

Chapter 1 – The Watcher and the Light

It was cold. The sound of wind through the dark pines was a soft murmur. Each breeze was a new chorus in the song of lonely vigilance. The stars illuminated the valley below with silver light. Gevan let his eyes drift to the mountains in the far distance, remembering his journey there years before. He stood, watching for a long time, breathing in the night's air. The smell of pine and the coming winter was strong. No danger was at hand, he finally decided, so he sat and warmed himself by the fire.

The silence was broken by a distant rumble, faint at first but quickly growing louder. It was a low pitched hiss that reminded him of hot iron being dipped in water. The sound became so loud it echoed off the mountains surrounding the valley. Then he saw it, a light, moving incredibly fast, soared over the mountains to the west. The ball of fire descended in an arc, trailing smoke as it fell and casting light on the pines and rivers of the valley as it passed.

The explosion was like nothing Gevan had ever seen. The object slammed into the earth and shook the ground beneath his feet. A flash of light lit the whole valley as bright as if the sun was shining overhead. Rocks and trees were thrown into the air while dirt was pushed before the comet like a wave of earth. A massive blast boomed in his ears as a rush of wind pushed against him. The sound of trees and rocks crashing back to the earth slowly subsided and the valley fell into silence.

Gevan looked around and realized he was standing, heart pounding and hands clenched into fists. Whatever had hit the ground rested a few miles down from his campsite, a faint glow emanating from the area it had landed. He hesitated; and looked from the warm fire beside him to the darkness beyond the tree line. He grabbed his gear and disappeared into the woods.

Gevan moved quickly through the trees, keeping a constant watch on his surroundings. As a Watcher, he knew how dangerous nighttime travel this far north could be. Drakes, yoti, and other beasts roamed unchecked, and the Trulloc had a tendency to crop up at the worst times. Despite his experience he had never heard of anything like the falling light. If it was a threat, he would return to Kressing with a warning. As he drew near he slowed, taking care to keep cover

behind trees and in shadows cast by the glow ahead. He hid behind the trunk of a fallen pine and peered into the clearing.

Gevan could see a large oval stone resting in the center of a smoldering crater. The strange object was unlike anything he had ever seen. It was smooth like worked granite but was as black as an unlit cellar. Strange patterns of gold light twirled and danced on its surface, casting eerie shadows along the ground. Orbs of light floated around the clearing, causing the shadows to shift and flick constantly. Motionless he watched from behind the tree, fascinated with the twisting patterns of light on the stone.

He rose slowly and crept forward into the crater. Hand outstretched he approached the object. His fingers lightly touched the warm surface when two thoughts crossed his mind. *It's an egg!* And then, from a more primal part of him: *Run.*

Gevan's hand snapped back. He was turning away when a crack like stone breaking in two rang in his ears. He sprinted toward the edge of the crater when the egg burst with a blast of energy, knocking him to the ground. He looked back and his eyes widened in fear. Leathery black wings stretched from inside the broken shell, unfurling in each direction. His heart dropped in his chest. *World's end... It's a dragon.* He was up in a second, vaulting the fallen tree and racing from the clearing. A long, terrifying shriek ripped through the air. The sound filled Gevan's ears, pushing every thought from his mind except one: *give up and die.* His legs almost gave out and he stumbled. Clenching his jaw he forced himself forward, willing his legs to move he dashed through the undergrowth.

Panicked thoughts raced through his mind, *a dragon? How?* All of Xorias feared the Six Great Serpents. Each was like a catastrophe; powerful, deadly, and unstoppable. But this was... another dragon? Were dragons born? *Are there more than six?!* Gevan thought desperately.

Despite his fear he slowed, realizing he had been mindlessly running and was close to collapsing. *It just hatched,* he told himself as he slowed, looking around and getting his bearings. *I'm alright, I'm alright. I just need to get back and warn everyone.* He forced himself into a steady pace and pushed on.

And he ran; through stream and brook, over hill and peak, across valley and plain. On and on he sped, unceasing in his journey. He stuck to frozen earth that

masked his foot falls and covered forest that hid him from the sky. For days he traveled, pausing only to eat scant rations and forage berries or roots. Fear and necessity fueled his flight, for deep in his heart he knew; the serpent hunted him, and he must not be found.

Chapter 2 – The Phantom and the White City

Qaden ducked the large man's right hook, and then quickly slammed his knee into the man's gut. *One down, three to go*, he thought as the man slumped over. On a good day he would win this fight, but unnecessary bruises were not really his thing anyway, so he decided to cut it short.

Qaden turned to face the now sizable crowd. "Today is a special day!" He shouted, pulling a fistful of gold coins from a pouch and holding them high. "Because today," he paused dramatically, throwing the coins into the air between himself and his pursuers, "I get to make it rain!"

The crowd fell silent as the gold sailed through the air. Even his would-be attackers watched open-mouthed. The moment seemed to stand still as a small fortune flew through the air like glittering confetti. The strange quiet ended with the sweet sound of jingling coins on stone. The result was almost instant; chaos erupted as the crowd rushed forward in a throng, pushing and yelling as they fought for the money. Qaden watched the pandemonium for a few seconds and then turned, laughing as he ducked into a small shop and ran out the other side.

The streets of Yhildran were packed as thousands went about their business. Merchants shouted their trade as poor and rich passed by intent on whatever errand they were running. Stalls lined every street and corner, selling rugs, food, jewelry, weapons, and trinkets. A few people from Oris, Boltak, and even Lyntir moved about the market otherwise dominated by native Yhildrish. Children with varied amounts of clothing ran up and down the road, either in play or on a task for a parent or employer. The din of constant talk and shouting made the streets seem alive, each as vibrant and familiar to Qaden as an old friend.

The sun glared overhead in a clear sky, its light magnified by the white sandstone of the buildings and roads. The constant heat of the sun sank deep into his skin, making it difficult to remember what it was like to ever have been cold.

The warm day and loud clamor only made Qaden smile more. He loved this place, where the desert sand was almost as plentiful as the people to rob.

It wasn't that Qaden enjoyed stealing from *people*, just that he enjoyed stealing. The challenge of the planning, the heist, the chase, all of it added to the thrill. He was too good not to, he believed, and thievery kept life interesting. Yhildran had an exceptional amount of wealth which allowed him to pick his targets however he wanted. He took from where it would scarcely be missed and usually got himself something nice while making sure the gold got back to the people who really needed it.

Qaden moved quickly at first, making sure he lost the men in the crowds, and then more slowly as he attempted to find something in the bazaar that caught his eye. As usual, it didn't take long to find what he wanted. A small and ragged stall, with a matching old man, was selling what appeared to be random pieces of junk. Like many in Yhildran the man was in rags and his stall seemed to have nothing of real value. It looked like he had gathered pieces of worn out furniture and cast-off clothing in the hope that someone would see something they might need. What really caught Qaden's eye were the two children peeking from the tiny roomed tent behind the stall, obviously hoping for something of their father's wares to sell, ensuring dinner for that night.

"I'll take the lot!" Qaden exclaimed, "How much for everything?"

The man scoffed in disbelief, "Please sir, do not mock me, buy something if you will, otherwise leave us in peace."

The man looked tired and thin from lack of food. No doubt his children were the same.

"No sir, I do not mock." Qaden said, more seriously than before. "Peace is exactly what I hope for you, if you'll take it."

Untying his heavy and recently filled coin purse he handed it to the old man.

"Take it quickly and find somewhere safe to stay. Your fortunes have shifted my friend."

The man opened the pouch and his eyes widened. Then he moved quickly, grabbing his staff and motioning to his children to emerge.

The man studied Qaden for a moment, and then spoke softly, "Thank you, whoever you are."

He then moved into the crowd with his children in tow, not looking back. Qaden watched them go and then turned to his recently acquired junk.

"Well, trash or not, you're mine now." He mumbled to himself, bending down to have a look.

Qaden sighed. *You had to go and pick someone who really had nothing didn't you?* As he expected there was nothing of value and almost everything was broken or ruined in one way or another. Tucked beneath the counter he found a carved necklace nestled in a small wooden box. The necklace was fashioned after what appeared to be one of the many Yhildrish gods, perhaps Yaan, he was not sure. He draped the necklace around his neck. *A nice souvenir I suppose. Better than nothing.*

The sun was setting as Qaden walked empty streets. The city had changed from the dazzling white of midday to a rich red as the sun cast crimson light across the desert. This shift in mood was another thing Qaden loved about this place; the city itself changed with the sky; white at midday, red at dusk, and a silver blue during the night.

Qaden wandered aimlessly, musing on shifting colors and shifting fates. His thoughts turned to the old man and his hungry children. *It's always the same everywhere I go; hungry people and fat rulers.* This thought, most of all, troubled him in his travels. It was rare indeed to find a city where there were no rich or poor, so rare, in fact, that he had yet to find it.

"There! Grab him!" Someone shouted nearby.

Qaden was ripped from his thoughts by a strong hand and a thick set of arms. As he struggled in the powerful grip, guards filled in the street around him, blocking the way in both directions. The men were wearing the tell-tale red and white of the royal guard.

"It seems the "Phantom of the White City" is not so difficult to catch after all." One of the men said, stepping forward.

The man had the piercing white eyes of a noble, glowing faintly in the shadows of the evening. He wore the uniform of the guard as well; a loose fitting pair of pants and a finely trimmed white tunic with two red stripes entwined into the fabric. This man also had a red desert rose, the symbol of the Sahvir, embroidered on his chest. He was obviously in charge.

Despite his predicament, Qaden couldn't help but smile. *Phantom of the White City? I've never heard that one.*

"Ah, well, we all have our off days, but "Phantom" might be a bit much," Qaden replied, letting himself relax in his captor's grip. "You apparently know who I am, but I have no idea who you are."

"Remember the name, thief," sneered the man, stepping closer. "I am Captain Helkir, I tracked you down in less than a day, and I will bring you to the Sahvir myself."

"Yes, well, about that," said Qaden stiffly. "I don't know anything about phantoms, but I don't like being caught."

And with that Qaden shot up, ramming his head into the jaw of the unsuspecting man holding him. With a shout of pain the man released him, giving Qaden just enough time to sidestep a tackle by the Captain and shove him in the back, toppling him into the recovering guard.

Qaden ran, jumping onto the counter of a nearby booth and vaulting off, sailing over the heads of the guards on the far side of the street.

"Get him!" Shouted Captain Helkir, enraged at his humiliation, "Or I'll have your heads sent to the Sahvir!"

The royal guards themselves... Maybe I've ruffled more feathers than I thought. Qaden sprinted down the street, dodging people, stands, and the occasional camel. Unfortunately, this chase was not going as well as Qaden would have liked. Whenever he thought he was losing his pursuers they would somehow reclose the gap. *They're good, I'll give em' that. Better than the normal thugs at least.* Qaden ran up a large stack of barrels and crates lining the street, deliberately toppling the pile as he ran. A loud crash behind him let him know that he had successfully brought the whole thing down. He glanced back and saw most of the men either jumping the mess or plowing straight through, knocking barrels aside with ease. He shook his head in disbelief. *That barely slowed them down at*

all! This chase was quickly losing its thrill as he sought desperately for a way to escape. He rounded a corner and saw a man in a doorway down the alley, hurriedly motioning for him to enter.

Qaden dove into the man's house and the door closed quickly behind him. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness inside he looked around. It was not a beautifully adorned home, but it was cozy. A few lamps lit the area with a warm glow and a low table and cushions were arranged in the middle of the room. More importantly, he saw a mother and two small children in the corner, staring at him apprehensively.

"Uhh.. Hello." Qaden said carefully, "Thank you? I suppose?"

"Oh, my friend, my friend! No worry, they are only surprised, they are not knowing who you are!" A man speaking broken Orran was quickly closing the windows, glancing back at Qaden as he spoke. He looked vaguely familiar.

"I am sorry, but do I know you?" Qaden asked, still speaking Yhildrish.

"Oh, my name is being Yholdan! And this is my wife, Saree, and my two children. Saree," he said, gesturing to his wife, "this is the man! Yes, you once gave me enough frankas to move out of the pit where I was living in. I guess you are not remembering!" The man said happily, blissfully unaware of his poor grammar.

They both fell silent as the thundering of footsteps outside told them that the guards were passing by. Qaden took advantage of the moment to examine Yholdan further. He was a large man, both in height and width, wearing the traditional white robe and turban of his people. Qaden thought he knew him, but he looked so different Qaden could hardly recognize him. Last time they met, more than a year before, Yholdan had been homeless, dirty, broken spirited, and significantly thinner. After waiting a few moments Qaden spoke.

"Well, I am grateful for your help. You can speak to me in Yhildrish, but thank you, you're Orran is quite good." Qaden said convincingly.

"You are much to kind!" The man seemed overjoyed that Qaden had complimented him, but he made the switch to his native Yhildrish. "Because of you my life has been changed forever. I now have a place for my family; I have a home. What's more, I have a good way to keep them both. For this I cannot repay you."

“I don’t know about that, I only gave you money, if I remember right. You did the rest. Besides,” Qaden said, peeking through one of the windows, “I think we might be even considering you just saved my hide.”

“Ah, I’m sure you would have gotten away somehow. Now, we must move quickly, how are you planning on leaving?” Yholdan asked, sitting down at the table and motioning for his family and Qaden to join him.

“Leaving, you mean your home?” Qaden asked, furrowing his brow.

“No, no, I mean the city of course! You cannot stay here,” said Yholdan.

Qaden sat across from Yholdan and asked “What do you mean, leave the city? Why can’t I stay here?”

“Surely you know?” Yholdan asked, surprised. “The Sahvir has personally called for your capture! All of the guard will be out looking for you. You are not safe here.”

“The Sahvir?!” exclaimed Qaden, “Why? I steal things, yes, but why is he concerned with a petty thief?”

Yholdan laughed, it was a deep and booming laugh that made Qaden smile, “Petty?! Ha! You have gotten away with stealing from the richest men in the city. Everyone has heard of your deeds! Some even wonder if you are truly a vengeful spirit, bent on tormenting the High Houses. Still, I do not know why the Sahvir would busy himself with such affairs, but I know he wants you in chains, while I do not. Whatever I can do to help, I offer freely. We must get you out of the city.”

Qaden’s thoughts ran wild, leave Yholdan? It had been over two years since he arrived and for once he was not thinking of leaving.

“I can’t leave, this place is my home now.” Qaden said quietly.

For the first time Yholdan’s wife, Saree, spoke up “You honor us,” she said sincerely.

To consider a place home was of great importance to the people of Yholdan; it meant it was the place you would die for. For a foreigner to call Yholdan home meant that he had not only moved here, but he had adopted the people, the city, and even the land as his own.

Yholdan nodded, “Yes, it is your home, but until it is safe again you must leave. I am sure this is one of the Sahvir’s passing whims and he will forget you. Once things have calmed down you can return.”

“I see...” Qaden replied slowly, “Well, you may be right, but I cannot endanger your family any further. Thank you for your help, I’ll find a way to get out.” Qaden began to stand but was quickly interrupted.

“Nonsense,” Saree said, “You have saved my family. Allow us to help you once more. My brother, Yullan, is leaving for the north tomorrow. He can take you in his caravan, no one in his group will betray you, I promise.”

“Ah ha! This is why I love this woman, she is always thinking!” Boomed Yholdan, kissing his hand and motioning to the stars in gratitude. He was obviously convinced his wife was the best woman in the world.

Qaden paused, it *was* a good idea.

Back north... It had been over six years since he had been there, would he be welcome? Qaden was not sure what kind of reception waited for him, but it was probably his best choice. Besides, a caravan would be perfect for blending in; all sorts of people left the city to go north and one more Orran going back to Oris wouldn’t raise any suspicions.

Qaden sat back down, “Very well. Thank you, Saree, going north would be perfect.”

“Wonderful, I will speak with my brother tonight.” Saree said.

“Do you have somewhere to go in Oris?” asked Yholdan.

“Yes, I think I do. Far north, past the great fortress Vandar, there’s a small village called Kressing, that’s where I’ll go.” Qaden said absently, rubbing his chin.

“That far?” Yholdan asked, amazed, “Why? Anywhere in Oris would suffice.”

“Because,” Qaden replied, “it’s always good to visit family, isn’t it?”

Chapter 3 – The Master and the Beast

Pon perched on a tree branch, light flitting through the leaves around her. She held her breath, listening to the heavy footsteps below. She peeked from her hiding spot, hoping the creature was moving past. The tree shook violently,

dashing her hopes. It had found her. She leapt from the branch as the tree collapsed behind her. Rolling to cushion her fall, Pon sprang into a run. The creature roared as it pursued, crashing through branch and bush with ease, gaining despite every obstacle Pon put between them. She was blinded for a moment as she ran into a bright clearing. Sprinting across the field she used her spear to vault onto a large boulder. She couldn't hope to outpace it in the open so she turned and planted her feet, ready to face the monster.

The brossen broke into the clearing and locked eyes on her. For a moment all was still, and then it charged. Six powerful legs thundered against the ground in terrifying rhythm. A green blur of claws and fur the creature crossed the field in a matter of seconds. It stopped barely an arm's reach from her face. For a moment it just watched, and then it opened its huge mouth and let out a deafening roar.

"Alright Hoblin! Alright! You found me," The young girl said, slumping onto the stone.

The brossen stopped roaring and sat on its haunches, apparently very pleased with itself. After a few moments, it nudged her expectantly with one of its large horns.

"Fine! You scavenger. I guess you've earned it." Pon said, pulling a green melon from her bag and throwing it into his mouth.

Hoblin chewed happily as Pon caught her breath. Only a few months ago she could have outrun him but he was far too fast for that now. Every day he got bigger; he already stood a head taller than she was, and he was not even half grown. He was getting smarter too. Brossen were naturally clever, using their wit and size to keep drake and wyvern from the rest of their herd, but Hoblin was learning all sorts of things from Pon that other brossen never figured out. By now he knew all her tricks and hiding places. More importantly, he was getting much better at staying still and doing as told.

Pon grabbed her spear and jumped onto the beast's back.

"We're going to a new place, and you gotta be careful," Pon said as she patted his side. "No roaring and jumping around, alright?"

Hoblin clawed at the ground eagerly, he wanted to run.

They'll like you. Definitely. How could they not?

“Just take it easy,” Pon told him as they started for Kressing. ‘Otherwise they might stab you when they see you.’”

Chapter 4 – Tokens

Three days after the egg fell from the sky Gevan crested the final hill. The sun rose directly ahead of him, illuminating fifty-odd houses and wood buildings in the valley below. A thin mist was forming as dew began to evaporate from the grass. From here Gevan could just make out the movement of a few people already hard at work. He paused to catch his breath, relieved to see such a welcome sight.

Nestled in a rich green valley surrounded by wooded mountains and tall stone cliffs, Kressing was a small village but had been here since before the splitting of the world. The people of Kressing took exceptional pride in this, as legend told that few cities survived the splitting intact, but this village, *their* village, had kept living its quiet little life largely unchanged. True or not, the story was a testament to their way of life tucked far away in the mountains and hills of the north. Little ever changed here because the people did not want it to. The winters were hard and the ground harder, but few ever dreamed of leaving. There was something about the chill breeze in the trees, whispering lightly as it passed over the mountains, that captured the heart, and a person felt as part of the land as the stone peaks themselves. The land was theirs, as each man and woman felt profoundly, but perhaps they belonged to the land even more.

Gevan descended the hill slowly, legs weak from the arduous journey. As he walked through the field towards Kressing he was quickly surrounded by a number of small green creatures, butting and pushing against his legs.

“No, I have nothing for you.” Gevan stated loudly, pushing through the herd.

One of the most incessant of the group hit him soundly with its thick tail. Gevan shoved it away in return. Grenig were waist high bipedal creatures with

green fur. While they were an important staple for the community he had never really liked them.

Gevan heard a call ahead of him. Henneth, an older man with grey hair and rough skin, was attempting to gather the herd to scavenge for rockwheat.

Leaning against his staff for support the old man called out, "Gevan! Good to see you! Thought you were Watching on the northern range? I don't think anyone thought you'd be back for another month at least!"

"Plans change." Gevan replied curtly as he pushed past the grenig. He was exhausted, and he had no time for questions.

"That they do lad. That they do." Henneth said carefully to his back.

Gevan kept walking but shook his head. *I've been away too much. I don't even remember how to act around people anymore.* He kept walking but looked back and called out "Sorry Henneth, I need to talk to the Quorum and then get some sleep. Its very urgent."

"Of course," Henneth replied, waving him on. "You'll find them in the Hall, they're already meeting to discuss Pon's proving."

Gevan stopped and looked back "Pon's proving!? The girl is barely thirteen!"

"Right you are Watcher, but wait till you've seen what she has gone and done." Henneth replied.

Gevan paused and then asked, "Do I really want to?"

Henneth laughed, "Ha! That's a question for the Gods if I've ever heard one. I'm sure as stone glad the Quorum handles such things."

"Pon spends all her time running through the woods, where did she get time to make a Token?" Gevan asked.

Henneth raised his eyebrows, "You're one to talk! I seem to recall a young boy who spent weeks in the wild and you seemed to do just fine. Youngest to be proven, if my memory is not too far off, unless Pon is found ready."

"Well, maybe, but my Token was... different, and it almost got me killed."

"And I've no doubt Pon has had some close scrapes of her own. Her token is like nothing I have ever seen." Henneth said, and then he shook his head.

"Baffles me, really, the two of you. The Bernwyld is dangerous, far too dangerous

for most of us, but as children you just up and leave, hiking through the trees and hills without a care in the world.”

Gevan shook his head, “I wouldn’t say without a care. I knew the risks, and it was frightening at first. I just... needed space.”

Henneth nodded, “I suppose you did, and I don’t blame you for that. Now Pon does the same, in her own way. My Token was a simple birthing, did I ever tell you? I helped a mother greinig give birth to four babes. Four! And I was proud of that! But after what you did for your token, and now seeing hers, I’m beginning to wonder if the woods make you stronger than the rest of us.”

Gevan was silent for a moment before answering, “Not stronger, but different, I think. Tell me, what has she done? Is her token really enough to claim adulthood?”

Henneth laughed again, “Not on your life! I won’t ruin it for the girl, you know as well as I that she would want to show you herself, and she’d have my head for spoiling it.”

Gevan sighed, “You’re right, she would. And I must get moving.”

Gevan waved to Henneth in parting and continued into Kressing. By now the rest of the village was awake. People were tending gardens, animals, or otherwise preparing for their day. More than once Gevan was greeted in welcome surprise, and each time he felt gladder to be home. But with his gladness, another feeling also grew. *They don’t know what’s coming, the danger that draws near.* He shook his head. For now, his duty was clear, and he had a message to deliver.

The Hall stood proudly atop a stone foundation, one of the few in Kressing, and was bathed in the golden light of the breaking morning. Great wood pillars and walls held a heavy arched roof. The once rich colors of the columns had long faded but ornate patterns were still visible, carved into the wood years ago. Old and sturdy, the hall had weathered storm, time, and attack for more than an age. Heavy doors open, it welcomed any to enter and enjoy the warmth and safety of its walls.

Gevan climbed the few stone steps leading to the Hall, eager to share what he had seen. As he entered he heard the familiar voice of his father, Arvid, echoing through the large room as he conferred with the other two members of the Quorum.

“Certain steps will have to be taken. For one, it cannot stay too near the village.” His father said.

“Yes, and we will need to alleviate the fears the others have.” A woman’s voice answered, old but strong. “Despite the danger it seems we have little choice but to accept the risks, we must take this chance.” It was Dima, another member of the quorum, she was one of the oldest women in Kressing but her voice and mind were as sharp as they had always been.

A third voice, again a woman’s, but younger than Dima, spoke more gently. “Indeed. What you have done is quite remarkable, but you must be careful, everyone will be watching you, for good and ill.” It was Yara, the final member of the Quorum. She was a tall woman with graying brown hair.

Gevan stood a few paces into the large room. Thick poles on either side extended the length of the hall, supporting the high ceiling above. White light spilled through the open doors behind him, mixing with the yellow glow of torch and fire. In the middle of the room was a large fire pit, a few logs burning to ward off the morning’s chill. At the other end of the hall was a platform a few steps high. On the platform sat the Quorum, comprised of the three leaders of Kressing. Arvid and Yara sat on either side of Dima, the eldest of the three. Before them stood a small figure with brown hair, long and untidy, wearing a green tunic and heavy cloth pants. Gevan recognized her instantly. Pon faced away from him, and the Quorum seemed so engaged in their conversation that they had not noticed him enter.

Gevan watched for a moment and then smiled. Pon was trying very diligently to stay still but her feet were getting the better of her. She was an interesting child, to say the least. She spent the greater part of each day playing and exploring in what most would consider an incredibly threatening environment, examining each plant, bug, and creature she could find. She was different than him in this regard; she knew things about the way the forest worked that he had never noticed before. Gevan, on the other hand, had always preferred to wander, seeking distant landscapes and peaks. When he was young he had pressed farther into the wild than most people ever did as adults, sometimes not returning for days at a time. They were similar, yes, in their love of

the woods, but perhaps the more similar you were to someone the more you understood how different you really were.

A few minutes before Gevan entered the Hall Pon stood before the Quorum somewhat impatiently. Part of her wanted to be done with this whole thing just so she could get back outside, but a greater part of her wanted everyone to realize how important Noblin, her token, really was.

“May I speak?” Pon asked, louder than she had intended.

Dima had been about to say something but she turned to Pon and nodded. “You may.”

“I understand why you are afraid. Brossen are powerful and dangerous, but this is exactly why I feel safe around Noblin. He guards me like they do each other, and it can be that way for the rest of the village too. He is strong. He could protect us, I know he could.”

The Quorum watched her for a moment.

“The girl’s point echoes mine, Dima,” Arvid said finally. “If she really has tamed a brossen to that extent, can you imagine how useful that would be? The strength of the beast alone could change everything about the way we live.”

“Change is not always good Arvid,” warned Yara.

“Nor is it always bad.” Dima mused, gazing at Pon intently.

Dima continued, “My only real fear, young one, is for the rest of Kressing. The creature is obviously loyal to you, but how do you know it will treat others the same?”

“If we are careful I think he can get used to being here.” Pon replied slowly. “A few of the braver men in the village have already approached him. He was scared at first but he is calming down a lot. But, um, he does growl at them if they get close when I am not around, so, um, that might be an issue.” She finished quietly.

“Is that so...” Dima said slowly, a faint smile on her lips.

Arvid turned to Dima seriously.

“We cannot reject her. My token was a table Dima. A table. A fine one, I might add, perhaps the finest in Kressing, but it was still just a table. This brossen,

this... Hoblin, it is something else entirely. In terms of proving capability, I cannot think of a single token more impressive.”

After a minute the old woman spoke, “Very well. I am satisfied.”

“As am I,” replied Arvid. “Obviously, certain steps will have to be taken. For one, it cannot stay too near the village. The greinig herds would scatter, or put off their feed, and the people might not fare much better.”

“Yes, and we need to do what we can to alleviate the fears the others have,” Dima said. “Despite the danger it seems we have little choice; we must take this chance.”

“Indeed.” Yara said, addressing Pon. “What you have done is quite remarkable, but you must be careful, everyone will be watching you, for good and ill.” Yara said.

“Just a moment, Pon,” Arvid said, leaning back to talk to the others. The three began whispering to one another, rapidly discussing something that Pon could not hear.

Pon stood quietly, wondering if Hoblin was staying where she had told him. He was obedient, usually, but sometimes he got a little curious. Waiting as patiently as she could her eyes began to wander. It was then that she noticed the bearded man standing in the doorway of the hall. He looked worn and dirty, rough black hair flowing into a thick beard. He was wearing heavy leather boots and furs, obviously returning from farther north. The man wasn’t old, barely in his twenties maybe, but he looked strong enough lift a wagon. He matched her gaze with dark eyes. *Oh! It’s Gevan!* Pon realized.

Pon had always liked Gevan. He seemed to understand why someone would want to spend so much time in the forest, and he actually listened when she spoke.

“Gevan!” Pon called out with a wave.

The quorum, which had still been whispering to each other, suddenly stopped talking.

Arvid stood and spoke, “Gevan!? Just a moment, I believe we are about to reach a decision.”

Arvid turned to the others of the quorum. “Shall we?” He asked.

Dima and Yara nodded and rose to stand next to him.

“Pon,” Arvid said decisively. “You have accomplished something none before you even thought possible. While there is much to discuss this much is clear: You are as capable and skilled, and are worthy to be considered an adult. As of this moment you are proven, as recognized by the Quorum and all of Kressing.”

The three spoke in unison, “Behold Pon, no longer child. May all approach for her wisdom.” Each bowed ceremoniously to the young girl.

Pon jumped into the air and shouted “Yes!”

Yara laughed, and then turned serious again. “Pon, you understand that this is a huge responsibility. Your token reflects your role in the village. Everyone will come to *you* for answers about this.”

“I am aware.” Pon said, growing somber again.

“Many will still treat you as a child,” Yara said. “Remember that there is much you must learn. Be open to advice Pon, but know that you have our support. You make your own choices now.”

“It’s not like she didn’t already.” Arvid laughed, and then stopped as he remembered Gevan’s sudden appearance.

“Gevan, come forward son, why are you here?” Arvid asked.

Gevan moved around the fire and stood next to Pon. He looked at her for a moment and said quietly, “Congratulations Pon, and sorry. This should be your day, but this is important.”

He then turned to address the quorum and stood upright, seeming a different person as he spoke.

“I return to bring dire news. I have seen a dragon.”

Chapter 5 – The Quorum and its Council

Gevan was not entirely surprised by their response. First shock, then doubt, and finally fear. Honestly he was not sure how he felt about it himself; he was too tired to really give it much thought.

The Quorum quickly summoned the most respected among the people, Henneth, the master grenherd and his daughter Nora, Arten the smith, Yona the

huntress, Rimot the guard captain, Wenara the spearmaiden, and Rendar the oldest man in Kressing. These, whether through title or common understanding, were known as the most knowledgeable and trusted people in the village. The Quorum, when presented with a problem of exceptional importance, would call for advice. This offered both a source of wisdom and a chance for input from those whose voices were not present in the Quorum.

After his tale, the gathered council sat in stunned silence. But the people of Kressing were stout by nature and level headed by necessity, and they quickly recovered.

“How long ago was this?” Yara asked for what Gevan felt was the tenth time.

“This is the dawn of the third day since that night,” Gevan told her, trying to keep his exhaustion from overwhelming him.

“Gevan, you are the best woodsman I have ever seen, but to travel that distance in such a short time is unheard of.” Dima said.

“I stopped only once, sleeping for a few hours, and then pushed on. I am quite tired.” Gevan said simply.

“You truly live up to your token, and are a great boon to the Watchers. I don’t think anyone has made that journey in such a short time.” Dima said.

“It is well that you are so capable,” Yona, a great huntress and tracker, said. “But have you brought this doom upon us? Often a rabbit flees the predator, only to reveal its warren to the hunter.”

Captain Rimot spoke then, “Would it have been better for him to stay in the wilds, letting this evil hunt, feed, and grow unknown to us? Surely, a dragon would eventually find us, and if they are anything like peak drakes, then letting it grow large is the most dangerous course.”

“Are we so sure it is a dragon to begin with? Not some drake mistaken by Gevan for something much worse?” This time it was Arten who spoke.

“I am certain, Arten, that it was no drake. The egg was much larger, and it fell from the very heavens! Again I say; this was no drake, and no wyvern for that matter. Its cry was great and terrible, and like a sinister voice speaking into my mind...” Gevan grew silent.

All eyes were on Gevan, and after he stopped talking everyone paused, lost in thought. After a moment, a quiet but firm voice spoke.

“The boy speaks the truth.” Rendar, the oldest man in the village, spoke. “A dragon’s shriek pierces deep to the very core, and while you struggle against the sound, its intended meaning is clear in your mind. I have felt it, lad,” he said, staring at Gevan, “Long ago, in the battle of Vandar-nol, and I know you speak truly. And you! And you!” he said, pointing a shaking finger at Yona and Rimot in turn, “it does no good arguing about what might’ve been done, for it is done, and done well in this old man’s reckoning. But now, a horror far greater than you imagine comes. It is no drake, for it is smarter, no wyvern, for it is more evil, and nothing like any beast alive, for it is more powerful than them all.”

At this, the questions and doubts were quieted, and the council quickly turned to discussing what might be done. Gevan soon lost the ability to follow the discussion, and Yara, ever observant, turned to Gevan and said “we need to confer, there is much to discuss. If the serpent finds us and decides to attack I fear there is little we can do, but Gevan, you should go and rest. You have warned us of a great peril, and we will now do what must be done.”

Arvid nodded and said. “Go, your mother is no doubt wondering why I am still here; tell her I might be a while.”

“But tell her nothing about the Dragon, Gevan, we must have a plan before we confront the whole village,” Yara warned. “Pon, you as well, speak of this to no one.”

They both nodded and left the hall together.

Gevan turned to the young girl, “Show me your token when I wake up? Maybe in a year?”

She laughed and then looked up at him, “You didn’t hear what it is?”

“No, I must have missed that part,” Gevan replied.

Pon smiled mischievously, “You’re gonna love it.”

Chapter 6 – The Great Fortress Vandar

Qaden shivered beneath his cloak. *Was it always so cold up here?* He had thought he remembered how cold it could be, but somehow he did not really remember how *cold* it could be. He was not alone in this feeling. Most in the caravan were from Yhildran or Boltak and had never traveled this far north. They complained loudly of the cold, and wondered what Gods would allow their people to dwell in such dire lands. *At least they have an excuse, he thought bitterly, I should have known better and packed warmer clothing.*

The caravan moved slowly through the Nilar pass. Steep and jagged walls surrounded them, blocking the sun. Wind passed through the crack in the mountains where a large road had been carved, whistling faintly. The walls pressed in on them, and the travelers walked quietly, listening to the creaking of wagon and the stomp of hoof upon stone. Soon the cold walls fell away, and the Great Citadel Vandar could be seen in the valley below.

Vandar sat in the middle of an expansive plain full of orchards and well-kept farmland. Even from this distance its immense size was clear. Those who had never seen it shouted and pointed in wonder, but Qaden looked on the stronghold with mixed feelings. It was magnificent, yes, but it was also dark and imposing. It was one of the largest cities in Oris, and by far the largest city of the north. Dark stone walls towered above the surrounding fields like a grey sentinel keeping constant vigil. Vandar had been built to endure Trulloc, wyvern, drake and troll attack with equal ability. As such, it was not built like the other cities of men, but instead it was a colossal, roofed fortress with thousands of people living within. It was a great keep and bastion from the cold dangers of the north. Masons, smiths, traders, carpenters, bakers, and many other common-folk lived within its thick walls. The wealthy dwelt in spacious and beautiful wings in the upper floors. The poor lived in the lowest levels of the keep; in small windowless rooms or shared living spaces beneath the ground.

Qaden planned on setting out for Kressing alone after a day of rest and getting the needed supplies for the journey.

“What is to be had north of Vandar, Phantom?” Yullan, the Caravan master, asked. Yullan often used Qaden’s now infamous title half in jest, half in respect. “No trade worth mentioning, no fortresses of legend or great cities.” Then he glanced about and leaned in with hushed tones, “And they say the fey have many groves to the north, and that men are not welcome in those parts.”

Qaden had not told Yullan of his family, partly because most Orrans did not know where Kressing was, let alone someone from Yhildran, but also because it had been so long since Qaden had been home it felt strange to talk openly of his birthplace.

“Ah, but doesn’t that make it all the more exciting, my friend?” Qaden said with a smile, “Perhaps there is some incredible treasure, waiting to be found in this wonderful land of warmth.”

Yullan laughed, slapping him hard on the shoulder, “Ha! You joke, but you’ll soon miss even the warmth of this place. The snows here are deep, and the winters of Vandar are long. I do not want to imagine what they are like beyond.”

“I have traveled here before. Do not worry about me; I have some experience with snow and those wild places beyond.” Qaden replied, somewhat somberly.

“Indeed? Well, perhaps you really will find some secret, and in that I wish you luck. Saree asked me to see you safely to Vandar, and I shall. Beyond that is your own will.” He paused, and then continued, “However, I shall be in Vandar for a week, perhaps two, and then I set off for Yhildran once again. If I can be of service until then, I will do what I can.”

“Thank you, Yullan,” Qaden replied, “But I depart from Vandar tomorrow. Perhaps one day we will meet upon the road, or in the home of your sister, and can exchange tales of our journeys.”

“I look forward to that day!” Yullan replied, clasping Qaden’s hand briefly before moving on to speak with other members of the caravan.

The hike from Nilar to the valley took most of the day, and the sun’s edge dipped below the horizon before they started moving across the valley towards the great keep. Despite the growing darkness, the caravan moved on. The roads leading to Vandar were well lit with torch and lamp, and well patrolled; they frequently passed groups of men mounted on the stocky horses of the north. It

was said that even in the middle of the night lone travelers could safely walk the long miles from one side of the valley to the other without fear. The moon rose steadily in the sky, and the white eye of the cold lady was high when the company finally passed through the outer gate of Vandar.

Chapter 7 – Pride’s Folly

It was a strange place. The grey sky seemed to stretch forever in every direction. Even down? Yes, it seemed, sometimes. Gevan looked around and found he was standing in a field. Colorless grass waved back and forth in a soft breeze. In the distance he saw tall dark pines silhouetted against the white sky. Usually a place of danger, somehow he knew the forest held no horrors for him today. He walked toward it and suddenly was at a pond with the forest still in the distance. A dark plant with rich green blossoms was growing around the murky water. What strange flowers! Gevan bent over, reaching to pick one of the buds.

He was in pain. Black vines wrapped around his arms and legs, cutting his skin and pulling him to the ground. He fought against the plant in vain. Each time he snapped a vine the severed fragment sprouted extra vines and grew with increased vigor. Tendrils wound up his arms and legs to his torso, sharp thorns digging into his flesh. He could not move. He screamed, feeling his throat burn with the effort but only silence escaped his lips. Everywhere the plant touched felt on fire. It kept constricting him tighter, hopelessly stronger than he was.

“You’re in quite the pickle, aren’t you?” A light, almost whimsical voice asked above him. Gevan looked up, forgetting his horror for a moment.

A small feminine figure sat above him, resting on a branch of a tree that definitely had not been there before. In his mind Gevan called her a Fyelin, or brownie, somehow just knowing what she was. She stood about two feet tall with rust brown skin. Green hair like untrimmed grass fell across her face. She wore a strange brown coat and a skirt made of roots and twigs.

“Hmm, guess you can’t really talk can you?” The small fey giggled, it sounded like chimes in the wind.

“Every time. They can’t move and they can’t talk,” she said, counting the two things on her fingers.

“Ah! Let me help you!” She said excitedly, hopping to her feet. “Everyone knows you gotta ‘pologize. We just call ‘em Follies, but I think they’re called Pride’s Folly by those all proper-like. Just say sorry and suddenly it ends, just like that!” She said matter-of-factly, snapping her fingers.

She put a finger on her chin, tilting her head to the side, “They probably came from some man’s guilty feelings huh!? Never matter, now they’re all over the place! Best of luck to you!”

And then she disappeared, or had she jumped away? Something happened, and the Fyelin was lost in the grey shifting. The pain came back now that he was alone, sharper than before. Gevan began to struggle all the more. Panic set in. He could not move! He could not breathe. The nightmare consumed every thought. I am going to die, Gevan thought.

Doing anything other than fight against the pain was difficult, like he was wresting control of something on a set course. He knew what he should do but each time he tried to act the world pushed back, compelling him to kick and pull at the folly instead.

Thoughts slipped through his mind like water through grasping fingers. He focused, trying to keep what he wanted to do clear in his mind. Finally he seized the idea firmly, and in that moment he pulled, straining against this world, forcing the course to change. It worked. The dream shifted; he was free. The folly still held him, cords like sharpened steel gashing his skin, but now he was in control. He wasn’t sure if it really was his fault, but if apologizing was the way to end this suffering he might as well try.

I’m sorry. He tried to say, but no words came out.

He tried harder. I’m sorry! Still no sound. Just pain, and the tightening of death.

Suddenly he realized maybe it really had been his fault. Was he too curious?

I am so sorry! I’ll be more careful next time!

“I’m sorry!” Gevan shouted, sitting up in his bed.

With shaking hands he wiped the sweat from his face. The memory of the gripping vines and burning cords lingered on his skin. He tried to take a deep

breath but it caught in his throat. He sobbed, tears falling to his sheets. He sat alone in the darkness, weeping silently and wondering what he had done wrong until he finally fell asleep.

Chapter 8 – Into Fire and Terror

Pon woke to the sound of a low growl emanating deep in Hoblin's chest. He lifted his head from the ground and stared intently out the door of the shed made for them a few days before. Pon could see the stars through the open door, and a cold breeze blew in from the north. After a moment his growling subsided, and he waited, head cocked slightly to the side.

In a flash he stood, throwing Pon from where she had been nestled beside him. He roared as he bolted from the enclosure. Pon, startled and confused, chased after him.

"Hoblin! Stop!" She shouted as he charged for Kressing on the other side of the valley, "Come back!"

What are you doing?! You're going to wake the whole village! She thought desperately, worried he would break the fragile acceptance everyone had begun showing over the last few days.

As she ran, she noticed a strange feeling had fallen over the valley. A deep sense of foreboding grew in her heart, and she felt afraid. No sooner had she realized that something was amiss did she see it; a shadow dropping from the sky like a hawk chasing its prey, but bigger, so much bigger. At the last second, massive wings unfolded in the darkness, and the dragon landed heavily on roof of the Hall.

For a moment, all was calm, and in the dim light she saw the dark silhouette of the dragon, larger than a wagon, perched almost majestically against the stars. Then the air was racked with a jarring shriek. Hoblin, already far ahead of Pon, stopped suddenly and clawed violently at the ground with his many legs. Pon herself felt weak and fell to her knees as terror and pain flooded her mind.

The screech filled the valley. In the dim light she saw the monster rise on hind legs, flapping its mighty wings as it continued its cry. Deep in her mind a terrible voice hissed angrily. *Give me the black-maned man or I will take him from piles of the dead. Give me the thief that I may consume him.*

After what seemed like hours but must have been only moments the awful sound ceased. Shaking, Pon saw the dragon crouch low, fill its lungs with air, and spew bright orange flames onto the buildings below. The flames spread rapidly, igniting homes in a matter of seconds. Screams of alarm and terror filled the air.

Again, the dragon unleashed a spout of flame and then leapt into the sky. Pon climbed slowly to her feet. She had to find Gevan. Unsteadily she started across the field, willing herself to move closer to the dragon. By the time she reached Hoblin, strength had returned to her. She grabbed him by the horns and looked him in the eye.

“Hoblin,” she said calmly, “I need you. We need to find Gevan.”

The brossen pulled against her grip, anxiously looking towards the flames and into the sky. He groaned deeply, fighting every instinct to run.

Pon hugged him, and whispered, “Hoblin. I’m going. I have to find Gevan. You stay here, or run, I’ll find you.”

Hoblin stopped fighting and looked towards the burning village. He shook himself from her grip and growled menacingly. She stared, not understanding. He growled again, letting it roll into a loud roar as he ran a small circle around her. He nudged her towards the burning buildings in the distance.

“Good boy Hoblin!” she shouted as she leapt onto his back, “Go!”

He sprang into movement, shooting across the field. Pon pulled close to keep from falling as he jumped a fence on the outskirts of town. By now, the dragon had ignited a number of other buildings and was circling overhead.

Shouts of a new kind began to fill the air. Some of the men and women of Kressing were calling for arms and allies, but many more screams of fear echoed as she passed. Pon rode past a group of spearmaidens led by Wenara. They called to her, but she had passed them long before she could respond.

Pon rode for the home of Arvid and Niri, sure Gevan would have rested there after his journey. The Quorum had announced what Gevan had found, and spearmen, maidens, and archers had been readied in response. Kressing was far

too small for a proper guard, but most residents were ready and willing to defend their homes from danger. The harsh life in the north was such that most farmers, shepherds, and craftsmen were also familiar with spearcraft or archery. Almost everyone had weathered a Trulloc attack or two throughout their lifetimes, and some joined monster hunts after the Watchers discovered a lair. Beyond that a few hunters, three guardsmen, and whatever Watchers happened to be in town were everything Kressing had to ward off hostile attackers.

Pon rounded a corner and almost trampled Captain Rimot and a few frightened looking archers in her haste.

“Steady now!” Rimot shouted as two of his archers fell back from Hoblin. “Pon, get out of here with that beast, we’re in enough trouble as it is.”

“Where’s Gevan?!” She replied as they moved past.

“How would I know? But he had better be shooting at this thing, we can’t even hit it.”

“Wait Rimot! Everyone!” Yona called, running from her cover and joining the rest. “It’s useless; my arrows just bounce off those scales. Twice now it’s turned to find me after I’ve landed a hit, and I’m out of arrows. We need the crosses.”

“Aye, I feared as much, so I came ready.” Rimot paused as he pulled a massive crossbow from his back. The bow was made of a hard, grey wood that grew in the frozen valleys to the north, known as *svelleik*, or frostwood.

“I’ve brought the one kept in the guardhouse,” Rimot said, “the other three are in the Hall, but the flames block our way. Yona, you take it, your eye and your shot are far keener than mine.”

She nodded as she took the *svelleik* bow. “We must move quickly. Pulling the great-cross is no small endeavor. I need a clear shot or our chance is wasted. The dragon circles above, letting its fires do their work, and is cloaked in shadow and smoke. If and when it chooses to land, I need to be ready.”

Pon listened intently and urged Hoblin forward. “I think I can help. Hoblin and I move swiftly, maybe we can get the dragon’s attention and lure it down.”

Rimot and Yona exchanged glances as the gathered men muttered, “That’s... incredibly dangerous, Pon. The dragon may simply burn you on the spot.”

“Well, then it will have gotten close enough for Yona to shoot, and will be worth it.”

Yona carefully stepped towards Pon, eyeing her horned mount warily, and handed her a spear. “As you say, Pon. We’ll move to the square. Bring it there, if you can. I’ll be ready.”

Hoblin leapt onto a woodshed and then onto the roof of the fletcher’s home. Aided by the night’s wind the flames spread south, engulfing more homes, but the Hall itself seemed undamaged. She glanced up. The dragon was almost impossible to see through the smoke and darkness, but she did not need to see it. She shouted with all her strength, issuing a battle-cry that felt hollow amidst the chaotic sounds of the night. Hoblin however, soon joined, and drowned out her shouts with a massive bellow that filled the night. They continued their challenge as they leapt from building to building, circling the village square. They climbed to the roof of the Hall, standing where the dragon had landed minutes before. “Fight me, serpent!” She shouted, “We’re not afraid of you!”

She heard a great whooshing above her, followed by an angry shriek. *Foolish girl! I tasted your fear and will do so again.* The noise filled her with dread. She knew it was coming for her, but it was all she could do to spur Hoblin to lunge to the square below.

A *thump* and loud *crash* sounded behind her as the Hall’s roof broke beneath the dragon. Pon and Hoblin landed roughly on the packed earth. They turned in time to see the dragon leap from the splintered roof and roar towards them. Pon froze. The dragon was dark and terrifying. Its scales were like a pit, dark as a cave despite the flames all around. Its eyes were hatred. Its mouth was fury and death. She needed to run, to hide, anything to escape. Even as she tried to move, she couldn’t, she was lost.

A loud *twang* shot across the square as a heavy bolt was loosed. Hoblin, snapping out of his own fright, leapt to the side. Pon was thrown from Hoblin’s back as he jumped and toppled to the ground. The bolt buried itself deep into the dragon’s forearm.

The dragon landed heavily and slid across the square, digging its claws into the earth to halt its movement. It hissed and whipped its head around to where

Yona stood with Captain Rimot and the other archers. Yona frantically pulled on the heavy lever, trying to cock the massive weapon. In a blink, the dragon crossed the distance and batted two men aside, their bodies striking a wall and falling limp. The dragon inhaled, fire growing in its chest. Captain Rimot shouted a command, but his words were lost in a torrent of flame.

Pon screamed in horror. She stood and ran to Hoblin. Leaping on his back they charged at the black monster. As they ran a chorus of shouts rose from the other side of the square. Arvid, Gevan, and a group of spearmen were running towards the dragon. Hissing, it leapt into the night, climbing through the smoke with great *thumps* of its wings. A shriek emanated from the darkness and the men covered their ears in pain. *Black-mane, come to the northern peak, or all will be cinders and ash.*

Chapter 9 – To Die Alone

By morning the fires had been doused. A cold stillness lay throughout the valley. In total, fourteen homes had been destroyed and many others damaged. Long trails of smoke rose from the charred remains of the collapsed buildings. The morning was wrought with the soft whispers of sorrowful voices, the cries of those who had lost loved ones, and the shouts of those who were at work tending to the wreckage. Many had perished in the building fires and smoke, and many others to the flames of the dragon's mouth.

Too many. Gevan cursed his own folly. *Yona was right. This evil came upon us from my error. Rimot, Yona, Dima, Bren, Simor, Tulin, Refan and his children, all dead. What have I done? The children! Light above... the children. What have I done?*

Gevan sat on the steps of the Hall, head in his hands, clutching his hair in rage and desperation. *I must go. Honor calls for it. Shame compels it. Anger demands it. I will go, and I will kill or be killed.*

He rose to leave, unaware of those who had gathered in the square around him or the debate that had started among the people. A heavy hand on his

shoulder pushed him back to where he had been sitting caught up in his own mind.

“And where do ya think you are goin lad?” Rendar said gruffly. “You’re not goin north are ya? That would be grave foolishness, in the view of this old man.”

Gevan looked around, surprised to see the people there. Everyone stood watching, some with looks of anger, some with looks of compassion, but most faces were simply filled with sorrow, sorrow and worry.

“I must go. It came for me. For *me*.” Gevan repeated, confused and full of anguish. “It called for me, did you not hear it? It will destroy us if I do not go.”

“Let the Watcher go. He is right, the dragon came for him, and what’s more, it called him thief!” Arten the smith shouted, eyes red from weeping and spit flying from his mouth. His son had died with Rimot and Yona. “I heard it, like a nightmare in my head. What did you steal Gevan?! What have you done?!”

“I don’t know!” Gevan cried in desperation standing and turning to the crowd, “I took nothing. It would have killed me and I ran. It was a grave threat; I came to warn the Quorum, as is my duty! I took nothing; it had nothing to take.”

“Then why does it come for you?! Why does it call you thief and name you from amongst the people?!” Arten pointed angrily, his whole body shaking. “My son! My son is dead, and I am left alone! My son...” He broke down and fell to the earth, weeping. “My boy. My little boy.”

Gevan cried in anguish, overcome, and fell to his knees screaming to the sky.

“Stop! The time for mourning is not yet come!” Rendar spoke firmly. Then he turned to the crowd and raised his voice, “I say it again, in my reckoning, Gevan did as should have been done. The dragon is not one of the nine. That is clear from its size and its color. Have any heard that one of the Great Serpents is black? Or that it is so small? I say it was born as Gevan said, and came to us from the north. It would have come with or without him, for dragons seek out the races of Xorias to kill and destroy.” Rendar paused, making sure all were listening, “We must now decide! The dragon calls for Gevan, and will return for him soon if he does not go himself. But will it stop once it has him? I say nay, but I am just one old man. Do we send him to his doom, and face what may come after, or do we keep him here?”

Wenara stepped forward from the crowd, "We cannot win this fight, even if we wanted to keep him here. I am loathe to send him, but what choice do we have? Half our homes are burned already, our captain and many of our best are slain, and the dragon is unharmed, save a small blow that may or may not have even happened."

"I saw the shot land," Pon spoke from the back of the group. The crowd parted to let her pass. Hoblin strode close beside her. The respect for the girl had grown dramatically overnight. Everyone had heard her challenge to the dark monster, and now they knew the ferocity and loyalty of her beast. "And I saw them lost to the flame, too." she added sadly, looking to the ground.

Yara stood with Pon and said, "The last deed of Yona the Huntress, and those with her," she added, looking to Arten, "was to injure a Great Serpent, should that be doubted, even in times of great fear?"

"No, you are right. I dishonored the dead, and I recall my words," Wenara said, "Yona and those that stood by her will be remembered, I swear it. But we cannot face the dragon. Even when we knew it would come, and even with all those we lost, we were helpless against it. And its full wrath is yet upon us! Beyond its great flame and the terror of its cry were magics used? I think not. It will only be worse when next it comes."

The crowd nodded, the damage it had inflicted in a few minutes had been great, but they had all spoken in fearful tones and agreed that worse may yet come. Dragons, it was said, wielded great and powerful magic, unique to each of the serpents.

"It will not come," Gevan said, rising to his feet. "For I will go. I will not stand for more death if I have any chance of stopping it."

"Please!" Niri burst from where she had stood at the back, listening fearfully. "Do not send my son to die. I could not bear to lose another child. Arten!" She faced the man, "The horrors you now face I have walked, but then I had other children to bring me peace. Would you see me go through the same again?" Her voice was strong and clear but full of compassion and understanding. Niri had a gift for love and healing. Where her salves and gentle touch could not reach she mended with soothing words and songs softly sung. She spoke rarely, a trait she had passed to Gevan, but when she did it lifted the hearts of those that

heard it. Even now she spoke softly, reminding everyone of times spent in her tender care. Arten glanced at her but could not hold her gaze and looked away.

Rendar shook his head and said, "Your death will serve no purpose, Gevan. The dragon wants you, but for what evil end I cannot say. Too often evil creeps in and claims that which is good while we look away, distracted by simple things. Rare is the chance to stare darkness in the eye and protect that which it craves to destroy."

"The way I see it, whether he go or stay it does not matter." Henneth the herder moved with his staff to the center of the circle. "I agree with Rendar, once the dragon has Gevan, it will do as dragons have always done. It will come with ruin on its wings. But we cannot face it; it is too dark and too powerful. We must call for aid; the Lord of Vandar is sworn to these lands as a protector and ally."

"That aid will come too slowly, if it comes at all," growled Rendar. "The Lord of Vandar is not wont to send men this far from his interests in the west, and if he did our bones would be long frozen in the ground ere they arrived."

"Another course then, is perhaps best." Yara said, glancing at Arvid and Niri, "Gevan must leave, but not for the northern peak to a pointless death. He must flee, with all haste, and lead the dragon from us. It hunts him, wants him, perhaps it will chase him. Vandar's walls are thick and its defenses strong. There Gevan can find protection, and with luck, answers."

Arvid now spoke, "I have remained silent, as I am far from neutral in this decision, and the Quorum should remain so, but I must speak. This seems madness to me. Who can outrun a dragon? The distance is too great. Even if he made it through the Bernwyld without being caught, he would not cross the Horngart plains unseen. It would be hopeless. He would die." Arvid looked desperately at those around him, seeking for someone who agreed.

Gevan moved to Arvid, "No Father, Yara is right. If I go to the northern peak, it will destroy me, and once it has finished it will look upon Kressing with vengeance and hate. When I leave I may not reach Vandar, but if I lead it away perhaps it will not return."

"I will go too." Pon said.

The square fell silent.

Everyone stared. And Gevan was suddenly full of dread. *No, not her. Not Pon.* Feelings of concern stronger, by far, than he anticipated, rose in his heart. He had not realized what she had become to him, that her death would mean opening wounds he long thought healed.

An image flashed in his mind, a memory of a little girl laughing while running across a field, her hair flying wildly.

Yara broke the silence, "Why? Pon? Would you go to your death?"

"Do we send our people away, to face death alone?" Pon answered evenly. An edge to her words sounded cold, angry.

The silence in the square returned, but it felt different. It was heavy and full of shame. Many in the crowd shifted uneasily.

"Do we tell those we have known our whole lives to go! Die alone and friendless! Stand without the support of those who should be by you?!" She was shouting now and her eyes flashed with accusation. Her great beast growled, sensing its master's fury.

And Gevan remembered. Pon's mother has been a Watcher in the Bernwyld. Something unseen, something unknown, had found her and she had been slain. Her father was grief-ridden but vengeful, and he hunted for the monster. He pled for help, for friend or guard to go with him, but the quorum objected. They said the monster had passed, that other Watchers had searched for signs of the beast to no avail. He left to hunt deep in the Bernwyld alone. He never returned.

Gevan paused, then put his hand on her shoulder, "Will you let me go, Pon, alone?" He asked, afraid he knew the answer.

She shook her head.

"It hunts for me, and it will likely find me." He said quietly.

Pon nodded grimly, "It might find you, but not alone."

Chapter 10 – Come Back to Me

Qaden let the horse trot steadily on the wide path through the trees. His stomach turned. Had he been on foot he would have turned back already. The trees over and around him were familiar, and he knew the shape of the opening in the trees down the road. His mind and stomach reeled in nervous anticipation. The sun shone through the leaves brightly, and the afternoon's warmth was finally driving off the night's cold. Qaden could smell smoke and vaguely thought it odd that fires had been lit this early in the fall.

As he moved into the clearing, he expected to see the outline of his birthplace as he had remembered it. He expected to hear the shout of someone on watch, seeing a rider emerge from the southern road. He never expected to see half of Kressing burned to the ground, or hear the mourning songs in full chorus.

He dismounted and drew the near the ceremony on foot. Solemnly, hesitantly, he approached the gathering.

His heart dropped as he heard the words. A child, or children, had died. He had only heard this song once before, and he was troubled to hear it again echoing through the valley.

*Little child, so sweet and fair.
With golden laugh, and unkempt hair.*

*Where is the sound of feet on the floor,
the patter of steps that run to the door?*

*Who could have seen this awful end?
Was death so eager for a friend?*

*Why have you left me in grief and strife?
Why did fate steal your precious life?*

*Come back to me, my little child!
Come back to me, my little child!*

*How long I'll remember the sound of my name
as you called it so sweetly while playing in game.*

*What would I give to hold you again
and feel the tight clasp of your little hand?*

*When will I again feel your soft still kiss?
The hope of my life is gone but this:
one day I'll hold you beyond the mists.*

*My little child, so sweet and fair.
With golden laugh, and unkempt hair!*

By the time the song ended Qaden had reached the now dispersing crowd which had begun quiet conversations and mutterings of support and condolences. Qaden searched among half-remembered faces and old friends, and then he froze when he saw her.

His mother looked older, but her eyes were full of energy and strength. She looked sad, but not broken. She spoke earnestly with a weeping woman, wrapping her arms around her shoulders and offering comfort. He wanted to run to her, to hug her tightly and say he had missed her and he was sorry and how much he thought of her and a thousand other things, but six years of anticipation and anxiety were like a wall in his mind and he stood rooted to the spot.

“Qaden? Is that you?” He heard the familiar voice of a stranger beside him, perhaps a young friend now grown to a man, in a surprised whisper. Despite how quiet the question had been his mother stirred as if she had sensed his name spoken and she turned his direction.

When she saw him, she smiled, and in an instant all his years of worry and remorse were blown away. Niri pushed through the crowd and hugged him, whispering “Oh my son! My son. You came back.”

A large hand landed on his shoulder, and the familiar voice spoke again, “Qaden, it is good to see you.”

Through watery eyes Qaden turned for the source of the voice and realized that he looked into the dark eyes of his brother. Qaden broke from his mother’s arms and embraced Gevan.

“You’ve grown huge, brother!”

“It’s been a long time.” Gevan replied.

Qaden nodded, “So it would seem. I have so much to tell you. And it looks as if much has happened here as well.”

He stepped back next to Niri and looked around.

“What has happened? Have the Trulloc grown so strong?”

“No. It is something much worse,” Arvid said as he approached.

He stood awkwardly near his gathered family, unsure what to say.

Qaden suppressed another churning in his stomach. It was good to see his father, he decided, but this reunion was by far the least sweet.

Chapter 11 – The Alchemistress and the Boy

Saris carefully added another mistling core to the mixture bubbling softly before her. A blue light shone from the clear liquid for a moment before fading.

“Another,” She demanded, “Now boy!”

Bodwik hurried across the room. Saris quickly added a spoonful of white nectar to the vial, hoping to finish before he saw. The young boy returned, bringing the precious core with him.

“This is the last one,” he said quietly.

“I know, but it will work. Watch.” She replied shortly.

She carefully dropped the tiny core into the potion. This time the light burned so brightly it lit the whole room. Saris glanced away, waiting for it to dim.

Looking back at the vial she smiled, the liquid had turned a deep blue and still glowed faintly in its bottle. It would shine for another day at least, but its potency would strengthen over the next weeks.

“There,” she said matter-of-factly, “I told you it would work.”

The boy nodded, soaking it all in. He was a timid one, to be sure, but honest and observant. Both things Saris valued highly.

Bodwik stood there, staring at the bench they worked on.

“Go ahead Bodwik,” She said evenly.

“You added more nectar?” He guessed, looking at the spoon.

Saris glanced at it and realized she had put it back a little too far to the right.

“Yes, I did,” she said, trying to keep an even face. *Maybe too observant*, she thought.

“I thought you said to never add reagents after you’ve measured it all out?” He continued, slowly.

Saris looked sheepish for a moment before looking stern.

“Right, well. *You* shouldn’t. I can do whatever I want. I knew it needed more white nectar, so I added it.” She said, turning to put things away.

“You knew because of how it flashed, after the first core?” He concluded. *Definitely too observant. Excellent.*

“Right again boy. Now, put this away, but not with the other two, they are different. They would not play nice if they sat close together for too long.” She said, handing him the vial.

“I think you’ll do,” She said, looking at him. “You can stay until tomorrow.”

He glanced at her and smiled. Like he always did when she said so.

Chapter 12 – Dragons and Dreams

Gevan felt the morning’s chill seeping through his cloak. Compared to his last journey, this was already proving significantly more comfortable and less grueling. Gevan had been given a horse for the journey by the Quorum, along with provisions and other necessities for the trip. He was also entrusted with one

of the few frostwood crossbows left in Kressing. Its dense wood felt heavy but comforting on his shoulders. For most, these bows were almost impossible to draw alone, but they were made to pierce the scales of elder drakes or the thick hide of a bull brossen. The bow's power had already been proven against the dragon the day before, so one was given as a small bit of hope to the fleeing party.

Hoblin and the horses kept a steady pace, and the farther they moved from Kressing the better Gevan felt. *I wish Pon and Qaden had stayed behind.* It wasn't that he did not appreciate their company, in fact, if he could have chosen anyone to accompany him it probably would have been them. He just felt that whatever dangers pursued him should not be faced by anyone else.

Gevan glanced at his companions. Pon, despite her age, was a calming influence. Behind her happy and inquisitive demeanor, she was alert and mindful of every sound. *She knows what to listen for,* he realized. It was comforting, to not be the only pair of eyes and ears that understood what the woods were saying. Almost as alert was her mount, the green, six-legged beast was as interested in each new twist and turn as his rider.

Qaden on the other hand, seemed oblivious to even the loudest sounds or obvious tracks. Despite having just arrived, Qaden had insisted on traveling with Gevan and Pon.

"I came to find my family again, including my brother," he had said, "I'm not about to let him leave alone."

Gevan smiled to himself, grateful for the support. *Although, Qaden was perhaps a little too happy for the chance to leave before having to talk much to Father...* If you had asked Gevan how he felt about Qaden and his sudden reappearance, he would not have known what to say. *It's good to see him,* he thought, and it was surprising how quickly he felt their brotherhood rekindle, but some wounds he had ignored for years began to ache within him. For his part, Qaden seemed glad to be there, if not indignant at the cold.

"I had completely forgotten!" Qaden exclaimed, pulling his cloak around himself tightly, "I'm telling you it is so cold up here my feet are likely to fall off. It's a wonder anyone can bear it."

“Where did you come from?” Pon asked curiously, having never left Kressing or the woods, “It’s not that cold, we’ve still even got leaves on most the trees.”

Qaden shrugged, “Somewhere warmer, much warmer, for sure. Although,” He looked around, taking in the trees and bushes around him, “I had forgotten how great it is to actually hear a breeze sweep through the trees and to feel the coolness of it around your face. There were not many forests in the south. Not like this anyway.”

The conversation fell into a lull as the group moved steadily onward. The sound of crunching leaves marked their passage along a wide trail. Yellow-orange leaves fell softly with each gust of wind and beams of light occasionally found passage through the thick canopy above.

Gevan’s thoughts drifted as they rode and fell to the events of the dream he had the night before. The pain had been so real. He shifted unconsciously in his seat to make sure his feet and arms were still free. It was like nothing he had experienced before. The grey world, and the fear. Not to mention the small creature that spoke to him.

“Gevan!” Pon said again. Snapping him from his reverie.

“Something’s here. Something big.” Pon hissed fiercely. She nodded her head forwards and to the right.

Gevan glanced around and realized Pon had her spear in hand. Qaden looked worried but unsure what he should be looking for.

“Are you sure...” he started, before a screech ripped through the woods.

Thief! You flee! But now you have no village full of biting shafts to ward you, Blackmane. An insect should not leave the safety of its hive.

The dragon rose from behind a deep gorge. Black scales slide over each other as it rose from the trench. It’s dark red eyes bore into Gevan. It crouched low, preparing to leap.

Qaden swore and grabbed Gevan’s reins, “Move!” he shouted.

The trio bolted down the trail as the dragon shrieked again, clawing up the gorge after them.

“Off the path! It’s fire!” Pon yelled.

They scattered as a burst of flame flew between them. Pon felt the heat of the fire on her face as she and her brossen dived off the trail to the left while Gevan and Qaden fell down the gorge to the right. Their horses, panicked and wild from the dragon and its flame, stumbled and bucked, throwing their riders tumbling down the ravine. The dragon skidded, tearing the path as it tried to turn and follow their fall.

Gevan rolled to his feet and stumbled as he pulled wildly for the crossbow slung across his back. Qaden had somehow vanished in the fall. Before Gevan could draw the bow he saw the dark monster leap towards him and barely managed to dive under the dragon's maw, ending up beneath its feet.

The dragon hissed, *You are mine!*

Before he had time to react, the dragon grabbed Gevan in its claw and slammed him into the ground. Flashes of light danced before his eyes. He felt weak.

"No!" Qaden shouted from somewhere above Gevan. Qaden leapt with a large dagger pulled behind his head and slammed into the Dragon's flank. The blade drove partially into its thick scales and black blood began to drip from where it lodged. The dragon roared and shook Qaden from its side who narrowly manage to duck a sweep from its large tail.

Gevan was still pressed into the ground, struggling for breath as the Dragon spewed fire. He didn't see what happened to Qaden, but felt a powerful jolt through the leg pinning him as Pon and her beast slammed onto the back of the serpent. Hoblin's six legs clawed furiously at the dragon's back but struggled to pierce its armor. Pon thrust her spear towards its neck but could not land a solid blow against the black scales.

Gevan was vaguely aware of the battle raging on top of him. He felt dizzy and immobile. The dragon's grip held him tightly against the ground. In a daze, the world seemed grey and he felt trapped. Dazed, he felt like he was within the grip of the horrible vines from his dream. *The vines crept over him, eager to bind and entwine him. Gevan could see the vines and the grey world, but also thought he saw the shadow of the dragon on top of him. He was not sure what compelled him, but he reached out and firmly grabbed the vine inching towards him. It wiggled and flailed in his grip. I need you, he thought. And he pulled. It strained*

against him, violently writhing in his hand, attempting to pull back. No, he commanded, I need you. He pulled, with both mind and body, and he felt the dream shifting.

The grey world fell away before him, and the roars and cries of the fight flooded his ears.

Confused, he tried to push against the claw that pressed him and felt something moving in his hand. To his amazement he saw a dark green vine wiggling angrily in his grasp. He stared, not fully comprehending what he saw: he had it, the Pride's Folly from his dream. Without pausing to think Gevan slammed the vine against the dragon's leg that pinned him to the dirt. The vine wrapped around the serpent and spread quickly, splitting and multiplying as it spun up and down the dragon's leg. The vines that touched the earth dove through the leaves into the dirt and rooted themselves into the ground while others continued to wind towards the dragon's chest.

The dragon's piercing shriek ripped into Gevan's mind once again. *What is this?! What is this?!*

The dragon roared and lifted its paw from Gevan to tear itself from the vines. Suddenly, he felt himself being grabbed around the arm and yanked from under the dragon's claw.

"Stand up!" Qaden yelled, his shouts barely audible over the painful cries of the dragon.

The dragon pulled and snapped the vines with its teeth and claws, but as it struggled the vines only spread more vigorously. Soon they had spread to its other legs and wound up its wings. The dragon's screeches seemed to fade as the folly spread across its body. Soon, the dragon opened and closed its mouth furiously, but only silence remained.

Pon appeared next to them, blood dripping down the side of her face, and leapt off Hoblin, "We've gotta run!" She shouted as she helped Qaden pull Gevan onto her mount.

Bursts of fire and an ominous black vapor spewed from the Dragon's mouth in turn. It thrashed and pulled angrily, wings and sweeping tail coming dangerously close to the shaky group, but still none of its cries could be heard.

Pon and Qaden jumped onto Hoblin, holding the almost unconscious Gevan, before turning and fleeing into the brush.

Hours later they collapsed onto the ground in front of a small cliff overhang surrounded by trees and broken rock. They had not made it very far in the last few hours but were about to collapse. Hoblin's breathing had grown increasingly labored and he had slowed to a crawl. Pon's head wound stubbornly kept bleeding, and Qaden's left arm had gotten badly burnt sometime during the chaos. Both of them, however, were more worried for Gevan than for themselves. He constantly fell in and out of consciousness. Occasionally it seemed he was aware of what was happening and would mutter questions about the dragon, but more often than not he whispered incoherently in his sleep.

"What is wrong with him?" Pon asked nervously.

"I have no idea. Did the dragon do something to him?" Qaden replied, worried.

Pon looked at Qaden. He was pale and shaky. From his wounds or something else she wasn't sure.

"Maybe getting stepped on like that?" Pon asked.

Qaden shook his head. "No, I don't think so. It looks like he is breathing fine, and I don't think anything is broken."

Pon unloaded her bedroll and tent from Hoblin's saddle.

"We should rest as long as we can. He can use my stuff. Maybe if he sleeps he will get over it?" She said, half question half statement.

Qaden nodded, "I guess so."

Qaden looked around at the rocks and trees and felt lost. *I'm out of my element here Gevan.*

Gevan heard voices. Some confused, some excited, most very, very strange. One of the voices billowed like wind through grass. "You're saying he took some folly, broke it in his hand, and then woke up?!" it asked, incredulously.

"Ya! It really was something." A light, whimsically familiar voice said. "He sorta just pulled really hard and then SNAP, the vine broke off and he vanished with it."

“Surely the vine did not cross with him?” A new voice asked slowly. It sounded creaky, old, and deep. “It must have stayed where he had been?”

“Nope, I told you ya old root, it went with him. Oh, and there he is now, See? Out and in, out and in.”

The voices went quiet and Gevan heard some creaking and shuffling then more silence.

He hesitated, a little worried at what he was going to see, and then opened his eyes to a Fyelin staring at him from very, very close.

“Hi! How did’ja do that?” She asked, grinning.

Qaden woke up with pain throbbing in his left arm and a sharp poke in his back. They had done their best to wrap his burn but the pain was intense. The rocky ground was not making rest any easier. Pale starlight illuminated the silhouette of Pon and her large horned beast a few paces from where he and Gevan lay. Qaden moved quietly and sat next to the small girl.

“Anything happen?” He whispered, looking out into the darkness.

She glanced over, wearily, and shook her head.

“No, and I think I dozed off once or twice, but Hoblin seems to have figured out the whole “take turns paying attention” thing.”

Qaden glanced warily at Hoblin’s face, its green eyes reflected bright in the night and gazed back at him.

“I still have a few reservations about your friend there. I’ve seen many “tamed” beasts lash out. Traders and merchants who thought they’d beaten the wild out of something ended up dead.”

“Well, that was probably their first mistake,” she replied dryly. “You can’t take the wild out of something like this. You got to let them be wild sometimes, and then hopefully you can point their wildness at the things you want to go away.”

Qaden shrugged, “You’re the expert. I guess I can’t hate something that saved our hides.”

He tentatively pet Hoblin on the side.

“You’re turn Pon. Sleep.”

She nodded and moved with Hoblin towards Gevan, then paused and turned back.

“Listen, right now, everything sounds like it should. Remember the noises like they are now. It’s when you hear something different than normal that matters. If something changes, say the owl in the tree over there stops hooting every now and then, or you hear a sound that feels wrong, that’s when you know.”

“Know what?” He asked, as she curled up against Hoblin.

“That you should wake me up, that’s what.” She said, falling asleep.

Gevan sat on the ground in the midst of creatures from tales and legends. The Fyelin he had seen before rested on a grassy knoll to his left. The grassy knoll itself was a creature, usually called a gnoll in the tales, appropriately enough, but somehow in this dream-like place he also knew it was called an Essiln. To his right, a much larger being stared at him. An Innenc, something told him, like a thick tree with gnarled features and great limbs reaching upward. It regarded him silently. The branches above him stirred slightly as he stared into brown eyes so dark they were almost black. Other creatures were hidden somewhere outside his vision, but he could sense they were there, watching curiously. Finally, the large Innenc spoke with a deep slow voice.

“Now you are something else. Something I’ve not seen before. A man, it would seem, but one with a firmness inside.” The tree rumbled.

Gevan glanced around and nodded, “thank you, I think?”

“Well, I suppose it is a good thing, yes. But perhaps not one of your own doing,” replied the tree.

The Innenc again fell silent. When it spoke it did so slowly and it did not seem to mind long minutes between every sentence.

“Reini here tells me you tore one of the grasping vines and took it with you when you woke.”

Gevan was not really sure what had happened. Everything was still hazy, and in this place it was difficult to keep track of what was happening right now, let alone remember anything. “Yes?” He replied carefully, “I think I did. I remember the dragon crushing me, and it getting hard to breath. After that it’s all blurred.”

“Hmmmmm,” the great tree toned deeply, like great wood beams creaking, “A dragon, you say? You escaped one of the nine? Are you sure it was not a drake?”

“It is no drake,” Gevan sighed, he knew he had recently had this conversation before. “Its cry is like terror rising deep in your mind. Even willing yourself to move is to fight some horrible fear. And its voice, in your thoughts, is like a dark terror from childhood you had forgotten.”

The tree “hhhhmmmm’d” again. “You’ve not slipped into waking in all this time, and speak as clearly as we do. In this place, that is rare, perhaps unheard of, for a man to be thus.”

Gevan waited, confused; it seemed like it wanted to say more.

“Gevan,” it said heavily, “I am called Hournn. Heed this warning: This dragon is like its kin, sinister and evil, but each unique in aspect and power. If it is smaller and weaker than its siblings, that will not always be so, it will grow. It appears the nine have finally become ten. Terror, for that is its power and essence, is loosed upon your world. Be wary, you are in danger.”

“How do you know my name?” Gevan asked.

“You think you are the only one to hear the knowledge of the dream?” Hournn toned deeply, “To know what you have not been told? Many men who dream can do so, but their presence to us is as fleeting as a leaf rushing by in the wind. A few fey can listen to the dreamsense, but it is difficult to hear for us, even for I.”

He sighed and then drew a deep, long breath, and began pushing his arms against the ground.

“For a man who dreams so clearly. And one who speaks of a dragon of terror. For this, I will journey to Goulnis,” Hournn said.

Gevan heard loud creaking noises like wood bending under too much weight as Hournn strained against the earth. Gevan fell back as the ground began to churn beneath him.

Reini looked surprised and leapt to her feet, “You move from your place?! If this is so important then I’ll go too! But it will take you ages to get there!”

“I will go, but do not wait for me little Reini. There is much for him to learn and he could wake at any moment. Teach him how to find us again,” the great

tree wheezed and groaned, shaking itself from the ground. Hournn's other branches spun into additional arms of woven bark, wood, and vine. He again pushed against the ground, pulling massive roots from where they had burrowed deep into the earth.

Gevan stepped back, awed at the sight of a tree uprooting itself. Hournn shook soil and rock from his roots and wrapped them tightly together into massive legs.

Suddenly, Gevan felt a tug in his mind and the feeling of movement, like being swept away in a great current. Hournn and his grove of grey-green trees melted from his sight. Gevan thought he heard Hournn call out to the Fyelin, something about finding him, but he couldn't hear. He was waking up.

“What do you remember from yesterday?” Qaden asked Gevan carefully. “I was sure you would be ripped apart by that dragon, or more likely crushed, but suddenly that plant was everywhere and pulled it to the ground.”

Gevan shook his head, “I cannot explain it. I dreamed about that plant once, and then I had it in my hand.”

Gevan looked fervently between the confused faces of Qaden and Pon.

“I had thought it was all a dream, brought by some dark magic or the press of the dragon on my chest! I dreamed I was in a valley. Powerful, living vines I had seen in another dream crawled towards me. I grabbed them in my hand. Suddenly I awoke and saw the dragon on top of me and you two fighting. I looked and found the vine in my hand, which then wrapped and ensnared it. I thought I hadn't woken up at all but was still dreaming. Yet you say it actually happened? You tell me that we escaped the dragon because it got trapped in some... some Pride's Folly?!”

“Pride's Folly?” Pon asked, surprised, “I've never heard of or seen a plant like that before, but you know its name?”

Gevan shook his head again and shrugged, putting his head into his hands, “It's what it was called in my dream.”

Pon shot a confused look at Qaden, who only shot a lost one back.

“Well,” Qaden said, attempting to steer the conversation to something he understood, “I think we simply need to move on. I don’t know what happened to the dragon but I don’t think we should assume it’s still stuck there, or dead.”

Pon nodded, “You’re right. The horses are gone, but I’ve some food left and I caught a rabbit in a snare last night. We should eat and leave. Hoblin can’t carry us, not after yesterday. The dragon got him pretty bad, and running like that with all of us on him didn’t help.”

Gevan looked at her and started to apologize before she cut him off, “Don’t even say anything. He’ll be fine. I’m just saying we’ll be on foot so it will take even longer to reach Vandar.”

The day passed slowly but uneventfully. They decided to avoid open valleys whenever possible; hoping the cover of the woods would hide them from above. The loss of both horses proved to be a more significant blow than they had anticipated. Not only did it mean losing most of their supplies but their injuries on top of walking dropped their morale dramatically. Each felt their journey could not have started worse. They now knew, sure as stone, that the dragon was hunting them. Worse, when confronted they only escaped through the appearance of some mysterious and unexplained fortune. Each was badly bruised and worn, and in one case burned, and constant hiking through back trails and thick forest only worsened their pains.

The day after was the same, except once they huddled in fear and silence for over an hour because Gevan thought he saw a shadow flying over the trees to the east. Eventually, they moved on, having seen nor heard anything more, but the constant threat of discovery wore heavily on their minds. Finally, the sun set, and the group silently prepared for another restless night in the cold and dark.

Chapter 13 – Creatures in the Night

Qaden quietly shook Gevan and Pon awake, he looked between them anxiously before motioning them to follow.

“I see something, in the field to the west.” He whispered softly.

Gevan and Pon were awake immediately. They moved silently to the place Qaden had been keeping watch.

Qaden pointed and whispered, "There, see? Some sort of light. It's so dim I thought I was imagining it. But now I'm sure. Something is over there, moving around, see how the light shifts about?"

Gevan nodded and gestured for them to follow. As quietly as possible, the three crept through the trees and thicket towards the field. As they drew near, the light became more obvious, casting a pale glow against the trees and stones surrounding the field. Finally, they gained a clear view and peered into the clearing.

Pon gasped softly, "Mistlings!"

Hundreds of blue-white creatures drifted slowly through the air. Each looked like a piece of fine cloth billowing gently on a non-existent wind. They shone brightly in the dark, lighting the field with an ethereal glow. Silently they flew, alighting on flower, grass, or branch for a moment before drifting lazily away.

Enchanted, the three sat motionless and watched the beautiful creatures move from place to place, seemingly at random. Eventually, the mistlings began to drift upwards, moving over the tree tops and out of sight.

Qaden whispered, "I've never seen anything like that, not in all my traveling."

Gevan replied, awed, "I've seen them, once, but from far away."

"I've heard a story," Pon whispered, "That they are the spirits of the dead, left by the Gods to wander aimlessly because of something they did wrong."

Qaden shook his head, "I've heard that story, but now, after seeing them, I'm not so sure. They don't feel sad or lost to me. They seemed... content."

The three sat quietly for a few minutes until Qaden broke the somber moment, "I've been thinking," he said, "We've lost our gear, so sleeping at night is more cold and uncomfortable than one would hope for."

Pon laughed, "You would say that. Hoblin and I are quite warm when we sleep, thank you."

Qaden continued, undeterred, "I mean it, we are not resting, not really. I know you're not sleeping well Gevan, if you can even call your fretful tossing

sleep. On top of that the fear of being seen by the dragon haunts our travels every moment of the day. Why not move at night, when we can breathe more easily without fear of being seen from above?"

Gevan nodded, "I've had that thought as well, but the dangers of traveling at night are far too great. Many of the beasts I watch for only hunt at night. The darkness invites things far worse than even Trullocs to roam about."

"Far worse than a dragon?" Qaden replied flatly.

"No, probably not." Gevan admitted.

"I think Qaden is right," Pon added, "We know more about what dangers lurk in the Bernwyld at night than we do about this dragon. I'd rather run into a wyvern or sythlik than that dragon again."

Gevan hesitated. It was true that he had not been sleeping well. Ever since his last dream with the Fyelin and the great Innenc he had been both frightened and hopeful that he would meet them again. As confusing and difficult to remember the dream had been, he was sure that there was more to it than just a dream. Not after what happened to the dragon. Not after something from his dreams saved them all. *But It's no coincidence that these dreams started after the dragon appeared. Has it cursed me? Is this some trick or madness the serpent sets upon me?* These fears, and the difficulty of their travels, only fed into his trouble falling into a deep sleep. Would he even be able to dream if they slept during the day?

Qaden broke into Gevan's thoughts, "Lets move Gevan. Tonight."

Gevan paused, and then nodded, "Alright, we travel by darkness."

Geni watched curiously as the three humans and the young viglos traveled through the forest. *They move well*, he thought, and he would not have noticed them at all except by chance. He had spotted them while watching the ishtonti in the field. Their reverence at seeing the dancing ishtonti drew his approval, but their unusual behavior, even for humans, drew his interest. *Why do you leave your man-places during the moonrise?* He asked himself while trailing them. *And why does this viglos not stomp you into the ground?* He knew man had long partnered with horse and hound, which was well, but a viglos was something different altogether.

Geni spun himself into an owl and flew closer. *Perhaps they have beat it until weak and chained it. It will be unwell for them if so.* He had only met a few humans, long ago, and they had acted well and unwell in equal parts. His heart still worried; for every story of man's close partnership with horse and hound there were rumors of the abuse of this partnership. He feared the latter was more true.

Geni landed on a branch a few paces ahead of the humans. He watched as the viglos moved freely, content to travel with them, and bonded it seemed with the smallest of the three. The viglos noticed him, green eyes curious in the night, and the small girl soon followed its gaze and saw him perched on the branch. *They are well connected. She hears his feelings.* The human female and the viglos stared at him for a few moments. He took to flight before she decided to investigate further. *Strange humans,* he thought as he circled above them, *but well.*

Traveling by night proved as relieving for the fearful humans as they had hoped. They still moved cautiously but with the cover of darkness they felt safer than they had since leaving Kressing. The first night passed quickly, and the group traveled a few hours past sunrise until they found an exceptionally dense grove of trees and made camp for the rest of the day. Exhausted but hopeful, they were in high spirits with the progress they had made. The next night also passed uneventfully, and they felt better about the next part of their journey as they prepared for sleep as the sun rose.

They were still many days of travel from Vandar. Qaden and Gevan reckoned that they needed to travel four more days southeast before crossing the Istonn mountains. From there, it would be another five days of good travel before reaching Vandar.

Their enthusiasm dimmed when Gevan found the tracks of a large sythlik close to camp.

"Where there is one, there are many, as the saying goes." Gevan told Qaden, while Pon nodded.

Gevan continued, "One is bad enough, but if we've strayed into the territory of a den of sythlik then sure as stone we're already being tracked by the pack. We're far enough from Kressing now that we could have been in their range all last night and not even realized it."

"And I'm going to guess they hunt at night?" Qaden asked, rubbing his face.

"Yup," Pon answered, "so the question is, do we stick with our plan and go later tonight, or should we leave now and try to lose them in the daylight?"

The group fell silent for a few moments. None of them were particularly happy about the idea of pushing on before sleeping, but the idea of a pack of sythlik on their heels while trying to stay hidden from a dragon was even worse.

"Can we scare them off?" Pon asked, looking to Gevan. "We could set traps, and then sleep until dusk. If they attack we could fight them off."

Gevan folded his arms, thinking, "It's possible. It seems foolhardy to seek out a fight against the sythlik now, but I do not think we have a better option. If we pressed on without resting our strength would be spent in just a few hours and we would have to stop anyway. If we sleep and try to escape tonight they will chase us and we will not be able to outrun them."

"They will not attack until well after dusk," Pon said, "if we're not running they'll wait until the moon is high. They don't really move much before then unless they have to."

"You've seen them before?" Gevan asked, surprised.

Pon grinned and nodded, "I've tracked a few, back to their dens."

Gevan shook his head, "That is incredibly dangerous Pon, even for a hunting party."

Pon nodded, "I know, I was careful." *But I'll just not say exactly how close I've seen their dens.* She thought to herself.

With a plan decided, the three set about preparing for the ordeal ahead of them. The sythlik would likely come eight or more strong, but they feared fire, and they were predictable. If a few of them were killed and their prey proved too dangerous the rest would flee and not return. Pon and Gevan decided a few fires would help in confusing and dissuading their attack.

"But won't fire be a beacon to the dragon?" Qaden asked as Gevan and Pon discussed where the fires should be built.

The two stopped mid-discussion, dumbfounded.

“You’re right!” Gevan said, aghast, “We got so caught up in planning for the sythlik we didn’t even consider the dragon. Fire is... the best option against sythlik, always, but it is a very bad idea right now.”

“So what do we do?” Pon asked, “Without fire can we scare them away?”

“They’ll still leave if we’re hurt them enough, and if we are loud enough.” Gevan said, “They are more scavenger than hunter, really. They crawl along the ground until ready to attack and then leap so their two claws and tail can strike at once. I’ve seen heavy stakes driven into the ground in a scattered pattern slow their approach, and the spikes agitate them a great deal.”

“Claws and a tail?” Qaden asked nervously, “I’ve never actually seen a sythlik.”

“Yes, blocking them without a shield is difficult. Best be ready to sidestep or jump to the side when they lunge, and you’ll want this,” Gevan answered, handing Qaden his spear. “Those short blades of yours will not fare very well against their long tails.”

The remaining hours of the day were spent driving stakes into the ground in key places to block the approach of the monsters from behind. They prepared to meet the monsters in an open field, where the moonlight would allow them the most sight of their enemy, and then they slept. Qaden watched first because he was too anxious to sleep anyway. Despite Gevan and Pon’s assurances that during the daylight they would not be attacked, he felt uneasy. Monsters were not his strong suit.

Night fell upon the woods and found Gevan, Pon, Qaden, and Hoblin ready in the clearing. The evening felt strange, even to Qaden, because an eerie silence had crept into the dark. Nothing except the occasional gust of wind could be heard. As the moon crept higher into the sky, the three began to hear the sound of something dragging across the ground in the darkness beyond the clearing. Hoblin cocked his head to the side, listening. He sniffed the air with deep sniffs, and then let out a low growl from his chest. The trio found the sound exceptionally comforting in the face of the impending attack.

A guttural hiss rose from the trees around them as a dozen sythlik moved from the shadows surrounding them and crept towards the travelers. The sythlik

half-slithered half-pulled themselves across the ground with writhing tails and large claws. Tough carapace covered their deep red bodies except where gaping maws with pincers and countless teeth opened in feral snarls. Behind them a few sythlik could be heard angrily hissing as they ran into the driven spikes.

Gevan calmly rose his crossbow and aimed at the nearest sythlik. A deep *thwomp* rang through the clearing as the bolt shot heavily into a sythlik, pinning it to the ground where it writhed in pain.

The five remaining monsters advanced furiously and leapt in tandem, launching themselves forward through the air with massive claws. Pon braced her spear against the ground and caught one in the air as it fell. The weight of the impaled sythlik pulled her spear to the ground, where she struggled to free the tip. A rancid odor filled her nose as pale blood spilled onto the ground.

Close by two sythlik landed heavily on Hoblin who roared furiously as their pincers gripped his side. Their sharp tails and claws tore furiously into his hide. Hoblin shook and bucked violently, trying to dislodge the creatures, but they held firm and ripped his flank.

Qaden tried to stab the sythlik leaping for him mid-air but missed. Frantically he fell to the side while pushing away with his spear in a feeble attempt to keep the monster at bay.

Gevan dropped his crossbow and in a sweeping motion brought his axe up to catch a descending sythlik in the chest. This is what he was trained for, this was his duty and responsibility to his people. To be a Watcher meant to know the monsters that threatened Kressing and its people, to see dangers before they grew too great, and to know how to destroy those dangers when necessary.

The sythlik was flung through the air, spilling blood in an arc from the gaping wound left by Gevan's axe. Gevan turned and brought his axe down onto the sythlik scrambling to get past Qaden's spear, severing it in half.

Pon shouted as four more sythlik emerged from the woods. She ran towards Hoblin and stabbed one of the creatures hanging from his side. The sythlik squirmed beneath her spear for a moment before releasing Hobling and falling to the ground, rolling in pain. Pon jumped and used her weight to press the spear further into its body. She felt the spear slide through the monster and into the ground. For a moment it flailed wildly before finally going limp.

Despite Hoblin's thick fur, the claws of the sythlik had done their work. Deep gashes dripped blood onto the ground where it reflected the moon's light. With a snarl Hoblin finally dislodged the other sythlik from his back and stomped it furiously into a pulp. The brossen raged against the dead creature, roaring furiously while leaping up and down.

Gevan and Qaden stood side by side while steadily falling back against the flurry of claws and hisses from the remaining sythlik. At hoblin's roar, the sythlik hesitated. The smell of their fallen broodmates now hung heavily in the air and the brossen's fury was the tipping point. The sythlik broke, and turned to flee into the woods.

Gevan almost shouted the victory when he began to feel an incessant buzz in his head. It was almost too deep to hear but he recognized with dread the resonating feeling in his chest and ears. *Oh no*, he thought, *their queen is in heat*.

The four sythlik's hisses turned to a deeper, more monotonous, tone before they slid away. Moving in unison, as if compelled, they slunk to the far side of the clearing and waited. In the moonlight Gevan could see a huge shadow moving in the darkness beneath the trees. Soon the sounds of more styhlik buzzing in harmony rose from other parts of the woods to join the deep hum he felt in his chest.

A massive creature slithered into the clearing. Flanked on each side by pairs of sythlik, the Queen towered over the others with six claws stretching from her bloated body. She rose her head and the buzz grew louder as she called more sythlik to her. Gevan knew that the sythlik would no longer flee. Queens only left the hive when ready to breed, and she would compel the brood to forage and kill until enough food had been found to satisfy her. They needed to run.

"We need to run." Gevan said, turning quickly to the others.

He started to point south when an owl landed on his outstretched arm.

Gevan stared at the owl in confusion.

The bird leapt from his arm and twisted weirdly into itself before transforming into a small person who landed softly in front of him.

"Man. Do well and follow me!" The shapeshifter shouted, "These *ikthik* will kill you and your kin. Come, move quickly!"

Pon and Qaden stared in wonder at the small figure. He was easily a foot shorter than Pon but looked muscular and nimble. He wore clothing made of rough leather and cord, with a heavy cloak woven from leaves and vines. His eyes, currently furrowed and serious, glinted in the dark, slightly brighter than the light of the moon alone would allow.

“Follow!” the man said again, looking at all of them frantically before rushing into the woods.

The sythlik’s buzz grew wild and intense as the queen let out a deep bellow. The three snapped out of their stupor. Gevan grabbed his crossbow from the ground and followed. Qaden and Pon glanced at each other for a split-second before they plunged into the woods after the diminutive man.

Qaden could hear the humming of the queen behind them as they raced through the woods. He heard hissing and buzzing from the darkness all around them in the black woods. Qaden was sure they were about to stumble into a waiting sythlik pack but they plowed heedlessly on, following the small man. Always the creature barely stayed in view as he sped in a seemingly random and twisting path through the woods. At times, Qaden was certain the horrific queen was close behind them, and he could hear the other sythlik around them, cutting them off. Other times, he could not hear any growls or hisses and thought they had finally lost them, only to have his hopes dashed when he heard their hum once again.

Soon his chest and his legs burned. Deep rasping breaths gave him no relief from the scream of his lungs for more air. They sped on. He was afraid he would collapse soon. He wanted to keep going, but his legs felt heavy and he started to stumble and trip. Somehow he managed to press forward, rounding another ravine and climbing another hill. Suddenly he bumped into Gevan who was stopped, breathing heavily, at the top of the ravine. In the dark, Qaden could make out the small man looking quickly left and right. Qaden noticed with some alarm that this creature’s eyes seemed to reflect light in the darkness. *Like a Cat*, he thought through his gasps, *Or Hoblin*. Qaden looked to the Brossen. His wounds glistened faintly in the scant light that shown from the moon above.

“Stay silent. But move swiftly. Follow the moon until I return.” The small man said in a strange accent. He turned to head back the direction they came.

“Who are you?” Qaden asked through deep breaths.

“I am Geni.” He replied, seemingly confused at the question, before running down the ravine and disappearing.

“That’s not very informative.” Qaden whispered angrily.

“We should keep moving,” Pon said, stretching her legs while panting.

“You think we should go where he said?” Gevan asked, eyeing the moon. Following it as the man directed would lead them east, more east than they had ever intended to go.

“He just got us out of there. Somehow.” Qaden whispered, “I’m not one to trust strange magical owl-people in the woods, but I think maybe I’ll make an exception this time.”

Gevan nodded in agreement, then realized no one would have been able to see it very clearly.

“East it is then. Quickly.” Gevan said.

As they started they heard a loud roar, like a large bear, echoing through the trees behind them. The roar sounded a few more times before they moved away and could not hear it any longer.

Good, Qaden thought, maybe that bear will take a few of them out for us.

“There! Do you see it?!” The older man exclaimed in excitement. “Right above Nobula’s tail. A new star!”

Saris nodded vaguely, looking through a smaller telescope but not really seeing what he meant. The astronomer was busy looking through his own telescope to notice.

“Fascinating Gwight, but I’m not here to learn the new Shifting in the constellations. I need starlight.” Saris said flatly.

“That’s my point Saris! This isn’t just an unforeseen shift, the other stars have stayed where they are. This is the beginning of a whole new constellation, you wait and see! This is a new star, I’m sure of it! And in a region that has been static for a thousand years! What might it mean?” Gwight exclaimed enthusiastically while pressed against his viewing piece.

“I’m sure you’ll figure it out and tell me. Now, where do you distill your light? I trust you have a potent vial?” Saris pressed, undeterred.

“Yes yes, of course.” Gwight said irritably, obviously disappointed that his friend failed to see the magnitude of his discovery. “I’ll require the usual in exchange.” He added, looking down from where he sat above her and Bodwik.

Gwight’s observatory was cluttered with books, scrolls, and diagrams of the night’s sky. Illustrations of constellations long since lost hung on the walls, with a few newer charts of the current sky incomplete on his desk. Notes and half-formed theories long forgotten lay scattered across every available table and bookshelf. Telescopes of various sizes poked out each window in his tower, with an exceptionally large and impressive looking scope mounted on a platform that poked through a hole in the ceiling.

Saris nodded in agreement. “One Yultine potion and a dreamweave net, as usual. The boy has them.”

Gwight, who looked as cluttered but impressive as his tower, climbed down a short ladder and began wending his way through the stacks of books and scrolls to a strange device made of silver pipes and glass. The device sat near large a window, catching the dim light of the evening on its surface. Gwight removed a small bottle made of silver from inside and quickly capped it with a matching lid.

“One vial of arrested starlight. Should stay potent for a day or two. The sooner you use it the better. And I won’t have another full flask for a few weeks, so don’t waste it!” He said pointedly.

“I don’t waste. I simply learn by expending resources.” Saris sniffed proudly, but smiled, “We’re close Gwight, this might be it. You’ll be the first to know if we are. Partly because we’ll be needing more starlight, and also because you’ve been most helpful.”

Gwight took the potion and net from Bodwik and set them down in a cabinet, locking it securely.

“That is most fortuitous!” He exclaimed, “Two important steps in our lives is surely cause for a drink.”

He retrieved a bottle of liquor from a small table and poured two glasses, handing one to Saris.

“Sorry boy,” the Astronomer said, looking at Bodwik, “Maybe when you’re older.”

“To discovery!” Gwight toasted loudly while Saris laughed.

“To discovery.” She said, drinking, and hoping.

Pon and the others collapsed wearily onto the grass. The cold wetness of the morning’s dew felt refreshing against her sweaty skin. They had kept a rapid pace throughout the night were finally able to justify sleep as the sun crept over the horizon.

Despite her weariness, Pon looked worriedly at Hoblin’s side. The worst of the bleeding had stopped. Thick clumps of blood coated each gash and hung in his fur. The wounds still oozed blood where the dry clots cracked. Hoblin lay next to her, panting heavily with his eyes closed.

As she attempted to clean the wound the best she could, Gevan and Qaden set up camp and prepared the last of their food. They ate in silence, too tired to engage in much beyond a worried look or a nod of understanding. They would have to spend a few days hunting and gathering food before they would be able to go much farther. Pon thought it would be best anyway, she couldn’t even muster the will to consider pushing on, let alone to try it. And a few days of preparation would hopefully give Hoblin time to recover.

The morning passed into afternoon as they lay in exhausted slumber. The warmth of the sun pulled them even deeper into a comfortable sleep on the soft ground. Pon was only occasionally aware of the sounds of forest life around them. A birdcall, a breeze sweeping through the leaves, the bustling of the stream they camped by. At times she forgot she was days from home and felt like she was simply dozing in the fields near Kressing as she had done so many times before.

Pon awoke with a start when the loud buzzing of an insect on her face sent her into a panic. Images of the sythlik flashed in her mind. She smiled at herself when she realized it was only a grasshopper, and she gently brushed it into the grass. She looked around and was startled to find the sun already setting beyond the horizon. The wind, gentle and relaxing before, now felt cold without the sun’s rays.

Pon shivered and glanced around, noticing the strange owl sitting on the branch of a tree nearby. She moved from the others and sat against a dead log. The bird gazed at her before flying elegantly to where she sat. It spun and twisted into a blur that was hard to understand before it was again the small man from the previous night.

They sat for a while, silently watching each other, before it finally spoke.

“Your beast will be fine.” He said comfortingly.

Pon knew he spoke of Hoblin and she could not help but feel relieved at his words.

“*Viglos* are strong and wise. It is well for you to have him, and him you. How is it so?” He asked.

Pon hesitated. She had never told anyone how she had met Hoblin, or how she had tamed him. She had planned on teaching others in her village to do the same, but was hesitant to do even that. Brossen were not like other animals, she had realized, and she worried others would treat them so. As she stared into the green and reflective eyes of Geni, a strange fae that had saved their lives, she knew that her next words would be important.

“I do not want to say. What if you hurt them?” Pon asked.

Geni’s expression was impossible to read. He stared for a time, before answering. “Would knowing how this came to be hurt them?”

“It might!” She said, “If you knew how to walk among them, befriend them, you might use this to hurt them. You might take them! Or use them to fight or kill.”

The strange man replied, “Did you not do so? Do you not use him to fight and serve you?”

Pon paused, worried. The fae spoke to the fears she held inside. She often wondered if Hoblin would have preferred to stay with his own kind, if he would have been happier left in the wild.

“I do not use him! He is not my slave...” She said, trailing into her own thoughts.

“But he is hurt, his wounds are deep. Would he have suffered them were it not for you?” Geni replied.

“I did not want it!” Pon exclaimed desperately, “When he is hurt I am hurt. I would have taken them instead if I could.”

“Would you die for him?” The fae asked seriously.

Pon fretted. She knew Gevan and Qaden would object, saying that to die for a pet or beast, even one as special as Hoblin, was foolish. But she knew, after months of raising and teaching him, that Hoblin was more than even the smartest dog or the finest horse.

“I would not send him into danger I would not also face.” She said, realizing that is what she feared others would do. “I would risk my life for his. But how can I know you would do the same? What if you would send them to kill and die where you would not go?”

The fae smiled, “I understand! And now I know you. Human, you are Beastfriend. Friends do not abandon each other to danger, but face it together. Friends understand that some dangers are worth facing for each other. Friends know that death for another is not a life stolen but one freely given. Once you learn that I am also Beastfriend, would you tell me?”

Pon nodded slowly, repeating his words in her mind to make sure she followed, “I think so, if I knew.”

Geni nodded. “This is well. Your friends, the men, they finally wake. Come, we must speak.”

Gevan stared at the Geni, unsure what to think. Even Watchers were wary of fae. Most people lived their whole lives without seeing or interacting with any of the faekin. Watchers by nature had more exposure to their world, even if it was mostly in rare sightings before the unusual creature vanished in the woods. The fae were as varied physically as the animals of the forest, and their culture was foreign to men, foreign and dangerous. What little Gevan knew of Faekin painted their rituals and laws as confusing and complicated. To the Fae these things were natural and almost foundational, which lead to deep misunderstandings between the groups when men accidentally broke some dearly held belief of the Fae, or when the Fae seemingly disregarded what men valued most. Physically, most Fae were smaller and weaker than humans, but some types, as Gevan knew firsthand,

were as large as trees. Despite their size, Fae had magic, and were thus greatly feared by men, who had none.

“We are grateful for your aid, Geni.” Gevan said, “We would not have escaped the Sythlik queen had you not saved us.”

Geni nodded. “It was well I followed you. And unusual for you to move in moonlight. Why is it so?”

Gevan glanced at Qaden and Pon. Qaden shrugged, but Pon did not catch his eye. She was distracted and looked more thoughtful and reserved than usual.

Gevan decided that even if there were no formal interactions between Faekin and Men, Dragons were everyone’s business.

“We run from a dragon. It hunts us, so we move at night to escape its gaze. We hope to find protection and advice in Vandar, to the south.”

The fae looked confused. “Dragons beset cities of men. They feed and thrive there. Why would a dragon come here, where men are few?”

“Do they not afflict you and your people?” Gevan asked, surprised. He had never heard Dragons spoken of in such practical terms, or that they sought men particularly.

Geni shook his head, “No, no longer. Our peoples are united now, and our strengths protect us. The *EsIkar*, or Dragons as you say, might still destroy and kill, but they cannot glut themselves on our emotions, so they leave us.”

“Wait... what?” Qaden said, slowly. “They seek cities of men to feed on emotions..? What does that even mean?”

“You do not know?” Geni said, eyebrows raised. “I know these things of old, they have long been known to us. They were once known to men... are they forgotten?” He stopped, shaking his head. “For another time. By one who knows more than I. This dragon, why is it here?”

“We believe it’s a new dragon.” Gevan said. “I saw it fall from the sky as an egg.”

“Truly?!” Geni said, amazed, “Then we must continue on, and quickly. The birds have seen this dragon well. They change their flights for miles around. I sought the reason for their fear and this is surely it.”

“Vandar is south, at least a fortnight’s worth of travel. If we leave tomorrow...” Gevan started before Geni cut him off.

“It is too far,” Geni said, pointing to the south, “The plains will offer you no cover from the Esllkar’s gaze, and the birds flee from that direction in large flocks.”

“Maybe the dragon waits for us at the pass...?” Qaden asked, looking at Gevan.

Gevan nodded gravely, “It expected us to go to Vandar and cut us off.”

“Why did you have us run east, towards the moonrise?” Pon asked, stirring from her thoughts.

Geni smiled, “It is well you did, for now you are close to my people. Three more moons and we will come to *U’undae*, the Brighthome, land of my kin.”

“Brighthome?!” Gevan exclaimed softly, “The Green Wonder?”

“The green wonder?” Geni asked, pleased. “A name that is well placed, and yes, it is there,” he said pointing to a set of tall forested mountains to the east, “but...” He hesitated, “Humans are not as enemies, but they are not as friends, and are rarely seen there. You will find shelter, but some will think it unwell to see you.”

“I have questions that need answers,” Gevan said firmly, steeling the drop in his stomach, “And we stumble from one danger to another. If they’ll speak with me, perhaps they can help.”

Qaden looked at Gevan for a moment and nodded. “And this dragon business, this... forgotten knowledge. I would learn it. ”

“I go where you go,” Pon said to Gevan, “I said you would not go alone.”

Geni rose and made a strange gesture to the rising moon, “*laente ilos nobu*. It is decided.”

They allowed another day to pass while Hoblin healed. Pon and Gevan spent most of the day scouting the area and hunting what game could be found. Qaden felt ill-equipped for their adventures after his struggles against the sythlik and the dragon. He was familiar with swordplay, and felt most at home with fists

and knives, but what use were these against such enemies? He took off his shirt and began to stretch and work through various combat stances and exercises he had learned in the south, hoping to shake off his feelings of unease.

Geni had disappeared early that morning but returned while Qaden was mid-practice.

“What do you do?” he asked, approaching cautiously.

Qaden was covered in sweat from his effort, but kept moving from one drill to the next in careful rhythm. “Practicing,” he said between strikes, “I seem to need more of it.”

Geni watched with interest for a few minutes before coming closer. “You practice combat?”

Qaden stopped and nodded, “Of course, if I don’t I might not be ready when I need it.”

“I have been told that men can master their work, be it art or dance or music, which leads to wondrous creations and songs. But I had not known they practiced to fight.”

Qaden paused, unsure what he meant, before asking, “Do fae not practice these things?”

“Most fae are... natural. Like the beasts and plants. A wolf does not practice against the air to kill a deer, it simply tries with its pack to hunt until it eats or dies. A flower blooms with beauty but does not close and bloom again and again until it is more beautiful.” Geni paused, glancing left and right before asking hesitantly, “Will you show me?”

Qaden was surprised at his tone. *He’s afraid!* He realized. *Of practice?*

“Of course. It is easy to try. Here, do what I do.”

Qaden began showing the small fae the basics of *enbol’var*, the hand-to-hand fighting style of Oris. Geni started out well, mirroring Qaden’s steps, but began to struggle combining the footwork with each punch. He was clumsy to a degree that Qaden could not understand. *He moves so easily and masterfully through the trees... These are not difficult stances.*

Geni seemed not to notice and was enjoying himself immensely. “Like this? And then.. this?!”

Qaden smiled, he was terribly bad.

“Try this, when you step you must *also* hit. So the strength of your legs add to the strength of your arm.” Qaden explained carefully, exaggerating each movement.

The pair continued their practice for another hour until Geni finally seemed to grasp the concept of the first basic drill. The fae sat on the ground and panted happily. “You must be a master to have such movements practiced well!”

Qaden shook his head, “I move half as well as the true masters.”

Geni eyes widened for a moment, “Man’s size and strength are great, but their practice even more so.”

Qaden watched Geni lay on the grass and realized how small he suddenly looked. He thought back to how the fae timidly asked to join in the exercise and realized what this must be like to him. Qaden was not a large man but was easily twice as tall as Geni. And if what he said was true, that the fae do not fully understand training, then of course he was wary.

“Do fae not war?” Qaden asked without thinking.

Geni sat up and looked at Qaden somberly. “War... It is not well, but yes, the fae war. It is not as man, but war is known to us.”

“How can you win a war without practice?”

“Does a bear sometimes kill a hunter? Does the bear practice to be able to do so? Or if the bear must hunt the wolf, neither practice, but one will die. The ants and bees, they war often, but they do not practice their killing.”

“But if the bear practiced, maybe they would always kill the wolves...?”

Geni thought for a moment and then nodded, “And then the wolves would cease to be.”

But getting bears to train might be impossible Dillion thought, *it’s just against their nature.* Fae had magic, a power and force unknowable. Even now, Qaden could see its touch in Geni’s eyes and when he shifted into the owl Qaden found that at least as terrifying as Geni found training. Still, he felt like he was missing something. Going through combat stances and stretching on the ground seemed laughable when compared to whatever curses and miracles magic could produce.

“That firemark, on your arm,” Geni said, glancing at Qaden’s burn, “It is from the dragon?”

He nodded and looked at his arm. He had ignored the pain since their battle with the dragon, and it was finally beginning to heal, but it was still grisly. *It's not too bad*, he forced himself to think, but much of the burn would likely scar.

"To escape the blaze of a dragon is well. You move as swiftly as a bird."

"Not quick enough," Qaden sighed, flexing his hand against the pull of healing skin, "If not for Pon and Hoblin I'd not be alive."

"And if not for you the flame would have struck one of them instead, and perhaps they are not so swift. Each member of a pack has a role to play. Each relies on the others to survive."

"And what of you Geni? What is your role in all this?"

"Who can say?" He replied, standing, "First I will lead you to Brighthome. Then... Who can say?"

– The Lieutenant and

The sounds of ringing metal, stomping hooves, and shouted commands filled the camp. Over one hundred men strong, the Greenwater Company was known in the armies of Oris for its strong backbone, good men, and its inept leadership. Despite numerous personal failings and poor tactical understanding, Captain Greenwater had not been removed from his position. Whispers among the men were that his poor abilities were not enough to outweigh the gold and lumber that flowed from Greenwater to the King's coffers. Captain Greenwater was either completely unaware of these rumors or willfully ignored them. *Either way, Wynnoa thought grimly, it does not garner much trust in the man.*

Wynnoa had been sent to the company for this very reason. Captain Greenwater would not be removed, unfortunately, but it was hoped that a capable lieutenant would be able to make up for his ineptitude.

Wynnoa crossed the thoroughfare to the smith's workshop and inspected his work. *Not bad, she thought, but it's no Irlennti.* The smith was orderly and obviously experienced in the making and keeping of blades and armor, but it seemed he was sacrificing quality for quantity.

"Nothing I can do bout it ma'am!" he shouted between hammer strikes, "I've got four more swords to repair today, a broken set of breastplate to mend, and my apprentice can't even keep up with the horseshoes and wagon parts we need. Ain't got time to put a fine edge to much of anything, let alone "fold them a few more times." The ore they keep sending me don't help neither," he added, glancing at her, "it's more dirt and stone it seems than proper iron."

She sighed, "I know you've got your hands full, but if I swear to pull for better iron will you do what you can? I worry these weapons will break long before our men do. Trulloc hide is hard, and their skulls harder."

"Aye, I'll take you up on that ma'am. I'll make the blades, best I can."

Wynnoa nodded and left the forge. After climbing a small hill to the command tent where Captain Greenwater and his other lieutenants met, she turned and looked out across the camp. There was much to do, and only four days left to do it before they marched north.