapt around, its head lolling to the side as it moved. He moved his fingers again, and the bear moved towards her, its arms out wide as if it wanted to hug her, she shrieked again in delight and kicked her feet.

The music abruptly stopped.

Silas looked up, and as his concentration was broken, the bear fell lifeless to the floor, much to Jani's dismay. She began to cry.

Silas, however, was staring at a room full of frightened Varites, each with their backs pressed against the wall. Elara was staring at him with a pained expression.

Celene was trembling.

"Get away from him," she whispered.