

# DARKNESS CONCEALED

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*Soli Deo Gloria.*

Glory to God Alone.

# Prologue

“Mommy, what’s going on?” asked Matthew, his wide eyes looking up at Hester.

Despite her weariness, Hester smiled at her youngest. “Preparing. Maybe we will survive.” She crossed to the other side of the room, checking once again that the windows were boarded tight.

“Survive?” He blinked. “What does that mean?”

She smiled at him once again. “I’ll let you know when you’re older.” She surveyed the empty center room of their home, its furniture moved to the front and back as barricades. All that remained was a single bed stacked sideways against the windows, the boards peeking out from either side.

“Hester, we’re as ready as we can get. Please, you need to let it go,” said her husband, Gregory, as he entered the room.

She looked over at him worriedly. “I know, it’s just-”

Isaac and Lily walked in front of Gregory, their eyes fearful. Unlike Matthew, they were old enough to know what was coming.

“Alright. We’ve done all we can do. Let’s gather together now.”

The family huddled around her, using the bed as comfort. Hester looked at the flickering

candles, her will extinguishing their light.

“Why is it dark, Mommy? Daddy? What’s going on?”

Hester reached out, pulling Matthew close. “It’s alright,” she soothed. “We’re going to be okay. Just be quiet.” She doubted her words as they stood in the darkness, knowing the dawn would not come.

#

Hester could hear the beginning, even as her eyes stared helplessly into the endless black surrounding her. A subtle rumbling, gaining in intensity as it got closer. *The monsters are coming. I just pray that our barricades hold.* A crash sounded from the house behind theirs, followed by screams begging for mercy. Mercy that did not come.

Matthew clutched at her, his hands reaching up for comfort. She picked him up, holding him close to her chest.

The sounds of splintering wood, breaking glass, and cracking stone erupted from all directions, a cacophony of destruction. Muffled screams joined the sounds, merging in a discordant rhythm. *Everywhere but here. We might escape; we might live.* She banished the thought at once, its hopefulness ignoring what she knew. *They will come.*

The house’s frame rocked from the force of something pushing inside. The splintering of tables, chairs, and dressers from the front confirmed what direction the monster was coming from. Despite the clutching of Matthew at her neck, she couldn’t help but shudder as the sounds of destruction got closer and closer.

“Mommy?”

“Hush!” she whispered, hoping for just a few seconds more. Her breath caught in her throat as she strained to hear the beast’s progress, but heard only silence, the background sounds of annihilation forgotten to her.

The door broke inward. She felt splinters scatter across her arms, scraping their way over her skin. Her head ducked, trying to shield her son from the shrapnel.

*Thud. Thud.* The monster took two steps into the room, its bulk seeming to fill the dark space before her. She could smell the rot and decay on its breath, the rancid fumes nauseating her.

*Thud.* Another step, and the world went white as a claw tore its way down the back of her arms, shredding skin and sinew but leaving Matthew blessedly untouched. A pained shriek escaped her as she gritted her teeth, making the pain her own silent, personal battle. *Stay strong, Matthew, stay strong.*

She barely heard the sickening squish to her left, Gregory uttering a gurgle instead of a shout before his body fell lifelessly to the floor.

Lily screamed, her voice piercing Hester's fog of pain. She heard scrabbling on the floor away from her.

*Thud.* Lily didn't stop screaming, her terror greater than her mother's command to stay silent. The scream was above her for a moment, then the crunch of shattered bones plunged the room into silence again.

Pain wrested the strength to stand from Hester. She fell to her knees, barely keeping Matthew in her arms. *Where is Isaac?*

Isaac stood alone, Gregory no longer protecting him. A surprised grunt sounded from the boy, before a crash issued from the hallway.

*Thud.* A single step away from her. Isaac screamed from the hallway, then was silent.

*Thud.* Another step away. *Thud.* The sounds of breaking wood joined those outside. Her arms were in agony, each motion triggering a fresh wave of pain. She felt a whoosh of air, then heard a massive crash in front of her, the roof falling down around them.

*Thud.* A step she could barely hear, then nothing but the sounds of death and destruction, all the clearer without a house to keep her from seeing the lightless sky above.

Her grip loosened from Matthew, his panicked breathing the only sound as he spilled from her arms. She fell back against the upended bed, hoping, praying that the creatures would not return. *That I will survive the Darkening with my only son.* Tears ran down her cheeks as the shock of blood loss robbed her of consciousness.

## Part 1: Unlikely Coincidences

# Chapter 1: Unspoken Questions

Caleb Moss shook himself awake, his tear-filled eyes opening on the soft light of the crescent moon. *Another dream, even more dead.* He looked out his bedroom window at the quiet fields of Tonsbury, the grain stalks quivering in the silent breeze of early fall. *Dawn is hours away, but I don't want to sleep.* He rose from bed, shuffling in front of the window to take in the tranquil beauty beyond.

*A beauty marred by what happens in a hundred years.* The Darkening was inevitable; everyone knew that. *But they don't know it like I do.* The image of the woman and child, left to survive in the wake of the Darkening, flashed before his mind. *Yet, they wake up and rebuild when things are normal. If that can be called normal.* For many, the dawning sun, the simple joy of living, and tomorrow being the same day after day were to be expected. *They don't see the world like I do. Every night, I see what everyone wants to forget.*

For ten years, he had dreamed of survivors, shivering in terror and naïve hope that the monsters would not return to finish them off. For ten years, his mother, Robin, had begged him to stop mentioning the dreams, to just live the life he had. *But how can I? How can I live ignoring what I cannot stop seeing?* He fell back onto his bed, the question hanging in his mind, unanswered. Against his will, sleep claimed him once more.



*The preparations are almost complete.* Gerald smiled to himself despite the dire circumstances. They were down to mere hours before the combined effort of thousands would be put to the most stringent test ever devised: surviving the Darkening. *Years of planning, construction, and training. I hope that we succeed.* He walked the streets of Andranine, explicitly designed to funnel any enemies into easily defensible chokepoints. *And when we have to fall back, we have the means to block that passage, forcing them to push through before advancing.*

Men and women in armor rushed past him, en route to their stations at the outer walls. Some bore weapons, others bore only their hands, but Gerald knew that those hands could conjure magics forgotten for centuries. *If nothing else, our triumph will hinge on that regained knowledge.* He ascended to the top of the city, the forbidding fortress at its center reflecting the pale moonlight for just a little longer. *I do not know what total darkness is, but we are prepared for that too.* He glanced from building to building, taking in the lit torches hanging from them. Even though the plain beyond the city was barely visible, the city itself was as bright as day. *For others, drawing notice would be a death sentence. For us, that is precisely the plan. Come, creatures of the Darkening, Andranine stands against you.*

#

Caleb awoke again, Gerald's words still echoing in his mind. *Are they crazy?* Gerald alone would have been considered a lunatic, but Caleb had seen the thousands of people with him, an entire city poised to defend against the impossible. *A city built just to defend against the Darkening? Is that even possible?* He knew they hadn't succeeded. It would long since have become legend if they had. But the dream was different. *I didn't see the Darkening itself. No creatures attacked, no monsters killed people in the way.*

Unlike the previous decade, he hadn't just dreamed of pointless death, of survivors by chance. *Why the change?* He didn't know the answer. *But it's a different question, a different thought.* He wasn't sure what to think, but he hoped that the change meant something new.

The sky outside lightened in preparation of the coming dawn, reminding him he lived two lives. One in the perfect, carefree world, where death was a distant thought for all but the oldest. The other repeating the day composed wholly of death. *I just hope things start making sense.* He got out of bed to dress and get ready for another day before harvest.

His mother called from the main room.

"Caleb, breakfast!"

"Coming!" he yelled back before pulling his shoes on and opening the door. She was already at the table, sausage and eggs ready for him. He joined her and wordlessly dug into the meal.

"Dreams again?" she asked.

Caleb nodded. *I don't want another lecture. She doesn't understand.* He hoped the conversation would stop there.

She ate a mouthful, then pointed at him with her fork. "If your father was still here, he would tell you to channel those dreams into something productive. Build a better future for those who will have to live through that, make the majority of their lives as good as they can be, you know?" She went back to eating.

It had been ten years since his father, Matthew, left Tonsbury, never to return alive. Dark Sentinels had found his mutilated corpse inside a cave several days after he had disappeared. *Doesn't stop Mom from mentioning him every single day.* "I-I try, Mom, I try," he lied. He ate faster.

"You'd better," she said, pointing with her fork again. "It's almost harvest-time, and I want you to show all of the other lazy men how to use a scythe properly. They need a good example."

He nodded again before putting the last bite of sausage in his mouth, setting his fork down, and standing up from the table. "B-best get out there and sh-show them how to get things done, then," he said over his shoulder as he left the house.

His mother said something, but he ignored the muffled voice.

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*Setting a good example is exhausting.* Caleb dragged himself into his bedroom. He barely got his shoes off before fatigue took over and forced him face-down onto the bed, his eyes shut before his head hit the pillow.

#

*It has begun,* Gerald thought when the moon abruptly vanished, leaving Andranine the lone point of light in a blackened world. He looked around at the pillars of obsidian, their familiar blue runes absent. Like clockwork he felt the rumbling beneath him. *Just like the books said, they are coming. We are ready for them.* "Ready the lines!" His voice echoed throughout the city, magically carried to every defender.

The rumbling grew louder and louder, seeming to come from all directions at once. His eyes darted everywhere, looking for the source but finding none. He knew he had no cause to worry; they were prepared for being surrounded. Everything centered on the fortress, its own construction virtually indestructible.

He shook himself, throwing off his fears for the final time. *We shall prevail, or die trying. I have no cause to worry.*

A black mass erupted from the impenetrable darkness; a horde of claws, teeth, and writhing tentacles running at top speed for the walls.

"Open fire!" he yelled.

Flame exploded outward, a wall beyond the wall searing the first monsters to reach the

perimeter. Arrows arced at the survivors, their tips aflame mid-flight. Countless enemies fell with just that salvo, but more followed. For every volley of arrows and magical fire, even more monsters emerged from the darkness, seeking the walls, the gates.

*There's no end to them, but we are holding steady for now. Those monsters will have to try much harder to make us fall this day.* He smiled again, his pride at their accomplishment overwhelming the gravity of the situation for just a few moments.

#

Caleb awoke, his mind already a raging storm. *Gerald again? Andranine again?* His eyes stared blankly at the ceiling for what seemed like an eternity, the same two questions repeating in his head. He shook himself, attempting to clear his head, only to have another question take their place: *What changed? I have dreamed of the same person, at the same place, at the same time, in two days' time.*

His head fell to the side, his eyes drawn to the window. *Every dream was always different. A different family, a different house, a different, desperate cry for mercy each time. But these...were the same. What does it mean? What do any of them mean?*

His eyes focused on the blue glimmer in the distance, the Tablet in the middle of Tonsbury's fields. *Gerald looked at the ones in Andranine, too. I've never seen Tablets in my dreams before, either.* Too many things were different about the past two nights. *Why?* There was no answer. *I have no reason for anything. For the dreams, for Gerald, for Andranine, for the Tablets, for even my own life.*

He sat up and looked around his room, the spare furnishings that had been there for years staring back at him. *Pointless years accomplishing nothing.* The thought came unbidden, a statement that flew in the face of years of labor.

The rains came consistently, but no matter how easily the crops grew the work required to harvest them was tiring almost year-round. Only during the mild winter did things slow down. *Work I do in ignorance to what I dream. Only Mom knows about them.* His hand balled into a fist and pounded down into his other palm. *She wants me to deny they exist, that they are a part of my life!*

*I'm not normal, I know that much. And every single day that I spend trying to act normal is pointless. I can't believe in simple happiness like she and the others can. I can't go through every day keeping half of myself hidden away. There has to be a point to all of this.*

He looked up at the ceiling, almost calling on a god he knew didn't exist. *There has to be a purpose in my life, and working on the farm is not it.* The thought shocked him, but it was true. "I can't stay here. I need to seek my purpose somewhere else," he said softly.

*But where? I've never left Tonsbury.* He sank back down onto his bed. *I know Westbrook is close by. They're our biggest customer and the best food comes from trading with them.* He wracked his brain, trying to think of other places he could go. Nothing came to mind. *I don't have much*

*of a choice, but at least it's a start.*

He got out of bed, walking to the corner where his father's old pack had sat for years. He tossed it onto the bed and gathered the few things he could call his own before placing them within. *Should I tell Mom I'm leaving?*

Caleb picked the pack up by the strap. *No, I'll lose my nerve.* Quietly, he opened the door and walked to the kitchen for some of the dried meat they stored in case of emergencies. *Emergencies that never happen.* He stuffed it all into the pack and tied the bag shut before hitching it onto his shoulders.

He turned back from the front door, taking one last glance at the house he called home. *I'm leaving it forever; aren't I? No, not forever. I will come back. Sometime.* His gaze rested on his mother's bedroom. "Goodbye, Mom. I'll be back," he whispered, opening the front door and closing it behind him.

## Chapter 2: Clouded Vision

“I have my concerns on this business proposal of yours, Ivan,” said Prince Theodore Matthias Felkirk III, his eyes focused on a spot in the middle of Ivan’s forehead. “You are honestly suggesting that I ignore several clear risk factors.” He began listing them off with his fingers. “First, bandits are more likely thanks to the distance involved. Second, weather stands a significant chance of slowing down material supply and the resulting trade. Third, the amount of intermediaries present requires an astonishing level of trust for anyone we cut into it. Fourth, this proposal is impossible without all of those being a major factor.”

*Five years of almost flawless performance, and he still has to raise an objection each and every time.* “Yes, sir, I understand,” Ivan said as respectfully as he could before raising his own finger of objection. “But I have decades of experience in arranging cross-continent trade. The investment is high, but the profit is higher. You need to trust me on that.”

“No one is perfectly right in their predictions, no matter how good they are at anything.” He waved his hand as if to demonstrate. “If you have miscalculated, all of the work I’ve done over the past five years will be erased.”

*Correction: the work I have done, after getting you to realize that I already covered all the potential risks.* “I have cross-checked everything, and even called in several favors to make sure that the offer came to you first instead of your competitors in Westbrook, Fartree, or Martan.” *Not even mentioning he was not on the initial list of prospective backers.*

Felkirk's expression soured. "I am not inclined to believe that statement, but I will let it be for now."

*He should know by now that anything I say has data backing it.* "I have connections all across Telthan. Please consider that I have been doing trade in some form or another almost as long as you have been alive."

Felkirk's eyes narrowed. "Experience is not necessarily the only determiner of competence," he spat. "I will let you know of my intentions." He waved his hand at him. "Leave me."

#

Ivan sighed as soon as his study's door shut. "Felkirk, the Doubting Magnate. A legend in trade circles for having more indecision than he has money," he said to himself as he collapsed into his desk chair. "And nothing has changed as he has gotten richer." *While Celeste, Philip, and Robert were of simpler means, they knew how to grab a profitable deal when they were presented with one.* He rubbed his forehead absently, the memory of his previous employers reminding him once again how much he tolerated for the one undeniable advantage of finally living in Westbrook.

*Its library, with books that have been preserved for over three hundred years. Two entire Darkenings!* He smiled despite himself, the memory of hours upon hours spent poring over the tomes going through his mind. His gaze swept across the study, its walls occupied by packed bookshelves, the accumulated wealth of decades. *Another reason to appreciate Westbrook's library. The largest stock of Darkening-related theories and treatises in the world.* He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. *Later, I shall get to see if any of the ones I have not read yet are worthwhile.*

He leaned back, looking up at the ceiling. *Why I have so much interest in something I will never see, I do not know. But it sure is interesting to read about. Certainly better than my work.* He scowled at the door, willing his distaste to somehow be felt by Felkirk. *I tire of his attitude about everything. He does not appreciate good advice.* He closed his eyes before admitting to himself what he actually meant. *More properly, he does not appreciate my advice. I may not be continuing in his employment much longer if he does not learn sense.*

"Ivan! I have decided!" came Felkirk's loud baritone through the heavy oak door.

*Of course you have.* His arms flew up in the air to quell his frustration. *Each and every time you realize I am right.* He stood up and headed back to Felkirk's office.

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Felkirk scowled at Ivan the moment he entered the room. "Against my better judgment," he paused, letting the moment hang, even though Ivan knew what he would say next. "I am willing to accept this trade deal you have proposed. What is the timeline?"

"It will take a week for your capital to reach them, a week for preparations, and a final week to

get the materials to their destination. Profits should be disbursed shortly after the materials leave Yardley in the east.”

“Yardley?!” he cried out in shock. “That’s on the other side of the world nearly, practically in the eastern mountains!”

Ivan blinked several times, trying to keep calm. “Yes, Prince Felkirk, it is. I did say that it was a very long-range agreement.”

Felkirk shook his head. “What have I signed myself up for....” He reached up with a single hand and clutched his temple. “Make the arrangements before I change my mind.”

Ivan resisted the urge to slap the man across the face. “I will make it happen.” *As I always do.*

#

*I cannot help but appreciate how predictable he can be at times,* thought Ivan as he left the mansion, the sun still high overhead. *Already had the funding and paperwork in line, ready to be sent with the next caravans to the eastern side of the world. Only needed to hand the documentation to the clerk for delivery to the market.*

He smiled to himself as he paused at the estate’s gate, his eyes looking out at the grand spectacle that Westbrook had become.

Merchant caravans drove past him toward the market at the north of the city, a bustling complex a full half-mile square. *When I arrived it was a quarter that size, if even.* In all directions, he saw houses, restaurants, and inns, the timber on most of them still smelling like the forest they had been cut from. *Prosperity everywhere, and in some small part I helped it happen.*

He grinned again, glorying in the small amount of pride he allowed himself before frowning slightly. *Even if I see it with my own eyes, I have difficulty believing in the optimism bred from simple abundance. Seems so...naïve. I need facts, and only the library provides those around here. Well, more properly, reasonably well-backed theories. Facts are rare when it comes to the Darkening.*

He stepped from the gate and headed south, his thoughts directed at the inconsistencies of living, even as his eyes wandered to the tall mansions, the ornate homes, and the simple luxury of the city. *There is no rationale to everyone being so hopeful for the future. The future has a definite endpoint: the Darkening.* He looked up at the passing clouds. *And everyone acts as if it is not coming; that history will miraculously be denied by a god that does not exist.* He returned his gaze to eye level just in time to get out of the way of an approaching man. *Yet I have my own optimism. There must be something buried in those old tomes to tell me either why everyone is optimistic, or, better yet, a reason to be optimistic myself.*

He sighed happily as the library came into view, its stone façade telling of its relative age. *With everything else so new, faded stone is the closest this city gets to old. Now to learn something new today. Or, barring that, something remotely factual.*

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Ivan scanned the aisles of books on either side of a long and wide hallway filled with tables. Some of the spines were faded with age and others were so new that the colors seemed to jump out at him. *One new, one old, one new, one old*, he reminded himself before glancing at the back of the building. The old man who tended the library waved without a word, a greeting that Ivan returned before doing a closer investigation of one of the shelves he hadn't pulled books from that much.

He ended up pulling two texts from the shelf: Population Trends in Western Telthan, 0-50 AD, bound in bright blue, and Magic: The Theoretical Basis, its drab brown cover faded into tan. *I wonder why we are so obsessed with color compared to our predecessors*. He recognized the older tome as pre-Darkening, one of the few volumes to survive the regular collapse of civilization, while the other book couldn't be more than a year old. *Not related to the Darkening, either of them, but I need a break from reading about mass death*.

He walked to a table and sat down with his volumes, opening the younger book first. *Hmm...perhaps population trends could explain some of the wanton expansion in all sectors Westbrook has recently experienced*. He rapidly skimmed the pages, picking up key details and summarizing data as quickly as he could. The book was laid out well, with tables interspersed with analysis and everpresent notes about methodology and relative rigor. *Must have learned from a great thinker who survived the Darkening; the depth of knowledge present here is extremely well-encapsulated*.

Eventually he came to a summary table of deaths per year with three columns: age, accident, or creature. *Creature?* He looked at the explanation paragraph below it: "Creature refers to any unfortunate death at the hands of a creature of the Darkening. These are rare, but a possibility that must be accounted for." *Thankfully, Westbrook has a local chapter of the Dark Sentinels, so we should be safe from any such horrible monsters*.

Looking from the vanishingly small statistics to the opposite page, he saw births and immigration over the same period, a massive increase year on year. *Astonishing, population has grown at a rate roughly equivalent to the amount of economic prosperity in the region, with maybe a few years' lag*.

Closing the tome, he couldn't disagree with the man's methods. *Telthan, at least my corner of it, is growing by leaps and bounds in every sense, keeping pace with the rate of population increase. Economic improvements, farming improvements, living improvements, the list goes on. And all of it can be correlated to how fast we are repopulating after the Darkening*. He smiled to himself, the book having accomplished its purpose of bringing him more knowledge.

He set it aside and picked up the book about magic. *Unlikely that this will have any practical aspects, but even theory is useful*. Its binding still held together, but the pages were much more fragile, forcing him to be more careful as he read through it. Inside the cover, he found an inscription: "Dedicated to my mentor, a sage of the magical arts who did not survive. Ellivander - 15 AD." *It is almost two hundred years old, and still in this condition? Amazing*.



A few pages in confirmed his suspicions: “This is not a book about how to do magic, for I have only started on figuring out the ways of it. Instead, this is a book about the meaning of magic, of the theory that seemingly underpins it when people successfully learn it by trial and error.” *I have never found a book that tells of practical magic, and I doubt I ever will. It is an art lost and found with each cycle of the Darkening.* He shrugged, the impossible goal not concerning him.

He kept on flipping, picking out several intriguing phrases: “Magic as best I can gather is a mental exercise. A person thinks what needs to be done and it is executed. Whether this is particular words unknown or a compulsive urge, I do not know yet.” *Purely thought-driven? So what I have seen at stage shows is simply for spectacle. Conniving.*

“Based on the writings I have available, magic is split into various disciplines, or schools, each dealing with a particular aspect of the natural world. The clearest examples of this are things like fire, water, and earth, but there are others like shadow, poison, and light itself.” *Schools of magic? An odd concept.*

Halfway through the book, he tired of the same qualifying statements of “I’m not sure”, “Based on others”, and “This might not be fully true”. He closed the book and put it on top of the other one. *Interesting theory, but repetitive. Ultimately, pointless.* He stood up and replaced the books on the shelf, his reading for the day complete. As he walked out, he waved goodbye to the owner. *At least some of that was useful to me.*

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Caleb’s eyes had trouble adjusting to the sight of Westbrook. For miles, he had seen the tall houses get taller as he approached. *It’s bigger than Tonsbury by...* He scrambled for a comparison. *...A lot.*

While the road from Tonsbury had been deserted besides his hopeful thoughts for the future, Westbrook was a bustling metropolis of activity. As he walked into the market at midday, his eyes searched for an end to the movement, to a farther path with no one on it. *This city stretches as far as I can see.*

*Where do I start?* He had put the question off for miles, letting wistful memories from the past occupy his thoughts, but the movement of Westbrook around him demanded he answer it. *Where do I start?* He stopped walking, his worry growing.

“Hey, watch yourself!” said a man, his body brushing past him.

“Get out of the way if you’re going to stand around,” said a woman, her eyes scowling at him as she walked by.

Caleb looked around and noticed he had stopped in the center of the market, its merchants hawking goods all around him. Quickly, he moved off to the side. *I don’t want to get in anybody’s way, especially if I don’t have anything to be doing.* His stomach rumbled, reminding him of the spare breakfast he had had shortly after dawn. *The food I have won’t last for more*

*than a couple of days.*

“Fresh fish from the lake, two silver coins each!” called one of the nearby merchants.

*And I have no money, either. I didn't need it at home.* The idea of striking out on his own to find the point behind his horrible dreams felt very foolish with the sun overhead and the sounds of commerce all around. *If I go home, I'm sure I'll be able to smooth things over and get back to normal.*

He stopped the thought. *I am not normal, I don't want to go back to normal. I want to find why I am the way I am, and home is not where to find it.*

*But where do I start?* The question came again, its answer still eluding him. His stomach rumbled as his eyes looked around the market. *I need to eat soon, but I'll run out of food if I don't find some way to pay for more of it.* The question finally had an answer. *I need to find a job.* He began walking with purpose, aiming to find someone who could provide him with work. *I won't learn anything at all if I starve.*

#

Ivan walked back through the gate as the sun finally touched the eastern sky, the guards nodding in his direction before looking back toward the street. *They look attentive, but I have caught them either not paying attention or outright sleeping on the job at night too many times to count.* He considered telling Felkirk as he walked to his study, but he came to the same conclusion he had before. *It will not change the situation, and it is not like we need protection against thieves in this town anyway.*

His supper was already on the desk, its contents still warm. *Right on schedule. Even if Felkirk is a complete ignoramus, the people he employs are extremely good at their jobs.* He sat down and with the provided utensils cut into the rare steak. *I shall need to compliment the chef when I next see her; this is delicious as always.* He feasted on the steak, beans, and potatoes, the seasonings excellent and the textures varied. Before he knew it, the plate sat empty, the clean utensils belying the quality of the meal.

*Now, to research new opportunities for Felkirk to disapprove, then change his mind about half an hour later.* He pushed the plate to the side and pulled out papers holding all manner of data, tables, predictions, trends, and the like. Scarcely had he started analyzing them when he felt a presence behind him. He paused, and glanced over his shoulder.

A man stood there, perfectly groomed, but wearing the simple garb of a traveler.

Ivan bolted out of the chair, leaving it rocking to the side for a moment before righting. “Who are you, and how did you get in here?” He looked back at the door, found it still shut, and turned back to the man. *How did he get in here?*

“That is not something to be concerned about,” the stranger said calmly. “I am here to relay a message.”

“I asked who you were, and in my line of work that is more important than what you have to say.” *Reputation determines the reliability of the data, as Robert used to say.*

“I am a messenger, and my name is of no importance,” he said in a more forceful tone. “Hear my message.”

“A message from who?” asked Ivan. *So his reputation is nonexistent, but whoever he is messaging for could have one.*

“God.”

Ivan burst out laughing. “Oh, that is great. God. Now I know you are just a washed-up has-been magician who is trying to find a quick buck or something to get to the next town.” He stopped laughing and scowled at the other man. “I do not do charity for people who trespass on both my employer’s property and on my privacy.”

The messenger looked at him, aghast. “How dare you say such blasphemy! I am not some impostor seeking the worthless trifle you call coin.”

“Call me a blasphemer, because I am not worried about some almighty being doing anything about it,” shot back Ivan, using his hand to wave the man’s offense away. “The only almighty anything I have ever heard of is the unstoppable force that is the Darkening. Next thing I know you are going to say that this God of yours is good and all-loving.”

“Well, yes, why would I say otherwise? For someone who doesn’t exist you seem to have a very clear idea of what He is not.”

“I read a lot. Descriptions of a divine being of some variety show up in the more far-fetched accounts. I am yet to see convincing evidence of a god.”

The man opened his mouth, but was unable to say anything before Ivan continued.

“Furthermore, I have seen and read of numerous cases of misdirection, false information, and other underhanded measures from competitors hoping to get an edge in the marketplace.” He put a finger up to once again stop the man from speaking. “Granted, thanks to the fantastic moral conduct of most of Telthan, these are rarities, but I cannot discount the possibility.”

The man looked aghast again. “Are you calling me a cheat and a liar? Are you truly serious?”

*A liar, but a perceptive one. Time to end this show.* “Yes I am, and let me guess at your expression upon calling you what you are? Maybe anger, sadness, perhaps rage if you are really vindictive? You really need to work on your acting skills; you might just trick the next person.”

The man’s eyes narrowed and he began to tremble.

“Ah, there is that rage!” Ivan smiled wide, relishing in both his victory and the fact that he had successfully ignited the temper of his erstwhile opponent. “I knew you had it in you, but the show is over and I would like you to please leave my study so I can get actual work done.”

“*Silence!*” he yelled out, his voice echoing throughout the study. “I will not tolerate your blasphemy, your ridicule, and worst of all your closed-mindedness. Money is worthless, and you know that. Of what does it gain me to come speak with you on such a transient and pointless thing as money?”

Ivan shrugged. *Second wind, I suppose. Time to shut him up for good.* “So if you are from...god, where is he? Where is his goodness in this world? We have nothing to look forward to other than death, either at the hands of mindless monsters, or at the end of our lives. Nothing more. If god is as good and powerful as crazy lunatics believe, *where is he?*”

“Waiting for the right time,” the man replied, his voice calm again.

“How about any Darkening-cursed day now? I would say that the Darkening has been going on forever, because we have no history to disprove such a notion. Just like we have no theory to prove the existence of a good god. An evil and sadistic one who uses us as playthings? More plausible, but still very unlikely.”

Slowly, the man bowed his head and grasped his temple with his hand. “I will not convince you. Here. See what I have come to show you.”

“Where? Some more illusions to appear out of nowhere?”

The study vanished, replaced by blackness. Off to the left, he saw light. He turned, expecting to see the hallway, but instead saw countless torches, illuminating an army that stretched for miles. Above them was a moonless and starless sky. *The Darkening? Right now?* Beyond the army rose forbidding mountains, the barrier that separated this part of Telthan from doubtless other lands of the world. Without any identifying features, he wasn’t sure which of the mountain ranges it was.

*A most astonishing illusion, but still an illusion. How to debunk this one...* He blinked, and his eyes opened in the midst of the army. He glanced down to find himself clad in the same armor they wore, a single rapier at his side. *This man is a master at the magical arts. How did he get roped into such a crazy charade?*

“Ivan!”

He looked up and found himself face to face with a much younger man, his blue eyes piercing and yet soft, framed against black, curly hair.

“Do you think we will succeed?”

Ivan looked all around him, at the black sky, at the army around him, at the field in front of them. *That field will have monsters beyond number any moment now.* He was about to say just how crazy they all were when he heard his own voice answer the man.

“We have learned, we have survived, and we have come through triumphant. This will be no different.”

*I would not say that in these circumstances!*

The younger man smiled. "I knew you would say that. Let's end this."

Again, Ivan was about to raise his objections, when the study reappeared. The sudden increase in light caused him to squint as he looked around for the man, the army, the black sky. *Gone. Just my study, and this crazy "messenger."*

"Do you see?"

Ivan resisted the urge to slowly clap at the man's skill. "Astonishing magical talent," he said in fake praise. "Have you considered delving deeper into the theory and learning more than has been learned in the past several centuries?" *Eventually he will break his act and give up. Hopefully sooner, rather than later.*

"You are the most difficult person I have encountered in generations, but I have shown what I came to show." He waved slightly. "Farewell." Even as Ivan looked straight at him, the unnamed messenger vanished.

He leaped forward, seeking to catch the man before his illusion allowed him to slip past. His hands came up with nothing but air.

"Where did he go?" No answer came to mind. "Who was that person in the vision?" Again, no answer. "What on Telthan did I just see in the first place?" Half-formed thoughts erupted in his mind, a torrent of contradictory theories and possible explanations. He grabbed the sides of his face with his hands, seeking to reduce the noise to a single simple thought. *The end of the Darkening. Or at least, some delusional other me who thinks it can be done. Fantastic illusion or vision, I do not know.*

He looked back at his desk and the piles of data that he had been so rudely interrupted from. *In any case, I will not live until the next Darkening, so that vision is of no concern to me at all. Keeping Felkirk happy for just a little bit longer is of concern to me.* He sat down at the desk and resumed comparing facts and figures.

## Chapter 3: Stalking Death

Alexandra Sterling tried looking past the torchlight, even though she knew it was pointless. Darkness was all she saw. *This cave is small and it's still daylight outside. Stupid Creeps.* She scowled at the darkness, knowing what it held. *I'm here to kill you, and I am not afraid of you.*

She looked around at the four men with her. Barnaby Brazelton, leader of the Westbrook chapter of the Dark Sentinels, held the torch, followed by Simon Teckon. She was in the middle, and behind her were Timothy Dranton and some new guy she hadn't even gotten the name of yet. *Out of training and into action. Wish the Sentinels didn't send us fresh recruits all the time. Only way to keep him alive is to shove him in the back and make sure we don't get surrounded.*

The torchlight moved, causing Alexandra to look from the men to the new reaches of the cave. *Still nothing. Where are they hiding?*

"What the-" started Simon before his back hit the ground hard, knocking the wind from him.

Alexandra looked down and saw a tentacle tightly wrapped around his leg. It jerked, pulling him past Barnaby.

"Help!"

She dove for him, reaching out her hand to grab his. "Reach for me!"

Simon flailed, but his hands never reached hers. Another tug, and he vanished into the darkness. A terrified scream echoed through the cave. Barnaby dashed toward the source of the sound as he pulled his sword from its sheath.

Alexandra jumped upright, pulling the hammer from behind her back as she ran after her leader.

Barnaby stopped, the light resting on a black form that towered over them, its clawed hands already reaching to tear Simon apart, his limbs splayed helplessly by the tentacles that had pulled him away.

“Help! Please! I’m gonna die!”

*I’d say “let go of him,” but Creeps know no mercy.*

The claws reached closer, their deadly work moments away.

*I won’t show any in return.* She ran at the Creep, bringing her hammer up as she gained momentum. *Just two more steps, and this thing is dead.*

The Creep’s head descended onto Simon, razor-sharp teeth tearing his head from his body. At the same time, its tentacles pulled, splitting Simon into five pieces. Blood and viscera spurted, drenching Alexandra as she jumped into the air, her hammer landing squarely on and through its head. The Creep crumpled, falling to the ground with what remained of Simon.

*Too late.*

“Simon!” cried out Timothy, his voice in anguish.

Alexandra looked around her, only to find Timothy and the new guy nowhere in sight. “Get here! Now!” *Why did they hesitate? They could be killed at any moment and neither I nor Barnaby can help.* She heard the sound of boots pelting the stone floor, closer and closer. “Barnaby, back the way we came, we need to get them into the light.”

Barnaby looked at her, surprised at the barked order. She could almost see him yelling back, “I’m in charge here,” but he did as she said, turning away from the bloody mess and running back the way they had come.

She followed, ignorant of the blood soaking into her armor. *We might already be out of time.*

Screams of agony tore through the cave air, followed by the soft squish of flesh being torn apart.

Two seconds too late, the torchlight illuminated a second Creep, its claws still holding the entrails of the other two men.

“Die, you scum!” she yelled out as she leaped through the air again, her hammer striking the thing’s chest, the momentum pushing the metal head through to the other side. She kicked off of its body, dragging the hammer back through its stomach. It staggered, but Alexandra didn’t give it time to contemplate its imminent demise. As it began to topple, she smashed the hammer

through its skull. “Die,” she repeated. She turned on her heel and marched back to Barnaby, her eyes full of fury.

He looked at her, barely recognizing the blood-drenched figure of vengeance in front of him. “Are they dead?”

She resisted the urge to spit at him. “You can’t tell?” Her scowl deepened, her hatred turning from the Creeps to her commander. *Insensitive wretch only worried about his own hide. Wish the Creep had pulled him instead of Simon.*

He was about to reply when they both heard the sound of tortured barking echoing from the end of the cave. “Hounds.” He turned from her, his sword ready for the onslaught.

*Great, the mindless cleanup crew of the mindless horde.* She hefted the hammer again, moving abreast with Barnaby. *Dig the dagger in deeper and twist, you cowards.*

The hounds continued to bark, the terrible racket filling her ears. The first leaped into the light, its body midway to Barnaby’s chest before he dodged to the side and brought his sword down onto its back. The gash poured black ichor, the rock floor sizzling where it fell. The hound spun, trying to leap back the other way at him, but Alexandra’s hammer crushed its spine.

Two more leaped out at them, but they didn’t fare any better. One went down with a severed head, the other with a crushed neck. Silently and efficiently, Alexandra and Barnaby killed the pack of hounds, their thoughts solely concentrated on ending the barely-there threat they represented. A final yelp echoed through the cave.

“We need to make sure that’s all of them,” said Barnaby, reasserting his leadership. “Then we’ll collect what’s left of the others and bury them, as much as I hate doing that.”

“You’d rather leave them here?” she accused, deliberately misinterpreting his meaning.

He looked back at her, shocked. “No, never. It’s just the worst part of our solemnly sworn duty: bury those who have fallen.” His head turned back to the darkness ahead of them. “But you knew that. Quit trying to get under my skin.” He held the torch high, its light extending further than before.

*That alone means that the Creeps are all dead.* Faintly, she saw the slight brightness of the day outside behind them. “Show an ounce of concern for them once in a while, and I might stop doing it.”

“This is a tough job, and one I take seriously,” he said as he walked further into the cave. “Our duty is to be between the Creeps and the innocents. Casualties are to be expected.”

She walked after him, her eyes trying to burn holes in the back of his head. *How dare he act so callous. How can he be at peace with himself, writing off our friends like that?*

Unsurprisingly, the cave was empty. “Mission accomplished; the town is safe,” he summed up.



“I’m sure Hantonville would thank us, but that’s against protocol.” He turned back to where the others had fallen. “Let’s retrieve Richard, Simon, and Timothy’s remains and bury them. I would prefer to be halfway back to Westbrook before the sun goes down.”

Alexandra resisted the urge to punch him in the face, the impulse only restrained by knowing she would need his help to dig the unmarked graves. Her eyes fell to her chest, the already-browning stain of Simon’s blood covering the steel plate. *You didn’t deserve to die like that. No one does.* She held back tears as she fell into step behind Barnaby.

#

Alexandra sat down at the campfire, avoiding Barnaby’s glances. *I don’t want to talk to a selfish jerk, and he should know that by now.* She locked eyes with the tongues of flame. *I don’t care how many years he had with the town watch, he’s barely a Sentinel, and he’s definitely not worthy of leading.* Her shoulders slumped. *Not like Jeffrey. He could lead me through a portal full of endless Creeps and I would do it.* She suppressed the admiring smile that came to her lips, not wanting to give Barnaby an excuse to open his worthless mouth.

*The Creeps killed him a month ago, and all Headquarters did was send this waste of space.* She hid the scowl by looking into the brightest part of the fire, her eyes squinting the rest of the way on their own. *Not like I should expect anything different from HQ. They sent that new guy, Richard, to replenish our losses. And now I’m alone without Simon and Timothy. Without my friends.* A sigh escaped her, the thought taking what felt like the last of her hope with it.

*I’ve been at this for just five years, and yet I’m the most experienced by far. One of the few to survive this...* “duty,” as Barnaby likes to call it. “It is our solemn duty to seek out the darkness where it hides, and to vanquish it before it kills the innocent,” she recited in her head, doing her best mockery of the man’s officious attitude. *And if tradition is right, somehow people keep on doing this, before and after the Darkening almost to the day. Makes as much sense as everyone being happy all the time.*

*But it does make sense,* she reprimanded herself, shifting position on the ground. *They don’t see their friends die at the hands of the Creeps, knowing that it’s nowhere close to a heroic sacrifice. They don’t see the cowards lurking in the shadows, picking off the unwary. They don’t see how much we lose to keep them blissfully unaware.* A sneer stole onto her face.

“Something wrong?” Barnaby asked.

She glanced at him long enough to see the lost look on his face, the desperate plea for comfort. *He’s on his own.* Her eyes went back down to the fire, her thoughts already replacing her non-conversation with Barnaby. *What’s the point? Why do I do this? To indulge cowards, protect naïve fools, and lose everyone I ever hold dear?* She yawned, finally noticing how tired she was. *Questions for tomorrow, I guess.* She finally tore her eyes from the fire and stood up, blindly stumbling for a few moments before finding her pack at the edge of the firelight. She laid out the bedroll and climbed in, sleep following after her.

#

Caleb dropped his hard-earned money onto the counter. *Earned and gone already.*

“Any other guests?” asked the innkeeper, his hard features seemingly incapable of tender emotions.

“Just me for the night,” said Caleb, smiling weakly. *And only tonight.*

The innkeeper didn’t react to the smile. Instead, he turned and drew a key from behind him and presented it to Caleb. “I trust you, but it’s a precaution for slowing down the rare thief.”

Caleb smiled again, more convincingly.

No reaction.

“Thanks,” he contented himself with, before going down the hall and into his room.

He collapsed onto the bed. *I only sleep here for tonight if I don’t find something else tomorrow.* He stared up at the wood ceiling. *And it was hard enough finding a job today. If the caravan hadn’t had someone not show up, I would still be on the streets. I doubt I will be as lucky tomorrow.* His eyes strayed to the night outside, the silhouettes of a dozen houses beyond the window. *A city this big, and there’s no work to be found.*

He wanted it not to worry him, to be a simple bump in the road. *But I need food and a place to sleep. And I need money for that.* He grimaced, his eyes squeezing shut against the spiral of doubt.

*And the entire reason I’m here is to find a purpose behind my dreams. I’m still worrying about the basics.* He frowned. *I can’t fix it tonight anyway.* He got off the bed long enough to pull back the covers and remove his shoes. *Hopefully, tomorrow will be better.* He settled into the bed and soon was fast asleep.

#

*This battle is going too well.* Gerald looked in around him, searching for the impossible horde he had read of. The same scene of endless, but easily dispatched monsters greeted him, their grotesque forms no longer disturbing. *What am I missing? I can’t tell. I don’t have the right vantage point.*

He glanced at the others near him, sub-commanders directing their various units from the superior position provided by the fortress.

*I need to see it on the ground, and I need to see it now!* His uneasy feeling had morphed into a panic for better information. *I’m missing something. We cannot possibly have overprepared.* He rushed down the nearest alley, threading the labyrinthine pathway with practiced ease. *Maybe I’m overreacting and should take it for the gift it appears to be.* He threw the seditious thought to the back of his head. *I have to be of one mind, determined to the very end. I have no time for foolish hope.*

#

Caleb opened his eyes, confusion already crowding into his thoughts as he stared up at the ceiling. The sound of pounding footsteps on stone still echoed in his ears, the night feeling darker around him. *What is he missing? Why are things going so well? What's going to happen next?*

He shook his head, unable to grasp why he was even asking the questions. *What am I even seeing? Why is it different?* The words taunted him, reminding him of both the dreams and his snap decision to leave home.

*Of what use are my dreams if I can't afford to follow them?* The thought sent shivers down his spine, the feeling of having gone from bad to worse filling him with an even deeper sadness. *I'm trapped, between dreams I don't understand and a life that won't give me the time to understand them.*

Sadness turned to anger. *What is fair about this? Why must I suffer, while the rest of the world lives in relative peace?* He trembled with rage, the covers rippling over him.

*I can't stay angry, not at people who have done nothing wrong to me.* He stilled himself, a single tear making its way down his cheek as the anger evaporated back into misery. *This is my personal struggle, and no one else's. I am alone.* More tears came, and he quietly sobbed himself to sleep.

#

Ivan lay awake, annoyed that his thoughts wouldn't let him be. *I know it was a ruse, do I not? Why do those blue eyes stay in my mind?* He sneered. *I will not tolerate this intrusion into my life.* He stared at the ceiling, his frustration boiling up against the being the messenger said existed. *Not that I truly care if he does. I do not have time for doubts and uncertainties. I need truth.*

Truth was the basis of his life, a necessary pull that had inexorably drawn him to his profession of capitalizing on the shifting tides of the market. The market would not lie. It could not. Even people who were in the market could try to lie, but the market would find them out for their deceit. Doubt was an unknown, uncertainty merely in how much money was going to be made.

*Why can I not get that man, that vision, those eyes, out of my mind? I should have been able to bear him out for a liar immediately, but he came across as genuine.* Ivan paused, his questions cycling around an answer he hated: the messenger wasn't lying.

*Even if he was telling the truth, what does it matter? The Darkening is nearly a century away, and my life is half gone. That vision is impossible, and furthermore, ridiculous. Stop the Darkening? Madness.*

The blue eyes continued to dance in his mind. *I have never seen that person in my life. No matter how convincing that vision was, that cannot have been me.* He exhaled, contenting

himself with the partial answer. *Tomorrow, I shall suss out the remaining details.* He shut his eyes, welcoming sleep at last.

#

Alexandra woke up feeling no better than the previous night. *Why do I do this? Why do I sacrifice myself for the sake of people I will never meet?* She distracted herself from the lingering cloud of doubt by packing up her things and making sure that the ashes of the campfire weren't hiding any still-lit embers.

"Ready to head back to Westbrook?" asked Barnaby, attempting to be cheery.

*Not even a day since everyone died, and he doesn't have a care in the world.* She looked off toward the nearby road, refusing to make eye contact. "Yes," she said as evenly as she could.

"Let's get going then." He passed by her and got onto the path without a glance back.

*If he dares to engage in "small talk" with me, there will be a new grave in the woods.* She gasped at the thought, the venom of it stronger than even Barnaby deserved. *No, he's not that bad, just self-centered.* She shook her head, trying to clear the gloom. Only when she thought nothing did she begin following, taking no effort to close the gap between them.

*Half a day back to Westbrook. And then what? Get more recruits who want to die a hero's death? What if they knew it was anything but? Would they sign up?*

Ultimately, she didn't care. *No recruits will ever replace Simon, Timothy, Yosef, Jeffrey, Edgar. None of them.* Tears wrenched from her eyes, the faces of her fallen friends flashing before her. *You did not deserve to die, not at the hands of cowards. Not defending people who don't care about you at all, only themselves.* She wiped at her eyes, forcing them shut in a naïve attempt at staving off the sorrow that coursed through her.

Her eyes opened on Barnaby's back. *He doesn't care what happens to me, so long as he stays alive. He cares even less about the recruits than I do. Why do I take orders from him?* It wasn't a new question, but her friends had always been there, filling the void Jeffrey had left behind him. *Now they're not, and I will be the next to die. I don't want to die for nothing.*

She sniffed, her tears finally starting to slow. Barnaby tilted his head at the sound, but didn't look back.

*You wouldn't understand. You never have with your talk of "duty" and "orders" and "sacrifice for the greater good."* She wanted to spit at him, but knew it wouldn't make her feel any better. Instead, she sniffed again, the last tear running down her cheek. *What am I living for?* She wiped at the tear, not wanting to answer the question. *I need to make a decision, but I don't want to. I know I'm living for nothing, but how do I live for anything else?*

## Chapter 4: Lies and Trickery

“Elizabeth Porterwather, you stand charged with three counts of grand larceny, two counts of breaking and entering, and fifteen counts of assaulting the Watch. How do you plead?”

Liz rolled her eyes, ignoring the disdainful looks cast at her. “Listen, judgeman, I realize you’re just supposed to be all formal and stuff, but I told you already my name is *Liz*, not Elizabeth, and if you say ‘Porterwather’ ever again I might be guilty of murder.”

The judge sighed repeating the question. “How do you plead, *Liz*?”

“As guilty as guilty ever was, of course.” She smiled and winked at him.

He sighed again. “Since there is no disagreement from the defendant, I hereby sentence you to three years in the Martan Jail.” The gavel slammed down, the sound echoing around the small room’s walls. “Know that the entire Watch is on the lookout for you, so escaping from jail isn’t suggested.”

“I’ll think about it,” Liz said unconvincingly as she was escorted from the room.

#

Ivan awoke later than he wanted. *At least I have no appointments scheduled today. And Felkirk did not demand my presence, either. Fortuitous circumstances.* He got up and dressed, his gaze

looking around at the various rarities he had collected over the years, before alighting on his two most prized possessions: a dagger and rapier.

The dagger sat on a simple stand, its hilt ornately inlaid with small gems of sapphire, ruby, and emerald. *No one knows where it came from, but the blade never dulls and it is light as a feather.* The rapier was sheathed, its simple construction belying its value. *Celeste's parting gift, and my blade for sparring. I wish I still had the time for it.*

*But the library is more important to me.* He turned and left the room. *First, a detour through the market, then the library. I do not want to give Felkirk enough time to have a conniption fit.*

The market was its usual bustling self. *Every trade deal I have done in this city started here.* His lip curled upward at his ingenuity, even though he knew everyone else observed just as he did. *If they did not, they would be fools wishing to be parted from their money.*

He watched and listened to the ebb and flow of the market, picking up snippets and figuring through the implications. But as he tried to overhear conversations, the words "I am a messenger from God" echoed in his ears, breaking his concentration. He turned away and sought another exchange, but all he saw was a pair of blue eyes. *Must I be tormented by that man and his vision?* He shook his head from side to side, but the eyes stayed, haunting him as they danced around his sight. *Stop this madness!*

He forced his eyes shut, willing the the eyes away. But when he opened them, he stared at the face of a man wearing a simple farmer's pack, his eyes casting everywhere.

*That face...those eyes!* Shock forced its way down his spine, setting his body tingling. *But he's a farmer, and completely lost. Not remotely close to the man I saw in the vision.* He pursed his lips, not sure what to make of the contradiction.

Ignorant to Ivan's staring, the man kept looking around, walking past him to continue his search. *Even if he isn't the same person from the vision, maybe he has a brother, or a father. Maybe a son? I must speak with him!* He took off after the man, but doubt stopped him two steps in. *He will not believe me talking about a vision, and certainly not a "messenger from God." What will I say?*

The man continued to walk away, his gaze never settling for a second.

*I cannot just let him leave. I must know if he knows anything. The words will come later.*

#

Caleb felt like someone was following him, despite his slow trudge through the market. *Who's behind me?* His eyes looked to the sides, but saw no one moving to overtake him. *Just keep on looking for work.*

The feeling didn't go away, but no one stopped him. He passed a mirror hung on the outside of a merchant stand, and had his fears confirmed. *Someone is following me, and not trying to catch*

*up. Older man, graying-black hair, wearing nice clothes. Why would he be following me?* The question stopped him, giving the man time to catch up.

“I really do apologize for the inconvenience, sir, I just felt like I needed to meet you.” His eyebrows raised as he stuck out his hand.

Caleb looked from side to side again, trying to figure out what the man was aiming at. “Um...I’m nobody special. J-just a former farmer from Tonsbury, l-looking for a new job.”

“Ah.” The man looked down at his ignored hand, and put it back at his side.

“Wh-why do you ask?”

“Oh, forgive me, I got lost in thought. I am Ivan Stradinski, trade broker and the primary reason behind the success of three of the most successful men in Telthan, as well as the richest woman.”

Caleb stared wide-eyed at the introduction. *But why does he want to meet me? I’m just a farmer.* “G-glad to meet you, I guess. I’m C-Caleb Moss.” He brought up his hand, and Ivan shook it. “Y-you really have me c-confused here. Wh-why do you want to know who I am?”

Ivan grimaced, his eyes suddenly darting in every direction. “It is...a difficult reason to state. I am sorry. Trying to put it into words is failing me at present.”

Caleb resisted the temptation to turn and run. *Don’t want to make a scene. He’s not offering work. Need to keep on moving. Slowly.* “Well, if that’s all you needed, I really need to find some work. Have a good day.” He waved as he left Ivan behind. A quick glance back showed Ivan standing still, a puzzled look frozen on his face.

#

*I am foolish, and my age is beginning to show. Now a country bumpkin thinks I am an eccentric. Not that I care that much about my reputation, of course.*

He dug himself out of his thoughts long enough to watch Caleb get further and further away. *Off to find a job, in the center of the Five City Labor Union’s territory. He will never find more than a day job on his own.* “On his own,” he repeated softly to himself, then his eyebrows shot to the top of his forehead. “I can fix this!” He took off at a brisk walk, ignoring the surprised merchant beside him.

In seconds, he was walking side-by-side with Caleb. “Caleb, forgive me for a second interruption today, but I have some bad news.”

Caleb stopped. “S-so being waylaid by some rich guy who wants to know your name and won’t say why isn’t bad?” He glared at Ivan.

“Uh...I apologize for the awkwardness. It is just hard to put into words what I am trying to say without sounding like a complete lunatic.” He half-smiled, trying to win Caleb over.

“Is it a weird job offer? I’ll take that.”

“No...”

“Then we have nothing to talk about.” Caleb walked away, forcing Ivan to chase after him to keep talking.

“Well, I could possibly fix the job part, but the bad news is that you will not find any lasting employment searching on the streets. Labor associations control the vast majority of jobs in Westbrook, and the application process for here or any of the surrounding six cities is far longer than you have time or money for.” Ivan paused to let the news sink in, instead putting effort into making his aging legs move fast enough for Caleb’s increasing pace.

“Labor what?”

“Labor associations,” Ivan completed. “No matter, that is not really important. I can get you a job working with my employer. A week ago, we had one of the clerks quit to move to Martan to the east. As long as you can write letters, copy figures, and do dictation fairly well I can get you off the street.” *He is most certainly not qualified by the looks of him, but I need to get him in a more private setting. He has to have some form of answers for me.*

Caleb looked at him, confused. “Ivan, if you're trying to apologize for being really weird, you're overdoing it. I thank you, but the only figures I've ever written were crop yields, and I’ve never written a letter.”

*This is not going to work. He will not trust me, and I cannot say I blame him. I still have to try.*  
“At the very least, allow me to offer you a place to stay tonight. Prince Felkirk is an understanding man and quite given to charity.” *I should not make a habit of out-and-out lies like that. A man with a larger amount of unrestricted greed I have never met.*

Caleb’s eyes went to the sky, seeming to consider the track of the noontime sun before resting again on Ivan. “Fine. I get the feeling you won't leave me alone until you've been able to apologize in a big enough way to make up for whatever you think you did.”

“Excellent! Now please, follow me, his mansion is not too far from here.” *I am going to be in so much trouble for this, but I will not let this source of answers before me go walking off into starvation.* He started to walk away, but noticed that Caleb wasn't following yet. He turned back and beckoned. “Come, this way.”

Caleb frowned, but joined him.

#

The solid oak door slammed shut, the reinforced iron on the opposite side grating with the stone blocks above them. Liz peered at the door as it shuddered from the bar being dropped into place, her lip curling up into a half-smile. *At least they have the sense to try to guard me well. Just makes it more fun to escape.* She felt around the door for weak points, or a large enough gap in



the frame to allow her to throw the bar to the ground. Her fingers found nothing. *This will be a fun, little challenge.*

*Wasn't the challenge not getting caught?* sneered a voice inside her head.

*So the kid woke up and started wailing right as I was leaving. No one heard me. I just had extremely bad timing. Now I just get another opportunity to enjoy myself.* She moved her jaw around for a bit, then spit out a small, rectangular object. *That was starting to hurt.*

*Just going to run away from justice again, not ever learning your lesson.*

*Oh shut up, Porter.* She began waving the object around the door frame, paying attention to its spurts of faint green light. *Oh good, simple middle-of-door bar, and exterior hinges. Would keep normal prisoners in, but not me.*

*Just because it's "fun" doesn't make it right.*

*Got it, O Great and All-Knowing Voice of Moral Reason. Shut up, I like my fun.* She put her ear against the door, listening for movement. *Nothing. Must be in another room of the jail.*

*There are more honorable occupations than thief and vagabond.*

*And all of them are boring. Could you please leave me alone? I'm busy trying to escape from jail.* She reached down her shirt and pulled a simple cord from where it had been curled. *Bless the guards for not wanting to be considered lewd, they always think this is part of my shirt.* Carefully she threaded the cord between the frame and the door, letting it drop down above the bar. On its own the cord curled back toward her. She grabbed both ends with her hand.

*Whoever came up with this thing is a magical genius.* She pulled up on the cord, and the bar on the other side lifted out of its cradle. *Now to get it off the door.* Her hand kept rising, taking the side of the bar with it. Eventually, the angle was too great for the cord to retain its grip. It went slack, and the bar slid off the other side of the cradle, hitting the stone floor with a loud thud. *Oh, great. Now I need to move, and quickly.*

*Running to the next city again? Porter needled. Hoping your reputation follows slower than your ability to steal, sell, and skip town?*

*You would say that. I'm just seeking new opportunities.* She swung open the door, its hinges not making a sound. *Maybe I got lucky and they didn't hear the bar hitting the ground.* She jumped out of the cell and looked down both ends of the hallway. *Two more cells on either side of me, the door out to the right, and a corner to the left. Must be more cells that way.*

She heard footsteps from around the corner.

*Well, they're not rushed, but he's not going to like seeing this bar on the floor.* Hastily, she picked it up and set it back into place. *No wonder it was so easy to lift, it's cheap pine.*

The footsteps got louder.

*Out the door!* She flew down the corridor, careful to close the door quietly.

On the other side was a guard, his eyes growing wide at her abrupt entrance. “Ha-” he started to yell, but Liz chopped him in the throat, causing him to choke and gag. She kicked his legs out from under him and surveyed the room for the one thing she needed. *I know they put my bag here. I saw them do it. Where is it?* She looked everywhere, with the occasional sidelong glance at the guard to see how close he was to getting back to his feet. *There it is!* She dashed for it and slung the bag onto her back.

“I said to-”

Liz whirled and kicked him in the stomach, knocking the wind out of him as he stumbled back into the door. She sped for the outside door, slid the bolt open, and tore across the city streets. She was already halfway to the city limits when she heard the cry that defined her life when things didn’t go according to plan.

“Thief! Stop her!”

*Just try. You’re all too out of shape to catch up.*

*How’d they catch you in the first place?*

*I wasn’t looking for a Tablet in the middle of the road. Freak accident.*

*Wouldn’t be a problem if you weren’t always stealing from others.*

*It’s not a problem to have fun all the time.* She smiled to herself as the northwestern road came closer and closer, no watchman in sight. *I wonder whether Westbrook is as easy to steal from as Martan was. Aside from the prison stay, of course.*

*Aren’t you running out of places to run?*

*Haven’t yet. Not going to worry about it until I do.*

#

“You can’t just resign, Alexandra.” Barnaby was predictably against her decision.

“Why not? I reviewed my contract and it says that if at any point I feel unfit for continued duty, I am to inform my superior officer that I wish to resign. Otherwise, I am a danger to my unit.” *Try sliming out of that, you legalistic scum.*

“Yes, but it is up to that superior officer to decide whether you are truly unfit, or whether you are trying to simply leave. And based on your admirable dispatching of the two Creeps who took out the rest of our detachment, I highly doubt you are anywhere remotely close to unfit. If you want to take a break to mourn their loss, I understand. But I need you here to help me with the new recruits HQ will send soon.”

“I’ll mourn their loss in due time, but their deaths were pointless. The Creep picked Simon instead of you, and Timothy and Richard froze. Simon had no choice, and it could have just as easily been you or me who froze. I refuse to feel comfortable doing something where my life is not in my hands.”

Barnaby scowled at her. “Those are dangerously seditious thoughts to be having, Alexandra. You know that the Sentinels have a difficult role in keeping Telthan safe, one that the town watch would never understand, between chasing down a thief and solving the rare murder. Our danger is everpresent, but if we do not take it then all of Telthan suffers. Which would you prefer?”

Alexandra glared, her sheer determination in the face of overwhelming odds now focused on Barnaby. She smiled inwardly when he flinched. “I don’t believe Telthan would be in any more or less danger if the Sentinels suddenly ceased doing their jobs. Why terrorize innocents when you can have those supposedly prepared for you show up at your doorstep? For all of the bold slogans about how we seek the darkness where it lies, they clearly have the upper hand. And I’m not believing any of it any longer. Now accept my resignation.”

Barnaby stared back, his features twisted in indignation. “Fine,” he spat out. “Fine. I’ll take your resignation, but I am not going to recommend you for wherever you want to go from here. Enjoy your fine life, Alexandra Sterling, because it won’t be as vital, or as appreciated as what you are leaving.” Without waiting for her reply, he stood up and left the office.

Alexandra preferred to take the high ground, but she couldn’t help but make a vulgar gesture at his retreating back. *I sure hope he’s wrong. There has to be something to believe in out there. I thought I could believe in the Sentinels, but now I just...can’t.* She went to pack her things.

#

“You unilaterally decided to pick a random bum off the street, who by his own admission, is ill-suited to a clerk’s job, and you want me to be *alright* with this?” Felkirk’s face had morphed into a red caricature of its normal self.

“No, I do not expect you to be, but trust me when I say that this is for the best. I have not steered you wrong in the past. I do not intend to do so now.” *I do not believe my own words, but I only need to buy enough time to speak with Caleb privately.*

Felkirk’s anger subsided, Ivan’s words forcing him to consider what was being said. “Very well, but I expect you to keep your end of the bargain on this one. I do not want inefficiency in my operation.”

“Certainly not. I will make sure that his work is of the highest quality as soon as possible.” Ivan wasn’t honestly sure if he could do that, or if Caleb even wanted to learn, but any other answer would have brought Felkirk’s rage back in a flash.

“You are dismissed.”

#

Caleb didn't want to doubt Ivan's kindness, but nothing about his behavior made any sense. *First he wants to talk to me, then he offers me a job, and now I'm staying in clerk's quarters?* He looked from the feather-filled mattress and silken sheets he was on to the mural painted upon the ceiling: a field in summertime, green shafts streaking in every direction in defiance of the wind. *At least I know he wasn't lying about advising some of the richest people in Telthan.*

*But what on Telthan does he want to know? Why is he being so kind to me? What makes me so special to him?*

A servant summoned him to supper before he could repeat the train of thought. *I am not worthy of this treatment, but I have to wait to find out what Ivan wants.* He followed the servant to the dining room.

As he sat down, he looked around the table. Five others were already eating, Ivan among them.

He tried looking Ivan in the eyes to wordlessly ask for some explanation, but the other man was focused on his food. *I'll have to pull him aside after the meal, then.* He ate his food in silence, anxiously awaiting Ivan's explanation.

#

Ivan just wanted the meal to be over. *I cannot ask him now, and he will certainly strike up a conversation and force it out of me if I pay him any attention at all.* He stared down at his plate, trying to will the food gone faster, but social propriety kept him from it. *I need to speak with him alone, not now. If this does not pan out, I want to be able to contain the damage as much as possible.*

*But can I really tell him the truth? He will never believe it. Even if I am able to find out why Caleb looks the same as that knight, what good is it? I will never convince Caleb that he is capable of such things, and I will never convince Felkirk to keep Caleb around.*

*Furthermore, it will be impossible to convince anyone in Telthan that I was visited by a messenger who showed the end of the Darkening. Why must I act so rashly after decades of properly considered actions?*

Ivan's thoughts moved from idea to idea, possible solutions evaluated, discarded, then variations of them subjected to the same withering scrutiny. *There must be some sort of solution to this, I know it!* He said nothing as he left the table, his head aching from the mental exertion.

## Chapter 5: Broken Boundaries

“Caleb?”

Caleb looked up from the bed to find Ivan closing the door behind him. “Going to explain yourself now?” He winced as he sat up. *I didn’t mean to say it like that. It sounds demanding.*

Ivan frowned, his forehead creasing. “I certainly owe you that, I just...could not explain things in front of others. It is too risky.”

“Too risky?” *What does he mean? Simple lies aren’t too risky.*

He nodded, his frown still present. “I suppose I should just take the direct approach. Yesterday, I had a man who called himself a messenger from God appear out of nowhere in my study. I did not want to listen to any of his obvious lies, but he ended up showing me a vision. With me so far?”

Caleb stared at him, the mention of the word “god” setting him on edge. *I’ve seen the lack of any god firsthand, over and over again. No god that I could believe in would allow those deaths.*

“Still with me?” he asked, an uncertain smile trying to offset his furrowed brow.

*It would be funny if what he said wasn’t so unbelievable.* “I am, aside from the...’god’ part.”

He nodded. “Yes, I agree with you there. You see, that vision showed me the Darkening, but an army greater than any I have ever seen arrayed against the monsters. As best I could tell, that army was led by someone who looked a *lot* like you.” He exhaled, his shoulders rising.

“M-me?” Caleb pointed at himself. “L-lead an army?” *I knew he was odd and overly helpful, but what he’s saying is ridiculous.* “Must have been a lie, too.” *Has to be.*

Ivan held up a finger. “I will clarify by saying that I never saw anyone remotely similar to that man in the vision until I saw you earlier today. The most striking feature was his eyes, identical in tint and intensity to yours.”

“B-but still, h-he has to be lying. I’m j-just a farmer, l-looking for a new job now that I’ve gotten b-bored with the fields.” *Not true, but I don’t want another lecture.*

Ivan grimaced. “I am not sure in either direction. I was hoping that you would have some answers, or some explanation. That you would be able to corroborate the vision...or totally discredit it.”

Caleb gave the best fake smile he had. “I guess it’s another mystery. Telthan’s got plenty of those, right?”

He didn’t return the smile. “Unfortunately. I am still willing to honor my statement of making you a clerk, though Felkirk will insist on an audience with you soon to try to convince me otherwise. He is not the easiest man to please, just so you are aware.”

Caleb’s smile inverted. “I figured. Y-you don’t have to make me a clerk; I c-can find something with an association. The p-paperwork doesn’t scare me as much as it m-might someone else, I d-don’t have anywhere else to go.”

Ivan winced. “Stay at least the night, and we will decide things in the morning. Please do not consider me some insane daydreamer for telling you of my vision. I am not sure what to believe right now, but I will not try to change your mind.”

*That’s...somewhat thoughtful.* “Thanks, I guess. Have a good night?”

“Yes. You as well.” Ivan left the room, shutting the door on his way out.

*I leave a pointless life to be helped out by a madman. He seems well-read. Maybe he’s heard of dreams like mine. Maybe he could help.* His body fell back onto the sheets. *Maybe.*

#

If Liz hadn’t been so tired, she might have been more surprised at how large Westbrook was. *The rumors were true, for once. The rumors are never true.* She staggered into the city, her tired feet only working because she refused to let them quit. Her gaze traveled across the market nearby, the dawn failing to illuminate anything to pique her interest. *Guess I’ll need to look elsewhere in the city for my payoff.*

*Already planning your next heist? You have no sense of morals.*

*What are morals, anyway? Some big lie told to each other so that we make our lives as painless as possible? It's not like we make actual life better, we just feel better about ourselves. No one is judging me except some incompetents who can't even fund a proper jail.* Liz had been over this line of reasoning with Porter dozens of times, but he seemed brainwashed by the same words that worked on everyone else. *I don't have the time to be normal, much less the interest.*

Eventually, she found what had to be the rich quarter of Westbrook. Towering mansions with high walls around them for at least a half-mile. *Traders are so predictable with what they do with the money they end up earning. Just as easy to steal from.* Slowing down to better evaluate her list of targets, she made note of the guards present, the structure of the mansion itself, likely locations of any valuables, and most importantly, the doors and windows. *Only ways in, only ways out.*

About halfway down the line, she found her target. The walls were high and covered by a thornbush in full bloom, but the men guarding the front gate were barely paying attention. The mansion itself was a three-story monstrosity, one of the most obvious examples of foolish wealth she had ever seen. *The man is more obsessed with showing off how much he's made than in necessarily holding onto it. I'll be happy to relieve him of a good portion of his valuables, then.*

*There has got to be a better life than stealing, getting caught, getting exiled, and then repeating it at the next town over. It won't even take that much effort.*

Happy with her decision, she ignored Porter's continuing tirade in favor of finding an inn to get some sleep. *Can't wait to rob the mansion blind tonight.*

#

Alexandra sighed as her body fell upon the bed. The frame creaked dangerously, but didn't break. *"Excellent post-service opportunities," they told me five years ago. What a bald-faced lie.* None of the pitched organizations had been hiring. The town watch was fully staffed, all of the local movers and shakers had a full complement of bodyguards, and even the caravans weren't looking for people.

*The curse of relative peace. Most of the security is just to make people feel comfortable. Creeps are a rare danger in Telthan, and criminals are even rarer.* Alexandra didn't understand it. People got along, even though they had no real reason to. *Something about the Darkening makes everyone nicer to each other, even if we'll never see it with our own eyes.*

At one point, Simon had given her a hard time for her questioning simple human goodness, but he ended up admitting how off-kilter the justification of "the Darkening" was. *If it didn't exist, would people get along as well as they do with it? That's what everyone is saying.*

She shook herself from the reverie. *Too much thinking today, I don't have any energy left to remember the talks I used to have with my friends. The friends that are no more.* A tear tracked its way down her cheek as she fell asleep.

#

*I just love recon. Going through all the possibilities, thinking about all the things that will soon be mine, over and over again until I'm ready to do it for real. And it's even more fun with Porter complaining about my life being in danger, my morals in a sewage trench, and his advice in the trash heap. She grinned evilly. Where it rightfully belongs, annoying little git.*

*I'm right. And you know it. You're just too proud to admit it.*

*I'd disagree with you, but you won't be convinced.* She put on the close-fitting black outfit that made her indistinguishable from the shadows, its complement of pockets enough to carry all her tools close at hand. Her smile returned, the fun just beginning. A quick glance in the mirror confirmed that only her smile could be seen.

She left through the window, quickly closing it before dashing through the darkness. She easily avoided the sparse torchlight from the few places still open at midnight. In short order, she was next to the mansion's wall, the thorny greenery her main obstacle. *I don't know what they tell all these traders, but the salesmen must be good.* She always saw thornbush for the false security that it was. No determined thief was without a simple rug to drape over the prickly plant. She pulled it from a long pocket on her thigh and put it in place. A couple of choice grabs through the rug and she was on top of the wall.

The southern courtyard was deserted, a nice detail she had been unable to find out earlier. *This guy is way too busy boasting about how rich he is to worry about people stealing from him, else I'd have some guards to knock out.* She sprinted across the dim courtyard to the outer doors.

*Now for sink or swim. I have no idea what it looks like in there. Maybe the pathetic guard watch outside is made up for by a ton of people inside. I could wait for something to give that away, force the lock, or-I'll just hit the second floor instead.* Taking advantage of the ornamental columns supporting the outside wall, she bounded to the second floor windows, the darkness of the room beyond clear through the panes.

*Much better. Now just a quick movement of the lock, and I'm in.* Pulling an oval trinket out of its place, she slid the window's lock open. *I love magic and all of its uses.* A quick jerk on the pane and she dropped lightly into the mansion, the drapes making the room darker than the night.

She had almost started replacing the latch when she heard snoring. Her heart jumped into her throat, but as the snoring continued without interruption she relaxed. *That was a scare.* Her hand quietly put the latch closed. *Now to leave this dreaming fool to his rest while I rob the place.*

*Single-minded as always, chided Porter. Never mind that you are a deviant of the worst sort in Telthan.*

*I'll deviate as much as I feel like; this is rather fun. And it's certainly more of a challenge than any "honest" work would be. Haven't we been over this?* She looked around the room one last time for anyone other than the dreamer on the bed, then padded across the luxurious rug and into the hallway.



#

Gerald didn't like what he saw at the front lines. *Nothing but half-hearted feints. These aren't the horrible monsters we prepared for!* In both directions, he saw the same ridiculous sight: monsters standing around, waiting, an occasional one daring to move toward the wall of fire. The enchanted traps had barely been tripped, a scarce few etching a path to the front line.

*I need to know how long this farce has been going on.* He looked down the line, finding the closest officer to him. "Commander Samson, report!"

Samson started, his head jerking everywhere before he focused on Gerald. "Sir?"

"I said, report! I need to know *now*, stop wasting my time."

"Yes-yes, sir! They attacked us full force at first, then stopped. They've been just as you see for the last half-hour. Some of them test to make sure the mages are still awake. Which they are."

Gerald scowled, then softened at Samson's frightened look. "It's not you. Why would they be waiting? Why wouldn't they be trying to slaughter us now?"

"I don't know, sir, but it worries me too."

He looked forlornly at the horrible creatures, their motionlessness scarier than anything he had ever seen.

#

Caleb's eyes jerked opened, the dark bedroom assuring him that he wasn't in Andranine. *The monsters are not here. I know that.* His breath slowed, the adrenaline ebbing as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Gerald's uncertainty gnawed at him, the chilling scene of unmoving creatures still playing before his eyes. *I know that Andranine didn't succeed. No one does. But I want to know how far they got.* The anticipation gnawed at him, the dream standing in stark contrast to his life. *My dreams still taunt me, and I don't know what to do next.*

His thoughts were interrupted when he noticed something was wrong. *I closed the door before I went to bed, but it's open now. Did the servants check in on me? I'm of no importance. It could be some kind of precaution. The Prince does have a lot of guards around the house.* His thoughts drifted back to Gerald, his eyes closing against his will.

#

*This fool doesn't display anything compact at all. What happened to golden candlesticks, jewel-encrusted utensils, or other over-the-top stuff? The smallest thing I've found in this stupid place is a small clock.* She sulked through the hallways, searching for something, anything. *I hate leaving empty-handed.*

*Perfectly fine leaving without scruples, irritated to see a clear sign to clear out. Your hubris is astonishing.*

*Your persistence in being annoying is astonishing too, but you don't hear me complain about it all the time.*

*Actually, yes I do.*

Liz stopped, her lips twisting. *Fine, you're right. This time. Now leave me alone while I steal something.*

*If you find anything.*

With the main hallways empty, it left her with no choice but to try the upstairs rooms. *Just need to listen for a few moments, silently open the door, and search. There can't possibly be people sleeping in every single room.*

But the first couple of rooms echoed with obnoxious snores, and Liz was forced to change her opinion. *Okay, so there are a lot of people sleeping up here. This target was so easy to get into for reasons I hate to admit: it's not worth trying to steal from. Lamé. Doesn't stop me from trying anyway. I'm running out of rooms, but one of them has to be empty.*

Finally, a room was beautifully, mercifully silent. Her hand turned the knob, slowly retracting the latch until she was able to open the door without a sound. *This man's obsession with rich rugs is making me quieter than a cat. I love at least that much about him.*

A quick glance around showed the last thing she wanted to see: a person sleeping. *You have got to be kidding me. Silent sleepers don't exist. Has to be a brick of a sleeper, though. Just going to poke around real quick, and see if he moves.*

She looked over the contents of the room, and smiled at the plethora of small, valuable items that greeted her. Pulling a bag from a pocket at her waist, she began to put things within. *An ornate dagger here, a gold-bound book there, some other small trinkets to fill out the take. Done.* She looked down at the bag, its flat appearance belying its contents. *Smaller on the outside than it is on the inside, and doesn't show if it's full at all. Handy.* She tied it onto her waist, cinching its open mouth around her stash.

*Should be enough for the market tomorrow morning.* She smiled again and left the room, closing the door behind her.

#

Ivan had never been the best sleeper, and the impossible stress of the situation he had put himself in only made it worse. *My questions are still unanswered, and now I am stuck with the loose end of a farmer I need to train to be a clerk. And that is assuming Felkirk will continue to allow it. Or that Caleb will not consider me a crazy lunatic and want to leave immediately.* His thoughts had repeated for hours when they were interrupted by the ridiculous sight of a black-clothed figure opening the door and rifling through his things.

*By silhouette, she is definitely female, but what is she doing in here? Is she armed? She is closer*

*to my rapier than I am right now, so I cannot find out without severe risk to my life. I just hope she does not steal the latest edition of The Trader's Almanac. It went out of print almost immediately, and it has been a good source of information to find out the emerging markets this year.*

Somehow, the worry about a book slowed down his mind long enough to formulate a plan. *I will wait for her to leave, then arm myself and follow. Hopefully I will convince her to return my goods, but if not, I can disarm her before she harms me.* The thought of using his rapier, untouched for so long, filled him with unexpected excitement. *Never did I think I would need to use it for self-defense.*

The door closed, and Ivan set his plan into a blur of motion, his left hand turning the doorknob soundlessly while his right already held the unsheathed rapier.

He peeked around the door, looking for the intruder. *She is almost at Caleb's room! I cannot let him be in danger. She may be a simple thief, but she could also be a murderer. I will not take the chance. Explaining that to Felkirk tomorrow would be most difficult.*

When she disappeared into Caleb's room, Ivan bolted across the hallway, reaching the open door in seconds. The woman was fiddling with the window latch, a snoring Caleb ignorant to her presence.

“Halt!” called out Ivan softly, not wanting to wake, and thusly panic, the sleeping man.

The woman spun on her heels, locking eyes with Ivan. Her eyebrows rose in surprise, but before Ivan could use her hesitation to close the distance, she jammed the window open and dropped to the ground outside, her eyes grinning in victory as she disappeared from view. Ivan ran to the window to see her running at top speed for the wall.

“Thief!” Ivan yelled out into the night. *Maybe the guards will wake up in time to stop her, but unlikely. I can hope for the Watch, though.*

“O-oh, y-you saw her too?”

Ivan whirled to face Caleb, bringing the rapier mere inches from his face. Embarrassed, Ivan lowered the weapon. “My apologies. Yes, I did. I had difficulty sleeping. Hopefully she will be caught, but I am not about to jump out that window to try to catch her myself. In any event, we both need to get some rest. Tomorrow will be a busy day.” Ivan turned toward his bedroom.

“A-are you sure?”

Ivan stared at the ceiling, hoping the darkness made the gesture invisible to Caleb. *He does think I am a total loon.* “I realize that what I said earlier is...less than believable, but I assure you that-”

“Y-yeah, I-I know you’re not crazy, j-just uncertain.”

Ivan didn't like being interrupted, but Caleb had seen right through him. "...Yes. I am just not sure how to put things. I have so many questions of my own, and I had hoped that just maybe you had some answers to those questions."

"I-I'm sorry I don't. I-I'm just a farmer." His head moved toward the still-open window.

"That woman will not get far. Westbrook's Town Watch is one of the best in all of Telthan, and they were doubtless alerted by my cry. Besides, she only stole *my* things, nothing else of relative importance." *She took my dagger, but I need to calm him, not alarm him.*

"Ah," said Caleb, his head turning to face Ivan again. "G-guess I don't need to worry then."

"Do you believe in the Knight Victorious?" The words tumbled out before Ivan could think better of it.

"Th-the who?"

*It is a lesser known legend.* "There is a legend that speaks of a man who will raise an army to defeat the Darkening once and for all, and return Telthan to a land of complete peace and prosperity, never again shadowed by that horrible day."

"Sounds almost as ridiculous as believing in a god," Caleb said.

"It is, but it has not stopped people. The heart-breaking part of the legend is that person after person, both men and women, have tried to *be* that Knight. All they ever accomplished was being among the first killed. It is considered a false legend deliberately propagated to get rid of the people too stupid to realize the Darkening cannot be stopped, cannot be prepared for. Only barely survived."

"Oh-okay, wh-what are you getting at?"

"That vision, it...almost looked like the fulfillment of the Knight Victorious."

"A-and because I l-look like that guy, you think I'm the Kn-knight Victorious? Wh-who's to say the vision is even possible?" His hands flailed in the air, their motions random and agitated. "I-I've lived on a farm my entire life, and the only weapons I've ever w-wielded were scythes and axes. M-my only slain are wild animals and c-crops. I am no kn-knight of anything, and I never will be. I-I just want to have a d-different life than the one I had on the farm."

Ivan hung his head. "I was afraid you would say something like that. I took a risk bringing you into a job you are far from prepared for, but something about you forced me to know for certain. I apologize for the inconvenience, but I will do my best to make it right, as I said earlier today."

"So you think I could make it as a clerk?"

Ivan's face flooded with doubt, another emotion he hoped the darkness concealed. "Potentially."

"D-does Andranine mean anything to *you*?"

*Where did that question come from?* Ivan's mind ground to a halt before readjusting. "Not offhand. Why do you ask?"

"O-oh, nothing. J-just wondering."

Ivan's eyes narrowed. *Now he is hiding things from me. However, I doubt I have any grounds to force him to answer if he does not want to.* "Very well. It is late, and I must get some form of sleep before the next day finds us both needing to do a lot of work. I should be able to keep you as a clerk for a few days yet."

"Sounds...good."

*Cannot say I blame him for being unsure.* Ivan left the room. *I sure hope that thief gets caught.*

## Chapter 6: Accidental Choices

“Thief!” The cry pierced the night air.

*Great, now the Watch will be involved.* Liz sprinted for the wall and, with a single bound, grabbed hold of the top and hauled herself up. The thornbush looked menacingly at her. *Now for the carpet.* She began to pull it from its pouch.

“Thief! Spread out and search!” The cry was barely audible, but far too close.

*The Watch isn’t incompetent. I don’t have time for the carpet.* She shoved it back into place and leaped beyond the thornbush. She landed hard on her ankle, but recovered and sprinted for the shadow of another mansion’s wall. *I don’t have time for limps, either.*

*Didn’t do any fact-checking about Westbrook’s Watch, did you?*

*Shut up, Porter.*

*Just pointing out how even the smallest mistakes of a criminal can cost dearly.*

*Hasn’t cost me anything yet, thanks.* She looked out from the shadow for the next one, only to be staring straight at a Watchman. *How’d he get here so fast?*

His eyes widened, and he charged for her. “Stop! Thief!”

*Definitely not the right time for a limp.* She turned from him and bolted, ignoring the hammering pain of her ankle. She dashed in and out of shadows as fast as she could. *I'm not getting caught this time, nope, not happening.*

*Unlike the countless other times?*

*Unimportant right now!* She reached the end of the line of mansions and dashed across the street into an alley between houses, the closer roofs shrouding her. She dared a glance back to find the Watchman still close. *I need to shake him. Outrunning isn't working.*

“You will not escape! Turn yourself in!”

*Fat chance of that.* She ran harder, switching from alley to street in as confusing a pattern as she could.

“Thief! Find her!” yelled the Watchman, but further away, his breath short.

“This way!” Another voice cried out, just as close.

*They're way too good at this. Not even Mistvale's Watch was this good.* Her ankle throbbed. *I need to get back to the inn. Leaving town isn't going to happen.* She changed course toward it, using the shadows and silence to keep from being discovered again.

“She's headed for the eastern perimeter!” said one voice.

“No, to the north, the market!” disagreed another.

*They aren't good enough. Off my trail entirely.* She ducked around the alleys, thanking the crescent moon for its minimal light. Soon, all that was between her and relative safety was the wide street next to her inn window. She peered both ways. A Watchman ran down it, followed by another. *I'm not going to get enough time to get there unnoticed, am I?*

*If only you weren't a thieving reprobate...*

*You're starting to get on my nerves.*

*Maybe it'll convince you to reexamine your life choices.*

*Not likely. I'll just ignore you more.* She looked again, and the street was miraculously empty. *At least you're good for something. Here's my chance.* She picked up her complaining foot and dashed for the window, her hands forcing it open. She dove through, recovering from the inelegant fall on her stomach to turn and slam it shut.

Her room was silent, but the pounding of her heart and the fierce agony of her ignored ankle created a symphony of noise in her mind. *I'm safe now. They won't search random inn rooms, not when they think I went to the north, or east, or wherever.* Gingerly, she dragged her body to the bed, the adrenaline ebbing as she fell upon it. *Tomorrow, I'll disguise myself and sell these goods.* She patted the bag still at her waist. *Except the dagger. I'm keeping it. Too good of a*

*blade to sell to an ignorant merchant.*

#

*Slam.* Alexandra awakened, the sound of something in the next room jarring her sleep. *Sleeping light is a Sentinel "precaution" I don't want to take anymore.* Her mind repeated the sound, trying to figure out what it was. *A window slamming? At this hour?* She listened closely, but heard nothing through the wall. Instead, she heard muffled cries of "Thief!" and "Find her!" outside.

She stood up and went to the window, looking out to see members of the Watch dashing down the street. *A crime? And they're not caught yet?* Westbrook's Watch was extremely good at their job. They had honed their search patterns to make it practically impossible to leave town without being caught. Crime didn't happen in Westbrook as a result. *Whoever they're chasing must be a newcomer to the city.*

*But they haven't caught her yet. How?* Her mind drifted back to the slamming window. *What if she's hiding out in the inn until they give up? Crafty person, hiding in the midst of the search. What if she's right next to me? She might get away if I don't do something. I must know for certain.*

She stretched her legs, the joints sore from still wearing her armor, another habit trained into her. Stiffly, she left the room and walked next door. *At worst, I interrupt an innocent and have to apologize.* She turned the knob and entered. *Not even locked. Either trusting, or sloppy.*

Her eyes went to the bed, a woman sleeping peacefully upon it. She wore a skintight black outfit, with a bag hanging from one hip and a simple dagger from the other. *Foolishly trusting that no one would notice. But I did. This thief will not escape tonight.*

She smiled at being proven right, but something about the sleeping woman made her curious. *Why is she a thief anyway? Why is anyone a thief? I want to know, and it's not like she'll be able to run from me without running into the Watch.*

She moved to the bed and leaned close to the woman's ear. "You didn't escape."

The woman's eyes flew open, looking everywhere before seeing her. Instantly, she started turning to the opposite side of the bed.

*Exactly as I expected.* Alexandra caught the woman's hands behind her back and used them to pin her face down. "You aren't escaping now, either. Who are you?"

The woman forced her face to the side so that she could look up at her. "What business is that of yours? You're not Watch, you're..." She looked Alexandra over, taking notice of the armor. "Sentinel?!"

*I hope no one woke up to that. It'll make things more complicated than I want.* "Former Sentinel, and you didn't answer my question."



“Like I care about answering your questions. Leave me alone.”

*She's going to play tough. Not surprising. Steals even though the poorest of Telthan have plenty to survive on.* “The Watch doesn't know you're here, but what if I told them?”

“You wouldn't...”

“I'm in a good mood tonight, so I might not. If,” she pressed down with her hands, forcing the woman into the bed, “You answer my questions.”

“Do you have to do that? This bed isn't as comfortable if I'm being shoved into it.”

“What is your name?”

“Why would you care? You'll just throw me to the Watch in the morning anyway, so I'm not going to tell you.” She turned her head to look away. “Now excuse me while I get my rest. You can keep on holding onto my hands if it makes you happy.”

*I don't have time for this.* Alexandra flipped the woman over onto her back, her hands now pinned beneath her. For the first time, she looked at the woman's face in detail, seeing the line of scars along the right side of her jaw and across her left cheek. *I recognize those scars, I just don't know from where.* “You had your fun. Now what is your name?”

The woman laughed. “You're pretty violent, you know that? Did they kick you out of the Sentinels for piledriving your boss? Or did you quit because they didn't let you attack people whenever you felt like it?”

Alexandra's eyes rolled. “No to both. *You're* the one who has done something wrong here, not me. Trying to insult me does nothing other than make me more likely to pick you up and drag you to the jail in person. What. Is. Your. Name.”

“Oh fine, you win. My name is Liz. Congratulations, only took you five minutes. You must be terrible with guys when it takes you this long to get a name out of someone.”

Alexandra ignored her. *I don't care what she thinks or what she says.* “And what did you steal?”

“Who's to say I stole anything at all?”

“I do. You're wearing what a thief would wear when trying to be invisible in the dark, and you have a bag at your hip.”

“At least you're mildly observant. I got some trinkets, knickknacks, tchotchkes, the usual. I just got the rich man's version. Sells easily at the market, gets me money. Nothing too valuable, and I doubt the guy will miss it.”

*Hopefully, she stops fighting me on every single question.* “Which guy?”

“You think I figured out who it was? Whoever lives in the richest place on the block. So

extravagant you'd think the dude would invest in better security or something."

*Prince Felkirk. A demanding eccentric, but unavoidable in this city. At least I know where to return the goods.* "Most people don't expect to be stolen from at all. The fact that we even need a Watch is ridiculous were it not for the half-dozen or so people like you who try to pull some sort of stunt every year. I go out and fight Creeps to keep you safe, and you're too busy stealing things you don't even need from others."

"But you said you were a *former* Sentinel."

"Yes, recently former. Quit trying to change the topic."

"I'm not, just making sure you've got your facts straight." She stuck her tongue out in defiance.

Alexandra shook her head, her frustration mounting. "Now other than fencing off the goods to some oblivious merchant, were you planning on doing anything else?"

"Not really. Try to steal from another guy, fence his goods too, stuff like that. Were it not for a light sleeper who had a rapier handy, I wouldn't have even sounded an alarm. Guess I'll have to wait longer before the next attempt."

*Ivan Stradinski, Prince Felkirk's advisor. Fenced against him once. An amazing duelist. I don't know why he didn't consider the Sentinels at some point.* She paused, knowing the answer. *He saw the risks and was much less foolish than I was. Much less.*

"So you done with Morality Quiz Hour? Also, your hand makes it hard to breathe."

"I'm not talking about morality at all."

"So why are you holding me down? I have to have done something 'wrong' for you to keep at this."

"Just making sure I have the facts straight."

"You already said that! Besides, you're only asking so you can turn me in to the Watch with a lock-tight case and look like a hero. I see it in your eyes."

*She's bluffing, but why am I trying to keep her here? The Watch will find her if she runs. Am I trying to be a hero? Trying to salvage my miserable life?* "I'm not sure, honestly. But I'm feeling charitable tonight. Instead of turning you in like you keep worrying, I'm going to walk you up to Prince Felkirk's mansion tomorrow, you're going to return what you stole, and you're going to apologize. Or you can decide to enjoy a jail cell for the next six months."

Liz looked insulted. "Go and *apologize*? You are sick and demented for suggesting such a thing. Apology is admitting defeat, admitting that I didn't really steal without anyone stopping me."

Alexandra closed her eyes. Reopening them, she said slowly but deliberately, "*You* are the one who has things wrong. Apologizing is a courtesy to others, not a mortal sin against your pride."

Liz didn't flinch at Alexandra's condemnation. "You've asked enough questions. Now it's my turn. What's *your* name?"

"Why do you care what my name is?"

"Why do *you* care whether or not I know your name? What's the worst that can happen? They hold a parade in your honor for catching some notoriously horrible thief?"

*She has a point.* "Alexandra Sterling, since you *must* know."

"So Alex," continued Liz, "You're trying to execute your own vigilante justice. I don't know you, much less if you tell the truth, and as far as I can figure you'll do some bizarre ritual and then feed me to a creature of the Darkening or something."

"You Sentinels, former or not, are weird. The justice I *do* know is that of the Watch. The more ridiculous your requests, the more I'll find contemplating my navel in a jail perfectly acceptable."

"Are you serious? I haven't asked for anything ridiculous, and compared to being stuck in jail, I think it's a complete bargain."

Liz rolled her eyes. "Okay, so the Sentinels don't recruit the best and the brightest anymore. What I'm saying is that you'll just humiliate me, then take me into the forest and get rid of me, pulling strings to get my murder reported as a Darkening creature attack. I'm not playing your game."

Alexandra was tempted to reply "I'm not playing a game," but she refrained. *It is oddly touching that she thinks I have that much sway with Barnaby.* "We call them Creeps."

"Call who? The people you murder in the forest after you humiliate them?"

"Quit misinterpreting me. Creeps are Darkening monsters. Faster to say, and just as effective considering their obsession with striking from the darkness. Bigger cowards I have never met, present company included." *Take that, empress of insults.*

Liz's eyes narrowed. "Ah, makes sense. Except the part about me being a coward. I haven't run from you at all."

"But you ran from the Watch."

"Isn't the first time, won't be the last. Not shameful at all."

*This is going in circles, but I need to keep her busy until sun-up. The Watch won't quit searching for several hours anyway.* "I take it that you've traveled far and wide in Telthan due to your...profession."

Liz hesitated. "...Yes. Why do you care?"

“Just curious. We’re going to be here at least three more hours before dawn. I might as well get to know you better.”

“So you’re a former Dark Sentinel, a person obsessed with vigilante justice, and rank humiliation of anyone on the wrong end of that justice. Even worse, you now want to know all about me in some perverse enjoyment of keeping the memory of me alive even after you’ve slaughtered me without any hesitation.”

*Why is she still going on about me killing her? I haven’t even thought about it, though if she keeps on like this I might start.* “None of that is true, and you know it. Now stop trying to be a deliberate thorn in my side.”

Liz smiled widely. “You’d be surprised how much making crazy accusations gets people to be crazy right back. Congrats! You passed the first test of not being a complete idiot!”

Alexandra resisted the urge to smack Liz in the face. “No, I am not a complete idiot. What was your favorite city so far?”

“Clearly this one. In no other one have I been treated to being threatened with forced apologies and a loss of all money I was going to gain.”

*This is going to be a very long three hours.*

#

Ivan climbed back into bed, unsure of what to make of the night. *I have been stolen from, including my dagger. Very likely I will never see those things again. I would tell Felkirk, but he will not care. I hope the Watch catches her.* His mind drifted to the conversation with Caleb. *He shares my doubts, and yet I feel like there is something else driving him, something else that he did not talk about. What am I not seeing?* He scowled up at the ceiling. *Decades of seeing everything, and now I cannot. It is infuriating.* But his fury was interrupted, his tired eyes forcing him asleep at last.

#

Caleb couldn’t fall back asleep, his excitement overwhelming his exhaustion. *I thought I was alone, stuck with the Darkening before me at all times. But I’m not! Someone else is stuck with it too. He might be crazy, because there’s no god, but that doesn’t matter to me. I’m not alone! I just need to...* He faltered as he remembered the rest of his situation. *...do a job I have no idea how to do. I’m still stuck. Hopefully, tomorrow will have better answers.* His energy sapped, he fell into a dreamless sleep.

#

*This is more fun than stealing from that guy earlier. She’s been on the defensive for three hours now, and only dawn is going to save her from me.* Liz smiled inwardly, happy to have drawn some enjoyment from the terrible inconvenience.

*And to think I was telling you to stop stealing mere hours ago.*

“So, what you’re saying is Creeps stalk around in darkness, pull whatever hapless fool into the darkness with them, then eat their brains with really loud slurping sounds?”

Alex’s eyes went to the ceiling for what had to be the several dozenth time. “Not exactly, but close enough.” Her eyes returned to Liz, then looked beyond her to the window outside. “Dawn. Let’s go.”

“Go where?” asked Liz. “We were going somewhere?”

“Yes, we were. Either the jail, or Prince Felkirk’s mansion. The choice is yours, but we *are* leaving.”

“But I haven’t done anything wrong! I wanna stay here!”

“We both know you’re just trying to be annoying. Now which is it?”

*Don’t want to admit defeat yet, but if I say the jail, she won’t hesitate to take me there.* “Prince Felkirk’s mansion,” she said under her breath. *I can give her the slip at some point; one person is easier to escape from than a fully-staffed jail.*

“Excellent! Let’s go. I’ll pick up my things later. Actually, do you want to change your clothes? An outfit like that screams ‘I stole things last night,’ and that would make what I’m trying to do for you completely pointless.”

*Doing things for me. Isn’t she so charitable? Let’s see how far her charity goes.* “Yes, but I do like my privacy when changing clothes. Especially when getting out of this. Custom fabric, but still difficult to peel off.”

“The door is closed, and I’ll cover the window so no one else can see, but I’m not letting you out of my sight.” Alex moved to put her towering form in front of the small window.

*Drat, not charitable enough.* Liz thought for a moment of bolting for the door, but decided against it when she saw the deadbolt thrown. *When did she lock us in here? Guess I’m changing clothes.*

She moved to her pack, pulling out a baggy pair of gray pants and a loose white shirt, both well-worn and dusty from the previous day’s trip. *Ideal for hiding things and disappearing into a crowd.* She backed into the corner opposite from Alex before removing her assortment of tools and the bag, placing both neatly into the pack.

“Take the bag out, you’ll need it handy after you’ve changed.”

*She pays way too much attention to things. Why did I agree to this again?* She pulled it back out, letting it drop to the floor.

*Change of heart at last?*

*“Expedient” seems to be the best word. She won’t be in the next inn room over every single time I steal things, and I doubt I’ll get caught at the next place either.*

Liz stripped down to her underwear, stowing the outfit before putting on her traveling clothes. She placed her dagger into its hidden loop at her hip. *Alex is lucky I’m not a murderer. Killing others isn’t in the least bit challenging.*

*That has got to be the most contorted reason for sudden morality in the history of Telthan.*

*You say this like I care.* “I’m ready for this stupid excursion.”

“The bag?”

*She noticed that too.* Liz scowled, but picked the bag up and cinched it to the opposite hip.

“Excellent! Now, you leave first, I’ll follow.”

*Giving her the slip will be very, very difficult.*

*Didn’t you say that earlier?* reminded Porter.

*Doesn’t mean I can’t say it again. I’m allowed to be as repetitive as I so feel like.*

*But I’m not?*

*Yeah, because you’re annoying and I’m not. Now shut up.* Liz looked at Alex, only to find her staring curiously. “What?”

“Oh, nothing. You just looked conflicted for a few moments there. That, and you didn’t move. Planning to leave sometime before the end of the day?”

*She is so annoying.* She turned, threw the deadbolt, and walked out into the hallway.

Alex joined her in a flash.

*Not even a second to breathe. Is she serious?*

She closed the door and gestured for Liz to keep on walking. “If we have to stop every thirty seconds for you to try to find an escape plan, you’ll attract notice. And I doubt you really want notice with the Watch still trying to find a thief.”

*She’s almost as annoying as Porter.* She walked down the hallway, her fist clenched the entire time.

#

Ivan would have appreciated the hearty breakfast more if he hadn’t seen Caleb’s expression at the table. *He is looking at me every few seconds with determination in his eyes. Is it about last*

*night? Something else? I need to speak with him after the meal, before Felkirk gets involved.* Unconsciously, he started eating faster.

Felkirk walked into the room. “Ivan, are you still certain that this random person off the street isn’t just you trying to be kind, instead of mindful of my funds *as I hired you to do?*”

Ivan stared at his half-eaten plate. *Why must he be so obsessed with profit? For that matter, why is he not giving me the time I asked for and he agreed to?* “I am trying to do both simultaneously. To give a proper background, I was walking outside on my usual duties and saw this gentleman, clearly a newcomer to Westbrook.

“Out of curiosity, I stopped him to see if he had employment and lodging, and he said ‘no’. I offered him the vacated clerk position until such time as we can get a fully qualified person to fill it. Clerks are hard to come by these days, and someone is better than no one.” *Not the full truth, but he would never accept the full truth.*

“*You* offered him the position, even though he’s not qualified. For that matter, last night you specifically said that you would make sure he *was* qualified, not that he was a temporary fill-in. What about these two things is completely incompatible with how I make decisions?”

“I do apologize if it is not standard policy, but I just did not feel comfortable letting him go when I could do something.”

“You couldn’t ‘do something’ in this instance, because you *do not make hiring decisions*,” snapped back Felkirk. “Before you answer with more contradictory gibberish, I will let you know right now that I am not going to listen to it. Whatever your real reasons for usurping my authority, I don’t care. I want him out, and I will be docking your pay by half for the rest of harvest season.”

*He has called my bluff far sooner than I thought he would. Disobeying him in every sense was not going to end well, but I hoped that he would be slow to change his mind.* “Yes sir, I will make it happen.”

“Why is he still here?”

Caleb sat stock still, his eyes shifting between Ivan and Felkirk.

“Caleb-” Ivan began, but was cut off by the sound of rapping at the front door. “I need to get that.” He got up from the table.

“Go with him, Caleb. I apologize for needing to be so blunt about this, but I run an enterprise that cannot afford mistakes, well-intentioned or not.”

*You are not sorry at all, you profit-obsessed lout.* As he approached the door, he saw two women standing outside, neither of them familiar. *Odd time to be getting houseguests.* He opened the door. “How can I help you ladies this morning?”

One of the women shirked back, her baggy clothing not giving away any of her features, except for being short with red-brown hair and brown eyes. *Still, now that I see her closer I feel like I know her.* The other was taller than him, her black hair pulled back into a ponytail, drawing his attention to her green eyes and wide smile.

The taller one spoke first. “Yes, Ivan? Do you remember me from two years ago at the fencing group? I think you had just moved here at the time.”

Ivan looked closer, studying her face before breaking into a smile. “Why yes, I do! Alexandra, it is such a pleasure. What brings you here so early?”

“I’m here to help her tell you something very important.”

The woman said nothing, and instead produced a black bag from within her clothing, thrusting it at him.

Ivan gingerly took the bag and looked at its contents. His eyes widened when he saw the exact same things that had been stolen last night, including the dagger. “What does this-Who are you? What is going on?”

Alexandra prodded the woman. “And what do you say?”

The woman remained silent.

*I am not sure what is with this other woman, but I have had enough awkward moments in the last day.* “Thank you so very much for recovering the articles I lost last night. I thought them gone forever, and it is amazing that they were returned so soon. Did you find the thief?”

Silence.

“So, Alexandra, how have the Dark Sentinels been? I realize it is a tough job, but you look as good as ever. It does not look to have bothered you a bit.”

“I quit.”

Ivan blinked several times. “You quit? When?”

“Yesterday.” Her gaze moved back to the woman. “I do apologize for Liz’s lack of speech, she’s being difficult because she can be.”

“Liz? I assume that is short for Elizabeth in some form.”

The woman’s eyes went wide and her mouth curled into a snarl, but she remained silent.

“Yes, she likes short names. I’m now Alex, by the way. Decided it was time for a change.” Her expression hardened. “To answer the question you haven’t asked, I decided that the Sentinels are merely fodder for the games that Creeps like to play on us all. I’ve lost too many friends in the last year, and I couldn’t shake the feeling I was next.” She shook her head. “I couldn’t stay, not



when I knew that."

"Just didn't want to die like the idiot you are," said Liz, finally breaking her silence.

Alexandra didn't reply. "Who is *your* friend?"

"My friend?" *Oh my, I quite forgot Caleb was even here, he has been so quiet.* "Sorry, this is Caleb Moss. We met yesterday at the market. I tried to offer him a job here, but Prince Felkirk is having none of it."

"Oh. Doesn't surprise me any, but if it helps, I'm stuck looking for a job too. I've got enough to live on for a few months, fortunately." She turned from the men to look at Liz. "Now Liz, I'm more than willing to let you off the hook the second you do the other thing we agreed to."

"I'm...I'm sorry for stealing your stuff."

Ivan finally placed the thin face. *The clothing she is wearing now makes it almost impossible to figure out much about it. I could not place her silhouette.* "It's...not that big a deal, honestly. Just...surprising to see the thief returning things the next day. Thieves are rare to begin with, thieves who have a change of heart are even rarer."

"I didn't have any change of heart-"

"Shut up," cut in Alexandra, before smiling at Ivan again. "I forced her into it unless she wanted to be turned into the Watch to serve time for her crime."

*That is...very unusual, and makes me wonder for Alexandra's sanity.* "Oh. I get it, somewhat. So are you two done for now?" *I need to get rid of Caleb, and that will not happen until they are gone.*

"Trying to get rid of us already? You *won* that duel two years ago, you know."

"It is...not that. I just have a lot on my mind." *I believe I have just topped the list of understatements I have ever heard uttered.*

Alexandra tilted her head slightly. "Really?"

Ivan nodded. "I appreciate wanting to get caught back up, but today is not the right day. I will be in touch soon, if you are staying in Westbrook." He backed into the mansion again, grabbing hold of the door.

Alexandra stepped forward. "Oh, no you don't. I've seen that expression more than once before. Come on, we're going to a tavern and you're explaining everything."

"Oh look, she goes vigilante on me, and now she's turning into a counselor!" declared Liz. "Telthan shall be cleansed of all of its ills, to include minor crimes, bad days, and who knows what else when it strikes her fancy!"

Ivan couldn't help but push back on this intrusion into his privacy. *Felkirk's reaction was bad, not being able to help Caleb, or get to the bottom of that vision's meaning were worse. And now I am being prodded to spill all to someone I barely know? I have hit my limit.* "I am not going anywhere, Alexandra. You are leaving me alone, taking Caleb and Liz with you, and you are going to have a well and fine life for however long that may be." Without waiting for a reply, he backed into the mansion and shut the door.

## Chapter 7: Regrets and Revelations

*Where do I go from here?* The question hammered at Caleb's brain, all of the uneasy peace of the previous day gone. He looked between Alex and Liz, unsure of what to say to either. Alex still stared at the closed door where Ivan had been seconds before. Liz had turned her back to it.

"I'm out of here," said Liz. "Got better things to do. Like getting my things and going about my business."

Alex shrugged as she turned. "You did as I asked, and for that I thank you. I just hope you realize you're capable of more than simply stealing from others, no matter how much 'fun' it might be."

"You've convinced me to look into a life of normal, boring work." She rolled her eyes. "Not."

*I can't stay here, and they're going somewhere else. Maybe they could help.* "Um, wh-where are you going to go, and c-can I come with you?"

"I work alone, so you better ask Counselor-cum-Vigilante Alex here. As I said, I'm leaving."

"To where? To plan your next heist?" Alex accused, stopping Liz from leaving. "You already know that you can't leave town if an alarm is sounded, and I've lived in Westbrook long enough that if I told the Watch you were hiding in one of the inns, they'd believe me."

Liz whirled, her eyes mere slits.

“I-I hate to intrude again,” said Caleb. “B-but I have no job, and n-no idea where to go next. I-I just got abandoned by the one friend I th-thought I had in this city.”

“Not my problem,” said Liz with a dismissive wave. “Go pickpocket some random idiot in the market. Pretty easy work, and they won’t miss the money.”

Caleb recoiled. *They might be no better off than I am. I could never do that to someone.* He turned to Alex, desperation creeping into his voice. “M-may I go with you?”

“I don’t like begging, and I don’t have any idea of what I want to do either. But if you want to follow me, I won’t stop you.”

“T-to the tavern?”

“I said that mostly to force a decision out of Ivan. Wasn’t the decision I wanted, but it did resolve matters.”

“F-force a decision out of him?”

“Anyone who has lived in Westbrook for a while knows about Ivan Stradinski in some way. He’s new to the city, but he’s been at work in Telthan for as long as I’ve been alive. He’s legendary for making snap decisions when put under stress. I heard that his previous employers almost ruined themselves learning that the hard way. I didn’t want to stand here all morning. Prince Felkirk is a pompous brat, and eventually he’d wonder what was keeping Ivan.”

*I can't say that I disagree with her thoughts on Prince Felkirk.* “S-so where to?”

Alex smirked. “Good question. Still striking out on your own, Liz?”

Liz’s eyes narrowed again. “Not right now, but I’m keeping that on the table.”

“Well, I haven’t had breakfast yet this morning, so a tavern still sounds like a good idea.”

Caleb was tempted to mention that he *had* had breakfast, but he didn’t want to offend Alex’s kindness. As they left, he glanced back at the imposing mansion. *Best of luck, Ivan. Guess I’m alone again.*

#

Ivan closed the door of his study, the storm in his mind still raging. *First Felkirk, then Caleb, and now Alexandra.* He collapsed into the chair. *I have disappointed them all. Felkirk can be disappointed all he likes, but the others?* He sighed. *First I got Caleb’s hopes up, and instead of standing up to Felkirk’s lack of charity, I supported it without a word of complaint. Then, I saw Alexandra for the first time in years, and shoved her to the side the second her concern became uncomfortable.*

He looked around at the carefully sorted piles of papers around him. *I sacrificed two friendships for the sake of money, did I not?* His head fell to his chest. *What use is money? It becomes worthless when the Darkening happens. I mean to use my skills to make lives better, but all I have managed to do is make them worse. What was I thinking?*

His lips curled into a snarl. "I was not thinking of others," he whispered. "I was only thinking of myself." The words stung, their truth making him hate himself all the more. *What can I do? I have to make things right. But how?*

It seemed like an impossible question, but as he thought, a plan took form. *I need to find them both. I need to apologize and make things right. Never mind they could be anywhere in Westbrook by now, I need to make things right. Else, what am I truly accomplishing?* He flew from the room, certain of what he needed to do.

#

Caleb walked behind the women, his thoughts a jumbled mess. *Was Ivan telling the truth about his vision? What's going on with Gerald? Where is Andranine? When was Andranine?* The questions piled onto him, drowning out the terse conversation the other two were having. *I don't know what I'm doing in Westbrook. For that matter, I don't know what I'm doing at all. What is the point of any of this?* He hung his head.

"You still with us, Caleb?" asked Alex, her head turning to the side to look back at him.

"I...w-wasn't paying attention," he said, his quiet voice drowned out by the hubbub of the city.

"What was that?" Worry lines etched into her profile. "I couldn't hear you."

"I-I wasn't paying attention," he said, louder.

"Considering what I saw at the front door of Prince Felkirk's, I bet you've got a lot on your mind," she said, her voice strong, yet comforting.

He almost agreed with her, but stayed silent. *She wouldn't understand my situation.*

"Did you pick the most out of the way tavern in all of Westbrook or something?" said Liz.

Alex looked over at her. "In one way of speaking, yes, but I wanted to go someplace I enjoy eating." Her eyes narrowed. "I've done enough unenjoyable things in the past two days that I need to make up for it."

"And exactly whose problem is *that*? Doesn't sound like mine."

"If you're trying to get back at me for making you do the right thing this morning, you're doing a terrible job."

"Who said I was trying to do that?"

Caleb rolled his eyes. *At least she's distracting me from...everything else.*

"We're here," Alex announced before opening the door of the Barn Tavern and letting them both in before entering herself.

"This place had better be good," said Liz. "I'm both hungry and exasperated at having my fun interrupted by some do-gooders."

"Doing the right thing isn't horrible," reminded Alex. "And the eggs here are the best you've ever had."

"I'll be the judge of that. I don't have any reason to believe you."

"I haven't-" She stopped her objection and simply sat down at one of the tables, her eyes focused on Caleb as he came to join her. "So what about you?"

"Uh..." He looked at her, at a loss for what she wanted. "Wh-what about me?"

"Oh joy, we've got a shrinking violet for a tag-along," said Liz, plopping down on the chair hard enough to make it skid. "How has this day gone wrong? Let me start counting the ways."

"Oh, you know," Alex continued, ignoring Liz. "Where you're from, what you're doing in Westbrook, what you want to accomplish maybe?"

*I don't want to say. I barely know either of them.* "I-I used to be a farmer," he said, settling for the simplest way of putting it. "I recently m-moved here to get a different job."

"Very recently?"

"Y-yesterday." He stared into the table. *I hope she loses interest soon. I don't want to talk about me.*

"Tough city to get a new start in. If you'd headed to Martan or maybe my home of Sotendale, you'd have been much better off."

The proprietor of the tavern walked up, a wide smile on his face. "Alexandra, so good to see you again! The usual?"

Alex smiled back at him. "Of course, Frederick. I'm not sure about my fellows though."

"I-I'm not hungry," said Caleb, his mind wandering to the mansion where he had eaten breakfast not even an hour before. *Will I ever see Ivan again? He knows so much. He might be able to figure out what my dreams mean, or what that vision means, or the meaning of anything in my messed up, broken, pointless life.* A tear threatened to rip itself from his eye.

"What she's having, with double the eggs," said Liz, ignoring Caleb's bent posture.

Frederick smiled again. "Excellent. I'll have it right out."

“I thought you said you didn’t believe me,” said Alex.

“I don’t, but there’s a decent chance you’re not lying, and I don’t want to ask for seconds. Wastes even more time stuck near you.”

She chuckled. “First you’re annoyed at me and want petty revenge. Now you want to get away from me as fast as possible. Not sure what you want to do, are you?”

“Like I care what you think.” Liz’s nose turned away from her.

Alex ignored the gesture and focused on Caleb. “So what sort of job are you looking for?”

“Any.” *If any exist.*

“You really need to be more specific than that. I’ve lived here for four years. I might be able to help.”

“J-just whatever comes available that isn’t farming. Th-that life bored me.” *That isn’t true, but I don’t want to tell her the real reasons.*

She frowned, her expression uncertain. “Sometimes I wish I had found a more boring job, but what’s in the past is in the past.”

“A Dark Sentinel with remorse over becoming a Sentinel?” Liz’s mouth hung open in disbelief. “You can’t possibly be serious.”

Alex shot her a look, pain and loss displayed on it for an instant before simple anger took over. “I am serious.” She leaned toward Liz, her scowl deepening with each word. “And if you *ever* think you can condemn others for their difficult choices, when you constantly and unapologetically take the easiest way out for yourself,” she brought her fist within inches of Liz’s face, “Then so help me, I will beat that notion out of you as soon as I can.”

“Alex!” said Caleb, his eyes wide open in alarm. “Calm down!”

She looked over at him, her expression unchanged. “Why? This worthless maggot of a human being dares to insult...” She looked deeper into his earnest expression. “Dares to...” She trailed off, her face softening into anguish. “I’m sorry, I lost control of myself.”

The table fell quiet, all three lost in their thoughts as Frederick wordlessly served Alex and Liz their food.

#

Ivan stopped in front of the mansion and looked down both ends of the street. *Naïve to expect them to still be nearby. Regardless, I know Caleb has no idea where to go, so he will likely stick with Alexandra. Perhaps Liz will split off, and perhaps she will not. I am not interested in meeting her again anyway.*

*I also know that Alexandra did not have breakfast if she stayed in an inn last night and got up as early as she did to knock on the door. So she will find someplace to eat. Which there are dozens of in Westbrook. But if I narrow it down to only those that serve breakfast it will be much easier. And she has disposable income, so likely it will boil down to either personal preference, high quality of food, or both. Based on her attitude, I would say the last option. That is a very short list of places, but all of them are not nearby.*

Satisfied that his deductions had turned a wild goose chase into a simple and functional search, he started walking toward the far side of town. *All four of the places I have in mind are on the western side of the city. This will be quite a lot of walking.*

#

*She insulted your memory, insulted your sacrifice, no matter how pointless it was.* Alex kept the tears to herself, but her insides writhed in agony, the memories of both their lives and violent deaths playing one after another in her mind. The plate in front of her remained untouched, her fork motionless above the delicious breakfast. *I must avenge them, somehow, some way. The Creeps must pay.* Her jaw tightened, her rage redirected toward something worthy of its force.

“First, she threatens me, then she just stares at her food,” said Liz in between mouthfuls. “I didn’t know you had mind control powers, Caleb.”

“I-I don’t, I j-just didn’t want a fight.”

Caleb’s barely audible words made her retreat from her thoughts of vengeance. *He sounds like he has his own regrets, his own inner struggle. At least I’m not alone in that.* She finally brought the fork down and began eating, her remorse staved away for the time being. “Don’t feel bad about having no job in Westbrook, neither do I.”

“Y-you don’t?” He looked up at her, surprised.

“You didn’t catch the whole thing about ‘former Sentinel,’ did you?” asked Liz.

“I think he had other things on his mind when I was talking to Ivan about that. Yes, I quit the Dark Sentinels. They’re the only thing I’ve known for years, and the only thing I’ve really accomplished my entire life as well. Now...” She stared at the wall, eyes unfocused. “I don’t know what I plan to do at all.”

“I g-guess we could stick together trying to figure out our futures.” He tried to smile, but failed, his eyes falling again to the table.

Her heart filled with compassion, the earnest but uncertain youth reminding her of her friends. *He’s almost like Timothy when he first showed up in Westbrook, just...less talkative.* “That sounds great! Perhaps we can travel to another city and find something that we’ll both enjoy. I don’t know how farming and fighting will mix, but I’ve seen stranger things happen.” She smiled at him, trying to match her face with her words.



“I-I don’t know, I just...”

“Are you two serious? Why don’t you just start dating already? This conversation is more sappy than the sob stories I’ve heard out of judges across Telthan about how my form of fun is hurting others deeply.”

Alex glared at her. “I *am* serious, and maybe once you started to think of more people than yourself, you would understand.” She dug into a sausage and angrily tore a piece of it away with her fork. *Why does she get under my skin so well? Not even Creeps could do that.*

“Looking out for others isn’t on my list of things to be interested in, so I don’t do it.”

*She just won’t quit, will she?* Alex held her stare, but said nothing.

“Oh, now it’s time for the silent treatment. Fine, fine, I’ll just let you two lovebirds talk about how you’re going to rediscover yourselves, despite being from wildly different backgrounds.” She leaned back in her chair, her eyes on the ceiling.

*I thought that maybe I could get through to her, but I’m not going to try anymore. Not worth my time.* She looked over at Caleb, but his eyes were on the front door. *What is he looking at?* She turned her head to take in the disheveled, but relieved figure of Ivan.

#

Ivan’s first three stops were the closest to Felkirk’s mansion, and none of them had the people he was looking for. *No matter what order I go in, Alexandra will still be at the last one I check. I hope.* His pace quickened as he approached the Barn Tavern. *Hole in the wall, but legendary eggs,* Ivan thought as he opened the door to the sight of not just Alexandra and Caleb, but Liz, too.

Relief flooded into his face as he stood at the threshold. *I found them. Now I can apologize for my rash actions.* He was about to step toward them when Caleb’s head turned to look him in the eye. There was no anger, no malice, only surprise. *Has he already forgiven me?* Alexandra turned as well, locking eyes on him, her face expressionless. “I found you all. This is most fortuitous.”

“Why are *you* here?” asked Liz.

Ivan resisted the urge to turn his nose up at her. *I am here for Caleb and Alexandra, she is of no concern to me.* “I just wanted to explain a few things.”

“Like what? The latest profit figures for the third quarter of the year?” Her words dripped with derision. “Or a big lecture on how I shouldn’t have stolen from you?”

“Please be quiet, Liz,” said Caleb, his voice barely above a whisper. “Give him his fair chance to speak.” He looked to Ivan right before she stuck her tongue out at him. “So wh-what are you explaining?”

Ivan advanced to the table, taking a seat as he spoke. "First and foremost, I need to apologize to you, Caleb. I had questions, and I wrongly felt that I deserved to know the answers to them, consequences be Darkened. In the midst of that I put you, an innocent stranger, in an impossible situation. That was not fair to you at all. I am sorry for treating you as a tool, instead of as a person." His eyes turned to the other person he had offended. "Alexandra, even if we have not spoken for two years, yelling at you in a moment of stress, or any other moment for that matter, is unacceptable, and I apologize for that as well."

"Oh, great, he's a repenting buffoon now."

"Hush!" yelled Alexandra, her scowl deepening the longer she looked at the smaller woman. Liz stared back in defiance, but did not speak.

"I-is that all you needed?" asked Caleb, his face a mask of worry.

*He thinks I am just going to use him again, and I cannot say I blame him.* "Well, not exactly, it is-" He stopped speaking, unsure of what he was trying to say. *There is something more, I just do not know what it is.* He looked at them all, the unanswered questions of the past two days welling to the surface. *There have to be answers to this, and I cannot shake the feeling that I am staring at them.*

"It is what?" asked Liz. "What? Are you going to stand there thinking all morning before you get around to it?"

"This is going to be difficult to explain without some background information." *Enough information to blackmail me for the next several years if any of them decided to take advantage of it, but to be trusted, I must trust first.* "Caleb, you already know most of this, but I would like to repeat it for Alexandra's sake."

"What about me?"

"And you, if you even care, Liz. Two days ago, I was visited by someone who claimed he was a messenger from God."

"Wait, wait, someone from God?" She sniffed dismissively. "You aren't saying that you believe there's a god, right?"

"Of course not! I did not believe him at all, either in regards to his supposed employer or to his claims, but he showed me a vision. I saw a Darkening where people were actively working to fight against it. I heard myself say to someone who looked a lot like Caleb that we were almost sure to be victorious. I can scarce believe any such confidence, but that is what I saw. It has left me unsure, even as I tried to find answers by whatever means necessary. Again, I apologize."

"You're forgiven, but what are you driving at?" Alexandra's plate of food was empty, her eyes flitting to the door as she spoke.

"Since then, by extraordinary circumstance, I have kept on running into reminders of the

Darkening, of the questions unknown and unanswered. But unlike before, with my indulgent habit of researching it at Westbrook's library, it has been attached to specific people, namely the three of you."

"How am *I* involved?" Liz sounded more surprised than annoyed.

"One at a time, Liz. First, I ran into Caleb yesterday," he motioned at him, "Right after he decided to leave his home of Tonsbury for the first time in his life. He had the same doubts that you both have, but they all focused on the deliverer of the vision, not the vision itself. He has not explained to me why yet, but I digress."

Caleb did not react, his expression clouded.

*Perhaps he will tell us, perhaps he will not. I do not want to push the issue. At least not yet.*

"Second, Alexandra appears on my doorstep after two years of me not seeing her." He smiled, the warmth he should have shown her an hour before trying to reach her. "Surprisingly, she left the Dark Sentinels, and only yesterday at that, citing that she does not want to die pointlessly."

"That's, for the most part, true. I don't want to get any more detailed than that."

Ivan nodded, then continued. "Third, the most famous thief in all of Telthan comes into town, and picks my room and my belongings of all things to continue her exploits."

Liz looked at him, utterly surprised at the revelation, and began to mouth "How?"

Ivan smiled. "Now that I see you up close, I recognize those scars. Countless traders have told me of Elizabeth 'Liz' Porterwather, the scarred and unstoppable thief ravaging every city she ever entered. I am fortunate that you do not like to rob from caravans or many risk propositions would have been unacceptable."

"My name is Liz, not Eliza-"

"I know," he interrupted with a smile. "The same people informed me of your naming obsession. I just wanted to make it clear I know who you are. But that is not my point. Consider that all three of these things, all three of you, ended up together in a very short amount of time. People of such wildly divergent occupations, two of them newcomers to Westbrook, all standing on the threshold of Prince Felkirk's mansion first thing this morning. That is too coincidental to me to not be in some form intentional."

"Intended to do what?" asked Alexandra, her eyebrows furrowed.

"That is the conundrum for me. I do not know, but I have an idea based on two other clues. Whether Liz meant to or not, she stole some of the books I had on the Darkening. What do all of these situations have in common? The Darkening. But the Darkening is so big, so unknown, that I am not sure what to suggest. Caleb, I would gander the last clue resides with you."

Caleb was dumbfounded. "M-me? Wh-what would I know that narrows things down? I see wh-

what you're saying, but what d-does that have to do with me?"

"What did you not tell me last night?"

Caleb stared at him, his eyes shifting to look at different parts of Ivan's face. "What do you mean?"

"Caleb, you can't lie," said Alexandra. "It's good to be honest, don't get me wrong, but your face says that you're hiding something."

Caleb gulped in discomfort, his eyes moving from Ivan, to Alexandra, to Liz. Finally, he sighed in resignation. "I-I dream of the Darkening. I h-have for the past ten years almost every single n-night. F-for years, i-it was just me seeing people d-dying during it." He sniffled, his eyes welling with tears. "D-dying in more h-horrible ways than you can p-possibly imagine. I've t-tried to shut them off as something to t-tolerate while I live my life, and m-my mother tried for years to h-help me in doing that. It n-never really worked, but it w-was all I had."

A tear tracked its way down his cheek and he wiped it away. "A-a few days ago, I didn't dream of d-death at all. I-instead, I s-saw the events of a place called A-Andranine. Every d-dream picks up right after the last one ended. I h-have no idea what these new d-dreams mean either, but th-they seem to have a more clear p-purpose. I d-don't know what that p-purpose is, but I f-feel it being there." He smiled half-heartedly.

"Andranine?" asked Alexandra. "Did you say Andranine?"

#

Liz gaped, her jaw twisting in confusion. *So Worthless Boy has a talent. Didn't expect that.*

"Y-yes, I did," said Caleb.

"I've heard of Andranine," said Alex. "It was quarantined by the Westbrook and Fartree branches of the Dark Sentinels four and a half decades ago. It was their first organized action after the Darkening. I never got any reason for the quarantine other than 'the place is dangerous.'"

"Quarantined?" asked Liz, as she swallowed the last bite of eggs. "How come I've never heard of it?" *Can't really be dangerous. I'd have been there already.*

*No, you wouldn't. Too afraid of places like that.*

*Shut up, I know I would if I'd known.*

*So you're going to go with them?*

*They're not going anywhere!*

*Yet.*

“-included never speaking of the city to anyone else. Only the Sentinels know about it, and we aren't supposed to tell anyone else of where it is, or even its name.”

“And Ms. Goody Two Shoes breaks a vow,” said Liz in mock wonderment. “I didn’t think you had it in you!”

Alex winced. “Truth be told, the Sentinels keep more secrets than is really necessary, so I don’t feel bad for telling this one.”

“Anyways, do you know if they looted the city before they quarantined it?”

She shot her a knowing glare. “I don’t know for certain, but I was told all attempts at recovering anything from the city were utter failures. It’s been untouched by everyone for at least forty-five years.”

“So...plenty of things to pick up and potentially sell?” asked Liz. *Payday!*

“Yes,” she said with an exasperated sigh. “According to the Sentinels, the place is malevolent, poised to kill anyone who sets foot in it.”

“How would an abandoned city be deadly?” asked Ivan. “The creatures of the Darkening never remain afterward, so they cannot possibly still stalk the streets.”

Caleb raised his hand, asking for permission.

*What a wuss.*

“Yes, Caleb?”

“Th-the people of Andranine tried to d-defend against the D-Darkening. Th-they had command of p-powerful magic, th-thousands of men and women with weapons, and a f-full city dedicated to s-surviving the D-Darkening.”

“That doesn’t actually answer my question, though that is interesting to know. Why would a now-undefended city that fell to the Darkening be deadly?”

Caleb slouched down in his chair, his eyes fixed to the table.

*Still a wuss.*

“Traps,” said Alex. “There are traps all around the outside of the city. In addition to using Andranine as an object lesson for showing how Creeps in force are impossible to overcome, traps were mentioned as a reason to not go there.”

“That does create a semi-complete picture, but I do not feel comfortable committing us to anything yet.”

“Hey! Who’s committing who to what now?” Liz leaned forward, looking distrustfully at him.

“I didn’t agree to be part of anything whatsoever. I was just curious if Andranine is going to be more challenging than Felkirk’s Mansion of Luxurious Overkill. Or any of the other dozens of foolish rich men I’ve stolen from over the years.”

“Forgive me, I came to some conclusions, and failed to actually tell them to you. As I said before, we all have the Darkening in common. I have had a learned interest in it for over twenty years. Caleb has apparently dreamed of it. Alexandra has fought the creatures of that event in the isolated pockets they gather in during the intervening years. Liz-”

“I have absolutely no involvement with the Darkening at all. Don’t even try to rope me into any scheme based on that. I *do* have an interest in the challenge of trying to break into a city quarantined for so long. Whatever’s in there has *got* to be valuable by now.” *Well-intentioned idiot, I swear.*

“A fair point, but you did not let me finish. I think that among Caleb’s dreams of the place, Alexandra’s previous experience with ‘Creeps’ as she calls them, your acumen for challenging circumstances, and my background of information about the Darkening, we could genuinely find out something concrete about that city and its relation to the Darkening, perhaps even the reasons that the defense failed.”

“But won’t we have to leave Westbrook for that?” asked Alex. “What about Prince Felkirk?”

“I have no love of Felkirk, and I have no need of his employment. I have enough funds from my years of making others rich. I am tired of working for a man who has no sense of compassion, no sense of purpose aside from making more money. Leaving him will be no loss to me at all.”

*What’s wrong with making lots of money?*

*You don’t make money, you steal it from others.*

*Same difference.*

“So if I’m understanding this correctly, you want the four of us to travel together to a known dangerous city to *maybe* find out information about it and the Darkening?” asked Alex.

Ivan nodded. “It is a very simple plan, but it is the only thing that makes sense to me given the circumstances.”

“I quit the Sentinels to avoid the possibility of going in blind and dying pointlessly.” She looked down at the table, then back up at him, her eyes moist. “How is this any different?”

*And here I thought she was strong. Nope, a big, huge sob-bucket.*

*You wouldn’t know pain if it slapped you in the face.*

*I know pain. My ankle still smarts, and I swear she almost bruised my ribs crushing me down this morning.*

*Not what I meant.*

*Yeah, sure.*

“I understand what you are saying, but would not finding out why the Darkening happens be a greater cause than dying to Creeps in the night? If we find out *anything*, it has been anything but pointless.”

Her face hardened, her eyes dry in an instant. “I will follow you, then.”

Ivan smiled appreciatively. “Caleb?”

“I d-don’t have much choice if I want to find out what my d-dreams mean. It’s wh-why I’m even here, my dreams. G-going to where they seem to be leading me is the only thing that makes s-sense. I m-may not find any p-peace, but I c-certainly won’t be st-staying here.”

Ivan turned to Liz. “Will you come with us?”

“If you didn’t pick it up already, the only reason I’m remotely interested in joining you is because it’s something new and different, and likely a challenge. I have no commitment to any group, any information-seeking, none of that garbage. The Darkening isn’t my problem, but I’ll go.”

“That is all I ask. There is no reason to dawdle, so I want to leave today. We will need supplies for the road, and I am more than willing to pay for anything we need.”

“Rally point?” asked Alex, an eyebrow raised.

Ivan looked at her stupidly.

“Where are we meeting after we get supplies?”

“Oh, my apologies. I was thinking that we would go to the market together and I can pay for anything we need.”

She waved him away. “I have plenty of money for supplies, and I’m sure Liz does too, I just won’t ask how. Just take Caleb with you and we’ll meet at the south gate at midday.”

“South gate? Why the south gate?”

“You forgot to ask where Andranine is,” she said, a mischievous smile playing on her lips. “It’s to the southwest. We’ll pass through Fartree before striking out into the wilderness toward Andranine.”

“Ah, I knew I had forgotten something important. Thank you for clarifying.” His cheeks reddened.

Alex looked at Liz. “You first.”

*Still don't trust you, not after making me apologize to the windbag. "No, no, you first."*

Alex scowled, but exited.

"Ready to seek a purpose in this purposeless life we live?" asked Ivan lightly.

Caleb looked at him forlornly. "Y-you have no idea h-how much."

Ivan recoiled. "I apologize, I did not mean it that way. I need to tell Felkirk that I am done serving him, then we can get supplies." He left as well, Caleb at his heels.

*Might as well join Alex outside, before she mopes about me trying to run away again.*

*Like you weren't considering it.*

*Not when she's got the only directions to get there. Think of the loot!*

*I'm hoping there will be a day when you don't.*



## Chapter 8: Looking Forward

Ivan stopped at the gate of Felkirk's mansion, glancing over at his companion. "I will be but a moment, Caleb. Please wait here."

Caleb's nod was slight, his focus on anywhere but the mansion.

*I cannot fault him in the least for not wanting to be reminded of the past day.* He looked up at the garish façade, his resolve wavering. *I do not look forward to the confrontation to come, but it must be done.* He walked in, quickly getting his most important belongings and stowing them in the same pack that he had used to move into Westbrook. He strapped on the rapier and looked down at the jeweled dagger that he had almost lost to Liz. *Ironic that she is going to be traveling with me, not even a day after stealing from me.* He lashed it to the other side of his belt. *I will need to get a sheath for it at the market.*

*Now, for the hard part of telling Felkirk.* He went down the stairs to Felkirk's door, placing the pack to the side before rapping on it loudly.

"Come in!" boomed from within.

He took a deep breath, and tried to show the certainty he didn't feel as he opened the door.

"Ivan, I was just going to send for you. This trade deal we were speaking of yesterday, it needs to be clarified a little bit, just to make sure we're good."

*Explanations will fall flat, and he does not deserve them anyway. I will be direct and end this quickly.* “Sir, I have decided to leave your service, effective immediately.”

A rainbow of expressions raced across Felkirk’s face: surprise followed by fear, indignation, and finally anger. “I will not accept such terms, Ivan. You are my most valuable asset and to lose you would cripple all that we have worked to accomplish these last few years. We cannot afford that.”

*Correction, you cannot afford that. I have enough funds stashed here and other places in Telthan to last the rest of my life.* “I am sorry that you do not agree, sir. However, my statements are final. I will be leaving the city of Westbrook today, and nothing will change that fact.” *I hope.*

Felkirk sputtered, his anger escalating into rage. “Where would you be without my patronage to give you both a home and a place to do your work? Where would you be without my fortune? Nowhere! You would still be on the streets of Westbrook, just like whoever that fake clerk of yours was.”

*Remarkably, he is making this decision easier by his reaction alone.* “Where would I be?” Ivan’s eyes bored into the enraged Felkirk’s. “Did you forget where I have been before? You are not the first person to employ my services, but you are the first to not appreciate them in the least. If I were not more interested in furthering the overall prosperity of Telthan, I would have left your employment far sooner than today. What you have to say does not matter to me, and ultimately, it never has. Your severe lack of tact and gratitude only proves that you are not worthy of what you have been given.”

He narrowed his eyes, making sure to have Felkirk’s complete attention. “Now, Theodore, I am leaving, no matter what you say.” He turned on his heel and left the office.

“How *dare* you call me by that atrocious name, you ungrateful wretch of a human being!” His voice was so loud it felt like it would shake the walls, but there was no sound of stomping shoes to match action to words.

*Hesitating on what to do, as he always does. And to think I found it an inconvenience.* He picked up the pack and left the mansion.

#

As she walked alongside the suddenly energetic Liz, Alex resisted the urge to turn back and slap Ivan in the face. *Was he even thinking when he decided Liz should come with us? She might be useful with her out of the ordinary set of skills, but her moral compass stopped working years ago.* She sighed, unsure of whether or not to push the issue.

“Something wrong?” asked Liz, her eyes ablaze with imagined possibilities.

*If I told her the truth, she wouldn’t care anyway.* “Just thinking about our plan for the day. Right now, it looks like we get our packs from the inn, load up at the market, and meet Ivan and Caleb

at the south gate.”

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. “You say that like I’m going to just up and do that. That you’re in charge of me or something.”

Alex opened her mouth to reply, but Liz cut her off with a motion of her hand.

“You’re not, pure and simple. I’m only going with you because you’re the only person who knows where Andranine is. I’m going to get what I need out of the place and come back to Westbrook to offload them on some poor shmuck of a rich merchant who just wants the shiniest toys. Clear?”

Alex looked at her, brow furrowed in worry. *At least she’s honest about some things, if not others.* “That’s it? You care for nothing other than money?”

Liz’s lips pouted in mock sadness. “You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

“Whatever,” she resigned with a wave. “Let’s just stick with the plan, or you’ll never get to Andranine to loot it in the first place.”

“Quit reminding me that I have to be dependent on others, at least for a little while. It annoys me.”

She didn’t reply, instead focusing on reaching the inn. *I hate her already, and the journey hasn’t even started yet.*

#

Ivan looked over at Caleb as they entered the market. “How much do you have?” *I know most of the answer, but to get him what he needs, I need the complete one.*

He wordlessly opened his pack, its only contents a dried side of beef, a change of clothes, some flint, and a hunting knife.

*Practically nothing.* “It appears that we need to get you a large number of supplies for the trip. The good news is you have plenty of space for any food we will need between here and Fartree.” He looked up with a reassuring smile, only to be met with a hopeless stare. “What is wrong?”

“Wh-what am I bringing to this group of yours? Wh-what do I have to c-contribute?”

Ivan was at a loss for how to answer. Instead, he stalled. “If this has anything to do with the fact that you do not have the money to get supplies, it is not a problem for me at all. We all need you to be well-equipped so that, starting from now, you *are* contributing.” He patted Caleb on the back in what he hoped was an assuring manner.

He pulled away from Ivan, turning to face him. “I-it’s not that. I a-appreciate the help,” he gestured toward himself, “B-but I’m just a farmer with w-weird dreams.” His hand moved to

point at Ivan. “Y-you know a lot about almost e-everything, A-Alex knows how to fight C-Creeps, and Liz can do thief things like d-defusing traps or whatever. U-unless we plan on p-planting some c-crops once we get to A-Andranine, I’m useless.”

Ivan hated lying, but the honest answer would have only made Caleb feel worse. *I do not know how he is useful. Maybe that messenger was a clever con artist, but I cannot say for certain yet.* “You are not useless. Right now, you might feel that way, but give it time and you will see it differently.”

Caleb gave him a doubtful look. “I-if you say so.”

“You will never find out if we do not get you the supplies you need,” Ivan reminded, trying to get off the depressing subject. “I need to get some food for the road as well. Can you cook?”

His face lit up, the sadness gone. “I can cook some of the best cooked meat and soup you’ve ever had; all I need are some spices.” His hands rubbed together in anticipation.

Ivan resisted the urge to point out that he was already useful. *That is not what he is worried about, and appointing him as the group chef would be insulting rather than uplifting.* “Well, pick whatever you need, the market has it all.” He beamed with pride, knowing that in no small part, he had helped grow the market to its present size and diversity. *I can only hope that this new job I have set out for us accomplishes just as much.*

Caleb took him up on the offer, whisking them all over the market for spices, fresh vegetables, and meats. Along the way, Ivan made sure to pick up the other necessities, and some preserved meat and nuts. *It is rather odd that something as simple as cooking can raise his mood, but I will not complain. I need him. We need him. I just do not know how, precisely.*

#

Liz was astonished at the general naïvete of Alex and the other two members of the crazy party she had decided to tag along with. *She has no thought of her personal gain in this. It's all about helping Telthan, saving the helpless, providing for the needy. It's like I'm being preached to about all the things I should be doing.*

*Like I've been doing?*

...Yes. Liz chanced a gaze of disgust at Alex, who fortunately wasn’t paying attention to her. Alex’s pack was a bizarre monstrosity, bulging in every direction with food, tools, and who knew what else. Topping it all off was a massive hammer held in place by two straps, its beaten surface and stained haft speaking of years of use.

Liz’s own pack was too heavy for her, even though it was half the weight of Alex’s. *I like traveling light and stealing what I don’t have. It’s simpler, and allows me to move in whatever direction I need. This is too confining.*

*Why don’t you consider it a new challenge?*

*Shut up, you.*

“Ready for the road?” Alex asked, a playful smile on her lips.

*What a stupid question. Of course I'm ready for the road. You packed the bag!* “Yes, I am,” she said, throwing an annoyed look Alex’s way.

“Good, because the south gate is right there, and I see both Caleb and Ivan waiting. Based on the sun, we’re right on schedule.”

“If you say so,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I hate schedules. They make me have to show up to things on someone else’s time. My time is my own.”

“If you want to have any chance of making it to Andranine, much less looting it, your time is not your own.”

*I hate it when others are right.*

“Are we ready?” asked Ivan, his pack just as large as Alex’s. She couldn’t help but notice that in addition to the sword at his waist, there was the same dagger she had stolen from him.

“Yes, we are!” replied Alex. “Next stop: Fartree.”

Ivan smiled before turning around and walking through the gate, Caleb and Alex at his heels.

*What did I sign up for, the Lunatic Circus?* Against her better judgment, Liz followed.

## Part 2: The City of Defense

## Chapter 9: Fartree

“Best I can tell, the Creeps have tactics, but they only use the ones required to kill those seeking them,” Alex said, her tone neutral, but her eyes focused on the horizon and the bare outline of Fartree.

“I had always found it curious that they seem to work on minimum effort required, but that was based on my reading,” Ivan said, nodding his head yet again. “You confirm with first-hand experience such an oddity.”

Caleb’s head spun with their back and forth, the endless discussions about the Creeps, or Andranine, or simple life in Westbrook over the last three days lost on him. *It’s nothing like home, or my dreams.* The thought kept on going through his mind, preventing him from speaking for fear of being a pest. *At least they get along. Not like Liz and-*

“But Andranine shouldn’t have any of those, right?” Liz asked, her cheery voice souring the mood. “Nothing to get in the way of some treasures to sell to over-rich merchant princes?”

Alex rolled her eyes. “I don’t know.”

“Why not? Weren’t you a Dark Suicidal?”

Alex shuddered, but said nothing.

“Well, if half of what you’ve said on this trip about them is true, they won’t be there. It’s broad daylight.”

“I’ve never seen the city,” conceded Alex. “But if it was built with defense in mind, it’s got a fortress of some kind with few or no windows. Darkness everywhere within.”

“I-it has a f-fortress,” Caleb said, the words slipping out before Liz could continue.

Both Alex and Ivan looked from Liz to him.

“How do you know?” Ivan asked.

Caleb shrugged. “I-I’ve seen it in my dreams. F-fortress, lots of n-narrow pathways, t-tall walls. It was built for d-defense, just like Alex said.”

Liz clucked her tongue. “In your dreams? Yeah, best source ever. What are you going to tell us next, that the Darkening is caused by someone putting a gigantic blanket in front of the sky?”

His eyes fell to the ground, the dirt of the path failing to keep her sarcastic expression out of his mind.

“While I am hesitant to put too much stock in your dreams, Caleb,” Ivan said, putting a hand on his shoulder. “I do not take you for a liar.”

“Yeah, yeah, comfort the kid for spinning crazy tales,” Liz said. “We’ll see who’s right when we get there, since *none of us* have ever been to Andranine. Where is it, anyway?”

Alex threw her a glare, but pointed to the southwest. “That way once we get to Fartree. It’ll be half a day before we get to the path. Nothing but fields and trees before then.”

“Why does the path not exist?” Liz sounded confused.

“First thing I did in the Sentinels was help remove the path. Some people weren’t taking the quarantine seriously, and they never returned. So unless you know the way, you’ll be very unlikely to find it.”

“Mighty convenient that you know that,” said Liz. “Sure you’re not having a bad joke on us?”

Alex shook her head, her half-closed eyes echoing Caleb’s distaste for the woman.

*What did Ivan see in her?* He looked ahead of him, taking comfort in the approaching town.

#

Fartree had grown to more than twice its size in the five years since Alex had helped remove the path to Andranine. A half-dozen isolated homes were now joined by a town hall, a market, two mansions, and at least a dozen more homes. *Just like Westbrook, only younger. Prosperity, bought and paid for by the blood of my friends.*



She looked away from the town before a shiver could make it down her spine. *Ivan will notice if I do, and he can't understand my pain. He's too busy trying to apply trade agreements to dealing with Liz, anyway.* Her eyes rolled. *Unrepentant thief, convinced morally wrong things are simple challenges. Then again, if the Sentinel tales of the Defense of Andranine are even half true, we'll need her to keep from getting killed.*

"Alexandra," Ivan began, looking first at her, then the approaching city. "Where should we lodge for the night?"

"The First Leaf," she said immediately. *First and best inn of Fartree.*

"Uh...sure about that?" asked Liz, crooking an eyebrow.

*Great, now she's arguing over nothing again.* She shook her head. "They're kind and welcoming, and the rates are more than reasonable."

"And they ask lots, and *lots*, of questions. Sure it's a good idea to let them wheedle out our plan to go to a *quarantined* city?"

Alex opened her mouth to retort, then closed it when she realized Liz had a point. "Good catch."

"Yeah, so if you want no questions, not even some sideways looks, we should go to the Traveler's Rest."

"Considering the essential illegality of our intended actions, I do think that is wisest," Ivan said. "Where is it? Fartree did not have much more than two houses and a barn the last time I was here."

The comparison sent the shiver she was trying to avoid from her neck to her toes, causing her to miss Liz's reply. She looked away from the two, only to find Caleb's eyes.

"Memories?"

*How did he...* "Yeah," she said, then gritted her teeth as she fought for control over the maelstrom of regret at the center of her mind.

"I'm here for you."

She had only known him for a couple of days, but she knew he meant it. *He doesn't understand, but at least he cares.* She flashed him a half-smile, the storm pushed away once again. "Thanks."

"Hey, Alex, you did catch that *you* need to follow *me* when we get there, right?"

Rage boiled within her and her hand balled into a fist so tight her arm shook. But she let it go before Liz gained a broken nose. *I won't let her under my skin.* "Yes, I got that."

The innkeeper refused to make eye contact with Ivan, instead staring at the counter.

*Has he ever thought of manners? “Sir?”*

No reply.

“Let me handle this,” Liz whispered, elbowing him out of the way. Her hands danced across the counter, tapping in some sort of code.

Amazingly, the man replied in the same manner, then put three fingers down.

“Per room,” she hissed into his ear.

He looked down at her, only to receive another elbow to the ribs as she pointed at the coin pouch on his belt. He shook his head, then put six of the gold coins onto the counter. The innkeeper swept them up in a single motion, replacing the coins with two simple keys.

Liz snatched them and strode off down the hall.

Ivan blinked, looking between the man, his face still staring down, and Liz. *No questions asked, taken to the extreme.* A glance back at Alex and Caleb confirmed that he wasn’t the only one unnerved by the odd behavior. He smiled and followed Liz. *Going to keep my rapier well at hand tonight, just in case.*

#

Gerald heard shouting behind him. He turned, and his mouth opened in shock at what he saw. The rear guard was fighting the same monsters that stood still, waiting for a signal. *How are they behind us?* Images of being crushed between two walls of monsters flashed through his mind. “Fall back! They’ve broken through!”

Looks of confusion met his eyes, but one glance beyond him confirmed his command. As the news passed down the line, he turned to face the invaders, sword drawn. “While I breathe, there is still hope,” he recited, then rushed to help his men.

#

*Sleeping with a rapier has got to be one of the worst decisions I have ever made.* He rolled off the hard blade, his chest and right leg too stiff and bruised to coax into motion yet. His precaution felt even worse when he looked over at Caleb, pack already on his shoulders.

“Anything wrong?”

Ivan didn’t answer, sweeping his gaze across the room to find all of his things untouched. Dreading the pain, he stood up slowly, feeling the creak of joints that weren’t as limber as they used to be.

Caleb followed his gaze, then shrugged. “You s-suppose we should...uh, g-get going?”

Ivan looked back at him. “Yes, just after I get the kinks out.” He stretched further, the pain causing him to bare his teeth.

“Y-you alright?”

“Yes, I am!” he growled.

Caleb took a step back, his eyes wide. “I-I’m sorry, didn’t mean t-to, uh, pry.”

All thought of pain and stiffness vanished. “My apologies, you were just trying to be nice. I suppose Liz’s attitude is rubbing off on me to some extent.” He offered a wan smile.

“I-it’s alright, she g-grates on me too.” He smiled. “I’m j-just used to quietly d-disagreeing with p-people who b-bother me.”

“If only I were as good at the same skill. Anyways, this is our first day traveling out into the unknown proper. I agree with you; let us get going.”

Caleb turned toward the door, then stepped back. “I had another d-dream last night. I’m n-not sure what happened, but the c-city was being o-overrun. B-based on what we know, it d-doesn’t seem l-like they held on for m-much longer.”

“I thought you said they were holding the Creeps back. No idea how things changed so quickly?”

Caleb shook his head.

“I suppose we will need to find out ourselves when we get there.” Ivan pulled on his pack as fast as he could, ignoring the soreness long enough to get it situated. “Shall we, then?”

They entered the front room of the inn to find Alexandra and Liz mid-argument.

“I am tired of your moral lectures, Alex. What I enjoy should not be any business of yours!”

“All I’m saying is that all of your talk about ‘having a challenge’ or ‘plundering the corpses’ is disrespectful to those who died there. Is that too hard to understand?”

“It’s not like they care! They’re dead and gone, and forgotten to history itself, it seems. So shut up with your worry about people who can’t worry themselves. It’s sickening.”

Caleb moved to stand between them both. “Enough, you two. We aren’t even there y-yet to argue over whether we’re pl-plundering c-corpses or merely d-discovering the t-truth of what h-happened there.”

Both women turned their heads to stare at Caleb, their combined rage more than Ivan wanted to be the focus of.

Caleb didn’t flinch. “Please, stop. We need to get going.”

Alexandra's features softened, and Liz looked away.

*I wish I had such control, but alas, I am not as considerate.* "I agree with Caleb. We do not know how long the trip ahead is, but hopefully it is not *too* long. Alexandra, how far out did you destroy the path?"

She turned her back to Liz, giving her full attention to him. "About half a day's journey. Enough to keep someone from Fartree or nearby from finding it. The Sentinels themselves have kept any settlements from getting started closer than Fartree. Most of it through fearmongering over the menaces of Creeps in the outer reaches, but I know for a fact they won't be out there. No caves."

"C-caves?" Caleb asked. "Wh-what's so s-special about caves?"

"Creeps refuse to be seen in broad daylight, and avoid being under even a starlit sky for very long. They hide in caves or other places of perfect darkness. Sometimes, they venture out and kill a few nearby people, and that's when the Sentinels go hunting for them...and one less returns to home base almost every time." She looked down, unwilling to meet his eyes anymore.

Ivan wished he could understand, but now was not the time. *We need to stay on track.* "That is reassuring news, I must say. Now we only need to contend with whatever traps and defenses are left over at Andranine long after its fall. I may be a skilled fencer, but if half of the accounts I have read are true, Creeps are deadly foes that have no mercy, no reserve."

"Lame. We bypass the traps and all the fun is over," Liz pouted. "I want some actual challenge, like fighting these Creeps Alex speaks so highly of."

Alexandra's eyes were full of fire as she whirled to face Liz again. "I do *not* speak of Creeps highly. They are cowards, only deadly when they catch someone unawares."

"But if half of what *you* say is true, we would get along so well. And by get along, I mean stabbing them in the back. It takes a sneak to kill a sneak."

"I very much doubt-"

"Let's get going for the day," Caleb interrupted before another argument could start, walking between them and through the door.

Alexandra and Liz exchanged hateful glances, but didn't say anything else as they followed him.

#

True to her word, a path appeared in the distance around lunchtime. Caleb's breath came in sharply. *She never mentioned how pretty it would be.* The path was a polished tan marble, only slightly marred by dust and grime.

"What did you do with the stones?" Ivan asked as he appraised the path.

Alex looked at him in confusion for a second, then shrugged. "We pulled them up using some

ropes and had them loaded onto a wagon. Where the wagon went, I don't know. If it helps any, I never saw the Sentinels making a new headquarters out of the same material."

Ivan nodded his head as the path drew closer. "Still, those stones are quite marvelous. I have never seen anything of such simple beauty." He smiled, then changed the topic. "And it appears that from here, our way is clear."

Alex nodded. "The only concern I have now is I'm not sure how long the path is."

"Th-that's a p-problem?" Caleb asked, a smile dancing on his lips. "We packed enough food to last for two weeks."

Alex didn't return the smile. "We have to get there, *and come back*. So if we want to do more than just look at the city and leave, two weeks worth of supplies is not excessive."

"Oh." *I should've thought of that.* He looked away from her, trying to hide his embarrassment.

"Chin up Caleb, I agree with you that the path won't be that long," Ivan comforted.

Caleb's eyes found Liz. *Here's hoping so, she's already looking around for something else to do.*

She was looking in every direction except forward, almost tripping when the grass met the path. She stumbled, looked back the way they had come, then left and right at the trees roughly twenty-five feet distant on both sides.

He followed her gaze. *Those trees are really thick and hard to see into. It's almost pitch-dark in there.*

Liz sprang to the side, a razor-sharp claw suddenly where she had been a moment earlier. The claw's owner grunted and vanished back into the forest.

Caleb spun to see if there were any others, but only unwelcoming trees greeted him.

"No chance, you said. No way there are any Creeps at Andranine, nope, nada."

*Can't blame her for being surprised, but I'm glad they went for her first.* He shivered.

"Their surprise is lost. They won't come back," said Alex. "We just need to be on the lookout from now on."

"And I'm supposed to believe that too?" said Liz. "What are you going to say next, that Creeps like playing hopscotch at midnight under a full moon? I'm not a fan of getting impaled by claws, so I'm not about to trust your word on anything Creep-related."

"Liz, that is far from fair," said Ivan. "She did not realize that a forest she's never seen before might have Creeps. As she said earlier, she has only ever seen them in caves. And for me personally, I have never seen trees grow as thick as they are on either side of this path right now."

Liz didn't reply, instead narrowing her eyes at the pair.

"L-let's keep moving. St-standing here is not g-going to help us at all," said Caleb.

"Fine! Let's get walking so that I can get skewered in another fifteen paces or something." She continued down the path, glaring at the trees in challenge.

## Chapter 10: Cloak and Dagger

Andranine, if it even existed, was still not in sight when the sun set. Liz frowned, the stress of looking for the next attack having worn her thin. *No sign of the Creeps at all. No sign of an end for this stupid situation.* Her hand balled into a fist, but relaxed before Alex started asking stupid questions.

“We are going to need to camp on the path itself,” Ivan said. “There is very little chance of a clearing inside the woods, and I do not want to put us at risk, considering this afternoon's close call. That, and I am not interested in setting the forest on fire.”

“But that’d be *fun!*” said Liz.

Alex blinked slowly in response. “I hope you’re being silly.”

*Too easy.* Liz grinned. “Of course I am. I’m not a fan of being suffocated to death.”

Alex breathed a sigh of relief.

*It’s fun making her squirm.*

*Because that’s exactly how you want to treat the person who knows how to fight Creeps.*

*No, but she’s duty-bound to protect me anyway. I’m not worried, overwrought sense of justice*

*and all that.*

“We need to establish a watch,” said Alex, pointedly not paying attention to Liz’s smile. “Are you all familiar with the concept?”

Caleb looked at her, blank-faced.

*I know who won’t have my back in a fight. He isn’t even armed.*

Alex’s eyes widened, then returned to normal. “Okay. So essentially, one person stays up for each few hours of the night, and alerts us if our friendly neighborhood Creeps pay a visit. That way we aren’t all killed in our sleep. So who’s going when?”

“I will take the first watch,” said Ivan.

“Second,” said Alex.

“Third,” said Liz, rolling her eyes. *Better than being dead.*

“Fourth?” asked Caleb. “Wh-when is that?”

“When I wake you up.” *Were it not for Alex and Ivan, I’d leave him to fend for himself. Nothing but dead weight.*

The watch decided, they set down their packs and began preparing the camp. The other three insisted on having worthless small talk. Fortunately, they didn’t force her to join them. *I just want tomorrow to happen already, so that I can get a crack at Andranine.*

*Impatient.*

*You see what I have to deal with here. Either I’m dealing with a guy who can’t stop talking, another guy who can’t prove to be useful for anything other than getting Alex to shut up, and Alex herself always trying to "reform" me or something.*

*They might be worth more than you give them credit for.*

*I doubt it.*

#

A heavy-eyed Alex woke Liz up, her face barely visible from the dying remnants of the fire. *I told them all those twigs wouldn’t be enough to last the night.* She looked up, catching the glint of the moon. *Never mind, it’s bright out. I’ll see them if they decide to attack.* “Anything?”

“No,” she said as she walked to her bedroll and settled in. “Silent. Worryingly so.”

“Why do-” Liz started, but Alex’s eyes were already shut. *Never mind, then.*



She looked around at the surrounding area, the same boring scene greeting her. Uninterested in just staring out into nothingness for a couple of hours, she pulled out one of her daggers and began to twirl it, smiling to herself. The arc of it as the moonlight caught the cool metal's edge was soothing, but kept her from falling asleep.

She was halfway into a trance watching the dagger perform its delicate dance when she heard a sound. *Snap*. A twig breaking, behind her. The dagger stopped, its point facing the sound as she whirled.

A black form leaped from the forest, two clawed limbs reaching for her. She ducked the lunge, bringing her dagger in a rake across the creature's exposed stomach. Black ichor spilled from the long wound, eating away at the stones that formed the path.

*Better avoid that.*

The creature spun to face her, teeth bared. Blackness oozed from it, so deep it seemed to absorb even the moonlight. All except the teeth and claws, which gleamed malevolently with their own life.

*Shouldn't I wake the others to help?*

It snarled, its deadly grin widening further. But instead of leaping at her, it turned and vanished back into the forest.

*It didn't even want to fight me!* Her determination melted away into annoyance, the challenge of a fight to the death taken from her as soon as it appeared. She stared at where it had vanished, daring it to finish what it had started.

Only the dark forest stared back at her for the rest of her watch, even as she tried to look less and less prepared for anything trying to attack her. Grudgingly, she woke Caleb and went to sleep for the couple of hours left before dawn. *Hopefully, the creeps aren't smart enough to pick off the weakling.*

#

Ivan woke to the first rays of dawn twinkling through the canopy of the trees, and nothing else. Where there should have been the singing of birds, the chirping of chipmunks, only silence reigned. He craned his ears to hear something, anything, that wasn't the others waking up to resume the journey. Nothing. *Is this place cursed?* He shivered at the thought.

"Very quiet this morning," Alexandra said.

"Th-that isn't n-normal, is it?" Caleb asked.

"In some ways, it is," she said, frowning. "Anytime we eliminated some Creeps, the surrounding area had no wildlife."

Ivan smacked his forehead. "Oh, how forgetful of me. I have read similar from books about the

Darkening. Yes, either their presence scares the wildlife away, or the Creeps kill them all before taking up residence. Nobody is exactly sure, but the effect is the same.”

“Great, we’re surrounded by Creeps, even if they’re not willing to fight us straight-up,” Liz said, rolling her eyes at the absurdity. “Nothing happened on your watch, right, Caleb?”

“No,” he started, looking guilty. “I-it was quiet. Only th-thing I had to w-worry about was the c-cooler air when the f-fire went out.”

“Hrmph.” Liz crossed her arms over her chest. “One four-legged thing pounced at me, got a taste of my dagger, and ran off. Didn’t even look that hurt.” She pointed at the path, tracing out the aftermath of its flight. “Left quite a trail, though.” The marble was pitted where she pointed.

“Acid?” asked Ivan.

“Its blood, if you can call it that. Black as tar. Well, blacker than that. Tar glints in the moonlight.”

He nodded, considering what would happen to his own flesh if the acid touched it. “Something to be careful of if we have to fight more.”

“The only way we’re going to fight them is if they manage to sneak up on one of us, but we somehow get the jump on it instead,” Alexandra said, scowling her hatred of the fact.

“Yeah, yeah, cowards and all that. We get it.” Liz looked nonplussed, but her neutral expression soured into a scowl as well. “Extremely annoying behavior, let me tell you. It’s like they don’t want to die or something. Death-dealing machines, afraid of death. How ironic.”

Ivan stared for a moment, trying to conjure up a good response. *Some sort of common ground with this...misfit.* “You do not particularly like that, do you?”

“Well, no. Would you?”

Ivan smiled. “And that is something that we definitely agree on. I prefer to fight a man, creature, or whatever, honorably and to the death if needed. Creeps do not do this.”

“L-let’s go find A-Andranine,” Caleb said. “All this t-talking isn’t waking me up; it’s p-putting me back to sleep.”

“Tired? Already?” Ivan asked.

“Yeah...” He shuffled his feet, his eyes focused on their movement. “I j-just was b-busy looking in every d-direction for two hours, m-making sure I wouldn’t be c-caught unawares. And...and n-nothing happened.”

“It’s because you did that,” Alexandra said, rolling her eyes. “No way to sneak up on you if you’re paying attention.”

“I-if you say so.” He continued to stare at the ground. “I-I’d just like to not have to l-look everywhere j-just in case. H-hopefully, we’ll m-make it to the c-city, so we can use it for sh-shelter.” He finally looked up, a half-hearted grin on his face.

Ivan nodded. “Heading out now sounds like an excellent idea.” He smiled, hoping its warmth would reach Caleb. “Let us tear down camp and be on our way.”

“Yeah. L-let’s do that.” Caleb almost returned the smile, but shifted his focus to his bedroll and pack instead.

*I hope the road today is not as stressful as last night. I do not have the patience for it.*

#

The path was endless, the steady rise and fall of the ground the only indication Caleb was moving at all. Midday had come and gone, the simple meal they had eaten already forgotten by his aching limbs. *How long is the road?*

Worse still, Ivan had stopped speaking an hour ago, removing the last barrier against the eerie silence that still followed them, its weight bearing down on him. *This just isn’t right.* “Um, a-anyone else g-getting rather t-tired of this?”

“Wait, what?” said Liz, shaking her head as if broken out of a trance.

“What are you insinuating?” asked Ivan.

“It’s j-just...I d-don’t think we’re actually g-getting there. T-to A-Andranine.” He stopped moving. “I-I feel like we h-haven’t been m-moving all d-day. Th-there is no way we’ll get th-there if we’re st-stuck on a p-path that s-seems to be endless.” *There has got to be something else.*

“I never saw how long the path was, I said that before,” said Alex, shrugging. “We just have a short distance more before the city is in view.” She almost smiled, but faltered halfway through, her face unable to match her words.

“Actually, I think Caleb has a point,” said Ivan, raising a finger. “I have gotten the same impression these past several hours, like we are not getting any closer. That, and if I remember my local geography correctly, the topography of this area is atypical in the extreme. It is supposed to be flat, not rolling hills.”

“So where are we?” asked Liz. “Somewhere else? Exactly where we started?” She stopped, then smiled open-mouthed. “It’s a trap! We’re in some kind of trap! Awesome!” She looked at each of them in turn. “Now how do we get out?”

“Well, if we consider the overall plan of Andranine.... Defend against the Darkening no matter what...” Ivan trailed off.

“...Then it would make sense for them to keep out anyone not willing to do that,” completed

Alex, her eyes lighting up.

Caleb listened, his mind racing with memories of Gerald, of the dreams. *What did he say? It was...* “While I breathe.” He looked up at the path. “There is still hope.”

A curtain seemed to fall from the sky as the path in the distance disappeared, replaced with a city of tan marble, gems sparkling even from a distance. Each square-topped building looked as beautiful as the last. At their center was a massive building that towered over them all.

Everyone gasped at the sight.

*I know that building.* “Th-that big one, it’s the f-fortress within the c-city.” He kept on staring, amazed to see exactly what he had seen in his dreams.

“Caleb, those were precisely the words we were looking for,” said Ivan, slapping a hand on his back. “Where did you get them from?”

“I...uh, f-from my d-dreams.” He looked away, unsure of whether he’d be taken seriously.

“I was busy thinking up an answer to that riddle, and you had to go and figure it out first,” Liz said, glaring. “Jerk.”

“Liz, there will plenty of other traps and riddles,” said Ivan, throwing his own glare back at her. “I, personally, am glad that I do not need to walk in an illusory circle forever.”

“Well I am too, but-”

“Shut up, Liz,” said Alex. “Let’s move toward the city we can now see.”

“How dare-” Liz started, before realizing that Alex was doing her the favor of saving her dignity.

*I wasn’t trying to get in the way. I was just trying to help.* His pace fell behind the others as they dashed toward Andranine.

## Chapter 11: Wounded Pride

Breaking the illusion should have been the easy part, but Ivan waved the proposition away in the face of two, very important facts staring him in the face. One, the ground before him was pockmarked, scorched, and dead, the trees stopping short along an invisible line. Two, the city beyond the field still stood, and aside from the tumbled-down wall, remained pristine. “Nothing has grown here for fifty years, and yet...Andranine stands. That is not possible.”

“W-well, uh, f-for at least how it got b-burned,” said Caleb, walking up beside him. “Th-they used f-fire to keep the C-Creeps away at first.”

“But the city is *still there*.” His hands flew up in the air, his eyes widening as the impossible stared back at him. “How in all of Telthan is something *not destroyed* by the Darkening? It fell, right?”

“I don’t-”

“Yes, it did,” broke in Alexandra. “I never had reason to doubt what the Sentinels said of Andranine’s fall.”

He looked up at the soft clouds in the sky for a moment. “Of course. If they *had* succeeded, Andranine would not have become known as a cursed city. It would usher in a new age of the world, spreading the defense against the Darkening piece by piece. We would not even be here if they had-”

“We get it,” said Liz, scanning the pits in front of them. “What happened here?”

“If you would not-”

“I’m n-not sure,” said Caleb, furrowing his eyebrows. “B-but it could be c-caused by m-magic too.”

“Is the magic still working?” asked Alexandra, her gaze switching between the pits and Liz getting closer to them.

“Caleb, did they say anything about any...explosions, I guess?” asked Ivan, reclaiming his control of the conversation.

“N-no. J-just the fire.”

“It is still active. If there were no commands, nothing is needed to keep them going. I would guess that anywhere-”

Liz dropped her pack and stepped out into the field, her feet testing each step before putting her weight down.

“Liz! Get back here!” said Alexandra, reaching to pull her back, but missing her arm by an inch. “It’s too dangerous!”

“Sure, Mom, I’ll be right back, after I get us through-” *Boom.* She flew backward, the explosion propelling her up and behind them, skidding roughly to a halt on the end of the path. Where she had been was a smoking pockmark.

*Oh, dear.* Ivan rushed to her side, looking everywhere for blood, broken bones, or worse. “Liz, speak to me.”

“Ow.” She lifted herself off her back, grimacing as she left the ground. Her back was a torn mess of skin and muscle, but otherwise she looked fine. “Found one.”

“Thank goodness you are alright.” He smiled, though his mind occupied itself with all the chastisements he wanted to say, but didn’t.

“I told you not to do that, and why,” said Alexandra, taking her pack off and rummaging around until she found some bandages. “Now do what I say, for once, and hold still, so I can stop the bleeding.”

“Fine.” She raised her arms and said nothing, her face twisting in pain as Alexandra dressed the wound.

“You’re lucky the path is so smooth, or you’d have much deeper cuts.” She finished the wrapping and tied it off. “Now what were you saying, Ivan?”

“Well, very likely where there *is* a pockmark is safe, and where there *is not*-” He cleared his

throat. "Is not."

"Did you have to wrap the bandage on so tight?" struggled out Liz.

*Why did I think bringing her was a good idea? She has only succeeded in finding traps, not disarming or detecting them.*

"If you want the bleeding to stop, you need them that tight," said Alexandra with a glare. "Unless you want to die of skidding across a road."

Liz didn't reply.

Ivan looked ahead. "Darkening come," he cursed. "There is no clear path of pockmarks across."

"Wh-why not t-trigger the t-traps, then?" asked Caleb, throwing a burlap sack beyond the furthest pockmark. *Boom.* The food flew by them, skidding on the path before stopping, the rough burlap barely scratched.

Ivan looked from the package back to Caleb, his thoughts racing. *For someone who has never wielded a weapon, he reacted very quickly. I never even saw him pull the food out of his pack.* "At least we know that it is triggered by motion and not weight. That solves the immediate problem. Astonishing. They crafted the enchantment to always propel backward, never simply away."

"So we're throwing sacks in front of us until we get a path?" asked Liz, her arms crossed. "Sounds dumb."

"We could always throw *you* instead," said Alexandra, her tone only half-joking.

"I'll pass."

"If you want a challenge, you could always catch the sack mid-flight and save us the time getting it."

"I'll pass on that, too."

"Not taking up a challenge. What a disappointment!" Alexandra clucked her tongue. "I had such high expectations."

"You skin your back into strips," said Liz, advancing on the taller woman. "*Then* tell me I'm a disappointment."

"Enough, enough," said Caleb, stepping between them. "Let's just get going."

With a proper plan in place, the trip across the field didn't take long, the only hindrance being the occasional jog back for the abused sack of supplies. The tumbled walls of Andranine got closer and closer, their massive size and number becoming clearer with each step. "Ten feet tall, roughly, and so many. The walls must have been massive when they still stood."

“We’ll need to get over them to get inside,” said Alexandra.

“Sounds like something for tomorrow,” said Liz, pointing behind her at the sun beginning to set in the east. She slumped down on a black monolith untouched by the tumble of rock shards all around it. Its surface was etched with unintelligible runes, each one glowing blue against the deepening shadows.

Ivan’s eyebrows shot up. “By Telthan, they did not-How did they-That is-How?”

“Wh-what?” asked Caleb. “It’s j-just a T-Tablet.”

“Yes, it is, but it is alongside the wall of this city. By the looks of it, they built it *into* the wall. Astonishing.”

“How is that amazing?” asked Alexandra, waving her hand toward the west at an open plain, black specks dotting it. “Tablets are everywhere, and this city is so big that they had to build over and around them.”

“Well, yes. But normally Tablets stand on their own, even within cities. It is considered bad luck to build next to one, much less include it in the structure somehow. Even if you did not believe in luck, nothing is going to stick to them. Have you *ever* seen someone chip or break a Tablet, much less drive nails through one?”

“No.” She shrugged, failing to see the importance.

“This flies in the face of both superstition and common building sense, it is-”

“A-at least th-they were put to a g-good use,” said Caleb. “Th-they were very a-annoying in the f-fields. I-interrupted s-seeding, p-plowing, h-harvesting, e-everything. H-had to always g-go around.”

“Yes, yes, yes. Regrettably, from all the sources I have read, the best answer for *what* they are is that they are magical in some way. And they only change on the Darkening itself: the runes do not glow that day. Otherwise? No one knows.”

“At least we’ll be safe tonight,” said Alexandra. “Creeps avoid Tablets on reflex. Closest I’ve seen one come is a hundred feet, and it just stood there, snarling.”

“S-sounds like a g-great camp site for t-tonight,” said Caleb, dropping his pack. “W-want me to h-help you t-take yours off, L-Liz?”

Liz’s eyes could’ve killed Caleb. “I’ll get it myself.” She leaned forward and slipped the pack slowly off, grunting in pain with each motion.

“I agree with you, Caleb,” said Ivan, dropping his pack as well. “And while this is a safe zone, I do not believe we should assume it extends to the forest. We have food that can be eaten cold, so we will not go hungry without a fire.”



“We will still need a watch,” said Alexandra.

“Why?” asked Liz. “You just told us that this Tablet,” she thumped the column behind her, “Is Creep Repulsion Central. Do you just like telling us what to do?”

She scowled. “Just because I’ve never seen a Creep attack near one doesn’t mean that they’ll not try it now. We’ve just gotten to a city declared unsafe for forty five years, and in all likelihood that means it’s still infested by Creeps.”

“Fine,” spat Liz. “But I’m taking last watch. My back smarts worse than your lectures about morality.”

Alexandra looked away. “I’ll be third watch. Gentlemen?”

“First,” said Caleb. “I’m not tired yet.”

Ivan looked over at the other man, taking note of the droop of his eyes, the slump of his shoulders. *Not tired, or afraid to sleep?* He didn’t push the issue, instead finding some nuts and dried fruit to curb the grumbling of his stomach.

#

“Push through them!” Gerald called behind him as he ducked under the monster’s claws and pierced it through the chest with his sword. “Fall back to the fortress and rebuild the lines!” He sprang forward, stepping around the corpses of both friend and foe, the bodies mounting the closer he got to the fortress.

Then he was through, at the crest of the hill, the welcoming surety of the fortress mere feet away. He looked back, only to see a sea of black racing toward him. His eyes darted from side to side, hoping to see allies to rally to him. “To me, people of Andranine!” A few broke through the growing darkness and sprinted for him, their eyes wild with the desire to live, to defend, to conquer.

“While I breathe, there is still hope,” he said to himself, taking strength in the phrase, even as the death toll darkened his thoughts. “To the fortress!” he cried out, sprinting into a wall of monsters and cutting them down. *We must make it inside. The fortress will not fall to cheap tricks, and we can defend it to the last.*

He and his men fought on, their slowly dwindling numbers leaving behind a mountain of enemy dead. Finally, blessedly, he saw the door to the fortress, still sealed and untouched. “We have not lost this day, nor shall we while the fortress stands!” He ran onto the circle lightly etched into the ground, vanishing into the refuge beyond the door.

#

Liz woke to Alex’s touch, her mind still swimming with thoughts of her lovely trip through the air, destination marble path, the accursed misstep haunting her dreams. *I didn't see it coming.*

*Since when in the history of ever has that happened? And now I have to put up with my back screaming in pain every time I twist it.*

“Getting up?”

“Yeah, yeah, it just takes a bit,” she gathered herself, bracing for the agony as she leaned forward into a sitting position. Except, she didn’t feel any pain. *What?* She reached a hand up her back and gingerly touched the bandages. *No pain, and...* She pressed harder, gritting her teeth for the onslaught. *Nothing. There is no way.* She tore at the bandages, ripping them off. She reached back again and felt nothing but smooth skin. “I, uh, am healed, somehow?”

Alex cocked an eyebrow. “After that skid? You’re just putting on an act.” She sniffed. “You don’t need to impress me with how tough you are.”

“But I am!” She twisted in place, trying to show Alex the proof.

Alex was already lying down in her bedroll, eyes staring up at the stars. “Yeah, yeah. Wake me up if you get attacked this time. That’s the point of a watch.”

“At least I don’t need to worry about being slow,” she mumbled, looking out over the almost silent field, the soft whisper of the wind the only sound.

*You could use a few lessons in humility. You and your pride. Payoff before peace, challenge before courtesy.*

*Channeling Alex again? Or reading from a book of morality? Could you skip ahead to the chapter about things I actually care to hear about? ‘Cause this is boring.*

*And here I thought you were annoyed with me, not bored.*

*Both. I don’t have to qualify everything I say to answer a voice that only exists to be a pain.* She scowled out at the night, letting the argument keep her awake as the dawn steadily crept over the western horizon.

## Chapter 12: The Chill of Death

Alex stretched her arms into the sky, yawning awake to the sight of the dawning sun. *Long day ahead, especially scaling that wall. Good thing I brought some rope.* She glanced at the others, happy to see them up and about, then fished in her pack for the rope. *Never know when this'll come in handy.*

She looked around at the others, noting Liz scowling, Caleb absently stirring soup over a small fire, and Ivan intently looking into the cauldron, drawing in full breaths and smiling at the end of each. *Where'd the firewood come from? First, the plan.*

“So, are we ready for climbing a wall, finding and disabling some traps...” She looked over at Liz with her lip curled, “And figure out what happened here, or whatever it was Ivan’s after?”

Liz’s face contorted as she turned away, paying the sun her full attention.

Ivan looked up. “Ah, good morning, Alexandra-”

“Alex.”

“Yes, uh, Alex. I thought that my goal was aligned with yours, in that we are seeking why and how Andranine fell.” His eyes shone with hope. “I want to answer the mystery of the Darkening, and this is the best and most obvious place to start.”

A pang of guilt shot through her, his words reminding her of the Sentinels' false hope. *All it caused was more death.* "Yes, in some ways."

"Morning, Alex!" greeted Caleb with a wave, before turning his attention back to the cauldron.

She inhaled, and noted the smell of herbs and spices in the air. *There was no kindling on the ground last night.* She eyed him suspiciously, but he didn't notice. She was about to ask, when Liz cleared her throat. Her head snapped to find the scowl softened.

"I'd really like it if you didn't bring up yesterday," she hissed. "But at least my back is fine now." She twirled, showing Alex perfect, pink skin across her back.

The image struck a chord. "You, you said something about that last night, didn't you?"

Liz nodded, the scowl back in full force. "You didn't believe me."

*Why would I?* "Well, good to see that. Now may I suggest putting on a shirt that isn't in tatters?"

Liz flung her hand at the sky. "I'll get to it." She stalked over to her pack, looking in Alex's direction once to sneer.

Alex shook her head. *Now to address my final problem this morning.* She looked down at the fire, its only fuel leaf litter and twigs. "So where'd the twigs come from?"

"Oh, I g-gathered them during my watch," said Caleb, waving it away as if it were nothing.

Her face ignited. "You went alone...into the forest...past all of the traps we didn't trigger?"

Caleb ladled out some soup into a bowl, not taking his eyes off the spoon. "M-more or less. O-only went as far as I n-needed. T-took just a c-couple minutes. And th-there's a T-Tablet not even t-ten feet inside the c-canopy. Y-you'd never t-tell from the o-outside."

Her hands reached out to him, shaking uncontrollably. "Caleb, do you realize that you could have gotten yourself killed last night? And maybe the rest of us, too?"

Caleb set down a bowl just in time to recoil at her expression. "I-I did?"

"*Yes!* If a trap didn't get you, a Creep might have. We could *all* be dead right now, just because of you." Her voice went an octave higher, her patience shot. "*Do you understand that?*"

"Oh..." He looked down, unable to meet her gaze. "S-sorry, I d-didn't mean to c-cause any t-trouble, just th-thought y-you'd want s-some hot s-soup this m-morning."

The sight of him all but groveling at her feet filled her with compassion, but she needed to make sure he got the point. "I'd appreciate it more if you didn't do rash things that could get everyone killed."

"We are accountable to more than just ourselves now," said Ivan, his expression solemn. "We

cannot take unmanaged risks, because people are not like money. You cannot make back your losses with a few gains.”

Liz, finally wearing a new shirt, walked over and picked up the bowl of soup. “Smells good. Must *be* good.”

“Are you paying *any* attention to what I was saying?” spat Alex, her anger shifting targets.

“Yeah, but if he was going to die, so what?” She pulled a spoon out of her pack and began eating. “You’d bash whatever Creep got within a stone’s throw with that hammer of yours. Right?”

*Does she care for no one else but herself?* “I don’t want him to die because of a single bad decision.”

She shrugged. “If you say so.”

“I would appreciate it if you would take either my or Alexandra’s words to heart, Eliza-”

*“That is not my name!”*

“Uh, Liz,” corrected Ivan, eyes wide. “Now, let us stop arguing over an honest mistake and enjoy the soup he prepared.”

Caleb filled the other bowls, his eyes never leaving the soup.

Alex’s lips pursed together. *I did the right thing. I know I did. I can’t lose anyone else.* She sighed and took a tentative sip of the soup, the taste so delightful she stared at the bowl. *This is amazing.* She almost forgave him for his foolishness, but the image of Timothy flashed before her eyes. *Never again.*

She rushed through the meal, not wanting to be swayed from her purpose by Caleb’s magnificent cooking. She washed out the bowl with some water and stood up. In yesterday’s late afternoon sun, the wall had seemed an impossible barrier. But now she saw it for what it was: a roughly seventy foot climb, the tumbled stones creating a step pyramid. *So seven much shorter climbs. Easy.*

She moved closer, looking down to make sure the rope was still cinched to her waist. She tensed and leaped, arms outstretched for the edge of the block, only to find herself unable to grab hold. *What?* She clawed at the block, getting no purchase as she slid quickly back to the ground.

“Now is not the time for Dark Sentinel Physical Training Exercises,” sneered Liz. “We need to get over the wall and into that city, not increase our leg strength.”

Alex shot her a glare, then tried again. “I don’t understand it. My positioning is right, my arms are in the right place, but I miss the edge entirely.”

“Pfft. Let me show you how it’s done.” said Liz. “Gimme the rope.”

Alex handed it over. “Good luck.”

Liz came crashing down, her feet stumbling away from the wall before she steadied herself. “I thought you were being silly. I hit that, and yet I didn’t.”

“If I recall properly,” said Ivan. “It is possible to enchant a surface so that it cannot be touched.”

“Well Mr. Encyclopedia Magic Arcana, how do you bypass it?”

“I do not know how to disenchant such magic, or any other magic for that matter,” Ivan reminded her. “However, we are trying to climb the leading edge of the stone. If Creeps were trying to scale the wall, would not the most likely way to stop them be by putting an enchantment on it? Why not try the short side? They might not have planned on the wall falling during the Darkening.”

“Worth a shot,” said Alex, moving to the other side of the stone. Another leap and her hands finally found the edge. As she hauled herself the rest of the way up, she called back, “Good suggestion, Ivan.” *And I forgot the rope.* “Liz, throw me the rope!”

Liz threw it up at Alex, only to get it pushed back on top of her. “They didn’t think of everything, but they got pretty close,” she said before moving to the short side and throwing the rope up.

“Quite amazing that the magic still holds after fifty years,” Ivan observed.

“You said that yesterday,” Alex called down before wrapping it around her waist and throwing the rest back down.

“Does not make it any less valid!”

She shook her head. “Just get up here, and don’t forget the packs!”

“Oh, those *might* be important,” said Liz, halfway up the rope. She slid down and retrieved her own before climbing behind the others.

The rest of the climb went quickly, one block or another along the wall showing a side they could use. Within an hour, they stood at the top of the rubble, the intact city of Andranine spread out before them.

“It is quite an unbelievable sight. For one, it is still here. For two, it is beautiful. For three-”

“You said that yesterday too,” reminded Alex.

“But think of the time, materials, and labor that would be needed to get even a portion of this city built. Even if they had magic to help them, this city is a marvel.”

“A marvel that failed,” Liz said, her teeth exposed in a wolfish grin as her gaze flitted from building to building. “Their loss is my gain.”

“Their loss was a loss to us all,” said Alex, looking down at the street below. Bones were cluttered everywhere, some human, some unrecognizable. *Creeps?* “Could you consider the sacrifices of those who fell for just a moment?” *They never stopped fighting.*

“Um, no?”

“S-so wh-where n-next?” asked Caleb, his voice a whisper.

“That is a good question, but it must wait for us to reach the ground,” said Ivan. “Only then will we have a clear idea.”

Alex nodded her agreement, then uncurled the rope before throwing it the entire way down to the ground. In some places, it stuck away from the blocks, the enchantments causing the rope to defy gravity. *Don't ask questions, just accept it.* Cinching the rope around her waist, she stood as anchor again, dropping down each level behind them.

#

Caleb stared at his feet, the climb down feeling like a descent into deeper despair. *It was just for a few moments, just a few twigs. I wanted to do something special, to lift people's moods. And I...*

He touched down on another block, interrupting his thoughts long enough to get out of the way of the others. *I only hurt them, and it could've been worse. I can't look at them after doing that.*

“Taking a break already?” asked Ivan, a playful lilt in his voice.

He shuffled his feet, grabbing the rope again and continuing the descent, touching down on the ground of Andranine proper. A chill wind blew, the icy breeze causing him to shiver uncontrollably. He tried to feel the sun shining down upon him, but its warmth was robbed by the wind. *Why is it so cold?* He tried to shuffle forward, but his legs refused to budge, as if encased in ice.

*Why can't I move?* Despair turned into panic, his body convulsing in vain attempts to heat itself.

“Man, it's cold down here,” Liz said, behind him.

“Just a bit,” agreed Ivan.

*They're still alive, no thanks to me.* Alex's words echoed through his mind, each word punctuated by a gust of the frigid breeze. *“We could all be dead right now, just because of you.” All because of me.*

“A-am I th-the only o-one f-feeling l-like it's g-getting c-colder?” asked Liz.

He felt something on his back, the icy touch of a hand grabbing at him. *They're coming for me. Coming to end my life. I deserve nothing else.* His knees buckled, his shoulders slumping in surrender. *Come, end me.* He passed out, shivering against the cold.

#

“It’s all your fault.”

“There is no hope.”

“Everyone is dead because of you.”

“So proud and sure, you led us all to die.”

Caleb’s head spun in the darkness, trying to find the voices, trying to find peace. “I-I didn’t mean to,” he whispered.

“Yes, you did.”

“Had to get her back, didn’t you?”

“You murdered me, you cold, uncaring fool.”

“I-I did?” He backed away from the voice, only to hear another behind him.

“Malicious, unfeeling, unrepentant.”

“N-no, th-that’s n-not me!” He ran away.

“Self-centered,” said a voice next to his ear.

“Vengeful,” said another.

“Desperate.”

“I-I’m n-none of th-those!” He swatted his hands at the air. “I-I d-didn’t m-mean to d-do anything!”

“Liar.”

“Cheat.”

“Thief.”

He stopped. “Th-thief?”

“You stole our lives!” The words echoed around him, driving him to his knees.

“I-I d-don’t m-mean any h-harm, I j-just...”

“Silence, you murderer!”

“Killer.”



“Butcher.”

His hands came to the sides of his head as he rocked forward, trying to shut out the accusations. “I d-don’t w-want to k-kill anyone! I-I’ve s-seen so m-much d-death, I j-just w-want life!”

“Murderers only deserve death.”

“Death.”

“Death.”

Tears streamed down his face. “Then death is all I deserve. All I’m worthy of.” He fell prostrate, awaiting the executioner’s blade.

#

Ivan shivered for a moment, the wind rushing at him in a wall of cold. A shudder raced down his back, the unmistakable feeling of something, someone coming from behind. *Death comes for me.* He faced its approach, his eyes staring down the inevitable. *Let it come.* The wind stopped, the cold vanishing.

He blinked, shivering off the last of the cold. *Another trap?* “Remarkable. A trap that affects the psyche in addition to the physical makeup of an individual.” He looked around for his companions, and found them all collapsed on the ground. “I am a-oh dear.” He looked closer, seeing both women convulsing in the throes of the enchantment. *I must help them get past this.* He took a step toward Alexandra, but stopped when Caleb fell from his knees to his stomach, his body prone on the paved street.

“Caleb?”

No response.

“Caleb!” He rushed to the boy’s side, his mind filling with thoughts of imagined cold forcing Caleb into hypothermia and eventual death. The boy’s breathing was shallow, coming in rapid half-breaths. “Stay with me, it is just a mental trap!” He shook the boy, his brows furrowing into deeper and deeper concern.

Caleb gasped, pushing off the ground into a sitting position.

“You returned!” Ivan smiled from ear to ear. “I thought it had...you know....”

Caleb looked away, his eyes distant.

“But you figured it out. Amazing work, is it not? The understanding of our minds required to pull off such an elegant trap. Simply marvelous.”

“Y-yes,” he whispered.

Ivan looked from the boy to the women. "Can you help me with the others?"

Caleb continued looking away, wordlessly declining to help.

*He always wanted to help before. What happened?* Alexandra's remonstrance from earlier in the morning came to mind. *Just give him time; he is young.*

"I must protect...No, I can't, I won't..." Alexandra choked out.

Ivan took one last glance at Caleb, failing again to get eye contact, then rushed over to her. "Alexandra, just accept it."

She looked over at him, her eyes wild. "I. Will. Not. Do. That," she said through clenched teeth. "I did it for too many years, as all of my friends, all of my comrades, died around me. Leave. Me. Be."

"You will live, but first you have to accept that death will come one day."

"Death is for heroes, not for me," she spat as her eyes kept boring into him, seeming to search his very soul.

"I am no hero either, and yet..." Words failed him.

"You don't know death like I do. I refuse!"

"The enchantment will kill you if you keep on refusing. You will die for nothing."

She inhaled sharply. "For nothing?"

"Accept the inevitable future." He chanced a reassuring hand on her back. "And you will die for something."

She blinked at him, open-mouthed. "I-I know it's coming. But I must atone for their deaths first."

He smiled, patting her back. "Come. Get up. You are past it."

Alexandra brought her lips back together, her face dropping into a scowl as she jumped to her feet. "Never speak of this again. Understood?"

Ivan nodded. "We must help Liz, she is--"

"She can help herself." She turned away, taking particular interest in the roofs of the buildings around them. "She might learn about what's right and wrong while she's agonizing."

*Up to me, then.* He took a deep breath and moved to Liz.

"Shut up, I don't care what you say, I'm not doing it.... No, I'm not following any of your

‘advice’.... Shut *up!*”

He looked at her sideways, then shrugged before kneeling beside her. “You need to let go. You will not die here, just sometime.”

“Oh, great, now I’ve got two people telling me what to do.” She spat on the road, the saliva dripping down the incline. “Just because he’s agreeing with you doesn’t make either of you right. I know how you work, trying to pull people to your side of things.”

“Liz, who are you talking to?”

She didn’t acknowledge him, her teeth bared in rage as her body convulsed. “I’m *so* surprised, showing your true colors at last.... Oh, so *you’d* rather die than listen to me? Join the club!” She stopped shaking. Her eyes went everywhere, trying to find the cause. “What the-”

“You accepted your inevitable death,” said Ivan, smiling.

“Shut up, I don’t want to talk to you.” She stood up and walked away from him. “Or anyone else.”

He looked from her to Alexandra to Caleb. None of them would make eye contact. “So shall we, uh, continue onward?” He smiled again, but it didn’t make it to his eyes. *Not that any of them notice.*

“S-sure, if th-that’s what y-you w-want to do,” said Caleb, already looking down at his feet again.

“I...It is the only way to figure this place out.”

“Can the mystery crap,” said Liz, turning back to glare at him. “Let’s just find some treasure and get out of here.”

## Chapter 13: Frozen in Time

Bones littered the streets, black skeletons alongside white. Alex shivered, the forms reminding her of the friends she had lost. *Just like the Sentinels, they fought to the end, dying on top of those they slew.* She tore her eyes away from the macabre scene, looking up at the pristine city. *Why is it still here?*

“Wh-what are we l-looking for?” Caleb asked, his feet occupying his attention.

*Still moping.* She seethed. *Take your licks like a man.*

“I am honestly not sure,” said Ivan, bringing his hand to his chin. “But at the same time, I feel there is something, or some *things*, in this city that will tell us what ultimately happened. As I recall, you said they were holding the Creeps off, then abruptly they were not.”

“So why not break down a couple of doors and see if there’s anything worth taking?” asked Liz.

Alex’s ire changed targets. “Yes, open some doors and look inside. No, not walking around trying to steal from the dead.”

“Oh hush, Goody Two-Shoes Wannabe. It’s not like they need the stuff anymore.” She moved to the nearest door and gave it a quick kick on the handle. Her leg rebounded, causing her to hop twice before her balance gave way, tumbling her to the ground.

“Still locked, or at least resistant to forced entry,” said Ivan, trying to hide his smile. “Let us try simply opening it.” He tried the handle, but it didn’t budge. “Hmm...should we force the door?” He looked at Alex. “How about bashing it down?”

Liz stood up, dusting herself off before acting like nothing had happened. “No need.” She searched her pack, drawing out a tiny piece of jewelry. She waved it at the door and a click could be heard on the latch. “Lockpicker’s Charm. Never leave home without it.”

*You have a home?* “Another ‘acquisition’?”

“Well, yeah.” She moved to the door and opened it wide.

The house had no windows, forcing them to look around their shadows as the light poured in from the doorway. Inside was a single room, a bunk bed, two chairs, a table, and a fireplace in the corner. A small skeleton lay face up a few feet inside the house, the tiny head pointed at the ceiling.

Caleb covered his mouth, a pained gasp forcing its way past his fingers.

“Get used to it, Caleb,” said Alex, bringing a comforting hand to his shoulder. “This won’t be the last corpse we see in this city.”

“Y-yeah, I kn-know, it’s j-just...so y-young. I’ve seen ch-children die b-before, but, but...”

Alex grimaced, the image of Simon torn into pieces shredding her sense of calm. She patted his shoulder again, wishing comfort for them both.

“I-I’ll be f-fine, j-just...never mind.” He turned away.

Alex looked beyond the bones. The house had nothing else in it. *At least, not anything that will give Ivan his answers.* “Breaking into random houses isn’t going to tell us anything.”

“I see what you mean,” said Ivan, walking back to the road. “What if we looked for larger buildings? I realize the fortress is an obvious candidate, but if it is impenetrable after all of these years, I would like to see if we can get *some* information out of this expedition.”

“Hopefully, the larger buildings have stuff that’s actually worth taking,” said Liz, sniffing in disgust. “The rug this guy has won’t fit in my pack.”

*Obsessed and depraved.* She tried throwing a disapproving look at Liz, but Liz was already traipsing after Ivan and Caleb. *As long as she doesn’t get in the way for the sake of some “treasure.”*

#

“Well, here we are!” declared Ivan.

Caleb looked up at a five-story building, towering over the adjacent homes. Large square gems

decorated the top of it, the sun overhead casting iridescent shades of the rainbow across the marble and into the small windows on the top story. *Still intact.* Images of destroyed houses, collapsed towers, and mountains of debris flashed through his mind. *How?*

“Nice doors they have here,” said Liz, “Not.”

His eyes fell down to street level, taking in the gaping hole at the front. The hinges bit into the wooden door frame, fragments hanging off them. Inside the foyer lay a splintered mess of wood and metal. Past that was darkness.

“We are going to need a torch to see inside,” said Ivan. “Does anyone have one?”

“Who needs torches? I got this,” said Liz, pushing him aside as she pulled another thing from her pack. She cupped it into her palm, causing it to shine, the light spreading into the darkened interior.

“I am not going to ask where you got that from,” said Alex, her eyes already scanning.

“Didn’t you say that earlier?” asked Liz, giving her a pointed look.

Alex kept scanning. “I might have, but it needed repeating.”

“Stop trying to lecture me about my methods,” Liz sneered, then smiled innocently at Alex’s backside. “They get the job done.”

*Why would she want to steal from others?*

She pushed past him and Alex, leading the way inside. More bones littered the floor, forcing him to step over and around them constantly. Liz tried to crunch her way through, but after losing her footing twice gave practical reverence for the fallen. Four rooms, two on either side of the hallway, split off before a staircase at the far end led upwards.

“Th-they have no w-weapons,” Caleb pointed out.

“An odd detail,” agreed Ivan, “But perhaps their weapons were taken by the survivors as they fought.”

*At least I’m being helpful. Somewhat.*

One after another, they checked the four rooms. The first contained a collapsed table, the two pieces falling toward each other. Around it were a half-dozen chairs, their legs and seats crushed into powder. Around the bones were pages of parchment, torn into shreds.

Ivan bent down, snatching a few off the floor. “The writing is similar to ours, but the dialect is different. Let me see....” He studied the scraps as the others waited, Liz tapping her foot to punctuate her boredom. “Stop that, Liz, I am trying to concentrate.”

“Hurry up with your concentrating. I don’t want to stare at paper all day. I’m looking for jewels

or better.”

He looked at the ceiling, then back down. “These are just clerical memos. Similar to the job you did not quite have, Caleb. I would wring Felkirk’s neck for his lack of charity, but it started this expedition of ours.” He chuckled at his own wit, but was answered by silence. “Anyways, nothing worth sifting through.”

The second and third rooms were similar to the first. The fourth room, however, was locked.

“Liz, got that charm?” asked Ivan, stepping aside for her to get at the door.

“Better not be more stupid paper. Raiding records is the *last* thing I had in mind for today.” She moved forward and unlocked the door. The room was packed with bookcases that towered to the ceiling. Overstuffed folios full of parchment filled every shelf, miraculously undisturbed.

Ivan looked through several of the folios, but shook his head. “Nothing useful here.” He sighed. “I thought I had left memos and ledgers back in Westbrook.”

“Great, this is a bust unless I can convince some nutjob crazy that fifty year old ledger entries are worthy of a higher price than packing material.”

*She’s right, in her own way. What are we even finding? Dead bodies, destruction, shredded paper? What if this is all we find?* It was like searching for a needle in a haystack, the hay conveniently replaced with a pile of bones.

“Maybe the other floors will have something,” said Ivan, trying to smile everyone else into a better mood.

But the second, third, and fourth floors were identical to the first. “It must have been an administrative building of some sort,” he declared as they ascended to the final floor.

“You just *now* figured that out,” said Liz, covering the light in her fist. “After *how* many years doing lots of paperwork?”

Caleb looked around, the sudden blackness coming at him, forcing its way into his eyes, his ears, his mouth. *The Darkening*. He shook his head from side to side, forcing the thought away. *It’s just dark here, the Darkening is far away*. “P-please, let us s-see.”

Light returned. “Just wanted to punctuate how dumb that was for someone who’s obsessed with knowledge.”

“I-Well, I never.” Ivan stormed up the final staircase, stopping cold on the top step. “Darkening come, it is-” He turned away, facing the others as they ascended, tears streaming down his cheeks.

“What?” demanded Liz, pushing past him and shining her light around. “It’s just a lot of bones and dried blood.”

“Not just...that....” He sniffled, his eyes shut as the tears gushed. “L-look...closer.”

Caleb got to the top of the staircase, able to see what Liz’s light and the small windows illuminated. Dark brown stains intermingled with black ones, coating the floor and walls. The marble was broken and pitted, spiderwebs of cracks growing from countless impacts. Bones and weapons lay strewn in every direction, legs and arms separated from torsos.

*Thrown everywhere, ripped limb from limb.* He shuddered, agonizing death staring him in the face.

“This was their last stand,” whispered Alex. “And the creeps showed them no mercy.” She looked away, a tear tracing its way down her face.

“The price of defiance,” said Ivan, sniffing another time as he wiped his eyes. “It is a dear one to pay.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” asked Caleb.

Ivan cleared his throat. “I apologize. It is only a theory. I have read that the creeps seem more violent and crueler in their killings the more resistance that is shown them. Based on that theory, defying the inevitability of death almost assures that one’s personal death is more painful and gruesome.”

Caleb shivered, the feeling of being pulled apart tearing at his limbs. “Th-there’s n-nothing else here to s-see. C-could we p-please go s-somewhere else n-now?” His breathing accelerated as he surveyed the scene.

“What, too much blood for you?” teased Liz.

“I-it’s not th-that. L-let’s just g-go, I’ve s-seen enough.”

“So have I,” added Ivan.

“Oh fine, let’s go find another building with the exact same thing. Stopped to consider that this entire city is nothing but death everywhere?”

“Yes we considered that, Liz,” said Alex, shaking with fury. “There has to be a reason for it. A reason they failed. We just haven’t found it yet.”

“You keep on searching for that reason, Missy Hammer. I’ll search for something that’ll fetch a good price on the market. We’ll see afterwards who spent their time better.”

Alex stared her down.

Liz returned it, her grin widening to an ear-to-ear smile. “Okay, done wasting time with the Staremonster. Let’s go.” She bounded down the stairs, two at a time, ignoring the bloodied weapons littering the floor.



## Chapter 14: Broken Shelter

Despite all of the inconvenience the foolish trip had been so far, Liz was grateful for one thing. *Ivan hasn't asked why I was arguing with Porter earlier.*

*I was right.*

*So you say. I don't care. Just glad they're too busy fretting over my "insensitivity" and "obsession with stealing."*

*I was still right.*

*Keep on telling yourself that, Self-Importance Man.*

Liz took up the rear as they left the record trove. *Best name for that monument to memorandums.* Ivan led, Alex at his heels. *They both want to be in charge. Can't wait for the fight.* She smirked, her lips pulling down into a frown as the sameness of the streets greeted her every glance. *Yay, corpses everywhere. How about something else for once?*

They reached a long building stretching for several hundred feet in length. *A building in a past life, maybe.* The outer walls were broken through in dozens of places, the roof a mass of holes. *Change requested, change delivered.*

"Lemme guess, point of highest resistance," said Liz. "At least, based on one of the thousands

of books you read at some point, right?”

“It matches the description on the face of it, but we need to see what kind of building it was,” said Ivan. “It could confirm the theory, or disprove it.”

*People die in the Darkening. Such a crazy idea. Who cares how they die, anyway?*

They walked to the near end, a gaping hole greeting them. The doors were nowhere to be seen, the roof and walls around the entrance a broken-down mess of stone and timber. Light shone through the missing parts of the roof, illuminating wood that seemed to be on the verge of splintering, bringing more of the roof down with it. *If it hasn't fallen down by now, it likely won't while we're here. I hope.*

It only took Liz five steps inside to know what it was. The walls were thicker, the demolished frames spaced closely together. The hallways that led off the main entrance were narrow, with occasional slits along the lines, just wide enough to admit a blade or arrowhead. “Totally some kind of military place,” she said to no one in particular.

Ivan took in all the details she had just seen. “I would have to agree. Could be a barracks, a secondary fortress, perhaps a stronghold?”

“Does it matter?” She looked back at him, her eyebrow raised. “They put up a fight, or at least attempted to, and they got crushed for it. At least that crazy theory of yours got confirmed or something.”

“The theories I have read are not crazy, just either not provable or untested. This is a rather surprising confirmation of a theory I considered impossible to test.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Let's ‘search for clues’, but I call dibs on the first thing worth keeping.”

“Go for it,” said Alex, sighing.

*Finally wearing her down. That should make it easier for me to get my way.*

*Do you take pleasure in trying everyone's patience?*

*Apparently you do.*

Three doorways split off from the front room, each leading to a long room she couldn't see the other side of.

“Left to right,” said Ivan, taking off toward the left doorway. The room beyond was littered with weapons and bones, bloodstains accenting the chaos. Torsos were separated from their limbs, reminding Liz of the building they had just left.

“Looks like they didn't spare any time ripping these guys up,” she said.

“Your lack of respect for their sacrifice is appalling,” said Alex, stepping around as many bones

as she could. “Would you want your memory tarnished by someone like you?”

“Doesn’t matter to me.” She shook her head. “When I die, I’m done worrying about it. It’s the future’s problem whether or not they want to poke fun at my uncaring corpse.”

Alex glanced back, her eyes smoldering for a half second before she looked forward again.

The long room emptied into another hallway spanning the width of the building. In the center was a narrow hallway, two doors offset from each other on either side. *They sure liked their long corridors.* She peered into the other hallways and saw the same mottle of bodies and blood.

“Who would’ve thought death could look so same-y?”

Alex’s eyes lit on fire, but she held her tongue.

“That answers *that* question, at least,” said Ivan, his shoulders slumped as if held down by a block of stone. “Let us try these doors.” He moved to one of them and pulled at the handle. It didn’t budge. “Liz, if you please?”

*Dependent on me, and they hate it.* She grinned to herself. *Gotta wait until I get what I need.* She waved the charm at the latch, her ear pricked for the click.

But the door didn’t unlatch. *What? Every door unlatches.* Liz waved the charm a second time, then a third. Nothing. “I spent three hours in jail for this thing before I could break out. What a gyp.”

*I bet the look on Alex’s face right now is priceless,* said Porter.

*And I bet I don’t care about either her face or what you say.* Liz took a couple of steps back to look at the door, but nothing struck her as out of the ordinary.

Caleb stepped up, his face inches from the frame. “W-wait, wh-why is there no l-light coming under the d-door?” His eyes went to the hole in the ceiling. “And wh-why is this d-door still here a-anyway?”

Ivan studied the edges of the door, occasionally glancing up at the missing roof. “This is not actually a door in the typical sense of ‘opening into another room.’ It is a door and frame set into a stone wall, but nothing more.” He crossed to the other door. “Also not a door.”

“Why fake doors?” asked Alex. “It isn’t a trap, or something to cause a wild goose chase. Either that, or the Creeps didn’t take the bait.”

“Peculiar indeed, but I am sure there is a reason for it,” he said, nodding to himself. “This city has been very deliberate in its planning and execution, particularly when you consider Caleb’s dreams of the defense proper. Consider how long lasting all of the magical enchantments have been.”

“Whoa now, we’ve got a man of faith over here,” said Liz, acting like she was taken aback. “First a messenger of God, and now the certain planning of people who died in all the most

horrible ways we can imagine and some others we just haven't found yet."

Ivan's eyes narrowed, but then he shrugged. "It was not coincidence that brought us together. I know that much. But I doubt that messenger's credentials. Let us keep on moving. Surely answers are further down."

*Yeah, it was coincidence. Alex was lucky to catch me, and Ivan was lucky he was friends with her of all things.* She scowled at his backside as they walked on, shafts of light from overhead continuing to illuminate their way.

The corpses continued, like a demented painter had sketched the same few positions and copied them across a canvas. At the end was another hallway, connecting to three doorways: one in front, and two back toward where they had come.

Alex stepped into the left doorway going back. "This does occupy the space that door would have led to. Best explore it for treasure. Look, I'm Liz!"

"I am *not* that one-dimensional," retorted Liz. "These weapons do look pretty good, though." She leaned down, pulling a sword from a skeletal hand. She hefted it, feeling its balance, and watching the light play across the edge. *Light, and yet feels solid. Unscratched and likely still sharp.*

"Way to *really* underline your point," teased Alex. "Wait, that weapon." She reached for it. "Let me see it."

"Why? Want to take it for yourself?" asked Liz, pulling the sword away.

Alex rolled her eyes. "Do you really think I'd take a sword over the hammer that's been with me for years? Besides, it's not like there aren't *several hundred others* on the floor everywhere."

*She's right, for once.* "Just had to check your motives," she said, before dropping the hilt into Alex's waiting palm.

Alex harrumphed, then swung the sword around, watching each motion. She tested the edge with her finger, drawing a trickle of blood with only slight pressure. "This isn't steel. It's stronger. I've heard of magical spells that turn steel into something *better*. Strong enough to slice through rock with enough force, durable enough not lose its edge for years, yet light enough to keep the wielder from tiring despite hours of fighting."

"It would not be far-fetched that Andranine unlocked the secrets of such a metal," said Ivan, his hand held against his chin, a finger tapping along the jaw.

"Nobody ever bothered to name it, did they?" asked Liz.

"Well, no. Even when people successfully created it, it was so rare, they kept the secret to themselves. If it ever *was* named, it never reached books that I have read."

"Which is to say, no one ever named it. Dibs! It's called Telabride."

“Wh-why?” asked Caleb, his head twisting from Liz to Ivan and back.

“It sounds cool.” *All that matters to me.*

“Whatever works for you, I do not care,” said Ivan. “If it makes you happy, any of these weapons would be valuable enough to trade. Even so, it seems inappropriate to take the weapons from the fallen for no reason other than selling them to caravan guards or Sentinel detachments.”

*More lectures. These guys are horrible.*

His finger stopped tapping. “But what if we wielded them as our own weapons, to defend ourselves?” He eyed Alex. “Even you would be hard-pressed to find a good reason, other than sentimentalism, not to wield a Telabride hammer over your current one.”

“I’m taking more than what I need for defense,” said Liz, already looking around for daggers. “But just enough to cover my other needs.”

He sighed, then looked at her forlornly. “If I cannot convince you otherwise, so be it.”

*Finally wearing him down, too.*

*You like disagreeing with people just to make them break, don’t you?*

*It’s a rather entertaining habit, because most of the time it works, and most of the time I disagree with them anyway.*

“This hammer has been with me through every mission I had with the Sentinels,” said Alex, placing the sword back on the ground as she gripped the weapon lashed to her pack. “It has been my most steadfast ally through countless situations, where I could have been disemboweled, pulled apart, or worse.” She scowled, leaning over him. “And for the sake of *convenience* you want me to set it aside?”

Ivan looked her in the eyes, unintimidated. “I know that your current weapon means a lot to you, but consider that you never know when it will break. Some day, that hammer *will* fail you, but a Telabride one will outlast you. If you truly want to have something dependable to the very end, consequences be Darkened, the choice is obvious to me.”

She continued to stare at him, her scowl growing deeper until her eyes were mere slits.

Ivan looked away. “And it is so light that you *could* carry both.”

“I’ll agree to that.” Her face softened, the ghost of a smile dancing on her lips.

*Did they just argue over a hammer? And they call me weird.* “So...time to find some weapons.” She walked past Alex, looking for a pair of daggers, or hopefully more. *A girl can never have too many daggers.* It got harder and harder to see the glint of Telabride, the myriad swords, axes, and hammers spurring her further into the room. *Where are my daggers?*

She looked up, trying to figure out her bearings. Darkness greeted her in every direction. *What happened to the holes in the roof?* She looked back to the others, each of them appearing to be shouting. *What are they saying to me?* She strained, but heard nothing. *Must be a stupid joke.* Shaking her head, she searched the ground again for her prize.

There it was, the slight glint of metal, barely visible above the dark ground. *Mine!* She snatched at it, bringing a Telabride dagger into the center of her palm. She twirled it, turning toward the others. The metal reflected back at her, revealing her toothy grin despite the darkness surrounding her.

Then it reflected more than just her. She ducked to the side just before a massive arm came crashing down onto her. It kept going, hitting the floor and leaving a small crater. She rolled with her momentum, coming back up several feet from the attacker as it straightened to lunge again. *What's a Creep doing here?*

Its claws reached for her. She whirled around them, slashing the dagger down into the meat of the arm and twisting before wrenching it free. The arm fell away, its muscles shredded.

She continued around the back of the off-balance Creep, raking the dagger along its shoulder and down its back before plunging it through and out its chest. The Creep buckled, then fell in a heap. The floor crackled and hissed as ichor oozed from the lifeless form.

Liz waited, wary for more attackers, then sprinted back to the others. "That was fun, if somewhat dark."

"Wh-what was?" asked Caleb.

"You didn't see the darkness?" She looked the way she had come, light from dozens of holes greeting her.

"You were fighting against the air in broad daylight," said Alex. "Had to test out your new weapon?"

"No no, that makes no sense. I could barely see in that darkness and I got attacked by some Creep. I could feel its weight, hear its blood eating away at the floor, see its motions."

Ivan eyed her. "Well, whatever happened out there, I suggest we stick together in case something else...unexpected...happens."

Liz looked at them all, trying to see the hint of a smile, the suggestion of a chuckle. Concerned faces looked back at her. *They're not joking?* "Yeah, yeah, sounds good. Let's find our weapons together, or something like that. Great idea." *What did I fight against?*

#

Alex stared at Liz, trying to see the lie that had to be there. *There was nothing there. No darkness, no Creep.* But the closer she looked, the more worried Liz became.

“I’m telling you, that’s what happened!”

*She’s not lying.* She inhaled, already dreading what it meant. *Something made her hallucinate, and not us.* Her initial training with the Sentinels surfaced, a dour man telling them about the “mind-altering capabilities” of the Creeps they would fight. *“You’ll see what isn’t there, fight what doesn’t exist, exhaust yourself on nothing at all.” Just like Liz.* “We’re in danger,” she whispered, her breath forcing itself out as she shuddered.

“Liz, may I see that dagger?” Ivan put out a hand, the other already holding his own dagger. “I would like to check something.”

“Only if you say I wasn’t lying,” she replied, sticking out her tongue.

He looked over at Alex.

“She isn’t, and that means things are much more dangerous than I thought they were.”

Ivan blinked. “What do you mean? We have not found any actual enemies, Creep or otherwise, in this city at all. It is completely dead.”

“There are tales of powerful Creeps who can make you see and feel what isn’t there, imagining enemies and the injuries they could cause.” She hung her head. “They wear you down with endless fights until you can do no more, then kill you.”

“Whoa, so you *do* believe me?” Liz must have missed the gravity of her words.

“I do, and it scares me more than anything else. We aren’t alone,” She tilted her head toward Ivan. “No matter how dead it seems.”

“W-we h-have each o-other at least, r-right?” Caleb started to smile, but Alex’s stern glare stopped him midway.

“Let’s find some weapons,” she snapped.

“First, Liz, please, can I compare your dagger to mine? I have a theory.”

Liz shrugged. “Sure, why not?” She pulled the dagger from her belt and presented it hilt-first to him.

He hefted them, balancing the weights against each other, then peered closer to examine the intricate details. “I always thought mine was lightweight, but I never made the connection. And these hilts; they are identical.” He looked up at them all, breathing deep. “This dagger was recovered from Andranine before the quarantine was placed.” He grinned, handing Liz’s dagger back to her and putting his own away.

“That doesn’t answer any of the questions that matter,” said Alex, trying to find a reason why he had just wasted her time.

“But it does answer a question *I* had.” He kept grinning, either ignoring or missing her unhappy expression. “Knowledge is to be sought at all times, even if it is not directly what you want at the moment. Who knows how important it will be?”

“Let’s just get some weapons already, before Liz starts spouting off about the possible sale price of Andranine daggers.” She stomped off, only glancing back to make sure they followed. In short order, they found Ivan a new sword, Liz four more daggers, and herself a pristine warhammer, hanging off the back of a corpse..

*Must have used something else...not sure what. He’s missing his arms.* As much as it pained her, her mind refused to register the carnage the same way it had earlier. *So much of it, and everywhere I look.* She gazed at the others, making a mental check that they had all gotten armed. *Need to be ready for whatever’s out there, whenever it decides to attack.*

Caleb’s empty hands greeted her.

“Why haven’t you gotten a weapon?” She peered down at him, using her height to advantage.

“I-I d-don’t know h-how to u-use them.”

“You’ve *never* wielded weapons of any kind?” Her lips pressed into a tight line.

He shook his head. “I l-lived on a f-farm; we j-just used a-axes and s-scythes as t-tools, not w-weapons.”

“Axes?” She looked around and found two of them near the hands that had wielded them. *I hope they come to some good use, for the sake of this man’s memory.* “Something is out there, and we don’t know when it’ll make its next move.” She offered the weapons. “*Everyone* must be ready to fight, no matter what he or she might think.”

“B-but I can’t f-fight!” He took a step back. “I’ll g-get you all h-hurt!”

“I. Don’t. Care.” She spat each word out, her patience with his excuses still thin from the morning. “You. Are taking. The axes.”

“Th-this isn’t a g-good i-idea,” he said, taking the axes with shaking hands.

“I’ll be the judge of good or bad ideas, *especially* when it comes to Creeps.”

He nodded, terror in his eyes.

“So, shall we see the other side of the wall where the door was?” asked Ivan, glancing from Alex to Caleb.

“Great idea!” yelled out Liz, taking off at a jog. They caught up to her as she proclaimed, “The handle’s on the wrong side, hinges too.”

“Let us see if it is just as false as the other one is,” Ivan said. He touched the handle and



disappeared.

“Wh-where’d he go?” asked Caleb. “Wh-where? Wh-where is he?”

“Teleportation spell,” answered Liz, her eyes going to the ceiling. “Must’ve been attached to the door’s handle. Stage magicians use it all the time to impress the lesser informed.”

“B-but *where* did he go?”

Alex sighed. “Into that hallway. Just wait.”

“Alexandra! Caleb! Liz!” Ivan called from the opposite side of the room, pausing to breathe between each name. He jogged to them, a wide smile on his face. “It is a teleporter to the other door!”

“Called it,” said Liz. “Why have a teleporter when you can just use a door? And why put fake doors there anyway?”

“One must consider that all the *other* doors we have seen are a mess of splinters,” said Ivan. “The doors in all likelihood were a visual marker to help those on the other side. Someone might teleport on top of you if you are not careful.”

“Good defensive measure,” added Alex. “With one-way teleporters, they could have been both behind and in front of the enemy at the same time.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” said Liz. “Has Caleb stopped hyperventilating yet?”

Alex looked at him, his breath still coming in rapid gasps.

“S-sorry, I-I really th-thought he was g-gone.”

“Surprised by everything, aren’t ya?” Liz asked. “How about only freak out when you see one of us freaking out, too. Sound good?”

*Liz, lecturing Caleb? I’ve seen everything now.*

Caleb’s eyes found his shoes again.

“So, going to assume the other wing is the same way with the other door,” said Alex. “Who’s up for the third part of the barracks?”

“That would be a prudent measure,” said Ivan, “But we are rapidly running out of daylight.” He pointed up at the now-reddening sky. “I think we should establish our camp for the night and explore the rest of this building tomorrow.”

“Forgot what time it was, and considering Liz’s...excitement, night is not when we want to be exploring.”

“Where do we camp?” he asked.

“The front of the barracks is a more defensible location than the middle of the street, but it’s open enough to the air that if we find some wood somewhere, we’ll be able to light a fire for the night.”

“So let’s get over there, set up, and eat supper,” said Liz, holding her stomach. “We forgot to stop for lunch.”

“In case you forgot,” said Ivan, “My stomach was trying to maintain breakfast thanks to that extremely unpleasant fifth floor.”

Liz looked at him sidelong. “Haven’t we been looking at that exact same scene for few hours?”

He scowled, answering her question by walking away.

## Chapter 15: Twilight Torment

Caleb gazed out at the night sky, the silent darkness filling him with uncertainty. *Did Liz hallucinate? Is Alex right? Are we being watched?* He took solace in the campfire, the broken furniture fueling it a muted reminder of what had happened. *Everyone's dead. No matter what I've seen recently, the result is the same. Why am I even here?*

He sighed, letting the flames occupy his mind until he felt a prickle on his neck. *Something's here. Watching.* He glanced behind him, only finding the wall of the barracks. *Nothing. Can't get tricked, else Alex will have yet another reason to yell at me.* He shrank back, recoiling from the lecture already going through his mind.

*Why did I leave?* The question forced its way through his concerns. *I had to. There was nothing for me. Nothing here for me, either. I don't belong anywhere. Not even in my dreams. I'm not a part of anything, not even my own life.*

The corner of his eye caught movement, pulling him from darker thoughts. *What was that? What's there?* He didn't want to know, but he had to. *I'm just better off not being here at all.* He hung his head, sure that something was coming for him.

He heard nothing but the subtle popping and crackling of the fire. *What's out there?* He looked around again, searching the shadows at the edge of the fire for a shape, for eyes, for something. *Nothing's out there. Just me, the ignorable person with the crazy dreams, and the three sleeping*

*people who actually belong.*

He stared into the fire, letting the thoughts consume him until it was time to wake Ivan. “Y-your w-watch,” he whispered.

“Thank you, Caleb.” He smiled, leaving the bedroll to sit down near the fire. “Sleep well, I will make sure nothing ill befalls us.”

“Th-thanks.” *Don’t need to save me, just save the others.*

#

Ivan did and did not like how the day had gone. *We have managed to successfully explore a city thought too dangerous to even approach by the foremost experts on Creep activity. But...* His lips pursed. “We know practically nothing.”

The fire crackled, seeming to voice its own frustration with the situation.

*The city stands.* Yesterday, it had bothered him. Today, it drove him mad. *Corpses everywhere, this building half-destroyed, some bodies ripped apart more viciously than others. Why does it stand?* He looked through the missing ceiling at the tall fortress, its marble blocks faintly reflecting the moonlight. *Are the answers there?*

*We have not seen everything in this barracks yet, and there might be other buildings of importance besides. Best to garner what we can before finding out what is in the center. Maybe the answers we need are not there at all.* He half-smiled at the possibility, his heart dreading what the fortress likely held.

*Where else would the defenders put up their true last stand?* The only answer he *had* gotten all day was a confirmation of the defiance theory. He shuddered, the images of the dead within the barracks seared into his memory. *How horrible those deaths, and yet they will be worse within the fortress.*

The shudder turned into a shiver as a cold wind guttered the flames, ripping into his clothes. *Another trap? Unseasonable weather?* He shook his head, sidling closer to the fire. *I just wish these men and women had been buried in honor of their heroic sacrifice. Failure or not, no one deserves to rot in the sun, forgotten and unmourned.*

An icy breeze blew onto his back, his shirt feeling like a flimsy piece of parchment against it. He whirled, hoping for some fast-moving clouds overhead, or a creature toying with him, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary. *Is it that creature Alexandra was talking of earlier?* The third possibility joined its brethren, none of them making sense to him. *There has to be some explanation.*

Ivan was blasted from the front again, but somehow the fire mere feet from him was undisturbed. *Not weather, then. Trap? Creature? Something else?* He shivered against the cold as his overtaxed mind struggled for a definitive answer. *If I cannot solve the reason for some*

*cold wind, I will never solve Andranine's mysteries.*

The wind struck again, hitting him from both sides at once. *Cursed be this wind! Two creatures? Escalating trap? I cannot possibly be imagining this.* He glared at the fire, his eyes burning in frustration. *I have enough questions, enough worries. Now I have to contend with an inexplicable wind?*

It kept on blowing from every direction, leaving him cold and miserable as the fire continued on, giving its warmth to anyone but him. *When will this end?* He looked up, smiling at the sight of the moon directly overhead. *At last, I will have the comfort of my bedroll to keep this wind at bay. I need my rest, if I am to figure out the puzzles at hand.*

Alexandra stirred before he could wake her.

“Ready for the watch already?”

She sat up, wide awake. “A habit I don’t want to break. Creeps can attack at any time and I want to be ready. Anything to report?”

“There is some odd, cold wind blowing around tonight. Does not seem to affect the fire at all, but something to be aware of. Perhaps that creature you were speaking of earlier?”

She shook her head. “I doubt it. Everything I’ve been told says they can affect only sight and hearing. Phantom injuries don’t hurt, even though you see your hand or leg torn off.”

“It does not match up with that, then.” He let out a deep breath, happy at the news. *At least a Creep is not stalking us.* He went to his bedroll, giving a last wave to Alexandra as he tucked in. *But what if it is a Creep no one has ever heard of? Or an enchantment the defenders put in place? Or something else?* His eyes stared up at the moon in terror, until exhaustion forced them shut.

#

Alex waited for the wind that had vexed Ivan so much, but nothing came. *Watch always seemed more cold when I was alone. Something about having someone else awake with you warmed things up. Likely, Ivan felt the same.*

She put the concern away, letting her emotions loose after a day of keeping them under control. Rage poured out into her fists as they pounded at her knees, followed by sorrow that tore through her in wracking sobs. *They fought as best they could, and all they got was a more horrible death.* The faces of her friends hovered above her as she cried. *They failed, and so will I.*

Her fists went from her knees to the ground, pounding at the chipped marble until her hands threatened to tear open. She stopped, hanging her head as the crying subsided. *How can I hope for anything to change? Andranine prepared as best they could, and failed. All they got for their sacrifice was being forgotten.* She stared down at her lap, the last of the tears soaking her pants.

She heard barking and yipping in the distance. *Hounds, coming fast.* She leaped into a crouch, her hands reaching to pull the hammer off her pack, only to be stymied by the Telabride one. *Why did I let Ivan talk me into picking it up?* She shoved it away and picked up her hammer just as the first hound barreled toward her.

She bashed its head in, ending its maddening yipping. “Annoying, and stupid.” The words were little comfort. *Hounds always have friends. I need to wake the others.* She started to turn, but two more hounds leaped at her. She shoved one away with a crushing blow to its side, ducked the other, then crumpled its back. “Wake up! We’ve got company!”

She chanced a glance at them, only to find none stirring. “Come on! We’re being attacked!” She looked back to find a half-dozen rushing at her, teeth gleaming in anticipation. “Oh no, you’re not.” The hammer came down again and again, pushing them away from her in every direction, each landing lifelessly.

Her bruised knees ached, the memory of her rage making it harder to pivot around the leaping forms. “Wake up already!” *They must want to die if they don’t want to help. But I’m not going to let anyone else die on my watch, ever again.* She kept on fighting, ignoring the pain, the exhaustion, the infuriating barking of the endless hounds. *Where are the other Creeps? There have to be others.*

“You done practicing against air?” Liz asked.

Alex snatched a glance behind her, finding a puzzled Liz. “No time to talk.” She swung at the latest hounds, the bodies crumpling on top of the mountain of corpses she had created. “Get your daggers ready. They keep on coming.”

“Who is they?”

“This is not the time to be playing games, Liz.” She fended some more off. “This is serious!”

“Yeah, seriously nutjob.” Liz walked in front of Alex, blocking her view.

She leaned to the side just in time to see a hound readying to pounce. “Look out!”

“How about no?” Liz pulled the hammer from her grasp.

The hound lunged, only to pass harmlessly through both women.

“Wait, they’re not real?”

“No,” said Liz. “Glad you figured that out. Fighting the air with a hammer isn’t as cool-looking as daggers.” She hefted the heavy weapon back to Alex.

“Then what happened?” Alex looked beyond Liz, expecting to see a mountain of enemy dead, but finding only the dimming fire and an empty street.

“You thought something was there that wasn’t. Weren’t you telling us about some Creep

messing with people's minds?"

"I did, I just..." Her shoulders slumped, the grip on her hammer loosening. "I wanted to protect you."

"Appreciate it," said Liz, rolling her eyes. "Go to bed."

Alex walked over to her pack, putting her hammer in front of the other one. "I don't want any of us to die."

"I can take care of myself. Now go to bed." She turned away, occupying her attention with the dying flames.

"I'll...keep that in mind." She curled into her bedroll and let fatigue take over.

#

Liz shook her head, Alex's disbelieving look still in front of her eyes. *Flailing Alex, who gives advice she doesn't take herself.* She snickered at the irony. *Knowing my luck, something will try to mess with me, too.*

The sky darkened, the fire going from small flames to barely visible embers. *Be careful what you wish for, Liz.*

She looked up, her ears throbbing with the silence that pushed in on them. Then she heard something, a scrabbling sound inside the barracks, followed by a chorus of howling from outside. A chill wind washed over her, forcing her to shiver in its wake.

*This is fake. All fake. Just trying to unnerve me, whatever it is.* She scowled, annoyed.

The sounds stopped, the wind fading into nothingness. A man and woman hugging each other tightly came into view, their faces creased in bliss. Bliss turned into shock and agony as a sword pierced their hearts, holding them together as they fell, their lifeless eyes staring into each other's.

*People die. Whatever. I'm no murderer.*

The scene shifted again, showing a young girl staring up at the sky, confused and alone. People walked by on their daily tasks, ignoring her cries for help. She searched everywhere for someone, something, to help her.

Liz shuddered, the memory dredging itself up from a past she refused to remember. *That's not me. Not anymore.* She shrugged, tossing off the pain. "You can stop trying, whoever you are. Wasting your time."

Light returned, the fire blazing back to life before her. She looked around, smirking at every unchanged detail. *Don't mess with me. That includes you, Porter.*

*Someone needs to keep you in line.*

She threw her head back and laughed, the ridiculous statement the funniest thing she had heard since joining the motley band. *Thanks, I needed that.* She recovered and smiled into the fire, the last embers fading to nothing as the sun began to peek over the horizon.



## Chapter 16: Uncertain Footing

Dawn had come and gone an hour ago, but the others were yet to stir. Liz looked at their sleeping forms and shrugged. *I get the feeling that Caleb and Ivan also got messed with.* She left to get more furniture for the almost dead fire. *Not like they'll need it anymore. Talk about "sacrifice" all you want, Alex. You wanted something to burn the second night fell.*

*Not that you would ever make any sacrifices.*

*Yeah, you're right there. I am not about to kill myself hoping the Darkening is defeatable. I'd sooner believe a god exists.*

*Suit yourself, O Queen of Self-Interest.*

*I will, thanks.* She took her annoyance out on a table and chair, the broken legs more than enough to stoke the fire. The others had woken up, but their bleary eyes told her they were far from awake.

"Morning!"

"Good morning," said Ivan, his voice flat enough to slide under a door. "At least the sun is warm this morning."

"Yeah, the sun, uh." She stared, trying to understand the statement. "It's normally pretty hot."

“Of course it is,” he spat back. “But I doubt you had to contend with an infuriatingly cold wind last night.”

“No, I didn’t. Weird night, eh?”

Ivan shook his head. “Nothing worth stressing over.” He glanced toward the barracks interior. “We should explore the last part of the barracks as soon as we can. I want to cover a lot of ground today.”

Caleb wordlessly took the impromptu firewood from her and stoked the fire before putting the cauldron on top.

“More soup?” asked Alex, her eyes brightening.

“Y-yes,” whispered Caleb, continuing his habit of not making eye contact.

*Could he get that stupid chip off his shoulder already? It’s annoying to watch.*

*Just like watching your reckless actions?*

*I enjoy those actions, so no.*

#

Alex was still tired. Her limbs ached, her eyes drooped, but most painfully her mind accused her of all the things she had done wrong last night. *I didn’t wake the others. I didn’t bother to think past what I saw. I didn’t follow my own advice.* She scowled into the backs of the others as they walked into the barracks, accusations and soreness compounding to drag her further into exhaustion.

Deep within, they stood in front of a pair of ceiling-high metal doors, the only entrance into the final section.

“Since when did the Creeps not destroy the doors?” asked Liz.

“Odd,” said Ivan, looking up and down. “No structural defects either. I suggest we proceed with caution.”

“We weren’t already?”

Alex’s eyes closed, the stupid question harping at her already frayed patience. “We won’t find anything out by standing here.” She pushed through them and pulled one of the doors open, causing Caleb to dodge to the side.

Beyond was a disaster. The roof no longer stood, the lumber holding it up now littering the ground in a splintered pile. The walls had caved in on top of it. The rubble was so thick that she couldn’t even see the bodies beneath.

“Nothing left,” she said. “Nothing to see.” She whirled away from the destruction. “Let’s go.”

“Uh-uh-um, A-Alex...” said Caleb, his eyes widening at something beyond her. “Y-you might w-want to l-look b-back...”

She narrowed her eyes, daring him to lie again. “Really?”

“Now is not the time for doubt, Alexandra.” Ivan pulled out his sword, his gaze focused on the destroyed room.

Alex looked up to the hole in the ceiling, then turned around. Darkness consumed her vision, a black mass of nothingness threatening to swallow her whole. *No. It’s a lie. I will not be fooled.* “See through it! It’s another trick!”

“Uh, hate to break it to you, dearie,” said Liz, daggers in hand. “But that’s not fake. And you grit your teeth when you get fixated on something.”

Alex glared, but loosened her jaw. “Fine, so we’ve got some unexplained darkness popping into the middle of a room that’s in broad daylight.”

“The best explanation would seem to be Creeps of some form,” said Ivan, “Or perhaps that creature you were speaking of yesterday?”

“Hush!” whispered Caleb. “S-something’s c-coming.”

Alex tilted her head to the side, straining to hear. The scrape of claws on stone greeted her. “Incoming!” said Alex, unslinging her hammer and stepping into the doorway. Ivan and Liz joined her, but Caleb stayed back, his face transfixed in terror. “Caleb, axes! Defend yourself!”

“B-but I-”

“Axes or you die!”

He pulled the axes from his pack, the weapons trembling in his hands when the first hounds appeared out of the gloom.

*What if they aren’t real?* The question stopped her, the imaginary pile of corpses from mere hours before taunting her. Her hammer faltered, falling to her waist. *What if this, too, is a trick?*

One of the hounds leaped straight at her arm, the drooling maw closing upon it. Ichor ripped through her arm, causing it to jerk in pain. *It’s real. It’s...real.* She shifted her grip on the hammer, bringing it down on the neck of the beast one-handed. The body fell away, followed by the jaws as they lost their hold.

Pain seared through her mind, the holes still oozing with the ichor the hound had left. She gritted her teeth and took the hammer back up with both hands. *I’ll tend to it later.*

She changed her footing and stepped back in front of Ivan and Liz, ending as many hounds as

she could. Each swing was agony, but she kept on fighting. Blades flashed beside her, finishing the few that passed by. Then the beasts stopped coming, silence replacing their barks and howls.

"I...d-didn't help. I'm s-so s-sorry," said Caleb, his body trembling.

"Eh, I was having fun," said Liz, waving it off. "Whatever."

"He did not get in the way." Ivan sheathed his sword. "We will just need to teach him how to fight at some point in the near future. None of us are dead, or even wounded for that matter."

"Wrong," choked out Alex, the adrenaline ebbing from her. *So much...pain*. She closed her eyes, grimacing. "Can someone pull a bandage from my pack? I need to dress this wound."

Ivan rummaged around before pulling out a roll of cloth. "Hold still. This is going to hurt." He began bandaging the arm, the rising pressure on it sending more jolts of pain through her. She let out a grunt of frustration, refusing to cry no matter how much it hurt.

"All done." The words were followed by the wound ceasing its complaints. "Liz, do you have that light still?"

"Well, duh," said Liz, like it was offensive to suggest otherwise. She pulled it out from a random pocket and handed it to Ivan.

"We need to see what's in here." He advanced, shining the light in every direction. "There must be *some* explanation for sudden darkness and Creeps."

What she saw wasn't the rubble-strewn marble floor she was expecting. Instead, it was a rough obsidian, extending into the darkness as far as the light went. "Where are we?"

"Not the barracks, and possibly not even Andranine," answered Ivan. "Wherever we are, it is featureless. There are no answers here."

"So h-how do we g-get out?" asked Caleb, pointing back the way they had come. "The d-door is g-gone."

"What?" Alex followed his finger, her face contorting in disbelief as she saw nothing but blackness. "We're trapped in here!"

"Well aren't you Cheery McCheerington today," said Liz, shaking her head.

"Thinking about this logically, I believe some sort of spell that teleported us somewhere we have never been before." Ivan's voice dropped an octave. "Or ever described, to the best of my knowledge."

"We didn't teleport." Liz was still shaking her head. "Darkness can be faked, floors can be faked. It's all in our minds. In our minds." She walked in front of Alex, a frown on her face. "To quote Ivan, I need to test this theory. Sorry." Her right hand balled into a fist and struck Alex square on the jaw. Her head whipped sideways, and before she could react Liz brought an elbow

around her neck. Alex struggled against the chokehold, but her vision faded to black.

#

Ivan dragged himself back to wakefulness, a dull pounding issuing from his left eye. He tried to open it, but pain stopped him short. *By Telthan, why did Liz punch me in the face? Or Alex for that matter? It changed nothing.* He cracked open his other eye and immediately took back his thoughts. He lay on top of a pile of rubble, the midday sun shining into his face.

He sat up to find Liz. “How did you-?”

“Hit myself in the head hard enough to knock me out? You don’t want to know.”

“Well, yes, but how did you know? That it would work?”

Liz shrugged. “I didn’t, but I figured that if whatever it was, wasn’t tricking our vision, it was tricking our minds.”

“What? What are you saying?”

“Ever had an out of body experience?”

“I have heard of the concept,” he said, nodding. “But always thought the people who talked of them were not altogether sane. Are you implying...?”

“Something *like* that, but not exactly. We were physically in a dream or something. Sorry about the black eye.”

*Since when did Liz care about not taking things? Or for that matter, care about anyone not herself?* He stared at her, unsure of what to say next.

“Anyways, I’ve had my share of mental separation in my life, so I’m more resilient against it.”

*That does not clarify anything at all.*

“How did that give you the idea of knocking us out?” Alexandra asked, rousing herself from the floor.

“Good guess. I get the feeling that we just found out why this room doesn’t have any corpses, though.”

“No corpses!” Ivan yelled, casting his lone eye around. No bones or armor stood out to him amidst the destruction. “She’s-she’s right!”

“How?” Alexandra asked.

“I dunno,” said Liz. “All I do know is that I’d rather be in a different building than one that just sent me to dreamland or netherville, or wherever it was.” She walked across the broken wood

and stone, aiming for the outside. “I don’t want to find out where the last defenders went.”

“But we have not answered what just happened!” exclaimed Ivan, standing up. “We do not know for sure what happened, not even whether the men within died, never made it here, or somehow fled.”

“If you keep on needing to get all of your questions answered, we’ll never leave this city,” said Liz. “And we surely won’t get a hold of anything worth taking back to civilization.”

*Still Liz.* “Asking questions is the only way to know what answers to seek.”

“If you say so. Anyways, weird thing, weird place, I’m done here.” She left the building, walking down the street and out of view.

Ivan threw his hands up, at a loss for what to do. *I am not certain of what I saw, or what happened here.* He trudged across the broken building, a hand cradling his swollen eye. *Why are things only getting more complicated?*

## Chapter 17: Fortress Forsaken

The group circled the rest of the way around the fortress, the city a confusion of narrow passageways and identical homes.

“Nothing,” Ivan said, hanging his head. “We have found *nothing*.”

“So what now?” asked Alex, coming to a halt. “No answers, no real ‘treasure’ like Liz wants, and no explanation of what happened here.”

“We *have* found a lot of corpses in various states of dismemberment,” said Liz.

“Not funny.”

“Well, I thought it was.”

Ivan sighed. “I do not know. I thought that we would learn something just by walking the streets, but it has only confirmed what I already knew.”

“S-so why not t-try to get into the f-fortress?” asked Caleb, recoiling when the others stared at him in surprise.

Ivan faced the massive building, his eyes narrowing on the pristine front door. “It is untouched. Nothing got in. Neither can we.”

“It’s built for a true last stand. Maybe they succeeded,” added Alex, a wistful smile crossing her lips.

“They did not. We know that,” countered Ivan.

“B-but we h-have no other p-place to g-go,” said Caleb, holding his arms to his chest, eyes downcast. *There has to be some way in.*

“And it’s the last chance for something worth taking back,” said Liz, sidling up to the rough-hewn stone. “There’s only so many guards and Sentinels with a taste in mythic weapons, you know?” She waggled her eyebrows. “So how are we getting in?”

A shiver ran down his spine. *I remember the dream.* He moved closer to the entrance. *I know what Gerald did.*

“Caleb, what by Telthan are you doing?” asked Ivan. “We do not have the requisite tools or time to breach the door.”

He ignored him, his eyes looking for the circle, the actual entrance to the fortress. “There!” Just off to the side was a carved, circular outline, ringed by some sort of runic script. He stepped onto it, smiling as he closed his eyes. *I know this will work; it just has to.*

Daylight turned into darkness. He stumbled to the side, trying to find a nearby wall to at least get his bearings. *Liz will follow me, and she’ll have light when she gets here.* No wall greeted his outstretched hands, but his feet stumbled on something that clattered to the floor. He stopped, unsure of what his next step would find.

Light replaced the darkness, forcing Caleb to shut his eyes against it. Several moments later, he cracked them open on a scene worse than the barracks. The massive room overflowed with corpses. Bones lay scattered everywhere, interrupted by flattened armor and white powder. *Something crushed them.*

He backed away, narrowly resisting the urge to run. *Another massacre, worse than the others.* A tear came to his eye as he looked away. *I hope they come soon. I can’t explore this place, not on my own.*

#

Ivan stared at empty space, the afterimage of Caleb competing with what he saw. “Where did he go?” He looked back at the women. “Did he disappear?”

“Yeah,” said Liz. “Said ‘there’ or something.”

“He *did* say he knew how to get in,” said Ivan. “He just did not explain *how*.”

“Well, where was he?” asked Alexandra.

Liz pointed at the ground. “Thereabouts.”



Ivan followed her finger, eventually making out a simple white circle etched into the marble, runes surrounding it. *I have seen those before, somewhere. I just do not know where!* “This looks like our culprit,” he announced, walking near the spot.

“I didn’t steal anything!” yelled Liz, her eyes wide for a moment before returning to normal. “Ah, that...circle thing.” She nodded slowly. “On the ground. What about it?”

“It must be a teleporter of some kind.” *And it still works.* “Caleb must have stepped on the center. Liz, do you want to go first?”

“Why me first?” She leaned forward, eyeing him. “Worried I’m going to disappear on you?” She smiled at her pun.

“No, I-” He shut his eyes, bringing his fingers to the bridge of his nose. “I was attempting to be nice.” He took a step forward, the outside vanishing in a flash. He blinked against the unexpected brightness, searching around to gain his wits.

He gasped at the sight. “By Telthan...so much death...”

“Y-you m-made it,” said Caleb, his voice distant.

Ivan looked toward him, grateful to have a reason to avoid the carnage. Caleb stared back at him, his face an ashen mask of terror. “I know, I know,” he said softly, trying to comfort both himself and Caleb. “There is no justice in the Darkening. We can only hope to uncover why they failed. F-for the future.”

Caleb half-smiled, his eyes refusing to leave Ivan’s face.

Ivan felt a sudden weight fall on him, bowling him over. “Oof!”

“I said for you to go first!” yelled Liz, picking herself up from where she was sprawled on top of him.

“Sorry about that,” said Alexandra as he stumbled back to his feet. “Of course you did, but after all of your talk of looting the city and running back to the nearest merchant I...don’t trust you.”

“Oh, yeah, totally going back with all the grand loot from this city.” Liz walked up to the taller woman, her chin thrust above Alexandra’s chest. “Didn’t I already say that weapons weren’t going to cut it? Fortress is the only place left worth checking, so...?”

“Convenient to say that now, isn’t it?” She pushed Liz back with an arm. “If I trusted you, I might-” She stopped yelling, her mouth hanging open as she took in the scene. Tears welled in her eyes, her muscles slackening. “Where is the justice in this?”

“I...can certainly concur,” said Ivan. “But unjust or not, we need to find out what happened.”

Alexandra turned and smiled at him, twin streaks staining her face. “I know, it’s just.... Caleb,

have you seen anything else?”

Caleb shook his head, then met her eyes. “I-I don’t kn-know, really.”

Alexandra nodded. “I know, I know.” Her lips tightened into a line. “We need to avenge them, somehow.”

“Avenge what? Avenge fifty year gone dead people?” asked Liz. “I know! Let’s find the darkest cave in all of Telthan, pile into it without a torch, and give them a piece of our minds. Sounds great!”

“Liz, please,” said Ivan, trying to stop another argument from starting.

“I’m sorry, but all of this talk about justice, vengeance, and whatever else is ridiculous.” She crossed her arms. “I want no part of a pity-party for a past we can’t do anything about. Let’s move on already.”

“Sh-she’s right...in a w-way,” said Caleb. “Th-they’re g-gone, and n-nothing we d-do or say can ch-change that. L-let’s just...f-find out why.”

“You all have fun with that. I’m just going to see if they left anything remotely useful to the economic prosperity of present day Telthan, which of course includes myself.” She spun away, inspecting the room for valuables.

“We need to look closely for clues,” said Ivan, gulping at the thought. “Liz, find the way forward, or whatever it is you want to do.”

“Already doing that, but thanks for the ‘permission.’”

He looked down at the floor, trying to see beneath the pile of bones, armor, and blood. “It is...cracked.” He followed the small crack until it disappeared behind some bones, both black and white. *Some sort of melee here.* He looked around the pile, his eyes widening when he saw the source. “There is a hole in the floor!” It yawned beneath his feet, black bones spiraling downward until he could see no further. “So many dead Creeps. Astonishing.”

He looked out, trying to find similar markings. Cracks spiderwebbed in every direction, some terminating at mountains of enemy dead, others extending beyond his view. “I think I have found out why this room is a massacre, even with the gate untouched.”

“They came from underneath,” said Alexandra, appearing from behind another pile of bones.

“More or less. The amazing thing is that the bones are so numerous *below* the floor,” He pointed down into the hole. “They hold up the pile *above* it.” His finger extended to the pile’s peak. “Defeated or not, the defenders of Andranine did not give up.”

“B-but h-how did they b-break through into the c-city o-outside?” asked Caleb. “I s-saw them f-fighting hand to hand at the c-center of the c-city. G-Gerald called f-for them to f-fall back into the f-fortress. He w-was s-surprised they had b-broken through. N-none had m-made it past the

f-front lines.”

“That...I am not sure of,” said Ivan, gripping his chin. “We saw no similar holes in the city itself, nor damage done to houses that would indicate holes within them.”

“What if they got into the fortress *first*?” asked Alexandra, grimacing at such an unsavory thought. “Creeps can do some kind of teleportation, and we know they broke through here. What if this was the chosen starting point?”

“Chosen?” asked Ivan, quirking an eyebrow. “Everything I have ever read describes the Creeps as mindless brutes, reacting out of pure malice and spite with no overriding plans or strategy.”

Alexandra held up a hand. “Perhaps that was the wrong word, but wouldn’t the best way to crush this city’s opposition be to rip it apart from the inside out?”

“Well, yes,” sputtered Ivan. “It is a most intriguing possibility, but it will need confirmation. Liz! Have you found our way further in?”

“Yeah,” she yelled back. “While you two were orating the next grand thesis in a pointless book about the Darkening, I found some doors on the floor over here. They *used* to be upright, got busted out from the inside.”

Ivan caught Alexandra’s eyes, his own widening with a growing realization. “The fortress was where it began,” he whispered.

#

The doors had been solid marble, the hinges a wrought steel. *Had been*. What lay at Caleb’s feet was broken stone shattered into a dozen pieces, the floor underneath it cracked at the center. The hinges were still attached, but twisted outward, the metal threatening to snap. “S-something v-very, very b-big broke d-down this d-door,” he said, his eyebrows rising to the top of his forehead as he continued to stare.

“Naw, duh,” said Liz, stomping into the darkened hallway, light brightening the space as she strode around more skeletons. Each one lay with its head pointing toward the door.

“Curse the Darkening,” spat Ivan, gingerly stepping over the long-dead men. “They were run over by that...thing. It had to have been a thing, right?”

“This hallway is easily twenty feet tall, and you mean to tell me something *ran down it*?” Alex asked. “Must have been a battering ram.”

“But no logic, no plan.”

She squeezed her eyes shut, stopping mid-stride. “Battering ram.”

A minute later they reached the end of the hallway, a spiderweb of cracks emanating from the center. To the left and right were other hallways, but his eyes caught three jagged lines etched

into the ceiling, tearing furrows back down the hallway. “Uh...c-can b-battering rams...” He pointed up. “...D-do that?”

Alex followed his finger, her eyes bulging so far out of her skull he was worried they would fall out. “That...that’s impossible. Creeps don’t get taller than ten or twelve feet. Yet...”

“Based on the other marks we have seen on the floors and walls in this city,” Ivan said, his brows furrowed. “It had to have been a Creep.”

“But...how?” She shivered as the explanation sunk in.

Ivan shrugged. “At least we know what destroyed the door, and killed the defenders in the hallway.”

“Where is the justice?” she whispered, taking her gaze off of the pitted ceiling.

“Who cares about justice, where’s the treasure?”

Alex’s hand caught Liz’s throat, pushing her back against the cracked wall. “You will *not* say anything like that again.” Her face contorted with rage, her arm flexing to keep Liz where she was even as she struggled against her grip. “Are we understood?”

Liz flailed, her hands trying to tear Alex’s away. “Yeah, sure, sure, Ms. Holy Protector of All Sacrifices Now and Forevermore.”

She let go of Liz, who tumbled away from the wall, creating as much distance as she could while still being in earshot.

“You could’ve broken my neck or crushed my windpipe doing that! Careful!”

Alex’s face shrank into a scowl, daring her to continue. “Let’s just keep on going. Which way?”

“Left, because I don’t want to go right,” said Liz, sticking out her tongue.

“Then the right path it is,” said Ivan, leading the way onward. Bones still littered the hallway, so similar that Caleb had to look at the walls to tell he was in the fortress and not elsewhere.

The hallway opened up to another large room, the ceiling vaulting above their heads. In the middle was a gigantic hole, its gaping blackness swallowing all the light it could.

“It started here and caught them unawares,” said Ivan, bringing a hand to rest on his chin as he looked around. “Notice how there have been no Creep skeletons. Whatever it was killed *everyone* we have seen so far.”

“So horrible,” said Alex, a tear escaping her eye. “So...wrong.”

“So...left path?” asked Liz, tapping her foot impatiently. “Bones don’t command a marketable value.”

Caleb put his head into his hand, Liz's callousness straining his patience. *Has she no heart?*

## Chapter 18: Torn Asunder

The left path was studded with holes, piles of bones reaching to Liz's waist and blocking most of the hallway. *I hate the stupid crunching sound bones make when I step on them.*

*How come you don't also hate yourself for all of the things you say? Why do you ignore what happened here, except when it's annoying or inconvenient?*

*Honestly, I'm saying most of it to keep them on their toes. What happened here actually interests me. Crazy, right? It's so different from what I was expecting, discovering what no one else has. Exhilarating.*

Porter didn't reply.

*I know you're shocked, but then again you're always shocked. Now, be a good boy and don't bother me anymore.*

The hallway kept going, rooms occasionally branching off to some more death and destruction. It ended with a massive iron door, plastered onto the opposite wall of the one it was originally attached to.

The room beyond was coated in blackness that didn't subside when she walked inside. *Great, the magical interior lighting fails right when it matters.* She squinted to see anything in the room, the light from the hallway barely making it inside the door.

“Liz?” asked Alex.

“Yes, your highness, I’ll get us some light.” Liz fished around in her pocket and drew it out. *They’re lucky I’m actually prepared for darkness, of all things.* She took a step forward and turned the light on. A face, frozen in agony, stared at her, blank eyes boring into her soul.

She jumped back, almost tripping over Caleb. She stumbled to regain her balance. “I thought...that all of these guys...were bones!” The light danced, giving her unwanted glimpses of a horror beyond her worst nightmares. Every beam illuminated a mangled man, a torn-apart woman, a disemboweled child. Each face was still locked in the moment of final death, the last gasp of excruciating pain from which there was no return.

*It’s just...too horrible, I can’t....* Liz fell to the floor, unconscious.

#

Alex reeled, the flashes of death echoing through her mind. “This...is so...wrong! They didn’t fight. Some can’t even walk.” She staggered, unable to reconcile the faces with her beliefs.

“Stay with me, Alex,” said Caleb, his hand steadying her. “Stay with me.”

Alex tried to look at him, but his face was a mask of shadows. “I’m trying, it’s just...it’s just....”

“I know.” He patted her shoulder. “I know.”

*He sounds so much older. Has he actually dreamed of the Darkening for ten years? Seen it, every night?* The thought was too painful to bear. She swayed on her feet, her knees buckling.

“Stay with me, Alex.”

“I can’t...I just...I can’t....” She fell to her knees, sorrow wrenching from her tears, pain, and loss.

#

Ivan’s mind echoed with remembered passages from countless books. “*The scale is beyond comprehension.*” “*Death lingers long after it has occurred.*” “*It is too terrible to describe.*” “Now I know why,” he whispered, blinking away the tears. “A moment in time, captured forever.”

Distantly, he heard Caleb and Alexandra talking, but he needed to reason things out. He needed to find out why, no matter how much it hurt. “God cannot exist,” he muttered, shaking his head in disgust. “The Darkening is proof.”

He took a deep breath, steadying himself from the initial shock. *Think, Ivan, think! How?* He closed his eyes, replaying the scene, comparing it to dozens of theories and hundreds of accounts of the Darkening’s aftermath. Time passed, minutes ticking away as he searched for an explanation.

“Aha!” He opened his eyes and squinted, looking for the others in the gloom. Picking out Alexandra’s hunched form, he ambled toward them. “Caleb, Alexandra, please help me rouse Liz. We are close to the source. I just know it. We need to push further.”

Alexandra sniffled twice, then slowly rose, wiping the tears from her eyes. She plodded over to Liz, leaning over to shake the woman awake.

“I...I...I don’t t...I don’t know...” She groped for her light and brought it up to see Alexandra’s face.

“Neither do we,” said Alexandra. “But we need to keep on going.”

“Correction: we *do* know,” said Ivan. “Based on some deductions, comparisons, and the like, this was the refuge of Andranine, the room to remain defended against all attack so that at least *some* would survive. It is enchanted to stop time itself in some regards, which is why there is nothing but perfectly-preserved death around us.” He sighed, hanging his head. “It is sad, but it does not really answer what we came here for: how did Andranine fall?”

“D-don’t we al-already know that?” asked Liz. “Taken from within almost immediately, then slowly broken from there out.” She shook her head. “We don’t need to go further, we know why.”

His lips tightened. “I wish I could agree with you, Liz, but something is not matching here. There is apparent intelligence in what we are seeing. Something more than blind hordes throwing themselves into the slaughter. There needs to be a source of some kind.”

“And...I really don’t want to find out what that source is.” She took a few steps toward the entrance. “You all can g-go find out, but I’m going to wait o-outside where it’s s-safe.” She dropped the light and fled.

“Liz, wait!” called Ivan, reaching an arm toward her retreating back.

“She’s in it for the loot, Ivan, you know that,” said Alexandra. “It was all fun and games when it was just bones. This ‘refuge’ is too real for her, and she doesn’t want to confront it.”

Ivan nodded. “I expected her lust for loot to keep her with us until the very end. I cannot shake the feeling that we need her, regardless of what she thinks.”

Alex shook her head. “I wish I had your faith, Ivan. She’s a thief, and nothing more. Let’s go.” She picked up the light and played it around. Eventually, it caught an empty hole where doors had once been.

“There! The exit!” said Ivan. “Alexandra, could you hand me the light? I will lead the way.”

“Alex,” she reminded as she handed it over.



Alex wanted to hate Liz for leaving. Wanted to scream at the top of her lungs about her cowardice. But she had seen her eyes, seen the terror and pain. *She has a heart after all.* She huffed, bitterness at the refuge behind them threatening to take control. She fixed her gaze on the hallway ahead, the floor devoid of bones. Along the walls was a delicate gold filigree, tracing intricate patterns across the stone.

“I thought the gems and endless marble were a statement of wealth,” said Ivan, running his fingers along the wall. “But this is...extravagant.”

“Pride comes before a fall,” said Alex, resisting the urge to put a fist through the wall.

“As much as I hate to admit it, the best explanation for such extravagance is simple hubris, just like you said.” He turned away. “Regardless, let us keep going.”

The hallway ended abruptly, two golden doors swinging open on their hinges as they approached. The chamber beyond soared high overhead, the ceiling almost out of view. Towering columns supported the ceiling, decorated on every side by ornate mosaics, each depicting scenes of Andranine’s construction and preparation.

Alex seethed, her body heaving in rage. “Hubris? This room is an insult to everyone who died beyond its doors.” She stomped into the chamber, her eyes filled with fury. “And an insult to everyone who put their hope in defending against the impossible.”

Her arms motioned to the mosaics and golden patterns, the baseless luxury sickening her to the core. She spun in place, catching more and more of the splendor, bringing her closer and closer to retching in disgust. As she looked around for some reason, some hope that the builders hadn’t completely lost their minds, the floor vanished from beneath her, gravity taking hold as it forced her down.

She didn’t have time to voice her surprise, only reach for the floor as it passed by. Her hands caught on the slick marble, catching hold but slipping with every second. “Help me!” *Please, oh please, I don’t want to die.* A chill wind ripped at her, the dire echoes of two days ago threatening to overtake her.

Caleb dove, his arms reaching out and catching her hand as it lost its grip. The other half of her flailed in empty space, a gaping hole threatening to swallow her. He yanked, dragging her back from the abyss, his feet holding steady. Hand over hand, he pulled her back to level ground before falling into a sitting position, his chest heaving.

“Th-thank you,” she forced out, her breath ragged. She scampered away from the hole, flipping onto her back as soon as she reached the wall. The hole before her was so deep the light failed to find its bottom. Above, the ceiling had fallen through in places, snatches of sky peeking through. Most of the columns had vanished, their ridiculous mosaics gone with them.

*Serves ‘em right.* She shivered, her heart torn between hatred of the room and sorrow for the men and women who had fallen defending. “Betrayed by their own leaders.”

“What do you mean?” Ivan drew up beside her, his face transfixed by the hole.

“Where are the bodies?” She waved across the broken room. “Where are the people who died defending?”

“D-down the h-hole,” said Caleb. “Wh-why did we s-see something d-different at f-first?”

“Another illusion,” said Ivan.

“Something messing with our minds,” added Alex. “I don’t care if it was the ‘defenders’ of this room or whatever was bothering us last night. That hole *wasn’t there*.”

“Well, this room is not defensible,” said Ivan. “Consider the wide-open spaces, lack of choke points, general gaudiness...”

“Ivan, be honest. It’s a monument to thinking that the fortress would never fall. And it did, immediately.”

Ivan nodded. “It must have been a command center of some form. Thorough defenses are pointless in headquarters.” His eyes left the hole to look around. “But regardless of the...pit before us, it did not destroy everything.” He pointed to several bookshelves at the far side of the room. He walked toward them, keeping as close to the wall as possible.

“At least we can see the hole now.” Alex pushed up the wall, regaining her feet. “I...I don’t want to find out how deep it is.” *Hubris or not, how did such a hole happen?* No answer came as she edged her way to the bookshelves.

## Chapter 19: To the Very End

Liz rushed onto the circle, refusing to look at the veritable boneyard the entrance room was. Dead Andranine stared back at her, the vacant city seeming to taunt her with its very existence. *Quit messing with me, I'm not going back.* She still saw the carnage of the refuge, still saw the pain echoing through her mind. *I'm not committing suicide.*

*And you're willing to leave them there.*

*Yeah. They're going to kill themselves, and that's their problem, not mine. I've survived everything this world has shoved at me, and I'm not throwing all that work away now. Besides, they're trying to one-up Andranine at its own game. Andranine had years to prepare, tons of organization, and for nothing.*

*And what have you done worth bragging about?* fired back Porter.

*I'm still alive, despite having no one.*

*You and how many other orphans? What an achievement.*

*You want achievements? How about the robbing of the East Salezi Merchant Conglomerate? Or the time I evaded the Red Dawn Enforcer Company? How about running off with the majority of Prince Cornwell's accumulated wealth?*

*All that ill-gotten gain, just squandered away because you want "challenge" or "fun" or whatever stupid word you're using as an excuse now.*

*I do not make excuses. She glared at the sky, wishing she could punch Porter. You just don't like the fact that I won't do anything "normal."*

*The very first time you started having an actual challenge, you ran away from it, because it was too dangerous.*

*I ran away from suicide, not a challenge.*

*Who's the fool? The person who steals from the unaware and calls it a challenge, or the person who wants to find out what happened to Andranine?*

*You don't get it, do you? What happened here is simple: they all died. Kinda like every Darkening since ever.*

*Is that all? Sure you don't want to know if things are different?*

Liz scowled, panning her gaze across the empty city, its former inhabitants not helping her with the endless irritation that was Porter. *Shut. Up.*

*You just want to live your easy life, acting like it's all in the name of "survival." And the second something that might actually fit you shows up, you run from it.*

Liz bared her teeth as the scowl deepened, her breath coming in frustrated gasps. *Darkening come for you.* She picked out the circle and stomped into it.

#

Ivan stepped in front of the shelves, his fingers tapping together in anticipation. "The ultimate references, present within the inner sanctum."

"What's left of it," said Alexandra.

"Yes, yes." He waved the words away as he scanned the bindings, trying to find the best volume to read first. "*To the Darkness: A Tale of Woe?*" he quoted, his brow furrowing at the silly title. "*Forgotten Fathers? My Day with Olivia?* By Telthan, what is this...garbage?" He tried to find something worthwhile to read, but every title seemed to be some inconsequential work of fiction, a book of fantasy far removed from the real world.

"There has to be something here." He glared at the tomes. "There has to be a message of some sort." He searched through title after title, looking for a text on magic, or a treatise on approaches to defending against Creeps, or just an older history detailing the further past. "Nothing! No clues, no evidence of what happened, nothing! What is the point of all these worthless books?"

"I d-don't know?" said Caleb, edging away from him.

“You didn’t let us look at them yet,” Alexandra reminded, winking. “Perhaps we can see something you didn’t.”

“I personally doubt that, but I am done here. Go ahead and see if they are worth anything other than fleeting and pointless escapism.” He stalked away, taking a studied interest in the chasm.

He was tracing the extent of the rim when Liz walked into the room. She stopped just short of the hole and waved at Ivan, her teeth glinting.

“Uh, what, why, uh...” he stammered, at a loss. “H-how did you get across the refuge without tripping several dozen times?”

“Who are you talking to?” asked Alexandra.

“It-”

“I have spares,” said Liz. “Nice hole you’ve got here.”

“Who?”

*I am not carrying on two conversations at once.* “One moment, Alexandra.”

“Alex.”

*Immaterial.* “Why are you back?”

“Not going to say,” said Liz, jogging around the hole.

“But-”

Liz shot him a glare.

“Aha!” declared Alexandra.

“What?” asked Ivan.

“These books are a code. Each binding has a handwritten letter at the top. Well, letter isn’t quite right...I guess rune would fit better? Are you familiar with these?” She moved to the side, giving Ivan space to see what he had initially missed.

He stared at the strange runes. *How did I miss these?* “I have seen something similar in other books. Books on magic, in fact. It is part of the symbology of etched enchantments, similar to the portal circle we used outside. But some of them are upside down...” He brought his hand to his chin, trying to get the last detail to fall into place. “I have got it! This is a portal. Take the books off the shelves and find some open space. Keep the order.”

“We’re making a portal?” asked Liz. “To where?”

“I am not sure,” he said, shaking his head. “But it must be somewhere that was going to be used in case of emergency. Since the books were still in place, it is an emergency no one in here got the chance to use.” He picked up the books and handed them to Alexandra and Caleb. “Hopefully, whatever is on the other side is still intact.”

When the last book was put in place, a white circle began etching itself into the floor, its inner bound defined by the runes.

“I repeat, I do not know where this goes, but it goes somewhere *not* here. I just hope there is a way to get back.”

“Eh, why not?” asked Liz, shrugging as she stepped into the circle and vanished.

“I do not know if she has a death wish, or she is trying to be helpful. I am not sure which I am more comfortable with.”

“I like neither,” said Alexandra, crossing her arms.

“Regardless, this portal is the last chance we have of finding out what truly happened.” He stared at the circle, unsure of whether he could step within.

“Wh-what are we w-waiting on?” asked Caleb.

Ivan looked down at the circle. “I fear not knowing what happened, and yet I fear knowing what did.”

“We must continue on.” Alexandra’s hand gripped his shoulder.

“I know. It is too late to turn back, no matter what the other side holds.” He stepped forward into the portal.

#

Alex stared at Caleb, her lips drawn tight. She dreaded what she would see beyond. *More arrogance, more pride.*

“Y-yes?” He half-smiled, his eyes dancing around her face.

She turned away. *It’s the only way to know for sure.* “It’s nothing. Let’s go.” She stepped within the circle.

The room she stood in was an illuminated catastrophe. Destroyed furniture and shattered stone were strewn across the floor, interspersed with torn-apart books and papers. Amongst the detritus were countless bones, broken and splintered. She covered her mouth, the thought of someone being ripped apart bone by bone filling her with horror.

Around the room were eight evenly-spaced holes. She peered down one of them and could barely make out a square silhouette several dozen feet down. She looked up to find no ceiling,

only a pinprick of light far above. *We're underground. Far underground.* She pulled her hammer out, searching every hole for the Creeps that had to be coming.

"Alexandra!" Ivan called from the center of the room. "Calm down! There is nothing here to harm us!"

"It's Alex, you fool," she muttered to herself before raising her voice. "We're underground, and Creeps *live* underground. They *have* to be coming. Be ready for the worst."

"Th-the worst?" asked Caleb from behind her.

*Forgot about him.* "Yes, the worst."

"But there are no Creeps here, not even skeletons," Caleb said, tracing his finger across the room.

"What?"

"I am inclined to agree with Caleb," said Ivan. "I have seen none."

"Then how did they die?" She brandished her hammer, refusing to be lulled into a false sense of security.

"No resistance, or at least not lethal resistance." He bent down and picked up several papers. "Interesting."

"Are you an idiot?" She stomped over the rubble, wincing each time bone crunched beneath her feet. "The Creeps will be coming any second now, and you're busy *reading*?"

"Oh, hush up with the paranoia already, Alex," said Liz, popping up from the desk she had just raided. "Crazy ornate pens in this thing. Jackpot."

Alex glared at her, but shouldered her hammer. "Just stay close to me, so I can fend off the first wave."

"Yeah, sure." She waved her off. "Whatever."

"Strange," said Ivan, his eyes still buried in the papers. "This one says 'Front lines holding, no resistance after probing wave. Enemy stands there, waiting.'" He shuffled them. "This other, 'Front lines surrounded, enemies behind. Fortress holds.'" He shuffled again. "And this third one 'Fortress surrounded, none remain alive outside.'" He looked up from the papers. "If we adhere to the hypothesis that the fortress fell first, which has been corroborated by every door we saw being broken *outward* as opposed to *inward*, in addition to the mass of casualties, how are these messages possible? The fortress would have already fallen by the time of the second one, much less the third. Based on Caleb's dreams, of course." He flashed a smile toward Caleb.

"Magical messenger spell," said Liz. "Stage magicians in the east love using it. Animate a pen to write in mid-air exactly what they say. Could've been done here."

“So these were created by magic.” He shook the papers. “But why are they here? This is an evacuation room...or shelter...or something like that. Why would reports from the battlefield be *here* and not in the command center?”

“Backup plan?” asked Alex.

“That is one possibility that makes sense, but why would the papers be on top of the rubble and not underneath it?”

The mention of the rubble reminded Alex of the holes. *The holes where the Creeps will come from.* She pulled her hammer back into her hands, moving to the nearest hole and looking down again. The same square shape poked out at her. “Liz, do you have a light? I can’t see what’s in the hole.”

“Oh, Ms. Sure They’re Coming now wants to be Inspector of Unknown Holes?” Liz snorted as she joined Alex. “You’re a hoot. Anyways, here you go.” She shone the light over the lip of the hole.

The square shape resolved into a long, wide beam made of marble, a multi-colored mosaic glinting from the sides. “Wait. I’ve seen that before.” A chill raced through her body, causing her hands to shake and her legs to go numb. “I saw it up above. In the fortress. Before I almost fell.” She stepped back from the hole, tripping over a piece of marble and tumbling to the floor. “Impossible.”

“What is?” asked Ivan, offering her a hand as she struggled to right herself.

“Thanks. These are the same columns as in the command center. The exact same. The arrogant, stupid, worthless columns showing off the spectacular failure that Andranine ended up being.”

“They made duplicates?” Ivan cocked an eyebrow. “*And* buried them in holes deep underground?”

“No. No.” Her eyes filled with tears, the pieces coming together all at once. “There is no ceiling, in a room deep underground used for an emergency escape.”

“No, you can’t possibly be.... Are you suggesting the command center *fell* down here?”

She nodded, a tear breaking free to slither down her jaw. “They weren’t ripped apart. They fell to their deaths.”

Ivan stared. “But to create such force, to pierce stone, to shatter bone, they would need to fall hundreds of feet, without anything to stop them.” His mouth hung open, his eyes blinking rapidly. “The ground beneath them vanished all at once, and they came crashing down here. The papers are on top, because they were on top in the command center, not beneath in this room. They are not copies. They are the originals.”

“And for the earth to vanish all at once requires something.” She broke down, her hammer



falling to the ground.

“An intelligent something. Or someone.”

“Wait wait wait. You’re saying that this was *planned*?” Liz asked. “Like, drop the floor out from under them and watch them die, then see the entire defense unravel?”

“Y-yes,” choked out Alex, dropping to her knees as what little comfort she had against the Darkening was stripped from her. “They aren’t...just mindless monsters. They’re cold...” She sniffled. “...killers with someone...or something to guide them.”

“Th-they have no m-mercy, no r-regret,” added Caleb, his voice small and pained. “They k-kill because they c-can, because th-they’re t-told to.”

“It was over before it ever began. Andranine never stood a chance,” said Ivan. “Defiance is punished with a harsher death. Only by cowering in fear do you stand a chance of living.”

“Man, with fatalism like that, the Creeps would be doing you a favor by killing you,” said Liz.

*She comes back, but she hasn’t changed at all.* Alex stifled another sob and pulled herself together. “We know the truth now.” She picked up her weapon and stowed it. “There’s nothing else to learn here.”

“Wh-why does it st-stand?” asked Caleb. “No c-city ever s-survives the D-Darkening.”

“I don’t know,” she said, standing up to pat Caleb on the shoulder. “But I just want to leave now. It’s...too hard to stay here.”

“Have any of you...” Ivan reached down and picked up a red hardbound volume. “Seen some of these?”

“Why?” asked Liz. “It’s just an old book in terrible condition. No one will buy that.”

“It says ‘The Defense and Construction of Andranine, Part Six’ on the cover. We might learn something about what they attempted to do, even if it was for naught.”

Liz shook her head, but looked around anyway. “Yeah, a couple right over here. Looks like they were already here; they’re stuck underneath some of these stones.”

“What use are they?” asked Alex. “They failed. They got haughty and overconfident, and *failed*.” She spat the word.

“The depth of knowledge on display even today is beyond anything that my father told me was available before the last Darkening. The capabilities of this city, failure notwithstanding, had to have a source. These journals might just tell us that.”

Alex glared. “Fine. Let’s get the journals and find a way out of here.” She picked through the debris, trying to find the red volumes amongst the stone, wood, and bone. In short order, she

found a half-dozen of them.

“Portal out is over here,” said Liz, waving from the far corner. “Find the other journals?”

“Twelve volumes,” said Ivan, accepting the last two from Alex and situating them into his pack. “Quite a lot of documentation. I hope it bears fruit.”

“Let’s. Just. Leave,” said Alex through clenched teeth. Her emotions were a storm of rage, sorrow, and disappointment, the truth of Andranine threatening to undo her with each passing moment underground.

“I know it is hard, but the Darkening is horrible in every way.”

Alex opened her mouth to snap back ‘*You know nothing of the Darkening’s horror,*’ but stopped. “Please. Let’s go.” She walked over the broken rubble and into the circle.

#

Gerald fought and fought, forcing the vile beasts back into the holes they had burst from. Each corpse stacked upon the one below it, covering the hole in the carcasses of their enemies. “We’ll choke off their reinforcements with their own dead! This fortress shall not-”

His words were cut off by a low rumble further inside the fortress. *A defensive spell. We still hold in other places!* He smiled at the possibility. But the rumble grew louder and louder, closer and closer.

The doors to the inside burst from their hinges, the polished stone flying through the air and cracking when they hit the ground.

A single creature poured from the opening, uncoiling until it towered over them. Claws, spikes, and tendrils flew in all directions as it rushed upon Gerald and his remaining men. His eyes grew wide as he realized that his words had been lies. That the bright future at the next dawn had already been snuffed out. He staggered before the half-dozen spikes pierced him through, the will to fight taken from him. “There is no hope,” he gurgled out as blood filled his throat. “It’s over.”

#

Caleb lurched awake, his mind reeling. He didn’t say a word, didn’t make a sound, only lay back down and softly, silently, cried himself to sleep.

## Part 3: Knowledge Lost to Time

## Chapter 20: Losing Sight

Ivan looked forlornly in the direction of Andranine, its empty streets and abandoned buildings a reminder of just how terrible the Darkening was in its entirety. *Too easy to forget the horror as time passes. Too easy to assure myself that "it will not be me." Even those who are destined to live through it do not understand. The last Darkening will have become a distant relic of history.* A tear fell down his cheek. *The massacre of Andranine is just one of countless such massacres for far longer than history records.*

He forced himself to look away, closing his eyes against all he had seen. *There is so much we do not know, so much out of our reach. How can I, or we, unravel the secrets of the Darkening?* He looked down at the journal in his hands, the ink on its pages faded with time. *The people of Andranine clearly had a strong grasp of concepts that are beyond anything else I have ever read. Surely, they knew secrets we do not.*

So far, the text had been a dry accounting of the materials, personnel, and construction plans for Andranine. *Based on these, it was clearly a joint effort among several cities and not the single-minded determination of one city. They built Andranine from nothing.* The thought almost stopped his reading, the depth of their conviction sending chills down his spine. *I must find out how they did it.*

He was still searching for clues, secrets, anything, when Alexandra roused and relieved him of the watch. As he settled into his bedroll, the excitement of discovery left him, revealing the

exhaustion beneath.

#

For reasons she couldn't fully explain, Alex felt betrayed. Betrayed by what she had thought, by what she had assumed, by what she had believed. *Andranine fell before it ever defended against the Darkening it explicitly prepared to face. And someone or something did it.*

She scowled at the dark forest along the path. *Not just overwhelming and unintelligent force, but something both evil and impossibly powerful.*

*Simon, Timothy, you died for less than nothing.* The admission ripped through her mind, rending logic from emotion. She squeezed her eyes shut, but the tears came anyway. *They were never mindless, bloodthirsty cowards using darkness to accomplish their horrible deeds. They, or whoever controls them, killed you deliberately, and I couldn't stop them. I couldn't save any of you, despite my efforts.* She sobbed into the night, her sole comfort against the futility of the Dark Sentinels' mission broken into worthless shards.

*There is no justice in the Darkening. Andranine is proof.* Her sadness morphed into helpless anger, her mind finally regaining some control.

*That city doesn't stand because of carelessness, it stands as a reminder. Defiance will be punished, to the last man, woman, and child. And that failure will be memorialized long enough to get the point across. Destruction needs no memorial. Unfathomable evil does.* It infuriated her, made her want to pull out both hammers at once and crush the heads of as many Creeps as she could find, but ultimately she knew she was powerless against it.

*An evil so great it does as it pleases, every 149 years.* The thought chilled her. *And Ivan sincerely believes we can learn enough about this powerful evil to stop it. Break the cycle Telthan has had for millennia.* She wished she could have the same hope, the same confidence. No such surety came.

*I must follow him, because I'm not sure what I would do otherwise.* She looked over at him. *He said the people of Andranine had to have learned what they knew from somewhere, and he's convinced the journals have it. I hope he's right.*

#

Liz woke to the tear-stained face of Alex. *What is with everyone and crying all the time? What's the big deal? They all died fifty years ago, not yesterday. And wasn't the whole point that they were determined to fight to the last? Mission accomplished, I say.*

Alex, satisfied that Liz was awake, wordlessly settled down and closed her eyes.

*Living for more than one's self would be a concept you've never heard of,* chided Porter.

*What if I have, and I just don't care? I'm not exactly a fan of blind hope and maybe's. Give me*

*some risks, sure, but almost certain suicide? I'll pass.*

*The Darkening requires blind hope.* Porter's tone was somber, as if he was capable of crying.

*How is this my problem, again? That thing happened before I was born, and it'll happen again after I'm dead.*

*The people of Andranine weren't in that situation. Can you condemn them for hoping?*

*Well aren't you a regular little philosopher? I'm not condemning anyone for anything, I just don't get why the Crybaby Trio cares so much. It's in the past. We didn't get killed in there, minus the part I felt like I was dying.* She rolled her eyes, the memory of her argument with Porter much fresher than she wanted.

Her gaze drifted from the boring trees and path to the still magnificent edifice of Andranine, the faces of countless dead flashing through her mind. *I feel like I'm being watched by that city.* She looked away, more than happy to content herself with the normalcy of trees and the path leading away from the city. *Leading back to where? It's not like I got anything that I'm willing to sell in the place.*

*Not even the daggers?* Porter sounded suspicious.

*Of course not the daggers. These things are beautiful, but also deadly. Keeping them in case I need to defend myself.*

*Since when did you need to defend yourself?*

*Um, since I had to worry about Creeps all the time?*

*There are no Creeps in the bigger cities of Telthan.*

*Well no. Why would I go there? Following these three crazy tearbuckets around has been way more interesting so far.* She thought it matter-of-factly, then she stared wide-eyed at the path as she realized what it meant. *Am I crazy? Since when was following a bunch of overly emotional people a greater rush than making a random merchant just slightly poorer?*

*Actually considering being a normal, functioning person in society? I am shocked. It has taken how long now?*

*Shut up, I don't want to hear any holier-than-thou tirades.* She looked at the graying sky that spoke of the oncoming dawn. *Where are we going next, anyway?*

#

Ivan almost didn't eat breakfast, but Caleb's urging convinced him to take five minutes away from the journals. *There must be some clue in here, and I am only done with the fourth of twelve. In the future, I shall need to make sure these records reach an archive somewhere. They might not survive the next Darkening, but that is a century from now, and there is much to learn in*

*these pages.*

He picked up the fifth volume and scanned it as quickly as he could before a voice imposed upon his concentration.

“Um, Ivan?” asked Caleb. “Sh-shouldn’t we be m-moving toward a c-city? Th-that was the n-next to last b-breakfast I can c-cook with our remaining s-supplies.”

Ivan looked up, his eyes darting left to right on Caleb’s face before focusing on the center of it. “A city? Well, yes, now that you mention it we should be getting to one.” He stood up, book still open, and idly began packing his things, carefully putting the remaining journals at the very top.

“I thought he liked reading before, but this is another level entirely,” said Liz, smirking.

“No kidding,” agreed Alexandra. “We’ll just have to make sure he doesn’t trip while we’re traveling.”

“If he somehow finds the one scuff-up on this polished road, I’ll try not to laugh.”

“You won’t be the only one,” she said.

Ivan barely heard them, favoring the text in front of him, his packing interrupted by the need to turn the page. *Still more manifests of supplies, manpower, and construction status. Fascinating, but not useful to my questions.* He picked the full pack up, and idly fell in behind the others as they walked back toward Fartree, his eyes still glued to the fifth journal.

#

“So wh-where are we g-going after this?” asked Caleb as they paused for lunch. “W-Westbrook? F-Fartree? S-somewhere else?”

Ivan remained silent, his eyes still scanning.

Caleb turned to look at Alex and Liz for support, but was met by shrugs. “I t-take it we’re g-going wherever he ends up t-telling us, aren’t we?”

“If he goes anywhere,” said Liz, with a quick glance at the sky overhead.

“I am working on it. I can only read so fast,” objected Ivan, his attention finally diverted from the journal.

“Could you look into reading faster?” teased Alex.

“I am reading-” He cut himself off when he saw the playful smile on her face. “There are about four more of these I need to read. Give me time.”

“Yeah, gotta proofread them for the archivist, so they don’t reject it as worthless trash,” said Liz.

Ivan said nothing, merely eating some of the salted beef, his eyes still scanning the journal on his lap.

*He's a good man, but being dependent on him for everything could be a really bad idea, Caleb caught himself thinking. But we have no other way to figure out where to go. Instead of teasing the man further, Caleb's thoughts drifted to his dreams. I have seen nothing new. I thought I would know where to go by now, just like I knew about Andranine, and yet... His eyes shut on their own, his mind overtaken by sudden sleep.*

#

Littani struggled to bring the grand framework together, to lay the finishing touches of their masterpiece. Knowledge filled her consciousness, and forced its way into reality as she willed it. Hallway by hallway, the enchantment gained strength, filling the library with its magic, steadily warping the space around the building. *Soon, it will be gone to all eyes, save the few who know of its existence. May they live through the Darkening to come.*

#

Caleb's eyes flew open to the sight of Alex, Ivan, and Liz staring over him. "D-did I miss something?" he asked as the sight of Littani faded from his vision.

"You fell asleep, and we're done with lunch," said Alex dryly. "I do have to commend you, though. You got Ivan out of his journal for more than five seconds."

Ivan shot her a glare, but said nothing. Instead, he moved from the roused Caleb back to his latest journal, his things already packed up.

"I...saw s-someone else," said Caleb as he tried to recount the dream he had just had. "Her n-name was Littani, she was k-keeping something hidden from the D-Darkening, for future g-generations. Some kind of l-library."

"Odd," said Ivan over the spine of the journal. "You said something kept hidden, right?"

Caleb nodded, then hastily added "Yes" when he realized Ivan was still looking at the journal.

"These latest volumes keep on making veiled references to a place hidden from normal sight, kept unknown to most. Never specifies exactly what that place is, though."

"She was using s-some kind of magic, now that I th-think about it more. M-magic specifically to 'hide from normal s-sight' as you said."

Ivan lowered the tome low enough to give Caleb a pointed look. "Then let us hope that one of the writers slipped up and names or locates the place," he said wryly. "Else, there is almost no chance of us ever finding it."

"I guess k-keep on reading?" Caleb asked.



“Well, of course,” said Ivan, the journal already obscuring his eyes. “Did you think I would suggest something else?”

Caleb stared at the back of the journal, his mouth gaping in astonishment. He shook his head and went about picking up the remains of lunch and putting them into his pack. *Where was Littani? For that matter, when was she?*

#

Alex stopped the group as the sun began touching the trees on its downward course across the sky. Ivan had sworn to them he was almost done with the journals, and for their sakes, she hoped he found *something*.

*This waiting is tearing me apart. Even if we can't really go anywhere until we're back in Fartree, not knowing where we're going makes me feel like I'm further and further from my vengeance.* The word shocked her, but it was the only thing she wanted from the Creeps who had killed her friends. *Old wounds that I will never let heal. I need that pain, in some form or another.*

She tried to make small talk with the others as they prepared supper, but they were all preoccupied with their thoughts. *They're waiting for the same thing I am, even Liz. Since when did she care about anything we did if it didn't deal with looting?*

It was the first time she had noticed Liz's change in attitude. *But is it just an act? Has she really thought about sticking with us, instead of finding a new house to steal from?* It was too direct a question to think of saying out loud. *I guess time will tell.*

“Aha!” exclaimed Ivan, practically slamming the book in his hands shut, before realizing he needed it for reference. “This journal mentions a Library of Antiquities. More books than they knew what to do with, tons of magical resources, and hidden from normal view. Something of a veiling spell that has endured for at least through Andranine's Darkening. And you said something about this...Littani preparing for the Darkening?”

Caleb started at the question, his eyes going from the stew to Ivan. “Yes, yes she was. S-so it existed before Andranine did?”

“Well before. It actually survived the Darkening. Her spell worked! That in itself is a marvel, and compiling the other things I read in the journals, that Library fueled the vast majority of Andranine's defenses and magical capabilities.” His excitement kept on building, the pent-up energy of hours of reading releasing in mere moments. “All of their knowledge was drawn from this Library.”

“Where is it?” asked Alex, an eyebrow raised.

“Ah, that is the problem.” His eyes fell to the ground, his enthusiasm drained away. “I have not gotten any hints as to its location yet, but we do have a name, and how important it was. If it has that much knowledge, that much history of some sort, we absolutely *must* go there if it still

stands.”

“Hard to go somewhere we don’t know the location of,” said Liz bluntly.

“Quit your griping about everything,” said Ivan with a dismissive wave of his hand. His head was immediately buried back in the journal, ignorant of all of the questioning looks everyone was giving him.

“So wh-while he’s doing that, supper?” asked Caleb cheerfully, holding up a ladle full of stew.

“That sounds like an excellent idea,” said Alex, trying her best to look upbeat and positive, despite the gnawing sense that Liz hadn’t deserved Ivan’s scolding. *At least we have the name of where to go...we just don’t know where it is. As Ivan would likely say, at least that’s progress.*

#

Ivan did not regret switching watches with Caleb. *There are only three journals left. There must be some answers within them.* In an earlier moment of weakness, he had considered handing some of the journals to the others, but had decided against it. *I do not know if they will be able to read the context clues and synthesize this information into a coherent whole.* His eyes hurt from the strain of reading, but he kept going. *Only a few more. I can recover when I am done.*

Caleb woke up and tried to get him to go to sleep while he took the watch, but Ivan waved him off. *There has to be a reference somewhere. A general location. Perhaps even a map.* His eyes went back and forth, back and forth, flying through minute details of the city’s defense plans, searching for those few lines that would finally lead them to their next location.

“You really need s-sleep,” reminded Caleb after a dozen more pages of frenetic scanning.

“I need to know the answers. Those are far more important.”

“You’re d-driving yourself nuts. We aren’t even at F-Fartree yet, you have t-time.”

“No, I do not have time. I am holding you all up by not knowing.” He looked at Caleb and shrugged. “Besides, I have done perfectly normal research like this for years. Nothing like a voracious appetite for knowledge to ease the effects this would cause to others. Now leave me alone so I can read.”

“If you s-say so.”

Ivan put down the journal and picked up the next to last one. The cover was different from the others, with an actual title written on it: Magical Training Resources for the Defense of Andranine. *Why did I not notice this title earlier? It specifically mentions magic, too. This might just be it.*

He opened the journal to the first page, and a smile came to his lips. The table of contents clearly stated the “Library of Antiquities” as the entire first part of the volume. He turned a few more pages, and was greeted by a roughly-sketched drawing. *It’s outdated compared to existing*

*towns, but that's to be expected. It shows all I need: its position relative to Andranine. All we have to do is go east, likely very close to Mistvale. His smile turned into a grimace. Bunch of cloistered-off supremacists, but they do not deny travelers the ability to spend the night. At least not the last time I was there eight years ago.*

He flipped from the map to the next page, only to be greeted with bright red ink:

**WARNING: The Library is dangerous. The magic holding it under veil is steadily unraveling, and reality is not as it seems within. Effects are minor, but be on guard for anything out of the ordinary.**

*Hmm...that could be a problem. A building that does not work by the same rules we are used to? How would that look? And if things were minor then, they could be far, far worse now. No matter. We will just need to be watchful.* Satisfied with his solution, he looked up at Caleb. "Found it."

"F-found what?"

"Where the Library of Antiquities is. It seems to be just the resource we need to try to find out more on the Darkening. And it is also where all of Andranine learned their magic. Perhaps we can learn some, too."

Slowly Caleb's worry faded, replaced by curiosity. "Magic? Isn't that a b-bunch of performance tricks that p-people do in the cities? Liz m-mentioned them as people even easier to dupe than the average p-person."

Ivan ignored the reminder of Liz's less-than-savory past. "Well, yes, in a sense. But that is because there are almost no books on practical usage. Knowing how to do magic is trial and error. We know it exists. We just do not know how to harness it. Illusions are apparently the easiest form, since that is all I have ever seen."

"Oh. Th-that makes sense. So where to?"

*He still knows so little.* "Mistvale," he said, only to be met with a blank stare. "To the east of Fartree."

"Oh," he said as his eyes narrowed. "Now go to bed."

*I am not done with the journal yet!* "But there is so much-"

"I don't want to h-hear it, you need your sleep," he said, snatching the volume from Ivan's hands. "You can read this on the road tomorrow." He held it aloft and out of Ivan's reach.

"...Fine." He sullenly moved to his bedroll and fell asleep, his thoughts still abuzz with the

possibility of more knowledge than he had ever hoped for.

## Chapter 21: Mistvale

“We’re going *where?*” said Liz, her eyes filled with unmitigated terror as they walked out of Fartree.

“Mistvale,” repeated Ivan, his tone level.

“That place is crawling with goodie-two-shoes and xenophobes. If you aren’t from Mistvale, you get picked out and watched by *everyone*. Even Andranine would be better than going there.”  
*He’s nuts to suggest going through Mistvale.*

“And?” said Alex, unbothered by her objections.

“It’s just, well you know, xenophobes, being watched,” she looked between Alex and Ivan, neither of them looking convinced. “Bad stuff like that.”

“Being watched doesn’t bother me when I haven’t done anything wrong,” said Alex.

“Um...” Liz’s eyes found the ground. “Okay, so I might have a history in the city beyond not liking being watched.”

*You only stole half the mayor’s fortune.*

“And they might remember me.”

Ivan took the news in stride. “Well, you *are* rather well-known across Telthan, regardless of how we might feel about that.”

She brought her head up to look at Ivan, defeat spread across her face. “Yeah, I started running low on places I could return to right around the time I met you all. Not like that matters now.”

“But it does-” Alex started to object, but Caleb cut in.

“So wh-what are we going to do about her?” He regarded Liz with warmth, a slight smile playing on his lips.

*Not going to fool me, idealism boy. Don't even try to act like you're on my side.*

*He's not that much younger than you are,* corrected Porter.

*He's still younger. I can call him boy all I want. And I'm still not falling for his attempts to win me over.* She almost sneered at the boy, but resisted.

“Good question,” said Ivan. “We could simply have her wear different clothing, and perhaps a hood of some sort. They are becoming fashionable, based on the latest market trends. Ultimately, we need to keep her face hidden, as that will be the most recognizable feature about her.”

“Hey! I happen to *like* my scars, thank you very much,” she said.

“But they identify you far better than hair and eye colors might,” said Ivan, a hand raised in counter. “We hide those, and you are more likely to enter and exit the city without someone calling you on your previous escapades.”

Liz couldn't help but drift back into the sweet bliss of that night. *Oh, that was quite an escape. Poor guy was fuming from the instant he saw me leaving his place with his family jewels.*

*That's not what he meant.*

*Still a good memory.*

“Does that sound alright to you?” asked Ivan, waving his hand in front of her.

Liz focused back on the present. “Yeah, I can do something like that.” She waved her hand in the air lazily. “I've got a hood or two anyway. Helps with not being recognized from before a heist.”

“Didn't you just say you *liked* your scars?” asked Alex.

“Just because I like them doesn't mean I'm dumb enough to be recognized by them,” she said, shaking her head in mock contempt.

Alex stared at her, her brow knotted in confusion. “If you say so. All that matters is that we

don't have to break you out of the local jail and become criminals ourselves in the process."

"You make that sound like it'd be a big problem," Liz said, a toothy grin spreading across her face as she rubbed her hands together.

Alex glared, her mouth going lax. "You wouldn't."

"Nah, I wouldn't," she said, the grin still in place. "It's just so much fun to see you squirm!"

"If we keep on standing here, messing with each other," Ivan reminded, his own exasperation showing. "We will never make it to Mistvale, much less the library."

"If only we could skip Mistvale and just go to the library," Liz said. *I don't want random things from the past getting in my way.*

*And yet more reasons for living an honest life, instead of trying to rob everyone blind.*

*Shut up with your preaching!*

*Actions have consequences, especially bad actions.*

*What did I just say?* Liz felt ready to strangle him, which was no different than any other time he got annoying.

"We d-don't have the supplies for that," reminded Caleb.

She shot him a withering glare, but he didn't react.

"Going to get that disguise on?" Alex asked.

"Yeah, yeah." She put her pack on the ground and donned the hood, making sure to pull the front of it far from her face. *I can't see squat with this thing on, but I don't trust Alex would actually break me out of jail if I went without a disguise. She'd likely leave me there to rot.*

"Ready," she said, before slinging her pack back on and walking ahead of them toward Mistvale.

#

"Good day, travelers!" yelled the first person to see them approaching the city. Alex smiled and waved back, trying to make a good impression. *Xenophobes? Doesn't seem that way.* But as she watched, everyone within eyesight did one of two things: disappeared from view, or stared at them. *Okay, so I judged the situation too quickly. I thought the rumors were false. Everyone else in Telthan is so outgoing, why aren't they?*

She shook off her misgivings and looked around the city. Above her, tall hills spread in both directions, enveloping the village on both sides.

“There’s only one inn,” said Liz, her voice almost inaudible. “Smallest building in town, too.”

“But it is an inn, right?” asked Ivan, sounding worn out for the first time in days. “I feel the need for a bed to sleep in at this point.”

Liz nodded, pulling the hood back to its original position.

*An actual bed. We might have stopped at Fartree, but that bed was so bare, it was almost wood.* She glanced around at the others. “So inn first, supplies second?” Everyone nodded, their eyes distracted by the aloof villagers.

She turned to look at the villagers herself. Work, or movement for that matter, had completely stopped. *Just keep walking. The inn can’t be that far.*

The staring went from unnerving to frustrating after a few more paces. *In any other town, this would be unacceptable. But here, it’s normal! As much as I hate to say it, I don’t blame Liz for having some sort of bad blood with these creeps.* She almost laughed at the comparison of the people of Mistvale to the horrible monsters she used to fight. *They are creepy.*

After a seeming eternity of trying not to lash out at anyone, Alex spied the inn. The building was standing, but from there nothing positive could be said. The paint was peeling, boards were missing from the siding, and over half of the windows looked broken or cracked. *Their inhospitality is consistent, at least.*

As they approached the front door, a young boy dashed in front of them, pulling the door open and ducking inside before slamming it in their faces.

“How rude!” she said through gritted teeth as she reached forward and pushed back open the door.

The now-present clerk, a boy of around 14 years, stared at them with a look of neither indifference nor malice. *The same stare we were getting outside. It must be taught at an early age.*

He didn’t say anything to them as they approached.

*No greeting? It fits. It’s just so...wrong.*

She tried to stare him down, but gave up after the awkward silence reached its limit. “Good afternoon. My friends and I would like to rent two of your rooms.”

“Two rooms?” he asked, as if he’d almost missed what she’d said.

Her eyes went to the ceiling before returning to him. “Yes, if possible.”

“One hundred gold pieces for the night.”

“You can’t be serious.”



The boy blinked, his expression unchanged.

Ivan put a hand on her shoulder. “Just pay it. It is only for the night.”

“Fine,” she said. Grudgingly, she pulled out the money purse and counted the cost out loud.

The erstwhile clerk pulled the money over to his side of the counter and also counted the cost, randomly inspecting the heft and shine of many of the coins.

*Can this situation get any more ridiculous?* She almost said something, but it was only one night. She bit her tongue and looked at the out of date furnishings, the dusty tabletops, and the continuing signs that no one ever tended the inn. *I never had to respond as a Sentinel out here. In training, someone said they brag about their lack of Creeps just because of location.*

“Here you are,” said the clerk.

Alex looked back to see him holding a pair of keys attached to the same ring like they would bite him. She took them.

“Enjoy your stay,” he said, his cold stare implying the opposite. He picked up the coins and left the inn.

She waited until the door closed behind him, then rudely gestured in his wake. “This town is just so *irritating!*” She started counting off the reasons with her fingers. “First they stare, then they charge us way too much, then they leave us alone entirely. What ridiculous snobs!”

Liz threw back her hood. “Why do you think I still don’t feel sorry for stealing their stuff?” she asked, eyebrow raised. “It was one of the few ‘good’ things I ever did.”

“They are certainly an odd bunch, but we need to express caution around them. We still need to get supplies for going to the library,” reminded Ivan. “Based on their conduct thus far, they have made Felkirk look like a paragon of virtue in comparison.”

“Let’s j-just go to our rooms and get s-supplies tomorrow,” suggested Caleb. “I d-don’t want to go back out there more than we n-need to.”

No one disagreed, and they went down the short hall to the two rooms. The beds weren’t made, but the bare mattress was easily three times as thick as the one in Fartree.

*At least something is comfortable about being in this accursed city.*

#

Ivan woke early, before the western sun had a chance to crest over the hills shrouding Mistvale. *Some habits refuse to disappear,* he thought as he quietly got dressed. *Might as well assess the market. Or perhaps get some actual breakfast. We had to cook our own supper last night.*

*Nothing excuses their snobbish behavior, but it is not worth the trouble of objecting. We just*

*need to get supplies. That is all. Get supplies, get back on our own, and away from this elitist village.* He steadily emptied his pack onto the floor, leaving as much space as he could manage. *I need to get everything in one trip, if at all possible.*

The early morning was refreshing, the staring of yesterday replaced by deliberate ignorance. *I do not know which is worse, but it does not matter either way.* The market wasn't far, but as he approached, he saw the clear signs of bartering. *No need to barter unless they want to designate a newcomer who only has coin. And if last night was any indication, they will try to scalp me for all I am worth.* He inwardly shrugged. *I would like to see them try to bankrupt me on foodstuffs.* Despite himself, he felt a sense of triumph in the thought.

He approached the nearest stalls and confirmed his suspicions. *Exorbitant prices, but I can afford them.* He worked along them steadily, desperately attempting to ignore the clear contempt he was shown as he filled his pack with supplies. Eventually, he found himself at what he considered the most important part of the list.

"Sir?" he asked, trying to get the man's attention. "Sir, I would like some of those beans." *Caleb's bean stews are magnificent.*

The man lazily turned around before scowling at him. "Tough luck, I'm not selling them to you." He got closer, letting his height lend weight to his words.

Ivan's patience was shot. "Why not?" he asked, staring right back at the man. "I am willing to pay the price you have listed on the sign."

"What part of 'I'm not selling them to you' do you not understand?" He leaned down, putting his face mere inches from Ivan's.

Ivan almost punched him, but stepped back. "Very well. Good day to you, sir." *We need to get out of here immediately. I am starting to consider solving problems like Liz does.*

"Just get out of our town, stranger." The shopkeeper turned back to what he had been doing.

*With all due haste, I most certainly will.* He rapidly picked up the remaining necessities, the pain of shelling out far more money than things were worth almost more than he could bear. When he left, his purse was almost empty and his good mood even emptier.

The others were awake and in the front hall of the inn when he returned.

"I got our supplies," he announced as he shut the door and put the pack onto the counter. "Please double-check that I did not miss anything so that we can get out of here as soon as possible."

Caleb went over to it and began picking through its contents.

"No improvement?" asked Alexandra, her voice betraying a desire for yesterday to be an exception rather than the norm.

He frowned. "Worse. One man refused to let me buy his goods just because I am not a local."

Her face reddened, the frustration of the day prior intensifying as she stewed over the news. “If this is how people in Mistvale treat others, I have to resist the urge to wish a pile of Creeps to rip the town apart before the Sentinels can possibly respond,” she declared. “I might be losing said mental battle.”

*I do not blame her in the least.* “We just need to content ourselves that once this food gets redistributed among our packs, we are ready to leave. I doubt they will care to know we checked out of their inn. They will stare at us leaving, anyway.”

“No beans?” asked Caleb, his inventory complete.

“The one...less than courteous man.”

“Well, at least we have food to eat.”

“Could we please just rob them blind?” asked Liz, her eyes looking innocent, despite the suggestion. “And then dump the money over their heads until they die of it? Please, please please?”

“Just because they’re pompous jerks does not mean that we’re allowed to be the same,” said Alexandra, though she didn’t sound fully convinced. “Let’s just leave before we do something we’ll regret.” She retrieved their packs. Ten minutes later, they were out the door and out of town, their eyes focused on the hills even as they felt the stares of the people of Mistvale.

## Chapter 22: Behind the Veil

Alex crested the hill, a trackless expanse of rolling green plains and distant trees greeting her, the subtle shadows of Tablets pocking the landscape at regular intervals. *So much ground to cover, there's no way we'll get to that library.* “Ivan, are you sure you’ll be able to find it? There’s no path or anything out here.”

Ivan chuckled as he pulled the journal out of his pack. “Since when did you doubt my ability to deduce esoteric details based on limited information?” He flipped to the first few pages.

“Good point. How far to go?”

“If I am reading the map’s scale correctly,” he said, looking closer at the journal, “We should be there well in advance of sundown.”

She shot him a look. “You’re sure?”

He chuckled again and gave her a knowing smile.

Alex almost stared, but regained her composure. Mercifully, Liz didn’t take the golden opportunity to jab at her silly questions.

“Alright. Based on that ridgeline over there,” he pointed to their left, “And the general position of the nearby forests,” he pointed both right and far in the distance, “We should go this way.” He

took off walking down the ridge, his long strides forcing her to rush to catch up.

True to his word, he came to a stop shortly after the sun started its move down to the eastern horizon. "Let us see here. If I am reading this properly, we are oriented to one of its sides, though I am not sure how close or far it is." He looked around before looking back down at the journal. "We need to be close enough for the entrance enchantment to work. Do any of you see anything out of the ordinary?"

Alex did as he asked, but she saw nothing abnormal. Just more grass. "No."

"Neither do I," said Liz, annoyed.

*Must not like coming up empty. Fits in with her past.* The thought ashamed her. *She's not just a thief to me anymore, as much as I hate to admit it.*

"I th-think I'm seeing something," said Caleb, his hand motioning to their right. "It's some kind of sh-shimmer. Is that what you're l-looking for?"

"Yes, yes it is," said Ivan, his excitement growing. "Where again?" Caleb waved toward it, only to have to jerk his arm back as Ivan shot by him, his free arm outstretched. Seconds later, his hand was pushed back by an invisible wall. "We found it!"

"Uh, correction there, Ivan," said Liz. "You found it, with maybe some help from Caleb."

"Regardless, we have found the Library of Antiquities, unused for fifty years, but still intact! Just think of all the knowledge within!"

Alex couldn't help but share his enthusiasm as she joined him at the wall, her hand working its way across what felt like rough stone. "Stonework?" she asked.

"Watch for splinters," said Liz.

Alex tilted her head, unable to make sense of the warning. "It's a stone building. There aren't any splinters."

"Stone splinters hurt! You don't even know the beginning of it."

*I will not ask why she has experienced stone splinters before,* she thought as her eyes went skyward. *I think it's best that I remain gleefully ignorant.* "So what now? Do we just find the front door?"

"There is no door," said Ivan.

"No door?" *I hate to doubt him again today, but who makes a building without a door?*

"Yes. There is a passphrase you have to speak and it will transport you inside, provided the magic is still working. Considering that we still cannot see the building, I would venture that the magic most certainly *is* still working."

“Well, what is it?” asked Liz.

“It is...” He looked down to the consult the journal. “I wish-”

“*Stop!*” commanded Alex. “If it’s something you say, and you’re holding the text, you’re going to disappear with the book, and if we forget, we’re still stuck outside.”

“But it is just four words!” he protested, turning the journal over to show the too-small text to her.

She looked at him. “Do you want to take the risk?”

“Fair enough.” He knelt down and laid the journal on the grass, still open to the relevant page. “I wish to learn.” He disappeared.

“I don’t th-think I’m ever going to like all of this t-teleporting and p-portals and such,” said Caleb, voicing concern for the first time since leaving Andranine. “We always get s-separated. But if we w-want to find out a-anything, it’s our only option. I w-wish to learn.”

“What is with those two and running on ahead?” asked Liz. “This is like the third time they’ve done that to us. One of these days it’ll get them hurt. Or killed.”

“Since when did you care about that?” asked Alex, surprised.

Liz’s concern evaporated, replaced by slight embarrassment. “Uh...conversation over. I wish to learn.”

*That was the last reaction I expected to see.* “I wish to learn.”

#

“Where are we?” asked Liz, her eyes looking all around the darkly-furnished room, lit dimly by candelabras. An obsidian floor was complemented by mahogany-paneled walls and a woodless fireplace. A single door out of the room was tucked away into the corner, its mahogany finish almost of one piece with the paneling. *Not even the richest fool I stole from had a place this opulent.*

“Inside the library, I would presume,” said Ivan, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “Did you bring the journal?”

Liz’s mouth fell open as she remembered the volume still sitting on the grass outside. “Uh, no, I didn’t. Alex?”

Alex frowned. “No, me neither. To be honest, I forgot about it.”

“And I did not look up how to *leave* the library,” said Ivan, worry eclipsing his excitement. “But never mind.” He waved the unknown away. “That is a future problem. I just hope we find out what we need to, to include how to leave, in due time.”

“Hey, at least we raised the stakes of a book-reading adventure!” deadpanned Liz, her tone betraying her boredom at the prospect.

“Indeed, you are right,” agreed Ivan, missing the implication entirely. “So many books. So much learning.” He spread his arms wide to encompass the space beyond the walls. “And at the very least, we have the opportunity to learn magic!”

Liz’s ears perked up. “Magic? We can learn magic?” She blinked, unsure she had heard correctly.

“That is what I said, yes,” said Ivan, his energy fading to puzzlement.

“*Awesome!!!*” Liz’s squeal of delight forced everyone else to put their hands to their ears. “Oh, sorry,” she said in a whisper. “It’s just that while trinkets are cool and black clothing is good, literally lurking in the shadows has been a lifelong dream of mine. I’ll even read if that’s what it takes.”

“Well...I suppose that is good for you...” said Ivan, looking everywhere he could to avoid her joyous face.

*Of course it’s good for me!* She restrained herself from saying the obvious out loud.

“So g-go through the door?” asked Caleb.

“That seems like the best plan of action,” said Ivan, ambling that way.

*I can’t wait, I can’t wait, I can’t wait...*

*You have the maturity of a ten-year-old.*

*I don’t care, I don’t care, I can’t wait!*

#

Caleb opened the door and had to jump back from the scorching hot substance that flowed beyond the threshold. The heat alone had seared his face and made it hard to see across the hallway.

“Ah, so that is what he meant when he said ‘the fabric of reality is at best unstable within the library,’” said Ivan, his eyebrow raised slightly as he took a better vantage point away from the extreme heat.

“Um, what exactly *is* that?” asked Alex, looking between Ivan and the hot floor.

He considered the floor. “I believe it is called lava, molten rock. There are a few exotic locations in Telthan with it, and consequently are the only source for rare metals.”

“It’s so hot that it *melted* rock?” Her jaw fell open.

“Yes, more or less. As to why it is here, reality is not what it is ‘supposed’ to be inside the library due to the enchantment used.”

His explanation only garnered him blank looks.

“Anyways, there were some margin notes to the import of ‘if the door opens on something you do not want, close and open it again.’”

“D-don’t have to tell me twice,” said Caleb, pushing the door shut with his foot. The second it shut, the temperature in the room dropped. “Open it again?”

Ivan nodded.

Cautiously, he turned the knob and pulled open the door a second time. Beyond was an empty hallway, also paneled in rich mahogany, the floor a magnificent white marble. “That...makes no sense.”

“Reality falling apart rarely does,” said Ivan dryly. “Not that I have ever gotten to see it before now. This will be a most fascinating adventure.”

“Hey, at least we don’t have to step over corpses this time,” said Liz.

Caleb frowned, but she didn’t notice.

“What are we trying to find out, other than how I can learn shadow-related magic?”

“That is a good portion of my reasoning, though some further history on the Darkening is also something I would like to look for.”

“You want to learn magic, too?” asked Alex.

“We have the opportunity to take in this vast trove of knowledge.” His arms spread out again. “Including the excellent resources the people of Andranine used to put up a competent, if flawed, defense against the Darkening. Why would we squander it?”

“Reality falling apart leaves me uneasy. Shouldn’t we just get the history, and the answers it provides, and move on before things get worse?” She sounded like she wanted to convince herself, her expression barely hiding deep desire.

*What kind of desire? For magic? For history? Something else?* Her normally honest attitude was gone, and it unnerved him.

“If it has held up for around two hundred years, I am sure it will hold up for a few days, or even a few weeks if we feel the need to take the time. Besides, if we ever get attacked by Creeps, it would behoove us to be able to defend ourselves against likely superior numbers, right?”

“Fair enough,” she said, breaking out in her own excited smile.



*What is Alex hiding from us?* He shook himself, not wanting to bring division to the group after them finally starting to agree. “So we g-go look for books to learn with?”

“Oh, most certainly,” said Ivan, nodding his head rapidly. “Though I do suggest that you keep in mind the Door Rule.”

“If you d-don’t like it, close and re-open?” he ventured. Doubt crept into Caleb’s mind. *It’s where we have to be, but why? It’s too dangerous to be here.*

“That is the one. Anyways, let us all split up and learn what we wish to. Liz, I assume, is going to find shadow magic, I myself will seek some history first, and I am sure you all have your prerogatives.”

“But reality is falling apart!” objected Alex, her half-desire, half-doubt returning like it hadn’t left. “What if things go wrong and no one else is around to help?”

“Do you have a better idea for getting this done in a manner that does not take forever?” Ivan asked.

“How will it take forever to go together?” she asked. “We have enough food to last for weeks anyway.”

“Yes, I suppose we could go together until we get a good idea of the layout of the place. There was a map in the journal you left outside, and I did not study it that closely.”

“Enough about the lost journal,” said Liz impatiently. “Let’s go exploring. I have magic to learn.” Without asking for anyone else’s opinion on the matter, she walked into the hallway, looking in all directions for where to go before breaking into a jog.

Caleb stood still, Alex and Ivan going past him to join Liz in her almost-sprint down the hallways. Worry gnawed at him. “At the worst, I’ll learn something new, right?” he whispered to himself, but his voice did nothing to assure him as he dashed after them.

#

Ivan was surprised at how well the library was laid out. Each hallway had signs to direct toward every sort of subject matter, but none yet had the words he was looking for.

“Have we found it yet?” Liz asked so fast he barely understood what she said, her raw energy almost palpable.

“I am looking for it,” he said. “We are going there first, I promise.” *As much as I share Liz’s enthusiasm for knowledge, mine is general while hers is very specific.*

“If you say so,” she said cheerfully, her head bobbing to its own rhythm.

*And as much as I hate to say it, I do not want her to start talking about how she is going to loot this trove of knowledge. Best to keep her occupied on more worthwhile pursuits, even if they are*

*narrowly focused.*

Finally, the signs pointed the way, putting them in front of a door made of the same rich mahogany of the hallway trimmings, a gold nameplate to the right bearing the words “Shadow Magic”.

“Shadow magic? Aw, Ivan you shouldn’t have,” said Liz. “This is going to be so *awesome!*”

“Yes, fantastic,” he said with a half-smile, while he looked apologetically at the others. *They have their own things they likely want to learn, but we have to get Liz satisfied first.*

He grasped the handle and opened the door on a field of endless blue. He leaned in and saw far below the threshold a green field he assumed was the ground. *Is every door opening going to remind me that this place is not the safest? I might begin to be swayed by Alexandra’s worries if I am not careful.* He closed and opened the door to see a room with bookshelves on the three opposite walls and several cushioned chairs in the center. “Well, that is more like it. I believe there was a History room a few feet back that I would like to delve into...”

Liz bounded into the room before Ivan finished. One moment she was staring wide-eyed at the volumes on one of the shelves, and the next she was simply not there.

“Wh-where did she go?” asked Caleb, panic rising in his voice.

“This is what I meant when I said I wasn’t sure about this library,” said Alexandra, shooting Ivan a glare. “Now she’s gone to who knows where, if she’s even still alive.”

Ivan looked at her, the sting of being so clearly wrong burning his face crimson. “I am sorry. I was wrong. I got too excited, and used Liz as a scapegoat without meaning to.”

“Uh, hate to break up the blame game, but I’m still here,” said Liz, her disembodied voice from generally in front of him. “And I can’t see myself, either.”

Ivan looked at the empty space where the voice came from. *What is going on? Apparently it was intentional magic instead of accidental, but what sort?*

The answer came to him like a bolt of lightning.

“Ah, a latent invisibility spell, perhaps meant to be illustrative of what you could potentially do when you are a master of shadow magic.” He cleared his throat. “Or at least a capable user.”

“Yeah, all that latent whatever is great, but I can’t see my hands to pick up a book with. I guess I’ll have to act like it’s total darkness and I’m feeling my way around.”

“At least you w-won’t have to worry about people in M-Mistvale recognizing you now,” said Caleb.

“One advantage, I guess,” she said. “Though I might botch the illusion by socking them all in the face.”

“Regardless, you should begin with the theory required and such, and you will eventually learn how to remove invisibility from yourself,” said Ivan. *I want to get to those books, all of this helping her is distracting me from them!* “I do think there were side mentions of ‘minimum time learning a discipline’ that framed several of the decisions made by the people in Andranine when it came to training and the like. The enchantment might be part of maintaining such a requirement.”

“It would’ve been great if, you know, you could’ve told me about that before I went and made myself invisible. Now to fumble around for a book about removing invisibility spells.”

“Before you try,” he said, holding a finger up to stop her. “I believe that the ‘minimum time’ implies you cannot just look up the relevant spell and finish. You will have to start at the beginning.” *Now that I see its effects, the minimum time principle is a rather fascinating way to keep people focused on their learning. I wonder if the history room has a similar capacity.*

“Oh fine, whatever. Not like I care about such a minor inconvenience anyway,” she said, implying the opposite. “To the books!”

Ivan heard the light tapping of fingers on bindings, before a book came off the shelf of its own accord. A moment later, it jammed itself back into place.

“Okay, seriously. I just picked that up and it went back on its own.”

“Literal beginnings,” Ivan reminded.

“Fine...” A book came off the shelf and stayed that way. “Shadow Magic for Beginners. Cheesiest book title ever, but apparently the first one whatever this spell is will let me read.”

“The technical term is enchantment.”

“Technically, I can act like you’re from Mistvale and knock you unconscious without you ever seeing me.”

*She does have a point.* “Well, I believe you are generally safe so long as we keep the door open. Now as I recall, there was a history room on the opposite side of the hallway.” He turned around.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever, I’ll find you somehow,” said Liz, already distracted.

“I thought we weren’t splitting up,” said Alexandra, tapping her foot.

“A mere ten paces down the hallway is not splitting up, Alexandra,” he said as he moved to read the nameplate. “It says something about BD Minus Four and BD Minus Two as a range, whatever that means.”

“Fine, we’ll do things your way,” she said, joining him at the door with Caleb in tow.

“I appreciate it,” he said with a genuine smile that faded as he looked at her less-than-pleased

face. *Why is she so unhappy with me?* Her dour stare forced him to break eye contact in favor of the closed door.

“Going to just stand there?” Alexandra asked, continuing to tap her foot.

“I was about to!” He opened the door. The room looked similar to Liz’s, three chairs spread around a center table, bookshelves covering the walls. Except that they were upside-down. “How are we to read anything when the room is upside-down?” he asked.

“Door Rule.”

“Oh. Right.” He closed and opened it, only to see no change. “Now what do we do?”

“Wh-what about walking in?” asked Caleb, before doing exactly as he suggested. As he crossed the threshold, he fell upward to hit his head on the ceiling. “Ow. Question answered,” he said, rubbing the top of his head. “I highly s-suggest holding onto something b-before you walk over the th-threshold, unless you want to have a b-bump, too.”

“Localized gravity change,” said Ivan, holding his chin thoughtfully. “That is...quite phenomenal.”

“What’s phenomenal is how much time you waste commenting on the fact that reality isn’t real in this library,” said Alexandra. “It’s a bad idea to stay here any longer than we have to, and you’re busy doing none of the precious learning you’ve been bragging about.”

“Yes, yes, but think of all the knowledge in here!” he exclaimed, spreading his arms toward the room filled with books. “And this is just one room!”

“I’m thinking about how to get in there without breaking my neck. Knowledge can wait.” Alexandra’s hands worked their way up the door jamb. She stepped forward and her body flew from the ground to the ceiling, perfectly balanced against the hands gripping the frame. “That worked.”

“I am nowhere near as balanced as you are, Alexandra,” he said, stepping back from the door. “Could you perhaps give me something to land on?”

“How about j-jump forward instead of w-walking?” suggested Caleb. “You w-won’t hit your head, and it’s n-not that far of a drop.”

“I hope you realize how stupid that will look, but under the circumstances I do not have much of a choice, do I?” He took another step back and launched himself forward into the room, landing heavily on his back with a grunt. “I am not looking forward to leaving,” he said as he picked himself up off the floor and looked at the bindings. “So that is what BD Minus Four means. Interesting metric.”

“What?” asked Caleb as he walked closer to see what Ivan was looking at.

“Before Darkening number 4, or phrased differently, before the Darkening four Darkenings ago.

These are books so old that I believe aside from here, they do not exist any longer on Telthan.”

“Roughly six hundred or more years old?” asked Alexandra, her impatience finally replaced by blessed curiosity.

Ivan nodded, absently setting his pack down near the door. *At last, she is not worrying about the danger of this library and is seeing the opportunity to learn more than we ever could.* “While that is quite amazing in its own right, I do not know what to make of any of these volumes.” The excitement faded from his voice. “The language is different, more archaic on some and on others outright unintelligible. I cannot read any of it.”

“Sure that’s not a ‘minimum time’ element?” teased Alexandra, setting her own pack next to his. “Need to find the right book to start on being a scholar of ancient history?”

“No, this is quite directly the language having drifted too far for any of us to read it. We might as well find another room from much more recent times.”

“‘The Relative Merits of Defensive Planning against the Darkening,’” Caleb read from one of the bindings. “Th-think the people of A-Andranine read that?” He pulled the volume from the shelf and handed it to Ivan.

Ivan looked down at the volume, then back at Caleb. “How did you read that? The script on this is unlike anything I have ever seen.” He opened the book and flipped through the pages. “And the words within are nothing but gibberish too. Are you sure you read it right?” He handed the opened book back.

“‘The foremost concern is not allowing easy avenues of attack. Pathways should be constricted and locations should be uphill or on top of other naturally defensible locations,’” Caleb quoted without difficulty, placing the book in one hand as he set down his pack.

Ivan’s mouth fell open. “You...came from a farm, correct?”

Caleb nodded. “Tonsbury.”

“Yes, Tonsbury. But you can read this just fine?” Ivan tried to keep the shock out of his voice.

Caleb nodded again. “I th-think I know why. I j-just never thought about it before now.”

“*Why?*” Ivan shrieked the word out, the battle for levelheadedness lost. *How could he possibly know how to read texts too ancient to read by virtue of language drift alone. If anyone should be able to read them, it should be me!*

“Well, I dream of the D-Darkening. I’ve heard them s-say these older words d-dozens upon dozens of times, and on a f-few occasions saw the writings they had, t-typically prayers or other hopeful m-messages on the day everyone d-dreads. I just d-didn’t realize that they were d-different languages until now.”

“That makes *perfect* sense, how could I forget that,” said Ivan, slapping the side of his head in

mock reprimand. “You are a linguist of language and dialects long dead and forgotten to literally everyone in the entire world, except you. So in the random case that we need to read books written in the older tongues, we are prepared beyond all logical possibility. That is just *so* convenient to everything we need.”

Caleb’s happiness wilted into nothing. “S-sorry, I w-was just t-trying to be h-helpful.” His head fell to his chest, the heavy tome barely held at his side. “D-didn’t realize it w-wasn’t what you n-needed.”

Ivan felt terrible for what he had said. “It is not a problem, I just...” He put a hand on Caleb’s shoulder. “I am sorry. I did not realize how fortuitous your dreams are for what would have been a hopeless situation.”

Caleb looked up and smiled, the sadness gone.

*I shall never understand how he forgives so quickly, even when people so clearly wrong him.*

“Well, I think that means Caleb gets to be our Darkening scholar,” said Alexandra, giving Ivan a self-satisfied smile from behind Caleb. “Ivan, you could always look to see if there are any books that are close enough to today’s language for you to read, and we’ll let him get the ancient things.”

Ivan turned to the other shelves, ignoring her veiled barb. “Yes, that is a possibility. Looking further, they appear to be ordered by age and not necessarily subject matter.” He scanned the shelves for something that made sense to him.

*I cannot believe Caleb can read these older volumes. So helpful, and yet I cannot do the analysis and deductions that will be the key to understanding. No offense to him, but I am far more intelligent. If it were possible, I should be the one reading, not him.*

His eyes alighted on a book with odd, but readable markings on the spine. He pulled it from the shelf and scanned the first few pages, stumbling on a few of the unfamiliar formations. *Fiction!* “I do not have time for trifles and meaningless fantasies,” he declared as he began putting the book back in its place.

“Meaningless fantasies?” asked Alexandra, sidling up behind him. “Fiction book again?”

Ivan gave her a sideways look. “Yes, and utterly pointless.”

She raised an eyebrow. “It could give us a look at how they thought back then. See if there are any mentality differences or something like that.”

“I have no interest in deducing what they enjoyed in their free time,” he said as he shoved the book among the others.

“Well, find another book and hand that one here,” she said, gesturing with her fingers. “I might be able to read it as well, and I do like a good story.”

He glared at her, suspicious of her intentions. *Is she trying to remind me of my limitations relative to Caleb?* “Then how come I have never seen you with any books?”

“Been too busy since we met, remember? As a Sentinel, I wasn’t in a constant state of responding to Creep incursions, but I was on call. Fiction has long been the best way to pass time while I’m waiting. Rather nice going somewhere without moving from a chair or bed, you know?” She tilted her head and smiled, a direct taunt of his desire for actual facts.

“Whatever.” He pulled the book back out and handed it to her.

“Thank you!” she said, sitting down next to Caleb, his face already deep in the book Ivan had handed him.

*Have I been so occupied with Alexandra that I never saw him sit down?* He shook himself of the thought and went back to the shelves, trying to find the only worthwhile thing available to him: a nonfiction book he could actually read.

#

Liz had been unnerved at the sight of holding a book in her hands without actually seeing her hands. Had been. *This is like the coolest thing ever; and I bet when I learn how to not be invisible, I’ll also learn how to turn invisible at will, too. This is the best day ever!*

The beginner’s volume had been a bunch of boring theory, a simple overview of just how much shadows, darkness and fooling light to bend around you wasn’t a tool of the enemy, but a tool against the enemy. *Whatever, whatever, defending against the Darkening and other stuff.*

*Why do you care so little about the Darkening?*

*I’ll be long dead before it happens. Haven’t I said that before?*

*So why stay with them?*

*Wherever they go, something interesting happens, and now I’m getting one of my lifelong impossible dreams actually accomplished. Whenever they get boring, I’ll leave. Simple as that.*

Porter was silent, so she resumed reading Basic Manipulation of Shadows, the hovering volume proof that she was far from done with the “minimum time” Ivan bragged about. *I hate waiting. This had better be more interesting than the first book.*

#

Caleb set down the volume, his eyes staring off into space. “That...is some really d-dense stuff, but it’s almost word for word what was in A-Andranine. They even added l-liner notes on some of the p-pages, Ivan.”

“Anything atypical?” asked Ivan, looking up from Types and Taxonomy of Creatures of the Darkening to give Caleb a disinterested glance.

*At least he isn't angry at me anymore.* “The b-book specifically said to not try for underground rooms, r-regardless of c-circumstance. Said something about d-drawing attention to anything above those rooms and c-compromising security too soon.”

“What Andranine did not do,” said Ivan, summarizing for him. “And ultimately, it ended their defense before it even began. It might have been the fatal flaw in their plan, or it might have just expedited the end. We will never know which.” He picked up his book, his brow furrowing immediately as he continued to scan the text.

“Anyways,” Caleb ventured, forcing Ivan back out of his book. “Any p-particular topic we need information on, h-hopefully not written so dry?”

“Dry books mean that there is factual information in every word, and is the most effective means of stating details without flowering it up with unnecessary language,” said Ivan.

Alex laughed. “Yeah, you don't use unnecessary language ever.”

Ivan glared, but didn't reply, favoring Caleb instead. “The best information you could get us is the particular patterns of Creeps, or according to the book I am reading, ‘Creatures of the Darkening’. Whether they are in packs, spread out, continually streaming from wherever they stream from, that sort of thing.”

Caleb turned to the shelf and scanned. *I need to keep him happy, somehow.* “So, Patterns of Punishment: Defiance and its Effects?” he asked, reading off the first related title he could find.

“Well, that is not exactly what I had in mind, but it could work. How old is that one?”

“BD Minus Three, a-according to the shelf.”

“Does the introduction note anything like if it was researched, and how much data was compiled?”

Caleb flipped through the first few pages. “A-according to this it's a c-compilation of eyewitness accounts from a s-sum total of ten Darkenings, three Darkenings ago. So...”

Ivan's eyes bulged. “750 to 2250 years ago, give or take. That is functionally prehistory as far as I am concerned.” He smiled, his enthusiasm returned. “Amazing. This library has all of those details, somehow preserved.”

“We're sitting upside down in this room,” said Alex, her eyes not straying from the text of Trite Circumstances: A Scandal. “Its preservation is limited, and we need to find out what we can before we get killed by this place.”

Ivan sneered. “And what are you doing? Reading some pointless novel!”

She set the book down on her lap and straightened herself, seeming to tower over Ivan as they sat. “Would you rather I leave you here alone, so that you can die amongst all of your ‘priceless knowledge’? I'd rather be doing other things right now, but I'm waiting for both yours and



Caleb's sakes."

He tried to stare her back down, but failed, his eyes finding the book in his lap. "I suppose you are right. Read what you like, I should not complain."

"Exactly," she spat, bringing the book back to her face.

Caleb looked from one to the other, distressed. *Why are they fighting over something like books, or being in this library? What is going on? They don't seem the least bit bothered about their own disagreement, and I don't want to spark another fight.*

Giving up on mending the rift he saw, he began reading the new book. He was thankful the author had chosen to dramatize each "case of defiance," giving him a break from the dry analysis and explanation that followed each narrative.

Halfway through the second analysis, he looked up from the book and glanced over at Ivan, the man's forehead still knit in deep concentration. *Why am I reading this, and not him? It must be bothering him, and yet...I can't do anything other than read.* He drew his lips together in a tight line. *I know I'm helping, but I feel like I'm hurting at the same time. Is there no right answer?*

He looked down at the book, his thoughts haunted by worry.

#

Liz emerged from her first trip through shadow itself, then placed the book back on the shelf. *That was awesome! I haven't learned how to see myself yet, but if all parts of shadow magic are this fun I'm going to stick around long after that silly 'minimum time'.*

She fumbled around for a book that would stay in her invisible hands, and after several tries pulled out a book entitled Hiding in Plain Sight: Invisibility and You. *Who named these cheesy books? And they read like they were written for someone seven years old. Are these books assuming I'm dumb? Like I actually care, time to see myself again!*

The book was a pile of theory, interspersed with the occasional spell that, while dealing with invisibility, wasn't invisibility itself. *How long is this thing going to string me along?* She started skimming pages, skipping over theoretical basis, small one-off practical applications, and finally found the chapter entitled "Becoming Invisible."

*At last!* She ignored the section on turning invisible. *Why learn what I already am? I'll do that later.* Instead, she looked down at becoming visible, the spell a simple phrase. She thought it and looked down. *I can't see myself.* She lowered the book, making sure her entire frame was still invisible. *You've got to be kidding me.*

She looked back at the text and then saw the warning she had missed in her hurry:

"Enchantments forcing invisibility are not removed by this spell. Casting your own invisibility spell cancels the enchantment and allows this spell to work as intended. **Failure to do this will result in the enchantment being permanent until such time as it is removed with more**

**advanced magics.”**

“Oh great, now I’ve botched it,” said Liz to herself, dejected. “Nothing like some more reading to get this ‘minimum time’ garbage finished.” Grudgingly, she read through the book, being extra careful to read every part.

#

“That was an entertaining read,” said Alex, closing the book.

“Have you wasted enough time on flights of fancy?” asked Ivan, his scowl even deeper than normal from the concentration he was pouring into his own volume.

“Like it or not, that was useful reading. It’s a romance about a dashing young Sentinel and the wife of a merchant prince whose marriage wasn’t going the greatest. I don’t exactly approve of their solution to that, but it had some facts I wasn’t aware of. Did you know the Sentinels used to be both Town Watch and their current role?”

“No,” he said, his interest piqued. “I cannot say that I have seen anything of the sort.”

“Either it’s an exaggeration for the sake of story or the truth, but Creeps used to be almost everywhere. Cities had to have walls erected and gates attended to keep innocents from being slaughtered. Central tension was the woman losing her Sentinel to the regular fights at the gates.”

“Creeps everywhere?” he asked, stifling a laugh. “Clearly, the author was being ridiculous. Even *you* said that Creeps hide like cowards in the darkest places of Telthan.”

“I know, just thought I’d mention it,” she said with a shrug. “Besides, great read to occupy the time.”

“That is one way of looking at it, but you know my opinion on the matter quite clearly by now,” said Ivan, throwing a dejected glance at the half-finished Taxonomy tome in his lap. “I just wish reading this book did not amount to translating out of date speech patterns constantly.”

“Th-think on the bright side,” said Caleb, setting his book down. “You’re learning the d-dialect differences bit by bit. W-with some more work, you m-might be able to read the books I am.” He smiled encouragingly.

Ivan stared at Caleb, his eyes unable to focus. “Yes, exactly that. In no time at all, I will be able to deduce the language difference of centuries of change.” He looked down at the book, bringing it even closer to his face.

*I think Ivan has never experienced jealousy when it comes to knowledge. If learning magic wasn’t available to me, I’d yank him out by force so he can stop being so irritated.*

*She glanced at the book she had finished. At least the fiction of the past is still pretty good, and in some ways better than some of the terrible stuff I’ve had to read over the years when I had*

*nothing better to do.* She went to the shelf and looked for another novel to read.

“Th-think Liz is almost done being invisible?” asked Caleb, causing Alex to pause halfway through pulling her selected novel from the shelf.

“We *did* tell her where we were,” said Ivan without looking up from the book. “She will get here eventually.”

Caleb frowned. “Well, I’m going to f-finish this book, then go ch-check on her. I’ll give you my summary of the b-book before I leave, too.”

Ivan’s face curled into a sneer, but his tone was level. “I will not disagree with that course of action.”

*Definitely jealous, and passive aggressive about it.* She drew in a deep breath. *If I confront him, it’ll just be another shouting match, and Caleb will take his side.* She exhaled, and sat down with the novel. *Why does this library make me need to worry about far more than I want to?* She flipped open the cover and disappeared into another world.

## Chapter 23: Elemental Fury

*I really should be mad at myself for skipping the one important thing in that entire book. Liz put another volume back on the shelf. So far I've learned traveling through shadows, invisibility, casting false shadows, creating darkness in the middle of light, silencing my movements, and a few different ways to conjure smoke and other obscuring agents out of nowhere. She smiled, more than satisfied at what she had learned.*

*Quite an impressive repertoire. And to think you'd only know half of that if you had read the instructions properly, Porter needled.*

*Since when did you tease? I likely would know almost as much anyway, because this stuff is awesome! I can't wait to sneak up on Ivan and show him what I've learned, first-hand.*

She moved her attention to the bookcase, finally picking up Enchantments: A Practical Guide for Students of the Shadow, a very thin volume compared to the other ones she had worked through. *At least these book titles are direct, and no matter how fun it is to learn this stuff, I need to join the others before Ivan has a fit about being unable to learn things.*

A few minutes later and she could see herself again. *Here I was thinking that my beautiful skin would be lost to the world forever.*

*Give me a break.*

*I just did! That's several hours of not seeing me, isn't that enough for you?*

Porter was silent.

*Anyways, kinda cool that the invisibility spell includes clothing and other items in more or less direct contact with the body. Would've been awkward needing to strip down every time I wanted to disappear, not to mention how long that would take.*

She read through the rest of the volume, each enchantment being a more permanent form of what she already knew. *A fitting conclusion, I guess.* She put the book back and attempted to leave the room. Instead, she stared at a wall of swirling blackness. Within its depths was a single book, its cover plainly shown to her: Shadows and the Darkening: Cautionary Tales of the Darker Side.

She tried to walk past the wall, but found herself at the opposite end of the room. "Oh great. The stupid enchantment wants me to read yet another book," she said, crossing back to the door and snatching the book from the shadow.

The wall dissipated, leaving in its place the doorway. She almost walked into the hallway, then remembered her pack sitting in the corner. *I've been in here so long I almost forgot about it.* She picked it up, making sure to stick her latest reading assignment within. *I'll get to it later. I need to show the others what I can do now.* Her face lit up, her eyes alive with happiness. *They're going to love this.* She went invisible and stalked down the hallway toward the history room.

#

Ivan stewed, his irritation at his companions growing by the minute. *Caleb is reading what I should be reading, Alexandra is wasting her time with meaningless books that do not advance our knowledge whatsoever, and Liz is somehow taking forever to learn how to cast some shadows around and make herself visible.*

The book in front of him was so archaic, and in some cases outright impenetrable, that it was a chore just to read any given page and garner any meaning at all. *I am learning nothing, meaning that all four of us are wasting our time here.* He resisted the urge to let loose his frustration. *I suppose I can thank Felkirk for increasing my level of patience about many things, to include extreme inconvenience. Only thing he was good for.*

"Boo!"

Ivan jumped to his feet, sending the book airborne. He whipped his head in every direction, ready to give Alexandra or Caleb a piece of his mind, but he found them still in their chairs. *If it was not them, who was it?* "Who is there?"

Liz appeared out of empty air, grinning ear to ear. "Me, of course. You should've *seen* how high you jumped there. It was priceless!"

Ivan's eyes narrowed to slits, his breath heavy. "I am glad you found it funny, but this is not the

time, nor the place for jokes. Our mission here is too important to be playing tricks on each other.”

“Like the situation that we’re upside-down?” asked Liz, still smiling.

Ivan looked up at the ceiling, his anger barely contained. “No, that is not what I meant. And your *lack* of concern is *most* concerning.”

“So now you want to complain to others about not taking the situation seriously?” asked Alexandra as she placed her novel on the table. “Let’s not worry about getting trapped here or anything like that, no, we need to learn! And now you want to complain to Liz about a simple joke?”

“Yes, because I realize we are trying to balance our best chance for finding out more about the Darkening against the danger of remaining here too long,” fired back Ivan, all pretense of control gone. “Unlike you, however, I want to learn *something* instead of *nothing*.”

“I never said that,” said Alexandra, glaring right back at him. “I just want us to be careful about what we’re trying to do here. You should know about how to manage risks.”

“You will not tell me what I do or do not know,” he said, moving himself so he could stare up into Alexandra’s eyes. “No one does, and no one ever has. Now if you think that you have a better idea of the risks in this library, you are more than welcome to *leave*.”

“Actually, I think I’ll do that,” she said, breaking eye contact to find her pack on the floor. “And I’ll take these two with me. Enjoy the books in here, since apparently they’re the only things that matter to you.” She strode from the room, barely pausing to grab the doorframe for the cartwheel outside.

Liz followed without a word, disappearing and reappearing next to Alexandra, the wisp of a shadow following her movement.

Caleb looked from Ivan to Alexandra and back, his lips drawn into a tight line. “I’m g-going with them, Ivan. P-please come back to us.” He picked up his pack and hefted it through the doorway and jumping out himself, his back landing on the marble floor.

*Let them leave in their foolish ignorance. I have weighed the risks, and if they doubt me, then that is their problem. He picked his book up from where it had landed and found his place. I will not lose this opportunity to regain knowledge lost to time, even if they seem intent on doing just that.*

#

Alex rushed down the hall with Caleb and Liz in her wake, passing other rooms without a glance at the nameplates. When she was out of earshot, she stopped and looked at the other two. “I didn’t realize that he was so single-mindedly uncaring about all of us, and for that I apologize.”

“What happened?” asked Liz, her eyebrows raised in confusion.

Alex looked back at her in surprise. *She was there for the entire thing. How did she not get it?*

“He’s obsessed with knowledge at any cost. You heard it from him.”

“No, I get that part. Why was he so angry in the first place?”

She looked away. “He couldn’t read most of the books in the room; they were too old.”

Liz tilted her head, unable to match the outburst with the cause. “So what? Why didn’t he just find a more recent room? It’s not like this library doesn’t have plenty of those. Are you serious he got bent out of shape about *that*?”

“Not just that,” she said, holding up a hand before gesturing at Caleb. “Caleb *could* read the books.”

“He *could*?”

“Yes, I c-can,” whispered Caleb, his eyes staring at the floor. “A side effect of d-dreaming about the D-Darkenings of all of time is that I know the l-languages and dialects of f-farther back than history records. I n-never knew.”

Liz put a hand on his shoulder and shook him playfully. “That makes sense in a way. Crazy coincidence, eh?”

Caleb sidestepped, causing Liz’s hand to fall back to her side. “One of the f-few positive things about seeing people d-die all the time,” he muttered without looking up. “I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

*And here he is getting depressed again. Might as well save him from Liz.* “Anyways, Ivan wasn’t happy about it. And even less happy about how I decided to find some of the ‘newer’ books to read some of the cultural references that works of fiction always have. He’s convinced that a novel or something of that sort is a complete waste of time. Add in a hard to read book that’s barely readable for anyone not Caleb, and he lost his composure.”

“Yeah...that’s...kinda messed up,” said Liz.

“At least we’ve given him space to do whatever he so pleases,” she said with a smile. *Good riddance.* “I’m going to go find something to learn myself. Fire has always fascinated me; Creeps avoid it like it’s sunlight. Tell me if you see ‘Fire Magic’ or ‘Elemental Magic’ or something like that on one of these walls.” *I must become stronger, and being able to wield fire as a weapon is a step in the right direction. The fallen must be avenged by my hands.*

“Wh-what about fighting?” asked Caleb, looking at Alex hopefully.

“What do you mean?”

“Y-you know, f-fighting techniques, means of using w-weapons, that s-sort of thing.” His voice

fell to a whisper. “So I’m not d-defenseless if we ever get a-attacked.”

She shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Just keep a lookout for words like that.” Alex looked over at where Liz was, but saw nothing. *And she’s gone again.* “Liz, where are you?”

“Sorry,” she said, appearing twenty feet ahead. “I decided to skip ahead right quick, but didn’t want to interrupt. There’s a room about ‘Martial Arts’ with ‘Weapon Fighting Techniques’ next to it. Around the next corner is ‘Elemental Magic’, with ‘Poisons’ across the hall. I’ll learn about some poisons while you two get your other things done, sound good?”

Alex waved her away. “Do what you like. See anything out of the ordinary?”

Liz started to shake her head, but stopped. “Well, there’s a blizzard about a hundred feet down the next corridor, but it’s not in the way.”

“For now,” Alex said. *I hope that reality falling apart is restricted to weird weather and upside-down rooms. I don’t want to see anything worse.*

“Wh-what are m-martial arts?” asked Caleb.

“Beating the crap out of people with your body,” said Liz. “I’ve heard it works with practice, but I prefer using daggers. Much more effective.”

“I’ll st-start there, if you don’t m-mind, Alex.”

“Go right on ahead. You don’t need my permission for anything.” *I’m starting to see what Liz means about him not having a backbone. If he wasn’t always trying to make sure we’re okay with things, he might be more useful.*

They walked until they reached the room labeled ‘Martial Arts.’

“Isn’t this your stop?” asked Liz, gesturing with both hands toward the door.

Caleb said nothing, instead opening the door and walking within. The doorway was replaced by a slatted pine door without a handle or hinges.

*Minimum time to everything. Whoever Littani was, she was thorough.* “It looks like you’ll have to break the door down to get out.”

“Not s-surprising. We’ll s-see if I can m-manage it.”

*You’d better. Having you freak out again about not knowing how to fight is the last thing I want to see.*

She looked around for Liz, but she was gone again. *Doesn’t stick with me even knowing the danger of this place. And here I thought she was changing for the better.* She rounded the corner and found the Poisons room, its entrance already covered by a dark red cloud of gas. *So that’s where she went.* She turned and looked at the best words she had read all day: ‘Elemental



Magic.’ “At last, I will gain the strength to pay them back tenfold what they took from me,” she said as she opened the door and crossed the threshold.

She felt scorching heat behind her and turned back to find a wall of fire, its tongues of flame licking at the doorframe, but not consuming it. *When I’m done here, I will be fire’s master.* She smiled to herself, dropping her pack in the corner and searching for her first book.

#

Caleb looked from the pine “door” to the room he had entered. *No books, no shelves, not even chairs.*

At the far side of the wide room was a man wearing loose-fitting clothing, his eyes calmly regarding him. “Welcome, my pupil.”

*Is he real?* Caleb walked closer to touch him, but stopped short. “Are you real?”

“I am a maintained enchantment of the library, set into motion by the great archmage Telifor roughly two centuries ago. It is my duty to instruct you in the arts of unarmed combat. Now, defend yourself.”

“D-defend myself?” *What does he mean?*

His answer came in the form of a swift kick to the gut from the instructor, his illusory form made solid.

Caleb stumbled back, gasping for breath. *No wonder this took a legendary archmage. That actually hurt.*

“You must be prepared for a strike from any angle, at any time. Only by being attentive can you hope to first defend against, then defeat the darkness that lies in waiting. Now, defend yourself!”

He looked for the kick and dodged to the side, his bruised middle reminding him of the price of failure. One dodge turned into several, as the instructor flew at him with a flurry of punches, kicks, and grabs. Eventually the onslaught ended, leaving Caleb panting at the opposite end of the room from where he had started.

“You have much potential, and you will learn much in our short time together. Now, do as I do.” He began repeating a simple punch, which Caleb tried to mirror, only to be corrected on his form endlessly.

*I sure hope he’s right about me having potential, because I don’t feel that way.*

#

Fire sparked from Alex’s fingertips and flew around the room in beautiful arcs, the heat of it warming her face and hands, but not burning them. *Now it is mine to command, in whatever way I choose.* She conjured a fireball with a thought, throwing it into the fireplace where it kindled

the long-untouched wood. *Caleb won't ever have a reason to go into a deadly forest just to get tinder now.* She smiled at her accomplishment, then dismissed the wall of fire that had barred her exit, only to reveal a wall of ice beyond.

“Really? Ice, too?” She wrinkled her nose at the wall before throwing a fireball at it. The wall remained, unmelted. *Great. Should have figured that 'elemental magic' meant all four. Guess I'm here longer.*

She went back to the bookshelves and found the section on water and ice, her fingers skittering across the books until one pried loose. “Death and Deliverance: The Dual Purpose of Ice and Water,” she said aloud as she fell back into the provided chair. *What a cheesy title, but it at least makes me interested in something so boring.*

She began to open the cover when the fire guttered and went out, taking with it all light in the room.

*That's...not normal.* She put the book on the table with one hand as she called fire into her open palm. The room was gone, replaced by inky blackness. Shivers went down her spine as she realized what sort of blackness it was. *Creeps.* She stood up from the chair, looking everywhere to find her attackers before they found her.

*Hiss.* Fire flew from her hand toward the sound, landing on a Creep about to lunge. Flame engulfed it, forcing it into pained spasms before it fell dead.

As the fire extinguished, Alex was surrounded by the darkness once more. *I don't have time for this.* She reached out and drew the outline of a wall of fire, sealing herself off from any who would try to attack. “Come to your doom, you cowardly Creeps!” she taunted, her fear conquered by the strength of her newfound abilities.

Instead of attackers launching themselves at her, the room returned, the fireplace still lit and the bookshelves untouched. The firewall raged around her, defending her against the paneled walls and age-old tomes.

*They wouldn't dare to attack me. I am stronger than they are. I can defeat them with ease.* She smiled and dismissed the firewall, her eyes glinting with malevolent certainty. *I no longer fear them. They fear me. I shall have my vengeance at last.*

She recoiled from the thought, the word “vengeance” impossible to comprehend in its fullness. *How can I have revenge against the Creeps? They are numberless.* She almost fell into the trap of being powerless, then she remembered the facts. *They refused to attack me after the first, for fear of dying. They have taken my friends and my purpose, but they have not taken my life, and they never shall. Revenge will be mine.*

Somewhere in the back of her mind, a worry about how the Creeps had shown up in the first place attempted to bloom, but failed. *Should they try to attack me, I will be ready. Fire will not be the only thing I will kill them with.* She sat back down, opening the book to the first page.

#

Liz wasn't exactly sure why she had walked into a room on Poisons. *Killing people is definitely not something I want to learn how to do.*

*One of the few morally bankrupt things you don't do. You're a model citizen for everyone.*

*How about I model ignoring you while I get at least the basics done in here. I won't skip over any warnings, either.*

Despite herself, she took a wistful glance at the door now covered in poisonous gas. *Good job Liz, trying to learn things you won't use.*

*You said it, not me.*

*Just shut up already.* Setting her dislike at the material aside, she opened the first book that would come off the shelf: Tinctures and Toxins: Poisons in a Nutshell. *These titles are universally ridiculous.* She shook her head and began reading about how to kill people by the most underhanded means available.

It didn't take long for her to become bored and disinterested, her sole motivation the poison-filled doorway that she looked at at least once every few minutes.

*I need to focus and get this over with.* She concentrated on every word, leaving no space in her mind to process the strange smell that came to her nostrils. Her focus finally broke when a scarlet color obscured the text, making it impossible to read.

*What on Telthan...* She looked up to see a dark red mist, its particles like scraps of cloth torn into tiny pieces and allowed to float on the wind.

*That is definitely a poison.* She inhaled sharply as she shut the book, her eyes trying to find the source. She gagged involuntarily on the gas, the particles seeming to rip at her throat and lungs. *Bad idea to breath in, really bad idea.*

Every direction her eyes went, she found the same scarlet gas, from ceiling to floor. *This was not in the course book, and if I don't stop it, I'm going to die.*

She pulled the book back open and started thumbing through the pages, rapidly scanning for anything on dispelling a gas, or poison, or making her immune to either. As she skimmed at lightning speed, she desperately tried to keep from inhaling any more of the gas, something her air-starved lungs refused to do.

Her coughing got worse, exacerbating the gas's effect. Blood spatters stained the floor, the rawness of her throat writ in speckles and spots.

*This first book was boring anyway,* she thought as she threw it behind her and after some fumbling pulled the book Dispelling Poisons and Gases: The Magical Basis from its place. She gritted her teeth, willing her lungs to put up with the pain until the air was clear. She turned the

pages as fast as her fingers could manage, finally seeing the required words. A thought and the air cleared.

She fell to her knees, gasping for breath, her heaving spattering the carpet with even more blood. *Hope Littani or whoever doesn't mind the mess I made on her carpet.* She hacked a few more times, clearing her throat of the worst of the blood as it started clotting. "That. Cannot possibly. Be intentional."

She looked out the door to see the opposite side of the hallway. *At least I don't have to stay here any more.*

Without any hesitation, she emerged from a freshly-used shadow within the hallway. *I suppose I can check on how Caleb is doing so far.* She started walking that way, only to be confronted with black nothingness. *Nothing is not a weather pattern. What's going on?* She heard feral growls and the clack of claws on marble. *Oh great, Creeps.*

She drew her daggers, the light blades deadly extensions of her capable hands. The Creeps advanced, stepping from the blackness into the hallway. She didn't hesitate, stepping through a small shadow and driving her blades through their bare outlines. Two stabs and two assailants fell dead. She stepped back, surveying the third.

"Come at me," she said, daring the creature. "Do better than they did."

The Creep obliged, moving its massive form completely from the darkness, its six legs tearing chunks from the marble floor as it barreled toward her. It roared, fangs easily a foot long ready to sink into her flesh. Before it got within striking distance, it leaped into the air, its claws extended.

Liz shadowstepped behind it and watched it collapse onto the floor. "Oh, sorry, I didn't say that I would stand there and let you kill me for free," she taunted, enjoying the game she had decided to play. "Give it another go?"

The Creep snarled and spit blackened bile, the caustic acid eating into the stone at her feet. It advanced once more, its jaws ready to tear her apart.

Liz smiled mischievously and disappeared, her smile all the wider for the confused look the Creep had as it looked from side to side to find her. She sunk a dagger through its head, felling it as she popped back into view.

"That's just too much fun," she said. "Who knew toying with Creeps could be a game?" She laughed, her enjoyment of the fight better than anything she had done in years.

She looked around casually to find any more "threats", only to find four tentacles erupt from the darkness to grip her wrists and ankles, forcing them apart and wresting the daggers from her grasp.

*Are you kidding me?* She struggled against the strong tendrils, steadily forcing their owner out

of the darkness to get a better grip. Her head whipped around to see her attacker, its fang-filled mouth agape and ready to devour her as soon as it finished its plodding advance.

*If I don't do anything ridiculous, I'm dead.* Her mind thought of the poison, the dispelling gas clear in her mind. *What if I reverse it? I don't even know if that will work, but here goes.* She took a deep breath and thought the words. Scarlet-tinged gas filled the space around them, forcing the Creep's grasp to lessen as it began inhaling the tearing particles.

She twisted in its grip, breaking free as her lungs begged for air. *Can't breathe that stuff,* she reminded them as she fell to the floor and retrieved her daggers. She whirled around, effortlessly bringing the blades up its side and through its heart. *Or I think that's where its heart is.*

The writhing tentacles slackened and fell limp, the Creep following them as it crashed to the floor. She thought again and the air was clear for her to drag in the deep breaths her lungs demanded.

*I...didn't know I could do that. And I didn't know that the summon and clear spells were so similar as to be reversible. I guess poisons aren't all bad.*

*Hopefully you don't afflict any of the others with that gas. It felt horrible,* complained Porter.

*You can feel pain? I should take up masochism.*

*You would never.*

*Want to find out?* Liz smiled evilly, enjoying Porter's discomfort. She gazed back at the darkness-filled hallway, her eyes still alert for anything else that would try to kill her. As she watched, the darkness disappeared, replaced by the hallway she had originally expected.

*Since when did Creeps just show up out of nowhere in here? Reality doesn't seem like it's got as good a hold of things as it used to.* She shook her head, looking down the empty hallway. *I'll just check up on Caleb, like I was intending to do before I got interrupted.*

#

Ivan slammed the Taxonomy down on the table, his brow aching from being furrowed in concentration for so long. *A long-winded way of saying there are all manner of creeps out there, and an almost total waste of time. At least I was not disturbed by anyone. They have already established their disinterest in taking advantage of the knowledge available to us. Even so, I wonder if they have realized the error of their ways.*

He poked his head out the door, only to be reminded that the room was upside-down. Feeling his head pulled down and his body pulled up so unsettled him that he almost threw up.

*Not what I wanted to feel.* He looked around the room, his eyes tearing up as he recalled that he couldn't read any of them. *If only I could, then just maybe we would know how to end the madness of the Darkening. Regardless, I need to find a room where I can learn something.*

He dove through the door, tilting in midair to land on his feet. *Why did I not do that earlier? It is far less embarrassing to do than falling on my back.*

As he looked down the hallway, his worries left him. *This library is a gift that we should not squander, no matter the risks.* He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, filling his nostrils with the faint scent of texts far older than himself. *They smell like dust and smoke.*

His eyes flew open. *Smoke? That makes no sense.* He looked behind him, only to be confronted with a raging fire, its tongues licking on the paneled wood and steadily spreading toward him along the walls. *A wildfire? In here?* He stumbled backward a step as the inferno advanced into the room he had just left, consuming all in its path. *More knowledge lost forever.* A tear came to his eye. *I could not save it.*

His expression hardened as he began walking backward. *I will not let any more knowledge be lost. Never again.* He turned and sprinted away from the fire, only slowing down when he could no longer hear the crackle of embers.

*I must find out how to protect the rest of this knowledge, no matter the cost. The Darkening has taken our history, but I will see it restored.* He stalked the hallways, certain of what he had to do.

#

The wall of ice fell away, only to reveal a web of lightning blocking her path. Alex trudged back to the bookshelves, fishing out the primer on air magic. As she read, the concepts disgusted her. *It wants me to channel my emotions? Who came up with this garbage? Emotions get people killed in the heat of battle.*

She scowled at the text, but completed it anyway, going through the motions required to make the lightning vanish. In its place was a wall of stone. *I sure hope this is the last one. This is getting tiring.*

Her hands closed on the first book, opening it to start her final course of study. She had just tilted her head down to read when the room was plunged into darkness.

*Again? This does not bode well.* She put the book to the side and looked around for the attackers sure to come. *Might as well use some of my new abilities to get rid of them quickly.*

She left the chair, holding up her hand as icicles sprang to life in a ring around her wrist, using her other hand to craft a fireball. She saw no movement for what seemed like an eternity.

A swarm of hounds erupted from all directions, their jaws snapping in anticipation of closing on her flesh. She sent the ring of icicles into the first wave to approach her, felling them all.

The second wave howled its entry, and she let loose an arc of lightning powerful enough to burn them into a congealed mass. *Convenient that I'm annoyed at being interrupted by reality falling apart.*

Another wave leaped at her, but were met by a cone of fire, incinerating them halfway through their dash. The snarling stopped, the only sound remaining the crackle of her orb of fire. She looked in all directions, ready for another attack, but nothing came.

“You will learn to fear me, creatures of the dark.” She scowled. “I am your doom, come to find and kill you, no matter where you lurk.”

As she spoke, the room returned, the darkness gone as suddenly as it had arrived. She let the scowl lift, her attention shifting to the book she had left on the table. *Now to finish my studies.*

## Chapter 24: Learned Purpose

Caleb hurt everywhere. Where he wasn't bruised, he was sore from stressing muscles he didn't know he had. *Ow, ow, ow.* He dragged himself off the floor for the umpteenth time. *Another sparring match I failed.* He righted himself, descending into a fighting stance again.

Instead of launching at him, the instructor smiled. "You have learned much, and you are ready to move on. There is just one lesson remaining." He stretched his hands out in front of him, a small pine board appearing between them. "Break with your fist."

Caleb looked from the board, to the instructor, to the pine "door" behind him. *Can I even do that?*

"Break with your fist."

*Only way I'm getting out of here.* He advanced, throwing his entire weight behind his fist as he drove it into the board. His hand rebounded, a shockwave of agony echoing back down his arm.

"You must focus all of your energy on the very front of your fist, precisely moving the blow to put all of the force on a single point. Only then will this board break." The instructor's steady calm was frustrating for the first time.

"How do I do that?" The instructor was silent, forcing Caleb to ready himself for another attempt. He gritted his teeth against the pain he knew was coming, then struck out again. He



wincing as the board held strong, his knuckles stinging as his hand untightened.

“Focus the force. Do not scatter it.”

*Really helpful words.* Despite his lack of confidence, he punched the board several more times, the skin on his hand finally tearing from failure. “This is impossible! What am I supposed to do?”

A growl answered him as the room’s light dimmed, black shadows seeping into every corner. The instructor was gone, the board awkwardly suspended in space without the illusion to anchor it. In his place was a black, humanoid form, claws spread wide as it leaned forward to leap onto Caleb.

Almost on reflex, Caleb dropped into a fighting stance, his eyes alert for the first move. It jumped forward and he ducked to the side, grabbing one of the arms and redirecting the force of its movement away from him.

It crashed into the wall, collapsing to the floor. It slowly recovered, snarling as it turned to face him.

Caleb didn’t give it the opportunity, stepping between its legs and kicking one of them out, throwing it to the ground again. “Leave me alone!” He drove his heel down and through the skull of the Creep, spilling its brain onto the floor.

Light returned to the room, the instructor faintly saying, “Break with your fist.”

He heard a sizzling sound at his feet. *The blood!* He tore at the ichor-coated boot, pulling it off just as it ate through the leather. He stared at the destroyed shoe, then the corpse behind it, its skull a shattered mess. *Did I just kill that thing by putting my foot through its skull? How?* His mind reeled as he remembered what he had done, the proof of the impossible lying dead at his feet. “If I can kill a Creep with my foot, I can break a board with my fist.” He turned, his eyes focused on the flimsy piece of wood.

His punch was rewarded with a satisfying crack as the board split, falling to the ground in two pieces. He put the same fist through the door, followed by a kick. Within moments, the door was in enough pieces that he could walk out. *I’m going to need some new shoes.* He opened his pack and pulled out the spare pair of boots, discarding the lone shoe.

Smiling, he walked to the second door. “Weapon Fighting Techniques,” he quoted from the nameplate, opening the door and stepping within.

#

Ivan stalked the hallways, searching for either his friends or for more knowledge to learn, to cherish, to guard at all costs. He found exactly what he was looking for. “Light magic,” he proclaimed, his face brightening at the sound of it. *The magic of turning darkest night into brightest day, of illuminating the dark unknown with all-knowing light.*

He opened the door and peered inside, reaching his arm limply through to make sure that he wasn't about to land on his head. Everything looked and felt normal, so he stepped over the threshold, looking back in expectation of the obstacle barring his path.

A darkness blacker than black gaped back at him.

Ivan sneered at the shadow. "As sure as the dawn crests over the western sky, I will banish you."

He turned to the shelves, fumbling about until the first text came into his hands: Blinking Light: Punishing the Darkness. "Punishment that is deserved, for the darkness has slain for all of history, taking history itself with it. I know its crimes, and I will not let them continue." He opened the book, his eyes ablaze with righteous purpose.

#

Liz rounded the corner, strolling over to where she had last seen Caleb. One of the doors was shattered, pieces of wood splintered into the hallway. *Wow, did Caleb do that?* She stared, the realization confirmed as she looked from it to the other door, an iron padlock holding it shut. *It's...* she read the nameplate. *A weapons room, not lockpicking. How is he supposed to get out?* She shook her head, perplexed at the locked door.

Before she could come up with an answer, she felt a low rumble off to her right. The floor was rolling in a wave toward her. *Wait, what? What does a floor rolling have to do with weird weather?* The rumble got louder and closer, eventually getting close enough that she saw the the marble pushed from its place, shoved to the side by the thing underneath. *That's...not weather.*

She dodged to the side as the wave reached her, twisting in midair to land facing it. The ground before her exploded, showering chunks of marble and dirt. She brought up her arms and squinted through them, trying to see the cause. She saw the rough outline of an insectoid shape right as the room went pitch black.

*Not this again.* Her ears perked up, immediately picking up her useless eyes' slack. She heard skittering that petered off into silence.

*It jumped at me.* She fell to the ground, mere moments before she felt the rush of wind over her head, the creature missing her by inches. It landed, screeching loudly on the marble. She held her hands to her ears as she regained her feet, the piercing sound tearing through them anyway.

The skittering began again, clacking louder and louder toward her. *I need to take the fight to it, or it'll run me over.*

Looking toward the sound, she drew her daggers and shadowstepped above the Creep, falling onto its back. It bucked, almost throwing her, but she straddled it and leaned low, stabbing down onto the carapace. The dagger rebounded, the tough hide untouched. *Great, it's armored. Had to make things hard on me, didn't you?* The creature answered by skidding to a screeching halt, throwing Liz.

“See if I care!” she yelled as she flipped and landed feet-first, a thought carrying her behind where the Creep had stopped. It barreled away from her, trampling the spot she had just left. *Predictable, but powerful. It has to have some kind of weakness. Right?*

*I’m not so sure...* Porter sounded terrified, fear infusing each word.

*Don’t be such a baby.*

The thing stopped and skittered in place before speeding at her once more. *How does it see me in this darkness?* She had no time to think about it, and instead teleported onto its back again, closer to what she supposed was its front. It bucked harder, forcing her to lose a dagger so she could grab hold of its soft flesh.

*Its soft flesh!* She stabbed down and through the skin, tearing a ragged line through the creature as it bucked again, throwing her, but pulling the dagger even further through its skin before the twist of her wrist forced her to let go.

She tumbled into a crouch, her hands reaching for another pair of daggers, ready for its next charge. *And to think Alex said I was stupid to get several of them.*

Instead, it roared in agony, drowning out the quiet hiss of ichor as it hit the floor. It roared again, weaker, with a slight gurgle to its pain. Then it whimpered, before falling with a thud, leaving only hissing in its wake.

“Die, you jerk.” She stowed her daggers before massaging her twisted wrist.

Light returned to the hallway, forcing Liz to shut her eyes against it. When she could open them, she took in the wrecked hallway, and the massive dead thing at her feet. It was over six feet from head to end, dozens of legs splayed at odd angles, each of them a chitinous spike just as sharp as her daggers. Its back was an armored mass of interlocking plates, with no place to wedge a blade between. Its head was topped with a rigid horn. *So that’s how it burrowed through marble to get here. From wherever.* In the middle was its neck, torn open by her dagger, its head half-severed by the long cut.

“Can’t take a simple stab, can you?” she taunted, smiling to herself. *And you said it had no weakness.*

*Don’t remind me.*

Liz’s eyebrows went up as her smile grew even wider. *So now it’s you telling me to not remind you of things? My, have the tables turned.* She looked behind her at the other hallway. *I wonder if Alex is done yet. Elemental magic can’t take that long, right?*

#

Alex smiled to herself, her studies complete. *I command fire, air, water, and earth, and their many forms.* The smile broadened, then a thought struck her. *I wonder if I can channel the*

*elements onto my hammer...*

She pulled her trusty hammer from her pack, hefting it, the memories of battles hard won echoing through her mind. *How fitting for it to be the instrument of their demise, the same thing that allowed me to live to see them dead.* Her eyes lit up as she made it erupt in flame, only to watch the time-worn metal rapidly melt into an unrecognizable hunk.

*My hammer!* She stopped the flame, but it was too late.

Her pride evaporated, her feeling of fitting justice gone on the tides of loss. *My hammer...my one physical reminder of my duty to my fallen friends. It's been with me through the good and the bad, through death and life. And I...I destroyed it.* Tears poured out of her, guilt welling up to match her sorrow. *My surest friend when every other friend was taken from me. Now nothing but a piece of metal.*

She advanced to the fireplace, placing the destroyed hammer on the hearth. *Goodbye, my last friend.* She closed her eyes as she willed it ablaze again, the white-hot flame reducing the hammer to a puddle of molten steel.

Alex turned away, her downcast eyes seeing the hammer she had avoided. *Telabride, Liz's weird name for the thing. Maybe it can handle the temperature, and if it can't, I'll be rid of the worthless thing.*

She hefted it loosely, the lightness of it unnerving compared to the certain weight she had held for years. *It's what I've got now, so might as well use it.* She called forth fire again.

The hammer did not warp, nor melt, holding its strength despite the scorching heat. *That is all I need to know.* She dismissed the magic, placing the hammer back on her pack. She looked at the remaining rock wall and with a casual wave dismissed it.

Outside was a very surprised Liz. "Oh, you're done? What took you so long?"

Alex looked her over, her black clothing covered in fine dust, her hair a mess, and her smile abnormally wide. "What happened?"

"Oh, nothing," she said with a shrug. "Just killed this weird burrowing Creep in total darkness, no big deal."

"A *what?*" Alex stormed into the hallway, her eyes taking in the corpse, the broken marble, the defaced wall paneling. "How?"

"Shadows, sound, thinking on my feet. You know, the usual things when in a *life or death situation.*"

"No, I mean the Creep. How did it get here?"

Liz shrugged again. "I'm not Ivan, you know. I just deal with problems when they show up. I don't read fifteen books about why they happened."

*Creeps in the hallways, too?* It worried her, the simple games of killing a few during her studying seeming very silly in comparison. “Have you seen any others?”

She nodded. “Yeah, a couple easy ones, then this tentacle-thing that splayed me out and was about to eat me. It ate some sort of scarlet gas instead, courtesy of me.” She smiled, her worry already gone.

*Simon died that way. I’m so sorry...* She pulled herself away from the dark thought and focused on what Liz had said. “Scarlet gas?”

“Yeah...it rips the throat and lungs to pieces somehow. Don’t inhale that stuff, it’s agony even after it’s gone.”

“How do you know that?”

“Enchantment went wrong,” she said flippantly. “I figured it out, else I’d be dead. Anyways, I don’t like what I’m seeing.”

The thought of Liz dying because of something going wrong unsettled her. She looked away. *I don’t want her to die to things like that.*

Alex did a mental double-take. *Since when did I care about her? Since when was she worth caring about?* She kept her expression steady. “Creeps everywhere you look?” She glanced back at the room she had just exited.

Liz picked up on the hint. “Seen your own?”

“Killed my own,” she corrected. “Cowardly monsters who deserve no mercy. And they’re everywhere in here, it seems.” She frowned, showing her worry as best she could. “I’ve learned what I need, and this place is unsettling me the longer we stay here. The last place I want to be is inside when it collapses.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to be here either. I want to have fun with shadows for longer, it’s just so *awesome!*”

“We need to find the others. Is Caleb still training around the corner?”

Liz nodded.

“Good. That’s one person down. We need to find where Ivan wandered to, if he’s moved at all. I may hate his obsession with being smarter than all of us, but I don’t want him to die here.”

“If it comes down to him or me, I’m picking me. Just so you’re aware.”

*That’s where Liz went.* Alex walked around the pile of rubble the hallway had become, turning the corner to wait for Caleb.

Ivan's eyes were alive with new-found knowledge, his pace through the trivially simple introduction to light magic, and a dozen books besides, likely unmatched in the history of Telthan. *A history that we may actually know thanks to this library. With its knowledge, we will be prepared for the Darkening at last.* "Knowledge that I will protect, for all of Telthan must know what we face, and how to stop it."

His hand rose in triumph at his calling, light radiating out from it in circles. "Light is the counter to dark. Nothing can hide from it, not even darkness itself." *A declaration backed by empirical evidence of Creeps getting weaker when confronted by light. They cannot handle it, so they hide in the shadows.*

He strengthened the blinding brilliance, ridding the room of all its shadow. *No evil can behold the light and survive.* He closed his eyes, an inner peace descending on him, his purpose sure, his power apparent. *I must protect this knowledge, and I am more than adequate for the task.*

He let go of the light, its brightness gone as he opened his eyes. An open doorway invited him to step forward into his new role. *Protector against the Darkness, Sage of the Forgotten Knowledge.* He passed the threshold, only to be plunged into darkness.

"Evil! I know you are here! You will perish!" His hand blazed with light, revealing six shivering enemies, their black eyes almost white in the face of his righteous purpose.

He drew his sword and charged, illuminating it as he ran to them. "Die for your sins against the people of Telthan!" He slashed three times. Three corpses fell to the floor.

"None shall escape me!" He brought his hand around, throwing light at each of the remaining Creeps. Their heads brightened, white-hot, then exploded in gore. He looked down onto his shirt, the blackened stain of their demise eating through it. *Light heals all that darkness harms.*

He closed his eyes and touched the spot, opening them again to see the shirt made whole.

The hallway returned, unaffected by his battle. "Blessed day, my charge is still unmolested. Now, I must tell the others of our new shared purpose. Knowledge must be protected, at all costs." He strode down the hallway, sheathing his sword as the light faded from it.

#

Caleb's mind reeled from the myriad of weapons he had not just learned about, but learned how to wield. *Axes, swords, shields, hammers, daggers, maces, even a flail.* He marveled at the variety as he held his favorite weapon: the greatsword.

*In just hours, I've learned how to fight. How is that possible?* He shrugged off what he knew to be true, the weapon comfortable in his grasp. He smiled, even as his body ached from bruises and exhaustion. *But where do I put this thing?* He looked from his pack on the floor to the massive blade in his hands. *I wish I had some of Alex's rope right now. Or perhaps some leather.*

His gaze drifted to the open doorway. *When did that open? I need to find Alex and Liz anyway.*

*They're likely waiting on me.* He shifted the blade to one hand, hefting the pack onto his shoulders and resting the flat of the sword against the side of his neck. He looked to the right and saw the nearby corner, but to his left was nothing but darkness.

*The Darkening.* He lifted the blade off his shoulder and back into his hands, his attention focused on whatever had to be coming for him.

*Thud. Thud.* The creature emerged from the darkness, throwing a candelabra to the side as its massive form towered over him. A tentacle sped at his chest.

He ducked to the side and rolled, keeping the blade tight to his body before popping back up and slashing down on the tentacle, severing half of it.

The Creep howled in pain, its other tentacles flailing without purpose for a moment, then flying at him in a coordinated motion.

Caleb almost froze, the impending tendrils filling him with fear. *Just need to remember what I learned. I can handle this guy.* He ducked again, rushing forward. His greatsword came up, slashing in a powerful arc across the Creep's arms, taking them off at the elbow.

The tentacles twisted inward as the Creep screamed, speeding back toward him.

He slid under the thing's massive legs, jumping up on the other side and burying the blade into its back.

The tentacles dove after him, but fell lifeless to the floor, their owner joining them with a resounding crash. The sword was torn from Caleb's hands. Black ichor gushed from its three wounds, eating away the floor near its body.

He advanced, his mind clearing. *I...just...did that. I killed that thing, without a scratch.* He shakily grasped the hilt, pulling it from the wound after several jerks.

The metal shone through the black blood, its surface pristine. *This is Telabride, too?* He pulled one of the axes from his pack, confirming it. *The blacksmiths of Andranine must have learned of it here.*

"Caleb!"

He looked up, his eyes finding Alex and Liz rushing to him. "I was just about to—"

"What happened?" she said, her head looking around the hallway, taking in the recent fight.

"This thing just a-appeared, and I killed it." He hefted the greatsword back onto his shoulder.

"With that?" asked Liz, her eyebrows raised.

"Yeah, I-I guess. I suppose I can hold my own now." He smiled half-heartedly, not wanting to brag.

“Good, because we need to get out of here,” said Alex. “Creeps shouldn’t be here, so the fact that all of us have fought them means we need to leave, and as soon as possible.”

He gasped. “You, too?”

“Isn’t that what she just said?” said Liz.

He ignored her, instead looking at Alex. “We need to find Ivan before we leave.”

She nodded. “This library can’t be too big, so we’ll find him if we stick together and keep on looking. If we’re lucky, he’ll be in the halls. If we’re not, we’ll need to wait for him to finish learning something. Let’s get going.” Her eyes held a cold purpose in them, the sense of loss gone.

He felt that something had changed. *But I don’t know what it is.* He looked at her worriedly, but she didn’t notice.

“Come on,” she said, stepping around the corpse and down the hallway. “We can’t just stand here, or we’ll be stuck when this entire place falls down on us.”

“The place falls down?” asked Caleb, his worry redirected as he scrambled to catch up.

She waved him away. “I’m trying to avoid that problem entirely. Don’t worry about it.”

“If you say so.”

“She *did* just say so,” threw in Liz from in front of them, smiling. “Have I ever mentioned how much fun it is to dance through shadows?”



## Chapter 25: Unraveled Threads

*Lesser men would give up hope if they saw what I have seen. The light faded from his sword for the sixth time since he had left the room. The evil that plagues us all dares to defile the sanctuary of learning I have sworn to protect. They will not succeed.* He sheathed the blade, his eyes straying to the dagger he still held on his belt. *A reminder of who I fight for, of why I must kill all who oppose this library and its purpose.*

He smiled grimly, looking up from the weapon to see intermittent bolts of lightning in the hallway ahead. *Another minor inconvenience, but it will not deter me from finding my fellows.* He turned his back to the storm and traced a circle using a parallel hallway, returning to the original hallway beyond it. *So many rooms, so many hallways, and yet so amazingly laid out. Littani's genius and higher purpose will be remembered for the ages. I will make sure of it.*

"Ivan!" called Alexandra, her voice back in the hallway he had just left.

*So she finds me before I find her. Hopefully, she will set aside her complaints and join me in our joint calling.* He turned and was surprised by Caleb and Liz being right alongside her. "By Telthan, it is so fortunate we have met again," he said, "We have much to discuss."

"Much to discuss?" Liz raised her eyebrow in doubt.

"Well, not that much as long as we agree on the most important part." *If they do, this will be much simpler. If not, I will need to convince them of their error.* "Without a doubt, this is a

magnificent place of learning and we must preserve it for the generations to come, that they may learn how to defeat the Darkening once and for all.”

“We’re getting out of here,” said Alexandra, ignoring everything he had just said. “Have any idea how to get back out?”

Ivan glared. “Get back...out? But why should we ever do that?” His arms flung out to his sides, attempting to encompass the library. “There is so much to learn, so many things to protect so that our descendants will finally live in peace!”

“Why would we leave?” she asked. “How many times have you needed to fend off Creeps?”

“Six,” said Ivan, off-handedly. “Which only proves my point further. The creatures of the Darkening, those Creeps, seek to destroy this knowledge, taking it from us forever. We must not let that happen!”

She held up a hand. “Stop. Think for a moment. We are being actively and consistently attacked by Creeps, in a library supposedly invisible to them. What is wrong with that picture?”

“Did I not say that they seek to destroy no matter what the cost to them? While they may have discovered its existence, they will not succeed if we stand our ground and kill them where they appear.”

“What about the library falling apart?” butted in Liz, her unwelcome question a cleverly devised distraction. “What about reality breaking down? What about having all manner of weird weather in here?”

He waved away her pithy concerns. “We can find out how to stop that with sufficient knowledge. We shall be just fine. In the meantime, the weather is a trifle, not a true threat.”

“Did you already forget the worst thing about Andranine?” asked Alexandra, clearly in shock at him speaking so much sense. “As much as I want to hope in mindless killers, something intelligent directs the Darkening. What if that intelligence is at work here, poking and prodding us? Everything I’ve fought has been a complete joke to kill. What happens when it gets bored and decides to actually kill us?”

“Intelligent or no, it has its limits. We have the strength and the will to end any threats that should assail this library.” His head bowed to his chest, his eyes remaining fixed on Alexandra. “It disappoints me that you do not see this directly, but I will convince you in time.”

“Convince us?” asked Liz indignantly. “Have you listened to yourself lately? You sound like a delusional freak wanting to stay here until the library collapses on your head!”

Ivan’s eyes flared. “How dare you doubt my words! I have realized our higher purpose, our calling to help save Telthan, no matter what our monstrous enemies might do.” He stepped toward Caleb, looking him in the eye. “You understand what I am saying, do you not?” *Always wanting to please, but also perceptive on how to keep us together. My best chance of reminding*

*these women of their folly.*

Caleb shook his head. “No, I don’t. I don’t know what happened to you either, but y-you’re not talking any sense. Calm down and help us leave this place, before it’s too late.”

Ivan stumbled back, the unexpected words, the newfound composure, feeling like arrows to his heart. He looked at each of them, misunderstanding concern visible on their faces. “You all are deluded fools! You would throw this knowledge aside for fear of death?” He paused, hoping to hear some sense of contrition from them. “It is up to us to help end the Darkening, and it starts here, in the forgotten knowledge of the past! Please, join me!”

“How about ‘no’ and you come with us?” asked Liz, self-interested to the last.

Ivan spat at her. “You uncouth leech, stealing from others who earned while you just take. This is no different, is it? Learn what you want, then abandon everyone to your own selfish purposes?”

“What is selfish about wanting to live?” asked Alexandra, stepping between him and Liz.

“How does she deserve your scorn?” added Caleb, his eyes disappointed.

*Disappointed? How can he be?* He stumbled back, the look the final straw. *They have rejected what we must do, and I will have no part of it. I will follow my calling to the last!* “All of you, get away from me. You have gone mad, and lost sight of our goals. I cannot abide such, but for the sake of our previous work, I will let you live. Just go back to your worthless, pathetic lives, forgetting the calling for which you were born!”

He spun on his heel and dashed away, disappearing into the darkness nearby. He called upon the light to illuminate his way, seeking the hallways he knew were there.

Nothing.

He turned his head from side to side, searching for the rooms of learning awaiting him.

Nothing.

He kept running, the foolish cries of “Ivan!” spurring him onward. *They would rather kill me than allow me to do what they refuse to.*

Ivan looked forward, speeding through the impenetrable darkness, the light showing nothing for what seemed like hours. *Mind tricks by our common enemy. I know the library is here. It must be protected!* He looked around, only to see the suggestion of a claw, the silhouette of open jaws, the sinuous whip of a tentacle. They got more and more numerous, choking out even the darkness nearby.

*They surround me! I must defend myself!* He skidded to a stop and spun in a circle, taking in the dozens of Creeps in all forms, all of them ready to rip him to pieces. “You shall not take me! I will triumph!” He drew his sword, ancient runes of light and protection etching onto its surface

as it shone in defiance of the darkness surrounding him. “Come at me, with all that you can. You will perish!”

The Creeps answered his taunt, slowly closing the distance, claws outstretched for the first swipe.

#

Liz looked after Ivan and what she saw ended all hesitation. *Darkness. He’s running straight into darkness! He really is crazy.* She stepped through the shadows, appearing behind him. She tried to step in front of him, but her thoughts went unanswered, leaving her rooted in place.

*Shadowsteps don’t work? How?* She gritted her teeth, sprinting after his retreating form. *I need to keep him alive. He doesn’t deserve to die just because he’s crazy.*

*Since when did you care about others?*

*Since I felt like it. Do I need a reason? And I still don’t feel like caring about you. Shut up.*

She glanced behind her, and saw Alex and Caleb at her heels, Alex's hammer ablaze and Caleb's greatsword drawn and ready. *At least I’m not the only one who cares here.*

“Ivan! Come back!” yelled Alex.

He didn’t react to her words.

Liz turned her head back to the front, and had to skid to a stop. Before her, barely illuminated by Alex’s fiery weapon, was a wall of Creeps, circling around Ivan and cutting off all escape.

“Come at me, with all that you can. You will perish!” he yelled out as his sword shined with light, making their deadly forms all the clearer.

*Okay, if I needed any more confirmation he’s crazy, there it is. I don’t think even Alex would take one against fifty odds. Looks like we’re going to have to cut him out of this mess.* She drew her daggers, ready to engage the second the other two reached her.

The Creeps made their move, closing the circle tighter and tighter around Ivan.

*Or we’ll need to start this now. This would be easier if I knew why I can’t shadowstep, but at least I can use my daggers.* She jumped on top of the nearest Creep, driving a blade through its neck and lopping off its head. She sprang from it and jumped onto the next one, her work far too slow to stop them from reaching Ivan.

She stole a glance in his direction, only to see him scowling at her.

“Only now do you see reason? I do not need your help to defeat these monsters, and if you get in my way, I *will* kill you.”

*Yep, totally crazy.* She went back to slashing at the Creeps, as screams of pain erupted from the horde.

“Get down!” yelled Alex.

Liz felt the heat behind her and didn’t look to see what it was, instead dropping off her latest slain Creep into a crouch. A fireball flew through the air with a speed belying its massive size before landing on top of the half-dozen Creeps remaining between them and Ivan. Only charred flesh and blackened bones remained when it dissipated.

Ivan whirled, his sword slashing in one direction and his hand throwing light at those nearest him, but they were mere inches from striking distance now.

“Come on, we need to kill them all. *Now,*” Liz said, launching herself to the right and chopping the smaller Creeps into pieces.

“Right behind you,” said Caleb, his greatsword singing as it took down the taller ones.

Tentacles flew in her direction, the Creeps finally paying attention to her. She effortlessly dodged, then was surprised as Caleb did the same, his body dodging out of the way before his weapon cut them to ribbons.

On the opposite side, Alex jumped into the fray, her blazing hammer burning what it did not crush. She willed daggers of ice to throw themselves into the ranks, thinning them as she bashed her way forward.

Steadily they cleared around Ivan, his sword stilled, his hand at his side.

*What is he doing? He needs to fight!* She hesitated, his proud boast contradicted by his inaction. She didn’t feel the tentacle coiling around her waist until it was too late.

She went airborne, her breath leaving her as the tentacle squeezed tightly. *Oh, great, for one second of hesitation.* She slashed down at the tentacle, carefully shearing it without cutting into her own stomach. Ichor sprayed everywhere, but the tentacle’s grip faltered and she inelegantly fell back to the ground in a tumble.

The ichor began to eat at her clothing, tearing at her skin. *Ow, ow, bad decision cutting there.* She grimaced, forcing the pain away by remembering why she was fighting. *Ivan won’t defend himself, so I’ll defend for him, the selfish jerk.*

She jumped past Caleb’s swinging blade, stabbing into the ranks once again. *I still can’t believe that this farmer who couldn’t fight two weeks ago can fight like a seasoned veteran now.*

Two tentacles rushed at her, but she pirouetted in place, driving her dagger into the skull of another Creep as they missed. She rolled through the legs of one, kicking to the side to throw it off-balance. Caleb struck a moment later and sliced both legs into stumps. The Creep fell sideways, becoming easy fodder for the plunging blade as Caleb sought its heart.

She started to laugh at its fate, then shrieked as her injured middle reminded her of its tenderness. She choked back the pain and kept on fighting, eventually meeting a gleeful Alex at the other side of the circle, the last Creep impaled by a hammer and then slammed to the ground as fire consumed it.

“Ivan! Listen to me!” demanded Alex, her wide smile vanishing as her brows furrowed.

Ivan looked over at her, then recoiled. “Get away from me. I will not let you kill me and end this knowledge we were so close to losing!” He tensed his legs, preparing to bolt again.

“I am done with him being crazy,” said Liz. “He’s going to see Reason.” *Which is now the name of my right fist.* She walked up to him, ignoring the still-bright sword as she punched him cleanly in the face.

He fell to the ground, his sword losing its radiance before he crumpled in a heap.

“There. He saw Reason.”

Alex smirked. “I guess in some ways, that’s the right way to put it. And I can’t say it wasn’t deserved.”

“Have any ideas of how to get out of here?” Liz asked, the adrenaline starting to ebb, her pain surging from within. “I’m not...exactly interested in staying.”

Caleb looked down at her stomach, shocked. “We need to get you out of here, as soon as possible.” He motioned to get closer.

“Yeah...yeah, it hurts,” she agreed, waving him away. “So any ideas?”

“Well, we did enter by saying ‘I wish to learn’. What if the reverse worked?” he suggested. “I’ll hold onto Ivan. Hopefully, the magic will take him with me.”

“Hopefully,” agreed Alex. “We need to get him out of here, and maybe distance will give him back his sanity. We can’t afford to lose him.”

“Ready to give it a shot?” asked Caleb as he hefted Ivan into his arms.

“If you don’t see me, it worked,” said Alex with a shrug. “I no longer wish to learn.” She vanished.

“I no longer wish to learn.” Caleb said without hesitation, Ivan’s still form disappearing with him.

*At least we have a way out of here. I just hope...* She winced in pain and clutched at her stomach, only having to take it away as the pain amplified. Her hand came away coated in blood, angering her. *Ivan is going to see Reason more than just once because of this wound, I promise.*

*So charitable.*

*Shut up.*

“I no longer wish to learn.”

Liz popped back outside in the cold of night, the full moon above illuminating the empty field that housed the library. *Wait. When we left it was the crescent moon, and it couldn't have been more than a day or two. Were we there for longer?* She shook her head, then winced again as the motion jarred her open wound.

Alex, Caleb, and Ivan were close by. She stumbled toward them. “Made it...out. Got any bandages?” She smiled half-heartedly, the throbbing agony keeping her from a full smile.

“Not before we get a fire going,” said Alex, her voice full of concern. “It’s much too cold out here, even if the moonlight is sufficient to see by.” A fire appeared on a clear spot near them, a ring of stones holding it in moments after.

Liz stumbled to the fire, lying down as slowly as she could to ease the pain. She finally looked down at her stomach, the tangled mess of torn tissue and ravaged muscle forcing her eyes from it at once. “Bad idea to look at that. Please, wrap it up. We just need to find a Tablet sometime soon and I’ll be good as new, right?”

Alex nodded, then motioned beyond her. “Got that handled already.”

Liz glanced behind, and was heartened to see the steady blue glow of the runes. “You’re amazing.”

She shrugged. “Just trying to cover for Ivan acting like a complete fool and getting you hurt and himself almost killed.”

“He meant well, you could tell by what he said. He just got a few things wrong,” said Caleb, dropping his pack to the ground and beginning to rummage through it. “He’ll come to his senses soon.”

“*You’re* why he’s crazy, Caleb,” said Alex.

“Me?”

She nodded. “He got jealous of you, that you could read what he couldn’t.”

Caleb nodded tentatively and went back to rummaging in the pack.

“He forgot the pain that it caused you to dream of death all the time, and only saw the advantage that he didn’t have.”

“But he got over that, I’m sure of it. He doesn’t hold grudges.” Caleb pulled the bandages from his pack and went to Liz’s side. “He just thought we were trying to stop him from learning

things. You can't fault him for that. Could you lift her up for a bit while I wrap this underneath her?"

"Certainly." She went to Liz's head and gently lifted her shoulders.

Liz winced. *Ow, that still hurts.*

"Sorry, Liz, we're just trying to stop the bleeding, okay?"

Liz nodded slightly as Caleb began to wrap the bandages around her.

"But I *can* fault him for going stark raving mad, insisting that we're all wrong, and treating us like we wanted to kill him," said Alex.

"If he hadn't...done that stupid thing...I wouldn't be hurt...right now," agreed Liz, wincing with each arduous breath.

Caleb frowned. "I know, it's just that h-he's too good a person to really mean those things, you know?" He finished wrapping and cinched the bandage above her stomach, causing her to grimace in pain even harder.

"I sure hope so," said Alex, letting Liz back down to the ground.

"I'm still going...to sock him in the face...when I wake up. And neither of you...are stopping me." Unconsciousness claimed her before she heard their replies.



## Chapter 26: Catastrophic Cascade

Caleb looked up from Liz's sleeping form, his eyes locking on Alex. "Shall we rest ourselves?"

Alex's eyes swept the plain around them. "We are as safe as we can be, now that we're outside the library. We shouldn't need to worry about Creeps out here on the open plain." She dropped her pack and pulled her bedroll out of it. "I just hope that Ivan doesn't do something stupid like try to run back in there when he comes to."

"And if he does?"

"There are some questions I don't want to answer until I have to," she said, her voice wavering. She climbed into the bedroll, her weariness overtaking her.

"Shouldn't we put him in a bedroll, at least? It's really..." he stopped talking when he saw her steady breathing. *I guess I'll do that favor for him. He may be deluded, but he's still my friend.* He rummaged through Ivan's pack and pulled the bedroll out, then lifted him up, working the fabric onto his legs and torso.

His stomach rumbled for food, something it hadn't done the entire time they were in the library. *How come I never felt hungry?* He pondered the question as he found a piece of jerky to munch on. *I don't know. I just...wasn't.* He swallowed and pulled his bedroll out, vanishing into the land of dreams.

#

Littani walked the halls of the library, the invisible grand achievement of a generation of mages. *So much sacrifice, so much time, but we succeeded despite the setbacks.* Outside, the dawn after Darkening rose overhead. The Library of Antiquities still stood, invisible and unsullied by the destructive forces that had ravaged the world.

*This is our gift to the next generation. Our preparation to help them bring an end to it all. They will be able to learn the ways of magic, the strands of history, and the path forward into the future.* She smiled to herself as she stopped walking, her eyes looking back and forth along the marble hallways. *My time preparing has come to an end. It is now time to rebuild, and plant the seeds for future knowledge.*

“I no longer wish to learn,” she said and walked away from her life’s work.

#

Ivan awoke with a jolt, his left eye flying open to the sight of the full moon, while his right remained tightly shut. He looked out on an open field, not the library he had sworn to protect. *That traitorous thief Elizabeth, and my former friends Alexandra and Caleb, unwilling to see the truth.* He attempted to stand up, but tripped over the bedroll he was tucked in. “Cursed fabric, keeping me from my purpose.” He wriggled free and looked around again, searching for the telltale signature of the library itself.

His eyes saw nothing, but he knew it had to be close. *After they attempted to fool me into listening to them after that Creep attack, they would not have had the energy to move away in the middle of the night. They will not keep me from my purpose, even if they do not wish to be a part of it.* “I wish to-”

Shaking earth rumbled louder than his final word, and instead of seeing the library’s familiar wood-paneled walls, he continued to stare at the grass before him. *What is happening?*

The earth continued to shake, joined by a cacophony of stone crumbling and wood splintering. His eyes widened in realization. “No, my library! My purpose!” He ran toward the epicenter of the sound, seeking some way to halt the invisible devastation. Before he could reach it, he was thrown back by a blast of explosive pressure, his back skidding onto the grass.

He jumped to his feet again. *I cannot stop it. I cannot...* The shaking ended, leaving behind it an eerie silence.

The library appeared, a broken pile of stone and wood, the shredded remnants of countless tomes peeking through countless cracks.

Ivan fell to his knees, tears spilling from his eyes. “No. I was powerless to stop it. I failed. I did not stop it.” He beat his fists on the ground. “I failed. I failed.” He fell prone, crying at the loss of everything he had held dear.

“We all failed in our own way,” said Alexandra from behind him.

He shook his head. “You failed to answer the call. You did not fail to uphold the call. I am a miserable creature, deserving nothing but the scorn of the ages.”

“But without you, we never would have found it in the first place,” she said, kneeling down next to him. “We learned things in there, and wasn’t that the point?”

“No!” His fist hit the ground again. “The point was to preserve it, to keep it available to the generation after us, that they may finally live.”

“Do you really think you could’ve saved it? It was falling apart when we entered; it was only a matter of time. Things broke down so much the Darkening itself started to invade. They were no match for us, but their presence means we likely couldn’t have done anything to protect it.”

“Nothing?” The question held hope in his mind. *Did I truly fail if there was nothing I could have done differently?* His mind raced through the decisions, the possibilities, the timing.

“Nothing.”

*She is right. She is completely and utterly correct.* “It is just...I just...What I mean is...” He pulled himself into a kneeling position, looking at Alexandra’s soft, understanding eyes for the first time. “I have been a fool. A fool convinced so much of his wisdom that I ignored true wisdom.”

“It’s alright,” she said, smiling. “We all make mistakes, even when we think we’re above them.”

“Even if true, I need to apologize to you, to Caleb, even to Liz. I said a lot of things that were not even remotely correct, all in a blind pursuit of saving what could not be saved. I treated you as enemies instead of friends, as dangers instead of helpers. I deserve nothing but your scorn.”

“You’re right, you don’t deserve forgiveness, but I’m going to forgive you anyway.” She smiled again. “You started this whole crazy adventure, and I’m not going to forget that without you, I’d still be stumbling around Westbrook without any hope.” She brought herself to her feet, and offered him a hand. “Come on, my fire is warm.”

“Your fire?” He blinked, trying to understand the possessive. “How is it *your* fire?”

A small orb of fire appeared in her hand, its tongues licking the air around it. “Because I make it at will.” The fire disappeared as quickly as it had come.

Ivan looked at her doubtfully, then took her offered hand. “So you learned that elemental magic after all?”

She pulled him to his feet and began walking back to the campfire still burning of its own accord. “Yep. All four of them.”

He matched pace with her. “I have learned my own new capabilities, though I hope we do not

need to use any of them.”

“That is a good hope to have.”

The wording surprised him. *She does not share the same hope? Nothing in Telthan, short of Creeps themselves, requires even the slightest fraction of our powers.* He joined her at the campfire and the still-sleeping Caleb and Liz. *How did they sleep through the collapse?*

He forgot he asked the question of himself when he saw the bandage across Liz’s stomach, the edges tinged with the subtle, dark red of dried blood.

*She got hurt?* His heart sank again, another reminder of his foolishness staring back at him. *I deserve nothing but scorn.* He laid back down in his bedroll, willing sleep to take him away from his gloomy thoughts.

#

Caleb awoke feeling rested, but his eyes looked up not at the dawn, but a starless void. The dim light of Alex’s campfire looked oppressed by the blackness without. *The Darkening.*

He bolted out of his bedroll, reaching for his greatsword. “The Darkening is here!” he yelled before adding, “Somehow.”

“What?” asked Alex, confused as her eyes opened. “By Telthan, you’re not kidding.” She sprang out of her bedroll, tearing the hammer from her pack by sheer force, the straps almost ripping free as it roughly slid out.

“The Darkening is not for another century,” complained Ivan as he awoke. “Quit talking madness.”

“Ironical that...the madman...calls someone else mad,” said Liz weakly before coughing violently. “I don’t...feel any better.”

Caleb looked from her to the Tablet. “The runes are dead. The runes aren’t glowing at all.”

“How did we sleep through one hundred years?” asked Ivan, finally getting out of his bedroll and retrieving his sword.

“It must have been the library,” said Caleb. “The moon was practically gone when we left, now it’s full.”

“Then we defend ourselves to the last, taking as many of them with us as we can,” said Alex, her voice overflowing with fatalistic conviction.

“I’m sitting...this one out...unless they try...leaping on me,” said Liz. She fumbled for her daggers, her face wincing with each movement. “Then they’ll get...a surprise...” She smiled, but pain distorted it into a grimace.

“We need to see what is out there, beyond the fire,” said Ivan. “I know just the thing.” He reached up, a blazing halo of light appearing over their heads, illuminating the plains for miles.

Caleb’s heart sank as he saw the same sight in every direction. Creeps, row upon row, all waiting for some unseen trigger. “Can we kill any before being overwhelmed?”

“Target-rich environment, Caleb. It’s a target-rich environment,” said Alex, her hammer burning white-hot.

Caleb wanted to smile, but he couldn’t. *The odds are against us. We will barely make a dent in their numbers before dying. But if it helps Alex die in peace, I will agree with her.* “Maybe. We can hope, right?” He chuckled uncertainly, his eyes looking from her to the circle of Creeps.

As one mass, dozens of them came pouring toward them, an indistinguishable blob of claws, spikes, and tentacles closing in. The hounds tore ahead of the rest, howling in glee at the prey before them. A wall of fire appeared in their way, killing most of them as they reached the barrier. A scant few jumped over it, only to be cut down by Caleb’s blade.

Alex launched a fireball over the ring at the rapidly approaching middle line of Creeps, their tentacles already reaching forward. When it disappeared, nothing remained where it had landed.

The rest of the horde was undeterred, bearing down on them. Tentacles flew through the air, seeking purchase on anything they could find.

Blades flashed and shards of ice cut down the rest, sending nothing but severed stumps back to their owners.

They kept on coming, oblivious to the pain that had slowed the Creeps inside the library.

An orb of light circled them, searing their skin before exploding in destructive radiance, felling the tallest.

The few remaining were mere feet away, the grass ripping from the ground as their clawed feet pounded faster and faster. They slipped on a conjured sheet of ice, falling helplessly to the ground before sliding within easy reach of the trio.

Caleb felt a rumbling in the earth, and looked around for the source. “What is that?”

“Rhinopedes....They burrow,” said Liz, her voice barely audible over the growing noise. “Aim for the head.”

“Their head? How am I supposed to hit that?” He stole a glance back at her, but she was looking up at the starless sky.

“Just dodge...to the side...and stab. Easy,” she coughed.

*Far from easy*, he thought, his doubts slackening his hold on his weapon.

Two furrows of earth bore down on him, a doom he couldn't avoid. The point of his sword hit the ground, the weight more than he could bear. He stared at the end coming for him. *Make it be fast.*

Two spikes of rock erupted from the ground, and the furrows stopped advancing. "Pay attention, Caleb!" said Alex over the roar of the earth. "This is no time to lose hope. We can fight, and we can win!"

He recoiled from the statement. *No, we can't. We can only die.*

"*Put that sword at the ready!*" shrieked Alex, jolting his blade back into the air right as one of the rhinopedes broke through the surface and leaped toward him, the armored chest presenting nothing to hit.

Time seemed to slow down as the monster neared. *There, its head. I can hit that.* He moved to the right, dodging the leap before slashing down, the sharp edge cutting through the soft flesh with little resistance. The rhinopede kept on flying, its head and body falling lifelessly beyond them.

Caleb blinked and time sped back up. *How did I...* He looked to the Creep's corpse for confirmation. *I actually did that. Perhaps we can win this, no matter how impossible it seems.* He turned back to the front and saw another pair of rhinopedes skittering along the ground. He skipped to the side again and drove his sword through one neck.

The other kept on running toward Ivan, who destroyed its head with a ball of light, horn and all.

Silence returned, the windless plain covered by the scorched, shredded, and sliced corpses around them. They panted from the exertion, the use of magic itself seeming to drain them.

The silence was replaced by bloodthirsty growls once more.

He looked up from the corpses to see another horde of monsters in the distance. "More!" *Can we truly do this again?*

They charged and fell just like the first, adding to the piles. Another break in the fighting followed, but the night's rest was gone as if he hadn't slept at all. The greatsword felt like a weight dragging down his arms, its heft too large to bring to bear on anything other than the ground. *Why am I so tired?* Glances at Alex and Ivan showed him they were having the same difficulty staying upright.

Silence ended for a third time. Against his own will, he looked back to the field the dimming ring of light still illuminated. A third wave stared back at him, more than double the size of the first two. *We are going to fail after all. We cannot survive against this.*

The Creeps launched themselves at the trio.

*By numbers alone, they will succeed. But if I have to die, I will take as many of them with me as*

*I can.* Caleb forced his tired frame to stand and face them, and with a great effort brought his heavy blade back into the air.

The monsters came closer and closer, mere seconds separating Caleb from his demise.

He gripped his greatsword tighter, ready to bring it down on the few that he could kill before he joined them.

Daylight broke upon his eyes, the darkened grass a brilliant green. Above him, fluffy white clouds tracked across a blue sky. He squinted, before forcing his eyes back down to the horde. Only the tall grass rustling in the wind met his gaze.

## Part 4: Guardians of the Land



## Chapter 27: Unhealed Wounds

Alex squinted against the sun, her eyes telling her the opposite of what she knew. *The Darkening came early. We were making a last stand against the hordes. Dawn never came, I saw the darkness. So why is the sun overhead?*

“Ivan, could you...turn down the light?” asked Liz. “I’m trying...to die in peace...over here.”

“I am not exactly capable of turning down the sun,” said Ivan. “Or doing anything to it, for that matter.”

“The sun?” Liz’s eyes sprang open, then squinted shut. “I thought it was gone.”

“It was, and now it is not.” He crossed his arms. “At least we are not dead. Somehow.”

“The only way I know we’re in the s-same place is the pile of rubble,” said Caleb, pointing at the remains of the library. “Did the library fall apart?”

“In a manner of speaking, yes it did.” Ivan bowed his head, his face flashing through several emotions at once. “It is gone forever from us.”

“Well, whatever happened earlier, we’re back to normal. Whatever normal is,” said Liz. “Now could we find a Tablet or something to get my stomach healed up?”

“You are hurt?” asked Ivan, rushing to her side.

“Well, yeah.” She pushed at his leg. “You were too busy standing around to notice me saving your butt, but that’s *perfectly* okay.”

“I truly am sorry, I just...” He looked away. “I was not in my right mind. I am to blame for everything.”

“No, no, it’s okay. I *like* having my skin eaten away.” Her eyes locked on him, her lips curled in a sneer. “Far be it from me to beleaguer you for something like that.”

“I-” He took a step back and glanced at Alex.

“Unless you have some way you can heal her, I suggest leaving her alone.”

“I...I do, actually.” His eyes filled with wonder. “I just do not want to force it on her if she does not want it.”

“Oh I can’t *wait* for a treatise on how to ignore pain and regrow tissue in just five easy steps!” said Liz, her scowl unchanged.

“You know what?” he said, kneeling down at her side. “I *am* going to heal you, no matter *what* you say.” He closed his eyes and held his hands out. A soft light issued from them, threading toward Liz’s bandaged stomach. It connected and Ivan convulsed as the ribbon flashed from him to her. His mouth twisted in pain, but he said nothing. The ribbon vanished and he fell prone, his breathing labored.

“What did you just do? Cause a weird light show?” asked Liz, sitting up.

Ivan didn’t respond.

“Oh, too ashamed to admit you wanted to only *look* like you were helping me? Suit yourself.” Her arms crossed over her stomach and she stared down at his unmoving form. “Huh?” She looked down at the bandages. “I don’t feel anything.” She tore them off and lay a hand on her unmarred skin. “Impossible.”

“He *did* say he’d heal you,” said Alex, winking. “Regardless, we need to move on. The library is rubble and should stay that way. Why dig up the past?”

“Easy for you to say. You didn’t get hurt because of *somebody’s* love of books in that stupid library.”

“True, but *you* didn’t have to talk him back from insanity last night. He’s normal now, and sorry for everything he said and did while he wasn’t.”

“But he *could* be lying.”

“The man can’t lie. You know that.”

Liz huffed, then threw off the bedroll and ruined shirt in one motion. She dug around in her pack, pulled out a new shirt, and put it on. “Yeah, I’ll think about forgiving him, but that’s *my* problem, not yours.”

“Yes, but it’s the only way to move on.”

“I said I’ll think about it. What are we planning to do anyway?”

“I’ll figure that out tomorrow. The fight was exhausting, and every spell I cast only made it worse. I didn’t realize magic could sap the life out of you.”

Liz looked at her, then Caleb. “What about you?”

“Me?” He clutched his chest with a hand. “Same as Alex. I’m r-really tired.”

“So you’re going to leave me alone while all of you sleep? What happened to watch?” She held her hands up. “To looking out for the enemy?”

Alex smiled, her eyes half-closed. “Something tells me that we won’t have any trouble in broad daylight.” She snuffed out the still-crackling fire and nestled down into her bedroll. “See you...tomorrow...”

#

Liz stewed, her eyes threatening to bore a hole in Ivan’s back. *What on Telthan did he do? He's still passed out on the bare grass without a care in the world. And I'm...just fine.*

*It was your decision to go and save him, you know.*

*Since when did I decide that? I was looking for a good fight, not trying to be a valiant savior of a poor lost soul. I’m sure that’s what it looked like to you.*

*Then why do you keep berating him for your injury? Why do you keep on wanting another excuse to yell at him the second he wakes up?*

*I...You know what, Darkening take you for making me say this, but you’re right. I did decide to save him. She turned away, refusing to look at the man any longer. Doesn’t mean I’m happy about the consequences.*

*Neither is he. He just returned the favor, despite you spitting bile at him the entire time. Never mind that he was defending you to the very last. Call yourselves even and be done with it.*

Liz scowled at the uncaring grass. *Might as well. It’s not like he’ll ever properly repay me anyway. She looked from the grass to the ruins of the library and let her eyes hang there. Wait, I still have that book!*

She tore into her pack and pulled out the volume, its spine still declaring its intent to let her know about the dangers of shadow magic. *Odd premise, but maybe it’ll let me know why I*

*couldn't do any shadowsteps in an environment with nothing but shadows.* She crossed her legs and began reading.

#

*The mountains. I have to make it to the mountains.* Fitz looked up, just for a second, and caught the lower peaks. *Just a little bit more.* He kept stumbling up the broken path, the snow obscuring it. Darkness pressed in on him, held at bay by the lone torch he held. *Just a little bit more.*

#

Caleb awoke just as the sun was beginning to set. *Another dream. The mountains? What's so special about the mountains?* He looked to the west and could just barely pick out the peaks as pink-drenched triangles at the edge of his vision.

"Up finally?" asked Liz.

"Yes," he said, nodding. "Didn't realize I was that tired. Anything happen?"

"Well..." She looked up from the book on her lap. "You snored for an hour, Ivan snored for two, and I think Alex pulled off an hour and a half."

"So nothing dangerous."

"I don't know.... Your snoring sounded like it was going to start the Darkening for a few minutes there." She giggled.

Caleb chuckled. "Thanks for the concern. What's the book about?"

"Just a cautionary book." She shrugged. "Shadow magic exploits the exact same things that Creeps do, so there's a chance of drawing attention by using it if we're in the wrong place. That, and shadowstepping requires a high amount of precision that only comes with practice. Something about distinguishing two very distinct pieces of shadow in a shadow-rich environment, to steal Alex's phrase."

"Hey, who's stealing my stuff now?" asked Alex, rocketing up.

"Nothing but your words, my dear," said Liz, winking.

"Don't ever call me that again. And I mean *never*. Anyways, it looks like the day is almost shot. So...tomorrow's plans?"

"You said it yourself," said Caleb. "We need to move on."

"But to where?" asked Alex, the uncertainty in her voice belying her lack of a plan.

"Wouldn't it be best if we waited for Ivan to wake up to talk about this?" he suggested. "Even if he liked making one-sided decisions, we don't have to. And we shouldn't."

“Good point,” she said, looking over to Ivan’s still form. “I don’t know when he’s going to wake up, though.”

Caleb changed the topic. “Supper? I’ll fix it to order, even.”

Alex laughed. “Okay, sure. Mind making some of that tomato and garlic soup?”

“Good thing you didn’t ask for anything with beans,” he said, winking. “I don’t feel like punching out the nearest person in Mistvale.”

“Hey, punching someone in Mistvale is completely justified!” complained Liz.

“I said I didn’t feel like it, not that I didn’t want to at some point.” He pulled the cauldron out of his pack and dug for the vegetables. “Looks like great stress relief.”

“You have *no idea* how good it feels.”

“Done treasuring other moments, though?” asked Alex, nudging her side.

“Yeah....” She looked up at the sky. “What’s done is done, as I’m sure Ivan would say. I’m bored staying here anyway. Learning magic and whatever-not was cool and all, but where now?”

“Ivan is still asleep, and I’m making soup,” reminded Caleb. “Hush with the sp-speculating and wait a few minutes for me to get this thing going.” He sliced the vegetables into the cauldron. “Mind if you start a fire, Alex?”

“Oh, yeah. Here you go.” A fire emerged inside the rock ring.

“Thanks. That’s really handy.”

“Handy, but a trifle compared to hurling a fireball the size of a house at Creeps.” She smiled.

“Well, don’t do that here, or the soup will d-disappear and you won’t get to eat it.” He levered the cauldron onto the fire, poured water inside, and stirred in some spices.

“Perish *that* thought. I asked for the soup for a reason.”

## Chapter 28: Woven Magic

Ivan awoke slowly to the sight of the stars overhead, the moon nowhere to be seen. *What did I sleep on?* As he got back onto his hands and knees, the hard earth staring at him answered his question. *I should really be standing on something more comfortable before I do that again.* He rose, his eyes going back to the sky. *A full moon? Already? It was new before we entered the library. I wonder-*

“The sleeping giant awakes!” proclaimed Liz. “We were worried you were going to start the next Darkening with how loudly you were snoring.”

“I do not snore!”

“Yeah, and I’m not known across Telthan as the worst thief in history.” She patted his arm. “It’s okay. We resisted the urge to smother you to make it stop.”

He shoved her arm away. “My snoring has never been objectionable to anyone during my entire life. I resent you insisting it is!”

“But didn’t you s-sleep alone at Felkirk’s?” asked Caleb. “Who was there to bother?”

“Yes, but-” He stopped, his eyes narrowing before shaking his head. “Okay, it’s not important. I may or may not snore. I cannot confirm this either way. What have I missed?”

“Well...” started Alexandra, turning her head toward the hill behind them. “We were considering having you be the first to revisit Mistvale for supplies.”

Ivan took a step back. “We have barely touched any of our supplies since visiting the library. We do not need to go back there.” He shivered. “And that is one of the cruelest tasks you could have ever set before me.”

“But my beans!” complained Caleb.

“Your beans...” He pointed at him. “...Are not as important as my desire...” His thumb came back to his own chest. “...to avoid searing the entire village’s eyes blind so they won’t stare at everyone who passes by.”

“I’m kidding about the Mistvale thing,” said Alexandra, laughing. “We don’t need to go back there, but where *do* we want to go?”

His eyebrows went to the top of his forehead. “I am not exactly qualified to make such a decision, considering recent events.”

“Group decision, and you’re in the group,” answered Caleb.

Ivan’s mouth hung open before speaking. “May I ask one thing first?” He turned to Liz. “Did it work?”

“Yeah, it did.” She waved him off. “Wish you had been less of a prude before doing it, though.”

“I am not a-” He stopped when he saw Alexandra’s sharp look. “Regardless, I should be more careful the next time I use that. The text said that it was very draining as it pulled at my own energy, but I did not believe it was going to be *that* draining. Still, good news to hear you are healed.”

“Are you done being an impromptu doctor and scientist?” asked Alexandra. “We need to figure out what we’re going to do.”

“Oh, yes, dear me, sorry.” *I do not want to get her angry again, because in all likelihood it will be my fault completely.* “So what do we know?”

“You should just ask what we *don’t* know. But I’ll humor you. We’ve found out the Darkening is masterminded by something intelligent, trying to fight against it only makes one’s death more painful, and the Tablets go dark on the day of the Darkening. If you can call that a day.”

Ivan frowned. “We cannot find out anything more about the first. It is simply beyond our capability to know. The second is a solved question and needs no further inquiry, especially in light of the first fact. The third one...” He paused, stroking his chin. “That strikes me as one worth pursuing.”

“So...stay awake until the day of and find out what they look like without blue runes?” asked Liz. “We kinda just saw that yesterday. Or earlier today. Or...whatever.”

He raised a finger. "But they do *something* every day, except the Darkening itself. They serve some sort of purpose, and one that is older than history itself, based on the...dearth of information about them. I do not think the theory that they help prevent the Darkening from happening every day is far off the mark. We need to find out why."

"So g-go figure out the Tablets?" asked Caleb.

"More or less," he said, nodding. "Though I have not the faintest idea where to start. The runes are an indecipherable mess for me, but you..." He raised his eyebrows.

"I-" Caleb paused, his pupils dilating. "I-I guess so. I just don't want to cause any more trouble."

Ivan put his hands on Caleb's shoulders, locking eyes with him. "The only one who caused trouble was me. I have relied on books for so long, and they always gave up their secrets to me, that when I saw you reading those old texts, I was consumed by envy. I truly am sorry for what that envy caused."

Caleb tried to smile, but looked away. "I suppose I *could* see if there's anything I can read. I've never really tried. They were just the things you p-plowed around while out in the field."

"Is anyone opposed to us investigating the Tablets?" asked Alexandra.

"Will it require me to walk into a dead city with corpses everywhere, or a library that is tearing reality apart?" asked Liz.

"No." Alexandra rolled her eyes.

"Oh, totally, I am *so* down for that."

"May I suggest we start on that tomorrow?" asked Ivan, his eyes darting among the others. "We quite slept the day away. While it may be *possible* to read glowing blue runes in the middle of the night, I would prefer not being reminded of this 'morning.'"

Alexandra glared, her eyes putting him back in his place before her features softened.

"Tomorrow sounds best. We all need to recover a little more anyway."

"Did I miss supper?" asked Ivan, his nose sniffing at the air.

"Yes, but we saved you a bowl," said Caleb. "Alex, could you give this some heat?" He pointed at a bowl near the fire.

Flames erupted around the pottery, then vanished.

"Thanks." He gingerly picked up the bowl and handed it to Ivan. "Alex, you need to teach me that flash-heating trick. It's really handy."

"Hey, I'm not giving away all of my secrets now." She shook her head, her nose upturned. "I



learned them fair and square!”

“Now you’re starting to sound like Liz.”

Alexandra’s mouth dropped open. “I do not-Oh by Telthan, you’re terrible. I’m going to bed.” She dropped down onto her bedroll and closed her eyes.

Caleb chuckled, then settled into his own. “Good night, everyone.”

Ivan looked up from the already half-empty bowl to find the others asleep. *That was fast.* He devoured the rest of the soup and lay back down. *Caleb sounds so much more confident now. Was it the library? Something else?* He drifted off, the bedroll caressing his sore back.

#

“Just a little further! I can see the path. I’m almost there!” Fitz’s cry echoed across the plains of western Telthan, but only some confused birds answered his excitement. “I know I can make it there. I have only a day more, but that is a day enough.” He bowed his head. “May the Order receive me with mercy and understanding.” He knew they were there, at the edge of the world, watching, waiting, on top of the white-capped mountains in the distance.

#

Caleb couldn’t help but be confused by the dream when he woke. *I know Fitz was still trying to get up the mountains before the Darkening started, but the Order? The edge of the world?*

The light of dawn drew him away from the impossible questions, the day beckoning for him to awake. Regardless of where Fitz went, Caleb was going to the Tablets nearby on the plain. *I sure hope Ivan is right about me being able to read the runes.*

“Well, that’s two awake,” said Alex.

Caleb jumped. “Sorry...just looking at the sun, and the fields. They’re really pretty in the early morning.”

Alex smiled, her eyes unfocused. “Yeah...dawn alone kept me going during my darkest times with the Sentinels. I saw the beauty, the simple innocence of it, and felt compelled to protect it and all the people who woke up under it.” Her smile inverted. “I wanted to protect too many, and lost everyone.”

“You haven’t protected too many.” He locked his eyes on hers. “I have seen s-sacrifice in the face of certain death, f-fighting against the impossible, and cries for m-mercy that never came. People like you keep us going, reminding us that there’s more than just the D-Darkening out there. That somehow, w-we can hope for more.”

Alex sniffed. “Maybe you’re right, but what’s done is done. Right now, we need to wake Ivan and Liz up, eat breakfast, and get moving. We’ve been at this camp for over a day and a half.” She looked to the plains, black pillars dotting each hill, then shook Liz awake.

“Why do we need to get up at dawn every single stupid day?” complained Liz. “It’s not like we have any schedule we need to stick to.”

“We’re sticking to *my* schedule,” said Alex, crossing her arms. “And that means dawn rising unless there’s a really good reason not to.”

“How about I like my sleep? That’s a really good reason.”

“Not to me, and I’m in charge here. Get up. The Tablets do something, and causing sleep is not among them.”

“Fine, fine, whatever.” She pulled herself out of the bedroll, groaning in mock complaint with every movement. “Not like I’ll do anything other than stand around looking bored.”

Ivan awoke peacefully, but said nothing other than thanks when Caleb handed a breakfast plate to him.

After the meal, they quietly packed the foodstuffs and set off into the fields, steering clear of the ruined library.

“Next stop: that bizarre pile of polished rock over there,” said Alex, winking. “And after that, another rock. And after that, yet another rock.” She stopped walking. “You know, I never paid attention to just how regular the Tablets are. It’s like it’s a big huge network of stone.”

“Are you babbling to hear yourself talk? Or one-up Ivan for sounding officious?” asked Liz.

“Oh hush,” said Alex, stopping in front of one of the Tablets, its blue runes glowing from every side.

Caleb approached it, and felt like he could almost read the strange script. “I don’t recognize these symbols, but they seem...close.” He walked around the Tablet, taking in every side. “Wait, the opposite sides are identical to each other. Both the one facing me, and the one on the side.” He looked back to Ivan. “Any ideas?”

Ivan squinted at the text before shaking his head. “I cannot read it, but...” He looked at the Tablet a few hundred feet in the distance, then pointed at it. “This Tablet is in a direct line with that one.”

Alex sidled to the opposite side and made the same comparison. “And this side is in a direct line with that Tablet.” She took a step beyond them. “They’re in a line as far as I can see.”

“Well, that’s *one* new thing we didn’t know yesterday,” said Caleb, smiling before focusing on the runes again. “Now if the s-script is similar, this rune would be...an ‘A’, and this other one...an ‘L’. Give me a second.” He pieced together the closest letters he knew, building out until every rune matched. “Gibberish. Meaningless gibberish.”

“How’d you read it?” asked Liz.

“Left to right, like we always do.”

“What about right to left? Or top to bottom? Or even bottom to top?”

“Good idea.” He took in the Tablet with new eyes, trying each arrangement in turn. Words emerged, the text speaking of magic, life, and restoration. He read aloud:

“In life we grant our power, in life we give our st-strength.

Magic weave throughout this land, strong and sure.

Bring to an end p-pain, bring to an end wounds not healed.

Deny the final victory, the t-triumph of evil beasts.

Restore the life above the s-surface. The hope of all time

Shall come one day, and life shall be f-forever.”

“That is just so...beautiful,” said Ivan, tears forming in his eyes.

“Yeah, so beautiful,” said Liz, “But what does it mean?”

“I don’t know yet,” said Caleb, frowning.

“Ivan, why don’t you write that down?” prodded Alex.

“Oh my. Sorry, completely slipped my mind. One moment.” He pulled open his pack and brought out a loosely-bound sheaf of parchment and a small pencil. “Very easy to forget what you have when it is not used.”

Alex rolled her eyes. “Caleb, could you please repeat what’s on the Tablet?”

“Yeah, sure.” He slowly recited the words, lingering between each line for Ivan’s scribbling to come to a stop. “Alex, mind if I check the other side?”

She waved her hand toward it as she looked over Ivan’s shoulder at the poem.

The same words came to him, written in the opposite direction. *It is like a prayer. A sincere hope and belief in something better. A something Telthan never had.* He held in the tears, surfacing from his thoughts to the sounds of the others arguing.

“It’s all just pretty words. They don’t mean anything,” said Liz. “I mean, who writes like this? I’m just amazed Ivan isn’t telling us about how it’s a flight of fancy with no meaning at all.”

“But there *is* a meaning,” countered Ivan, running his finger along the text. “Consider the fourth line, ‘Deny the final victory, the triumph of evil beasts.’ That is the Darkening if I have ever heard it. It is a heartfelt plea, but etched into the side of this Tablet. No Darkening has so much as scratched a Tablet, even while the entirety of civilization falls to pieces around them. As much as I want to think they are just flowery words-” He pushed his finger into the paper for emphasis. “-It has to mean *something* to be *here*.”

“What about the other lines?” asked Alex, shaking her head in confusion. “‘Magic weave’, ‘In life we give’? What do those mean?”

“I do not know.” Ivan’s brow drooped in defeat.

“Sorry to i-interrupt,” said Caleb, peeking over Liz at the paper. “But the other side reads the same, j-just in reverse.”

“At least we don’t have to figure out even more stuff,” said Liz, smirking. “Then again, more words might help us make sense of the ones we have.”

“The poem mentions life, healing, wounds, and restoration.” Caleb pointed out each word. “We already know that Liz was miraculously healed after sleeping with her back to a Tablet in Andranine. What if the poem *is* the magic?”

“But what about the other parts?” objected Alex. “That only explains three of the lines. And it doesn’t have anything to do with the last line and a half, which I swear reads like it’s predicting the Knight Victorious.”

“That is a ridiculous presumption!” said Ivan, almost throwing the paper to the ground in his fervor. “The Knight Victorious has been a myth for ages, but certainly not old enough to predate the Tablets. The Tablets have always been. The Knight Victorious myth has not.”

“Nobody knows when that myth started,” Alex said. “At one point, people considered it not a myth, but a prophecy, a prediction that would come true one day.”

“There is...certainly a...romantic hope in such a myth, prophecy, or whatever people want to call it. The horrible event that Telthan must always face, ended forever at the behest of one man.” He looked up into her eyes. “Do you not see how ridiculous that sounds? I do not care how charismatic any man might be. No one can muster the strength required to stop the Darkening, much less forever.”

Caleb gaped, his mind racing. *But he saw me in a vision of the Darkening. He even advised me that we would be victorious. Has he forgotten? Has he dismissed it?* He stopped himself, knowing that he did not believe in the vision. *I am no knight.*

“What if the Tablets *started* that prophecy?” asked Alex, keeping Caleb from vanishing into self-loathing. “If Caleb was able to read the inscription, at some point it must have been plain language anyone could read.”

“I suppose it’s rather nice we’ve got Sir Dreamer of Death and Destruction with us,” said Liz, sticking out her lower lip. “If what he saw wasn’t so helpful, I’d be scared.”

Caleb wilted, images of the past threatening to pull him down into the abyss. “I c-can’t help what I dream, wh-what I see. I d-didn’t wish to d-dream of d-death every n-night for t-ten years. That it helped us out is just a g-good turn of luck.” He shivered at the days plowing fields full of imagined corpses, the nights staring in horror at a ceiling coated in blood.

“Lay off him,” said Alex, her voice rising as she pushed her way between Liz and Caleb. “None of us knows what he experienced, and it’s wrong to chide him about it.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever.” Liz looked away. “Hey...Wait. Didn’t you say these Tablets were facing each other?”

“Yes, they were,” growled Alex. “What about it?”

“That one isn’t in line.” She pointed. “It’s to the side.”

Caleb’s eyes left the parchment and found Liz’s Tablet.

“It is, indeed,” said Ivan, the papers falling to his side. “Considering our impasse on figuring out these words, I suggest we go and find out if *those* words are different from *these* words.” He shuffled the papers, then looked to Alex.

“Sounds like an excellent idea,” she agreed, leading the others onward.

“This one *is* in line with some Tablets,” said Caleb, motioning out an invisible line between two of them. “They just seem further apart.”

“What are you waiting on?” prodded Alex. “Get to reading.”

“Oh. S-sorry.” *She was just defending me, but...* He looked over the Tablet, rapidly finding the same pattern. “They’re identical on opposite sides, and flipped on the neighboring sides.” He read, picking out each letter. The passage started the same, yet spoke not of life, but of death. He whispered the words, then repeated them louder:

““In life we grant our power, in life we give our strength.

Magic weave throughout this land, strong and sure.

Curse the destroyer, curse the kinslayer,

Bring them to their knees. Break their strength apart.

Have the sun rot their skin and rend their bones,

May light itself be their end, now and forever.””

“Whoa, could you lay off the hate?” asked Liz. “You’re practically spitting at us saying that.”

“That’s what it says.” His shoulders slumped. “It’s hard not to feel the st-strength of what they’re saying.”

“And the same two starting lines,” said Ivan, scribbling down the verse.

“But it’s all about killing,” objected Liz. “What does life have to do with that?”

“One step forward, two steps back.” Ivan scowled. “We do not know what those two lines mean at all.”

“That’s not true,” said Alex, tracing her finger on the paper. “Look at the second line. The Tablets are a network all across Telthan, right? That matches to ‘weave throughout this land.’”

“That would mean the first two lines are a preparation for the actual force of the spell,” he concluded. “Assuming the Tablets are maintaining a spell, of course.” He looked at the runes. “It *would* fit with the rest of both poems.”

Caleb read the runes again to himself, the hatred forcing its way through his mind. *I can barely keep it out. The words themselves scream to be said with hate and contempt. And all of that hatred is deserved.* “The entire thing sounds like a death sentence, but as a request and not a demand.”

“Well, duh, it sounds like that,” said Liz. “If *you* could rage at the Darkening itself, what else would you put on your list of ways to want the Creeps to die?”

“At least as bad as they did to me, or my friends, or my ancestors,” said Alex, her voice low and teeth bared.

“Hold your horses, Crazyhammer. Does the Tablet actually *do* anything?” She cocked an eyebrow. “I’ve never seen Creeps have their bones rended or their skin torn apart, and the only time I’ve seen them fall to their knees is when they’re already dead.”

“But have you ever seen a Creep near an active Tablet?” asked Ivan. “Even during our not-Darkening, for lack of a better term, the Tablets were inactive.”

She shook her head. “Well, no. I haven’t. But I saw them entirely too much in the library.” She cast a glance over her shoulder. “Actually, there weren’t any Tablets within the library. Look at that rubble pile.”

“It explains their cowardice,” said Alex. “If sunlight could ‘rot their skin and rend their bones,’ running out into the middle of it would be suicidal. And if light is ‘their end,’ they would hide in the darkness waiting for fools to wander by.”

“What about their behavior within the library?” asked Ivan. “It does not fit that conjecture.”

“I’m not sure,” she said, unhappy with the question. “But with the lack of Tablets and reality falling apart.... It felt like the Darkening was ‘phasing in.’”

“So we’re up to what, two networks of Tablets all across Telthan?” asked Liz, ignoring Alex’s words. “One for healing, one for killing. The first I’ve seen work with my own eyes, the other no Creep has ever obliged us with a demonstration. Anyways, life and death.”

“They do not complete the picture,” said Ivan, shaking his head.

“Wh-what’s missing?” asked Caleb.

“Among other things, why do they go dark?” His hand gesticulated, punctuating the question. “How come they still stand? If they keep the Darkening at bay, how do they do that?”

Silence answered him as they looked at each other, hoping for an answer.

“The first target of every D-Darkening should be the Tablets, but th-they go untouched,” said Caleb. “I’ve never seen a C-Creep go near one.”

“Then how come the defense of Andranine wasn’t centered on Tablets?” asked Alex. “How come they built around them instead of using them?”

“They didn’t know.” Caleb sighed. “The library blinded them from seeing more knowledge.”

Ivan jerked, the papers becoming his sole focus.

*Just as Ivan did. And I just condemned him.* “Ivan, I’m-”

“A good thing to keep in mind for the future,” said Alex, giving a pointed glance at both men. “It looks like the morning has disappeared on us. Shall we fix a quick lunch and see if some more answers appear to us after we eat?” She smiled sweetly, though her eyes said to drop the conversation.

*I didn’t mean to be a bother to her.* He set down his pack and prepared lunch.

## Chapter 29: Aftershock

Lunch passed quickly, the murmurs of conversation trite and unimportant. But beneath the surface, Ivan felt the sting of his recent mistake, saw the unsure glances, heard the words that they didn't say outright. *They do not trust me. Alexandra herself keeps tight control of anything I suggest.*

He spoke little, only responding to the few questions posed him. Every jab at his conduct he took without complaint, the truth of each word hammering into his heart. *I am worthy of nothing but disgrace. Forgiveness or not, things will never be the same.*

He beheld the library, its ruins reminding him of his own ruin. Part of him wanted to comb the rubble, see if he could find a stray book, a tome spared the destruction. *It is all gone, forever.* He shuddered unhappily as he finished the last of his lunch.

"Whatcha lookin' at?" asked Liz, her mouth half-full.

Ivan resisted the urge to shrink into himself. "Just the remains of the library."

"Good riddance," she spat back. "I didn't know it was possible for people to lose their minds over a bunch of books, but you proved *me* wrong."

"I know and I apologize, but I cannot change the past, as much as I wish I could." *If only we could have saved some fragment of the knowledge contained within.*



“If you really *were* sorry, you’d stop looking at the place like it was your long-lost lover. It’s sickening to watch you.”

“It is so hard to let go.”

“Listen to yourself!” She regained her feet and stared at him. “You’re saying that you would rather risk us all for the sake of a pile of books! *What is wrong with you?*”

Dozens of answers sprang to mind, all of them inadequate. “I do not know.”

“Get your head out of the ground and walk on, then! Chasing after what isn’t anymore only keeps you from letting it go.”

Ivan covered his face with his hands, trying to parse all the conflicting emotions, the contrary thoughts, into discrete pieces. He trembled with the effort, but had to give up. No resolution came. He stood, putting his back to the library and shouldering his pack. “Let us go.”

“Where?” asked Caleb, hurrying to put away the unused food.

“I do not know, but somewhere not here. Here needs to die to me, and only by leaving it will that ever happen.” *I must be rid of this Darkening-cursed Library.*

“I guess that works. Alex?”

“He’s got the right idea. I was looking to the northwest during lunch. There’s a third Tablet network. Looks like you thinking it incomplete is right, Ivan.”

Ivan almost smiled, but shoved the happiness he didn’t deserve away. “Could we head toward one far from here, please?”

“No good reason not to.” She cinched her pack and took off across the rolling hills.

Ivan shuddered as he followed, the destroyed library weighing down his every step.

#

Caleb looked after Ivan, the slumped shoulders and bent neck filling him with sadness. He didn’t understand why Ivan had become so obsessed, but he did understand how he felt now, lost and alone even among friends. *Like surviving the Darkening. What is there to live for when everything you knew and loved was ripped from you in a single moment?*

They walked for most of the afternoon, stopping at a Tablet only when the sun hung low in the sky. Caleb read the script. “This one was done later, in a sense.”

“What do you mean, ‘done later’?” asked Alex.

“The script. It’s...familiar to me. It has to be much younger than the other two.”

“So what does it say?” asked Liz, tapping her foot.

“One second....” He picked out the text. “Alright, here goes:

‘In life we grant our power, in life we give our strength.

Magic weave throughout this land, strong and sure,

L-lock off the ground where the sun shines by day,

Make t-treacherous the pathways of the killers.

Let none pass the c-circle of dawn, never pausing

In the v-vigilance bought and paid for in b-blood.’”

“It sounds...wrong,” said Ivan, disgusted. “It sounds desperate, like they were at their wit’s end.” He tilted his head. “At least it is very specific about what it does, unlike the others. It is meant to prevent any Creeps from ever walking on the surface of Telthan. Or to put it properly, anywhere the sun can shine.”

“It isn’t anywhere near as beautiful as the other two, and it sounds hurried,” said Alex. “And what does the last line mean? Ivan, do you have it written down yet?”

He looked from her to the hovering pencil in his hand. “No,” he confessed. “Caleb, could you repeat that last line?”

““The vigilance b-bought and paid for in blood,”” he recited, then turned his attention to Alex. “Were people d-dying in the process of being vigilant?”

“That does not sound right either,” said Ivan, shaking his head. “This Tablet feels like it is correcting a failure, an oversight. What it was, I have not the faintest clue.”

Caleb went to the opposite side of the Tablet and jumped in surprise.

“What’s got you so addled?” asked Liz.

“This other i-inscription. It’s not the same!”

“So it’s not like the ones earlier?” asked Alex. “Or not like *this* one?”

“Not like *that* one. It’s a completely different verse, so diff-” He waved his hand. “I’ll just read it all:

‘In life we grant our power, in life we give our strength,  
Magic weave throughout this land, strong and sure,  
Block and bind, b-bar and restrain those who seek  
The light where only d-darkness has been known.  
Render them helpless, f-fearful, and uncertain.  
Until the light shines everywhere f-forevermore.’”

“That is more in line with the other inscriptions,” said Ivan, stroking his chin. “Why is this side different?”

“I don't know, but the inscription on this side has the s-script of the other Tablets.”

Liz leaned closer to the first inscription, her finger reaching out to trace along the runes. “Hey, these go deeper than the others.” She poked into the rune. “And they’re covering up some shallower marks I can’t pick out.”

Caleb joined her and studied the shallow marks. Chills went down his spine as the words formed. “What on Telthan.... This T-Tablet’s writing was written over. It *was* the same as the other sides, but it was ch-chiseled down into the new ones. What can possibly d-damage a Tablet?”

“Ignoring that, why the change?” asked Alex. “Both sides have the same meaning, this one is so...murderous.”

“This is someone’s vendetta,” said Ivan, putting down the papers before crossing his arms. “A vendetta now etched permanently into the Tablets themselves. What could have caused someone to want to write this, much less accomplish it?”

Silence reigned.

“P-pain and loss happen all the time, not just during the D-Darkening,” said Caleb, breaking the wordless hold. “Whoever this person was, th-they lost someone close. The markings are r-ragged, clumsy. And if this T-Tablet did its job properly, th-there was no way for anything to get th-through the barrier. I think this was written immediately after the very first D-Darkening.”

“What? That’s crazy!” objected Liz. “The Darkening’s been going on for...pretty much forever. There was no ‘first Darkening.’”

“But the Tablets make p-permanent injury impossible, kill the Creeps that dare to attack on the

s-surface, and even bar their m-movement onto the surface.” *The pieces fit, I know they do.*  
“Why have such a n-network unless they could attack wh-whenever they felt like? Why have such p-powerful objects that not even C-Creeps can do anything to them?”

Ivan picked up the idea, his hand reaching up to stroke his chin. “What if peace did not exist? If each day you could die to monsters without a hope of fighting them off? The Death Tablet specifically made sunlight deadly, this Barrier Tablet prevents them from moving onto the surface to begin with. Anywhere the sun touches, remember?”

Caleb nodded. “The C-Creeps must have realized what the T-Tablets were, and killed endlessly to st-stop their construction. The v-vigilance bought and paid for was people dying to p-protect the Tablets as they were being built.” He let out a deep breath, his mind reeling from the conclusion. He looked from Ivan to Liz to Alex, his eyes unable to give the hope he wanted to feel.

“That is...so horrible, and yet...it makes sense. The Tablets were the last defense our ancestors made against the Creeps. They had peace and prosperity like we have now, and they forgot the horror. They must have lost their focus at some point, then everyone forgot about the Creeps. Then they struck. All at once.”

“Maybe, but d-do we really know? Will we ever know?” Caleb shivered, his lightless dreams replaced by images of murder with the sun high overhead. *They would have only known fear; instead of grim certainty. Any day could be the end, not just one day.*

The sun fell into the eastern horizon, the wind of late fall colder, harsher. He shivered again, more at the message of the Tablets than the wind.

“Why don’t we stop being all morbid and get us a fire going?” said Liz, her chipper voice ignoring what they had discovered.

Alex waved her hand and a patch of grass was replaced by bare dirt ringed by small rocks, followed by a fire. “Just for you.” She fell down, the pack slipping from her shoulders. “All this thinking has exhausted me. And that theory, even if it’s wrong, sounds so terribly right. How could the past possibly be worse than now?”

Caleb cobbled together a barebones supper and served it to the others. *Why are we even doing this anymore? All we learn only makes things worse.* His thoughts raced, exhaustion taking him into a fitful sleep.

## Chapter 30: The Depths of Sorrow

Liz felt lost for the second time in her life. She'd acted like she didn't care in front of the others, but sleep evaded her as she stared up at the twinkling stars above. *What are we even searching for?* She could already hear Ivan's reply. *"We must learn more about the Darkening so that in the future they may stand a chance of ending it."* Yeah, right. She snorted. *They solved the problem of rampaging monsters by containing it to a single day, and now we want to reverse that. Great plan.*

*I doubt that was the intention. Something went wrong.*

*And none of them fixed it. They just let it stay that way. Or, if I want to give them credit, they were wiped out long before their great solution failed miserably. Anything that allows the Darkening is a failure.*

*Is it?*

*I don't know. Shut up. Nobody knows that answer.* She turned over onto her side and shut her eyes against Porter's accursed question. *Is the Darkening truly a failure?* It echoed until sleep finally came.

#

Fitz let out a cry of joy. The Tablets of Passage lay within sight, a straight line toward the edge

of the world. He bounded toward them, exhaustion replaced by relief.

*Soon, I will see you face to face. Soon, I will be a Guardian like you.* He slowed down to a relentless walk upward, his eyes craned toward his final rest.

#

Caleb woke at the first light of dawn, his thoughts a jumbled mess. Fitz, the Guardian, the Darkening, the Tablets, constant fear. The phrases came and went in a whirlwind, leaving him bewildered and unsure. He focused on the western sky, shafts of golden light silhouetting the mountains Fitz sought. *Did he make it? And who is the Guardian? He was in such awe of the person.*

His eyes settled on an unusually straight line of black dots tracing their way down the side of the foothills. *Are those...?* He tracked the path as it came down the mountains, across the distant plain, and out of sight. *The Tablets of Passage. They exist.*

He looked back to the crest of the mountains. *What lies over them? More land beyond?* He didn't know.

Caleb shoved the dream, the Tablets, the mountains away, leaving only the Darkening. *How long has Telthan lived in danger of the Creeps? Why must we die against them over and over again, no matter what the form or the time?* He cast his eyes upwards to the uncaring sky. *What is there to live for?* He dragged himself from bed, his mind uncleared.

#

Ivan's disgust rose with his consciousness. *All we have learned, all I have sought for...worthless. The Tablets stopped a neverending Darkening. Is what we have now truly so horrible?* The question lingered as the quiet clink of a cauldron and ladle belied Caleb's wakefulness. *At least we still have soup to comfort us.*

He continued to stare at the lightening sky. *It is horrible. The Tablets were meant to be good, and yet...they are not. Pleas to a god who does not exist and a world that does not care, all in a vain hope of stopping monsters who exist only to kill. The Tablets are no better than Andranine, good intentions that failed.*

He remembered looking over Liz's shoulder, seeing the rough grooves of letters he couldn't read. *I know that man's pain. I know his hope. We have all dreamed of a time without monsters, and been given nothing but pain. He had the means to change it, and it did nothing in the end. All we have learned...worthless.*

"Breakfast's ready!"

Ivan felt miserable, but moping accomplished nothing. He rose and joined the others at the fire. *If only I knew what to do next.*

#

Breakfast was delicious, but did nothing for the emptiness Alex felt inside. She looked at the others, and saw the same. *No matter what, we must continue on. The creeps will pay. For everything.* “Another day in Telthan,” she began, compelling her face to scrunch into a fake smile.

“Yeah. What a day,” said Liz, her voice as spirited as her face. “I’m so excited.”

“Liz has the right idea,” said Ivan without a trace of expression. “This is *such* a marvelous day.”

“You two are just being difficult.” Alex pushed her hands at them, her false enthusiasm gaining momentum. “Yesterday was hard, but today will be better.”

“If you keep lying like that,” said Caleb, his eyes boring into hers, “We’ll need to have Liz punch you in the face.”

Ivan looked up, his eye reflexively wincing. “She hits like a wagon careening at full speed, I should add.”

Alex winced at both the image and the complete rejection of her attempt to lighten the mood. “I know it’s hard, but sometimes when you want to know something, the answers you find aren’t what you wanted.”

“Quit reminding me,” growled Ivan.

“But we can’t mope on it forever. That’s no way to live.” She spoke more to convince herself than to help the others. “And we can’t walk away, either. What is there to live for in our old lives? We need to keep on going, no matter how difficult it is.”

“Don’t tell me that,” complained Liz. “I might actually believe you.”

“But where do we go?” asked Ivan, his eyes desperate.

Alex looked down into the remnants of her soup. “I don’t know.”

“But I do,” said Caleb.

Alex’s head snapped up and locked eyes with him. “You do?”

“Ever heard of the edge of the world?” he asked Ivan.

“I have...heard mentions.... But generally unaccredited work that I would not trust. Supposedly, in the mountains somewhere.”

“I’ve dreamed of a man convinced that making it to the edge of the world would save him from the Darkening. He couldn’t wait to meet a Guardian, some powerful man or woman he wants to join.”

“Likely deluded in his questing after something that is not there.”

“I thought the same, but last night he spoke of the Tablets of Passage. They point the way to the edge, according to the man. He used them as his path through the foothills and the mountains. Those Tablets,” he pointed beyond the group, “Are right there.”

Alex’s gaze followed his finger, finding a line of Tablets a thousand feet away. Their slim profile was in stark contrast to the square ones that dotted the landscape. *Why do his dreams always seem to help us?* “So you’re suggesting we follow them and see what this edge of the world is, and who that Guardian is, if he’s even alive?”

Caleb nodded.

“We’re going to need more supplies and thicker clothing before going up there. By height alone, they have the bite of winter year-round, based on Sentinel records.” She scowled. “As much as I hate to say it, we’re going to need to go back to Mistvale. But I’m not going to put up with their attitude. Fair price, or they’ll get fair justice.” She patted her hammer.

“So I can punch them all on the way to the market?” asked Liz, her eyes lighting up.

“Not exactly...but if that’s the only way to get our supplies...” She started to smile wickedly, but kept herself from the indulgence. *None of them will get in the way of our greater purpose. If they do, I will personally shove them out of the way. I just hope Caleb isn’t leading us wrong.* “Let’s pack our things and we’ll be there by mid-afternoon.”



## Chapter 31: Return to Mistvale

They crested the final hill above Mistvale as the sun shone low in the sky, Alex's estimation right on the mark. Caleb gasped at the sight before him. "What happened?"

Mistvale was no more. Broken-down piles of timbers replaced the houses, shattered bricks ringing what remained of the sturdier structures. Nothing moved except a wispy smoke rising into the sky.

"Creep attack, and recently," said Alex, her lips pursing. "Fires run out of fuel after a couple of days."

"Creep attack?" asked Ivan, dismayed. "How do you know?"

"The destruction alone. Nothing stands."

"And here I wanted to go on a punching spree," said Liz. "Now I feel like a jerk."

"Let's just go," said Caleb quietly. "We need to get supplies. We need to keep going." He took off down the hill, letting the slope carry him toward the graveyard that was once Mistvale.

#

Ivan wanted to shut his eyes, to avoid the death greeting his every glance. Most had had their

hearts and lungs torn out, or their heads ripped off, promising a quick end. A few were missing limbs, torn violently from the sockets and flung far away. "But how?" *What once was Mistvale never had Creep attacks.*

"I deeply regret that I said I wanted Mistvale to suffer half a week ago," confessed Alexandra. "No one deserves to die at the hand of Creeps, no matter their treatment of others."

*I'm not sure it was just half a week ago. We were in that library longer than it felt, but how long?*

"Yeah, gotta agree with you there," added Liz.

"They had no warning, no chance to hide," continued Alexandra. "Almost none of the corpses are in houses. They're in the streets."

"Nothing remains," said Ivan. "Forgive my callousness, but we should salvage what we can and get on our way."

"Well it's not like they need their stuff anyway," said Liz.

"This must be how s-survivors feel the next day," said Caleb. "All they can do is pick up the p-pieces from their own friends and family, s-salvage what's left, and somehow start over." He hung his head. "I don't know how they can leave the p-past behind and try to build a f-future they know will only be torn down once again."

"But at least it's a future," reminded Alexandra. "A future I'm not sure our ancestors could ever hope for. What we have is terrible, but in some ways it's better than what they endured."

"Anyways," said Liz, rolling her eyes. "If we're done moping about recently dead people and people so dead their bones don't even exist anymore, we need to see if there's any food, coats, and whatever other stuff we might need is in this once-village." She stomped off in a random direction.

"She does have a point," observed Ivan. "Alexandra?"

"Stop calling me that." She towered over him, her scowl so deep he could barely see her eyes. "I have told you *countless* times that I am *Alex*, not Alexandra. Is that-" She poked his chest for emphasis. "-Perfectly clear?"

"Certainly, Alexa-" he stopped, his mouth hanging open. "Alex."

Alex stepped back and smiled. "Thank you, my dear Ivan. I'm glad that we can be on the same page."

"So a-are we going to get supplies here?" asked Caleb, glancing between Alex and Ivan.

"Yes. We are," said Alex. "Get what you need and meet back up here when you have it all. Remember, we're going somewhere very cold."

*She has become much more forceful since she took over, but I cannot fault her attitude with the burden of responsibility she has. I will support her as best I can.*

He stepped into the destroyed town, desperately trying to ignore the blood and gore haunting his every step.

#

*When did this happen?* The question gnawed at Alex as she rummaged through splintered wood and toppled brick for anything worth keeping. *Not even four days ago we were here, and it's...gone.* Each time she asked, the same answer she didn't want to hear came back to her: two days ago, when the library had collapsed.

She wanted the answer to go away, because it had only one explanation. *The Darkening that we experienced at the library spread to Mistvale, and they were slaughtered. We caused this.* She buried her head in her hands, refusing to believe the answer. *No, we couldn't have. We're not monsters.*

Alex lurched forward, trying to focus on the various foodstuffs strewn around the destroyed market. Most were rotten, bruised, or otherwise inedible, but a precious few remained in good health. *Including the beans.* The vegetables taunted her, reminding her of the fateful words she had said. *I didn't mean it.* She squeezed her eyes shut as the guilt broke through.

She forced herself to continue scavenging, the monotonous task unable to keep her from feeling responsible for the destruction. *I am so, so sorry. You did not deserve this.* Tears fell from her eyes, the pain refusing to stay caged. *We did this to them. I know we did.* Her pace slowed, her motions becoming mechanical as her mind fell into despair.

#

Liz was happy to get away from the Mope Trio, even just for a little while. Last night's worry was far behind her, and despite Porter's nagging, she didn't feel like lamenting stuff she couldn't change was a good idea. *Might as well steal from a poor man. Gain nothing either way.*

She picked through the village bit by bit, diverting her course from the others to get more time alone. *Wish they'd stop crying about something out of our control. Might as well break down and weep for the victims of the Darkening.*

Porter started to protest, but she shut him out as she searched for the things she needed.

#

Alex arrived at the rendezvous first, dabbing the redness from her eyes as she waited for the others. She had found a well-fitting coat in addition to more rope, spikes, and as much food as she could carry. *I don't know how long it will take us to get to that edge of the world Caleb spoke of, but I don't want to be stuck in the mountains without anything to eat.*

Steadily they joined her, each pack loaded down with as much gear as she had. *I've taught them something about being prepared. Took long enough.* "We have everything?"

They nodded.

"Excellent." She looked to the horizon and her shoulders slumped. The sun was beginning to set. "We'll need to camp for the night."

"Can we at least get on the other side of the hill so that we don't need to see this graveyard all night?" asked Liz, looking in disgust at the village.

"We can do that. Besides, it'll keep the smoke from blowing into the camp if we're on the other side."

She led the way over the hill. As she crested it, she looked back and another wave of guilt assaulted her. *You did not deserve this.* With an effort, she turned away from the smoldering ruins and joined the others in setting up camp.

## Chapter 32: The Upward Journey

His legs were past aching, his feet beyond complaining. Caleb looked to the side, his day-old headache making the Tablets a black, hazy mess. He forced in deep breaths, the thin air making each step feel like it would be his last. *How did Fitz keep at this?*

The journey was hard, and each glance upward made it seem like they weren't even moving. *Why aren't we stopping for a break?* He opened his mouth to ask.

"Are we there yet?" asked Liz for the sixth time in the past hour.

"No," thundered Alex, turning her head to stare Liz down. "And if you ask that stupid question one more time, I will lash you to one of these Tablets and leave you to starve."

"Alex! That is uncalled for!" said Ivan. "She is just trying to be silly, and you are threatening her with *death*? How is that the least bit--"

"Save your advice for someone who wants it."

"Could we p-please calm down?" asked Caleb, his voice small. "We've got to be close, the mountain peaks are just ahead."

"And you've been here before?"

“No, but I-”

“Then shut up and keep walking. Remember that this was *your* idea.”

Caleb recoiled. *What is wrong with her? She's not acting herself.*

The snow-covered mountains were much closer. *So very close. Something's wrong here, but I don't know what.*

He gritted his teeth and pushed through the pain that flared through his entire body. *We have to get to the top. Where else would we go?*

#

Alex wanted to appreciate Liz's silliness, but their pace was far too slow. *We're going to run out of supplies if we don't pick it up. All of the things we've survived only to be done in by hunger and thirst? Not on my watch.* Part of her thought Caleb an idiot bumpkin leading them on a fool's errand. Another part fought to ignore her body's pain, sure that Caleb would never lie. She feared the pain would win before they reached their destination.

*I just want to get to this edge of the world, check it out, and leave in time to reach a town.* She saw the sun behind them, already on its downward arc into the eastern horizon.

“Come on, we need to keep moving. Not much longer now.” *I hope.*

#

“Halt! Time to set up camp.”

Liz tried to sit, but her legs collapsed, sprawling her onto her back. *At last, some rest!* She tucked her arms in and rocked forward, leaving her pack where she had been. She looked over at Alex and resisted the temptation to complain about the long, lunchless march. *She'd pin me to the ground with icicles for the night if I dared.*

*She's under a lot of stress,* said Porter.

*Self-imposed stress isn't my problem. She keeps on assuming that she has to push us or we're toast. She needs to chill out before I punch her in the face.*

*She's sacrificed a lot to keep everyone together, especially when Ivan went crazy.*

*Whose side are you on? She's only sacrificed what she wanted to, and none of us asked for any of it. I could've handled Ivan on my own if she hadn't stepped in first.*

Liz broke off the pointless argument, looking around the campfire to clear her mind.

Caleb moved slowly around it, each motion accompanied by a grimace as he tried to cook supper. Ivan stared up at the sky, his mouth slightly ajar as his breathing slowed to normal. Alex

refused to make eye contact, her sole focus on removing her boots and rubbing the feet within.

*We can take care of ourselves. We don't need Alex to do it for us. Not like she will want to hear that.*

#

Ivan awoke too late. *Alexandra, or Alex, or whatever name she demands to be referred to by, is already awake.* He cursed his exhaustion as he wistfully gazed at Caleb, the person he trusted to get through to her. *I suppose I will have to wait. I hope I do not lose all sense of moderation before then.*

He opened the journal he had salvaged from what once was Mistvale, his eyes beholding its blank, first page. *What shall I write?*

Nothing came and he sighed at the emptiness, wincing in expectation of the ache. But his back felt fine. He swiveled his head around, finding a Tablet of Life mere feet away. *We really should camp near them every night. I almost feel ready for today's hike.*

He looked back down at the empty page, grand purposes and noble language starting to thread through his mind, the possibility of acclaim from future scholars. *No, that is not what I need.* He set them aside, and started writing what was truly on his mind. A torrent of emotions rained down on the page, overriding his cultivated sense of logic and sound decisions. His hand quivered with each stroke, the burden of stress and strain ebbing out of him. When he set the pen down, he felt at peace, all of his doubts caged within the ink drying on the page.

*I really should have done this decades ago when my first mentor suggested it to me. I never understood why, until now. Some things are too painful to bear inside. They must be let out.* He looked down at what he had written, seeing the pain from the outside. *We search for the Darkening's meaning, a tragedy beyond comprehension. Somehow, it feels like the right thing to do, the thing to seek. I just hope that what we discover plays some part in ending it forever.*

He kept reading until a single sentence stopped him: "Who could ever accept this?" The status quo of Telthan, the Darkening, the Tablets, whatever happened before the Tablets. All the facts and theories formed a maelstrom of injustice. *Who could ever accept this? How come no one made things better than this when it was possible? What human, or fictitious god, could settle for death and destruction?*

The question was unanswerable, the original answer given before history had even started. *So little remains, so much has been lost. Is this all we can hope for?*

"Ivan! Breakfast!" called Caleb.

Ivan snapped the journal shut. "I am coming. One second." He stood up and caught Alex's eyes. "Do you have a moment?" He stepped away from the campfire, beckoning her to join him.

She sprang to her feet and bounced over, a smile on her face for the first time in a week. "What

do you need?"

He blinked, his opening apologies unprepared for her better mood. "Uh...if my eyes do not deceive me, we camped near a Tablet of Life. Considering our better moods, greater restfulness, and I daresay lessened muscle soreness, we should make a regular habit of camping near them."

Alex looked at him for a long moment, tilting her head from side to side.

*Why does this require thought?* Ivan forced himself to keep a straight face despite his indignation.

"Sure, I don't see why not," she finally said, nodding her head. "They're only a few hundred feet away from each other anyway." She turned back to the others. "Now let's get some breakfast and get on our way. The mountains are directly in front of us, and we'll need rope at some point. Oh, and the spikes to hammer into cliff faces."

*Still micromanaging, but at least she is in a better mood. I hope my patience lasts.* He accepted his plate of food from Caleb and steeled himself for the coming day.

#

Alex was happy Ivan was back to normal, providing advice and letting her make the decisions. *Just what I need to counterbalance Liz's back-talking and Caleb's near-silence. Useful, not useless.*

She sat down and ate her as-usual delicious breakfast without a word, cleaning the dishes with a quick gout of steaming water.

*I wish I had known magic earlier. I might have saved my friends. I might still see them alive.* She scowled at the fire as she dismissed it. Quickly, she put on her coat and pack, only to be dismayed by the rest of them still finishing their food. "Hurry up. We need to get moving if we want to stand a chance of making it to the top."

Liz looked up, her head tilting sideways as her mouth opened for a retort.

Alex stopped her cold with a stare so fierce it would have killed Creeps. "Get moving."

They did as she said, and within minutes she was looking up at the peaks of the western mountains, the wind speeding off of them, seeking to chill her to the bone.

*Good luck.* She grinned, the warm layers keeping her unaffected by the dropping temperature. *We'll make it to the top, one way or another. They'd better not slow down today.*



## Chapter 33: On the Edge

Alex's good mood held throughout the day, the others having given up their whining and complaining. *We're making excellent progress. Why didn't Ivan tell me about the Tablets sooner?* She popped over the lip of the cliff face to see a plateau that stretched ahead of her. At the edge of her vision was a deep fog she couldn't see past, the Tablets of Passage disappearing within.

She pulled herself up and reached back to help the others, her eyes straying to the mid-afternoon sun. *Closer, yet it doesn't warm me.* "It's cold, but at least the going is easy now." She smiled to each of them as they joined her. "By the looks of the peaks, I thought we would have had a harder time, but you all have done admirably."

"News flash, Alex. We're not a military unit," said Liz. "We don't need pep talks, a set schedule, and good luck catching me in a uniform that isn't black." She looked at the men, nodding slightly.

"Please stop insisting any slowdown means the Darkening is happening in the next two minutes," added Ivan.

"My mother was overbearing and repressive for most of my life," said Caleb. "And you've made her look like a saint in the past week."

Alex took a step away from them. "All three of you? We're almost there, the going is easy, and

you want to *blame* me for keeping us going?” She crossed her arms, daring them to doubt further.

“Alex, listen to yourself!” Caleb took a step forward. “You’ve been treating us like we’re the S-Sentinels for over a week. We’re not.” He shook his head. “We’re a group of people who want to find out about the D-Darkening. If that makes us insane or c-courageous, I don’t know.”

“But without anyone to push you, we’ll lag farther and farther behind, and we’ll starve!”

His expression lightened. “Call it just a silly feeling, but I believe that there will be people at the edge of the world, a G-Guardian of some kind. We don’t need to make a return trip with the food we have.”

“You don’t *know* that!” Her arms flew above her head as she stepped face to face with the man. “We don’t know anything for that matter!”

Instead of falling back into himself like she expected, he stood his ground, staring up into her eyes. “A month ago we didn’t know anything, either!” He pushed her away, throwing her off-balance. “Every time we’ve tried to find things out, we’ve had to go on faith and hope. And look where it’s gotten us. We’ve *survived*, we’ve *grown*, we’ve *learned*. I don’t care if we die out here from starvation if somehow we can make Telthan better.”

Alex stared, a shiver forcing its way down her spine. *Caleb has never yelled at anyone*. Her head fell to her chest. “You’re right.”

No one spoke.

“You’re all right, okay? I’ve been trying to keep things normal and safe, when it’s been abnormal and dangerous the entire time.”

Nothing but stares.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I’ve been pushing us all too hard, and you deserve better. Sorry.” The corner of her eye found Caleb’s smile.

“It’s fine,” he said quietly. “We’re here because we *want* to be, not because we *have* to be. Don’t forget that.”

“I’ll try to, but you’d better keep me in line, understood?” He didn’t respond. “Understood?”

“You’re falling back into the habit.”

She stared at the sky. *I’m just trying to keep us alive, and it’s too overbearing*. She brought her head back down and nodded.

“Can we get going now?” asked Liz, miming Alex’s words. “We’re losing *so* much time standing around.”

“Sounds good.” Alex walked into the fog. “Let’s see what’s on the other side.”

#

The fog felt impenetrable to Caleb, a force actively trying to keep him away. He pushed through it, even as his eyesight failed beyond five feet. Each step felt unsteady, the ground warping beneath his feet.

“Think it’s thick enough in here?” Liz asked. “Even Mistvale can’t brag about fog this deep.”

“I think I can see it lightening up ahead. The brightness is less diffused,” said Ivan.

“Whatever diffused means. Could you try speaking like a normal person once in a while?”

“Say what you will, I will not.” He shook his head, a smile of pride beaming from his face. “If, however, you need me to explain things better, I shall try to do so.”

Liz’s hand smacked her forehead.

“At least the worst of our problems right now is how stilted Ivan talks,” said Alex.

“I do *not* talk stilted!” He glared at them all in turn. “I am a man of culture and learning, and I have acquired my capacity in vocabulary through years of study and work. It is completely natural to me.”

Caleb chuckled at the teasing. *He talks differently, but I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I doubt they do, either. It’s just fun to get him sputtering.*

The fog began to lighten, the Tablets off to his side visible again. He followed the trace of them forward, but couldn’t see how far they went.

Then he was through and staring at the impossible. The Tablets stopped short, halted by a wall of black and empty space.

#

“I think this rules out the possibility of getting *over* the mountains to...wherever,” said Ivan, his head swiveling around to take in the breadth of the darkness. *Everywhere past this point. How?* “You were not lying when you said the place was called the edge of the world.”

Caleb gulped. “I didn’t think it meant *this*.”

“I managed to finish that book about shadow magic and the Darkening the other night,” said Liz. “And that blackness is not empty; it’s alive.”

Alex’s face exploded in terror. “What do you mean, alive?”

“Remember the shadows that always accompanied the Creeps in the library? This is the same

stuff.”

“You mean to tell me that there is a permanent Darkening presence on the very edge of the world?” She stepped back, shaking her head.

Liz nodded. “It doesn’t seem like it’s able to project its presence...”

“What do you mean?” asked Ivan, taking his focus from the edge to give Liz his full attention. *How did I miss her reading a book? Was she invisible?*

“Well, if the book was right...” She mimicked Ivan’s hand-resting-on-chin gesture, “...There would be Creeps piling out at us right now if it *could* project its presence, ergo.... Ever read of a mass invasions of Creeps from the west, Ivan?”

“Well, no, but you still have not explained what you mean by ‘projecting its presence.’” *I need to know!*

Liz dismissed him with a wave. “Book’s weird way of saying that it acts like a portal. Projected ones can enter Telthan, un-projected ones can’t. This portal only goes one way: out.”

“Out where?” asked Alex, her face contorted in confusion.

Liz shrugged. “Book didn’t say, other than a general warning of ‘you don’t want to go there.’”

“What about the Tablets in front of it?” asked Caleb, pointing to a line of them that paralleled the portal. “They have writing on them.”

*But the other Tablets of Passage did not. Curious.* “You should see if you can read them.”

Caleb nodded and advanced to the Tablets. “You don’t need my help on these,” he called back.

“What do you mean?” *Why is it here, of all places, I get confused?*

“You’ll see.” He motioned them over.

Ivan scowled, but joined him in front of the center Tablet. His mouth dropped open of its own accord at what he saw. “Normal writing? How? They’ve been here for ages beyond memory...*how?*”

Caleb shrugged. “I don’t know. Shall we read them?”

“I shall.” He peered closer to pick out the words. “‘Five. Know that to pass this line is to pass from this life. There is no return.’” He looked at Caleb. “Why five?”

“Well I could’ve told you that,” dismissed Liz. “One-way portal to wherever Creeps live? Sounds like death to me.”

“But why does it say ‘five’ first?” asked Alex, rolling her eyes.

“Because it’s the fifth in line,” said Caleb, pointing to the left at four other Tablets.

Ivan looked around to see a total of nine Tablets, each of them faintly glowing. “How did I miss that detail? Regardless, how did whoever put these here see this far into the future, predicted the shift of language over time? That strains the bounds of logic to their limit.”

“Let’s just start at the beginning,” suggested Alex. “Whether or not we know *how* they got here, they’re likely talking about the edge itself.” She ambled to the first one in line. “‘One. What you knew no longer applies. What you believe may not either.’ What?”

“Just keep on reading,” said Ivan. “It might paint a clearer picture. ‘Two. He who goes alone is better off dead. Those who go together may yet succeed.’ I suppose that *could* apply to us.”

“Yeah, us,” scoffed Liz. “‘Three. Much lies beyond knowledge, beyond time. Little can truly be known.’”

Ivan scowled at her. “What tripe is that? ‘Little can truly be known’?”

She held her hands up. “It’s what it says. Keep on reading.”

“Without knowledge, we can’t do much of anything. Regardless.... ‘Four. Doom comes to the careless, death to the hasty. Prepare or die swiftly.’ I would figure that to be self-evident.”

“Yeah, Mr. Runs Into Darkness Away From Friends.” She stuck out her tongue. He opened his mouth to reply, but she cut him off. “We already read the fifth one. Got the sixth, Caleb?”

“‘Six. To guard is to serve the greatest purpose. No man shall impede their duties.’ I got the feeling the Guardian was important, but the greatest purpose? What is that?”

“Stay on track,” said Alex through gritted teeth. “‘Seven. The Way still lives while the Guardians still serve. Learn and prosper.’ Okay, these Guardians had better be somewhere I can ask them questions.”

“Hypocrite,” teased Liz, brushing past her. “‘Eight. Order from chaos, life from death, prosperity from poverty. Opposed yet allied.’”

“An odd philosophy to have,” said Ivan.

“‘Nine,’” said Caleb, preventing him from continuing. “‘Look not to the West, but to the North. Refuge awaits those who persevere.’”

“What did we just read?” asked Liz. “It reads like some cheap crypto-philosophy mumbo-jumbo.”

“I wish I had any idea, but I do not,” admitted Ivan. “One moment, though. I will write these down in case they become important at some point.” He pulled out the bound parchment and wrote down the words. *Crypto-philosophy indeed, but I cannot shake the feeling they are important.*

“Um, guys,” said Caleb, his body turned away from them. “You might want to pay attention to the last one.”

“What?” asked Alex, impatient.

“Ah, I think he means to...look that way?” He twisted in place, then stopped short. “That would be a very large building carved into the side of a mountain.” Before him stretched a towering peak, the side facing him showing a massive hunting lodge, its windows more than twenty feet tall.

“Oh, really?” scoffed Liz, shaking her head as she turned. “...You’re not kidding.”

“Who would live here, though?” asked Alex.

“The Guardian, or Guardians,” replied Caleb.

“But these Tablets had to have been here for ages,” objected Ivan. “And there is no telling *when* that man in your dreams-Fitz, was it?-tried to get up here. It is likely abandoned.”

“What if it’s not?” said Alex.

“Only way to find out is to go over there.” Caleb took off toward the building. “The sun’s got to be starting to set, we need to get there before nightfall.”

“Hold it!” commanded Alex, but he didn’t stop.

“Let’s just go,” he called back.

Ivan met Alex’s eyes and shrugged. “No sense waiting for a decision. Even if it *is* abandoned, it will be warmer than outside.”

“True.” She scowled as she trudged in Caleb’s wake.

Ivan joined her, but the silence caused him to look around and ponder what they had seen. “How does the sun set if the world is not round? Does it simply disappear?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” said Liz.

“But this turns everything people have surmised on its head. Think of the implications!”

“Ivan...” Alex started, her voice rising in warning. “Remember the last time your thirst for knowledge got out of hand?”

His wonderment vanished, his shoulders slumping under the weight of his error. “Understood.”

## Chapter 34: The Lodge of the Dawn

Alex was happily surprised upon seeing the light coming through the windows, a sure sign of someone living there. The building itself was massive, stretching for four stories further up and into the mountainside. *This makes the fortress of Andranine seem like child's play in comparison.*

“Wow, that’s big,” said Liz. “Want to advise whoever lives here on how to be prosperous, Ivan?”

“I am happily retired from that job,” said Ivan, gritting his teeth. “And do not wish to return to anything remotely resembling it for the rest of my life, or longer, if possible. Besides, I do not think they need the help.”

“*Halt!*”

Everyone stopped.

Alex searched for the source of the voice. “Who’s there?”

“You stand on the edge of the world, having read the Tablets of Warning, and now approach the Lodge of the Dawn. It is I who should be asking you that. I have spoken.”

*Great, someone we can’t see telling us what to do.* “I am Alexandra Sterling, former member of

the Dark Sentinels.”

“I’m Liz.”

“I am Ivan Stradinski,” Ivan said, following Alex’s example. “Former advisor to merchant magnates and inveterate scholar.”

“I’m C-Caleb Moss. F-Former farmer, I guess.”

“It pleases me that you all have shaken off your former occupations. If you are here for the reasons your actions have demonstrated, you will never return to them. I have spoken.”

A figure materialized in the empty air before them. He was middle-aged and stood taller than Alex by several inches, his blue eyes so light she could see them from twenty feet away. He was massive, his arms and legs larger than her torso. His features were care-worn from years facing the wind and cold, their strength deepened by the furrows in his brow.

“Come,” he said. “The Lodge is before you. You have passed the zeroth test. I have spoken.”

“Zeroth?” asked Ivan.

“All shall become clear in time.” He motioned with one giant arm to the lodge beyond. “Come.”

Alex took a tentative step forward, then another. She looked behind her and smiled upon seeing the others join her. *Is this man a Guardian? Does he have the answers we need?*

The lodge loomed taller and taller in her vision, eventually engulfing it. *I sure hope he does.*

#

Caleb desperately hoped the fear he felt wasn’t showing on his face. *Who is he? What does he mean we won’t go back to our previous lives? What do the Tablets mean, for that matter?* He knew he wasn’t alone in having questions, but the only person who could answer them left him uneasy.

He tried to shove the doubts aside as the man heaved upon two, massive oaken doors more than double Caleb’s height. Heat radiated from within, only getting warmer as he stepped across the threshold. *This coat is too heavy.* He dropped his pack and pulled it off, shoving the thick cloth within.

“You do not need those here, nor will you need them beyond if you pass the tests and are sure of your purpose,” said the man, stopping Caleb in his tracks. “I have spoken.”

“So, wh-where should I put it?”

The man swung an arm out and pointed at a coat rack beyond the doors. “If you need it, it will be waiting for you.” He turned and pushed the doors closed again, the heavy wood coming together with a solid thud.



Caleb did as he was told and put his coat on the rack. The others joined him, and he took comfort from the confused looks on their faces.

“It is night,” said the man. “You will need your rest before the tests to come. I will provide food for you to eat both tonight and tomorrow morning. Eat well, for you will need the strength.” He walked to the doors on the other side of the room.

Caleb’s heart sped up, the man’s words providing little comfort. *What are these tests? Who is he?* He forced his fear away and yelled out, “Who are you?”

The man stopped, then turned around. “My name is of no true importance, but since it will provide comfort to your uncertain souls, I shall speak it. I am Jardarin of the Guardians, Caretaker of the Lodge of the Dawn. I shall return soon with food for you.” He turned and left without another word, the oaken doors shutting behind him.

“Well, at least we got one bit of not-confusing information today,” said Liz. “So he’s a Guardian like Caleb was talking about. Of what, we don’t know. And what on Telthan are these tests he keeps mentioning?” She threw her hands up in frustration. “Never mind about the Tablets, that portal, and everything else that doesn’t make sense.”

“There is so little we know, and yet we have been given the kind hospitality of this Jardarin,” said Ivan, a polite smile on his face. “I worry about these tests he keeps speaking of, but he seems to be an upright fellow. In all likelihood, we will know what we are being tested on in time to prepare for it.”

“At least we have someplace warm to sleep tonight,” said Alex, her eyes casting about the room.

Caleb looked around as well, taking in the space. Along the front wall were large windows letting in the last vestiges of dusk. A huge fireplace to the right held a roaring fire. Around it were four cushioned chairs, a table between each pair. Behind the chairs was a large, intricately carved table, also with four chairs. On the opposite side were four beds, covered in sheets that seemed to shimmer in the flickering firelight. To the side of every bed was an assortment of blankets. “It’s r-rather nice in here.”

“That is one of the largest understatements I believe you have ever said, Caleb,” said Ivan. “This is head and shoulders beyond the best that I have ever seen in all of Telthan. Individual parts of the ambience might be superior here and there, but all of it? I feel like a ruler, not a traveler.”

The doors opened and Jardarin walked through, a massive platter of roast beef, assorted vegetables, and potatoes in his hand. He set the platter down on the table with scarcely a sound.

“I shall return with your drinks shortly,” he said. “Eat, rest, for tomorrow shall be difficult.” He left again, shutting the doors behind him.

“I don’t know about you all,” said Liz, walking over to the table and sitting down. “But I’m going to dig in.”

“Forgive me, Alex,” said Ivan. “But I do not see a problem with us eating.”

“Yes, let’s eat.” She sat down. “I’m starving.”

Caleb ate heartily, the long day’s travel and the unanswered questions at the end of it melting away as the food disappeared into his stomach.

Jardarin walked in, placing four oversized mugs of cider on the table. Then he was gone.

“He is not a very talkative sort,” said Ivan as he finished off his plate. “Except to repeat what he has already said.”

“Could we just talk about something *not* dealing with today?” asked Liz, moving over to a chair in front of the fireplace.

As she requested, the conversation stayed off of the endless questions a few hours had managed to ask. Caleb was thankful, but part of him knew that it was just putting off the inevitable. *I hope Jardarin can help answer our questions.* After an hour of reminiscing, his eyes grew heavy and he retired to his bed, sleep claiming him until the morn.

#

“Awake!” commanded a voice.

Liz bolted upright and spun around for the threat. Instead, she found the face of Jardarin, its stony features betraying no emotion.

“Got it! Got it. Now what?”

“I said to awaken!” Jardarin repeated, the voice thundering through the large room.

Liz looked at her fellows, and saw they were still asleep. *Oh boy. This could get fun.* She leaped out of bed and shook each of them awake.

“It isn’t dawn yet!” Caleb complained, his face a priceless mask of confusion. “I didn’t oversleep, did I?”

Liz shrugged, not knowing why Jardarin wanted them awake before dawn, either. The fire still burned, but outside she had to squint to make out the snow reflecting the dim light of the crescent moon. She stood in front of Jardarin with the others, her eyebrow quirked to ask an unspoken question.

“Behold!” he proclaimed. “The Lodge of the Dawn!” He swept his massive arms toward the outside.

As if on cue, light exploded into their vision, filling the windows with brilliance. Liz covered her eyes and tried to see the floor at her feet, but the radiance was too strong. *Did the sun literally just pop into existence right next to us or something?* She stopped her train of thought

when she heard Jardarin speaking.

“We greet thee, oh solemn symbol of our cause. We greet thee, oh sun of the sky. Bring forth your light. Bring forth your radiance. Banish the creatures that would swarm us all from this land. Come, oh dawn. You are the symbol of our hope. I have spoken.”

*And here I thought religion was dead in Telthan.*

## Chapter 35: Trials and Tribulations

Finally, the sun rose above the windows and Ivan could open his eyes, bright spots flashing in his vision as he tried to regain his bearing. *That does answer where the sun comes from. It just appears.*

“Did you hear my words?” Jardarin asked in a fatherly tone. “Behold their meaning?”

Ivan stared at him, his face blank.

Jardarin smiled. “It is tradition to give the sun acknowledgment of what it does for us. How it is a guardian of the land, a protector against the dark creatures who would seek our end. It only provides light, but every day it provides us with hope that some day we will not need to fear the darkness. I have spoken.”

“That has got to be the most weirdly pragmatic approach to religion I’ve ever heard,” said Liz.

His smile deepened, the kind creases out of keeping with his massive frame. “Are you prepared for your tests?”

“What tests, exactly?” asked Alex. “You never said what they were last night.”

“Those who would seek to cross the edge of the world must be ready for the trials that shall face them.” He crossed his arms. “If you cannot pass the tests, you are better off going back to your

former lives.”

“Who says we want to cross into *that*?” asked Liz, jerking her thumb toward the black portal just outside the door.

“Few who make the journey are not committed to seeing what lies beyond this world. Your own actions tell the tale. Terror of the unknown makes most falter long before they read the Tablets of Warning.”

Liz shot him an odd look, but he didn’t react.

“You will need nothing other than yourselves. Your belongings shall await you, whether you succeed or you fail.” He turned and pulled open the inside doors. “Come.”

Ivan followed him into a wood-lined hallway, small candles casting shadows along the walls. Not even twenty feet distant was darkness.

“Before you is your first test. Remember the Tablets of Warning, and what they said. That is all you shall need.” He vanished, a hidden door shutting behind him.

“He means the ones we read outside, right?” asked Caleb.

“I believe so,” said Ivan, tapping the side of his head. “I do not quite recall what they said, but I did write the words down.” He slapped himself. “And they are with my things outside. I need to go get that notebook.” He pivoted to walk through the doors, only to be greeted by a wall of timber. “Or...I will stay right here with you.” His shoulders slumped.

“These tests had better not be deadly,” said Alex. “I am willing to die, but not because of ‘tests’ forced upon me by a person I don’t know.”

“But if we don’t remember what the T-Tablets said, how can we p-pass the tests?” asked Caleb, anxiety rising in his voice. “Why is he so c-convicted we’ll walk into a d-death trap anyway?” His breathing accelerated. “Is he going to f-force us to? Maybe even th-throw us into it?”

“Calm down, Caleb.” Liz clapped a hand onto his shoulder. “I happen to have a good short-term memory. Anyways, the first Tablet said something about what we know no longer matters, and what we believe may not either. Whatever that means.”

“We do not know much at all, considering,” said Ivan, disappointed in the admission. “It should not be *too* hard to put that aside.”

“Could you stop acting like a scholar for five seconds and think practically? What we know no longer matters, so there could literally be *anything* ahead, and we’ll have to come to grips with it.”

“Standing here just wastes time,” growled Alex. “Let’s just *get* to the first test, *then* argue about whatever it means.” She stomped off into the darkness.

*Why do I feel like we are just being toyed with again?* He followed her, the darkness far from a comfort.

#

The hallway kept on going, candles illuminating as Alex approached them. *No end in sight. How long have I been walking? Is there even a first test to get to?* Her confidence drained away, her steps faltering until she stopped and cast a glance over her shoulder at the others. “What am I missing?”

“What you know no longer matters,” said Ivan. “Things might not be what they seem.”

“But this hallway *has* to have an end somewhere,” she protested. “We must be halfway into the next mountain by now.”

“You might know that, but does what we know matter?” His face contorted in discomfort.

She smirked. *Most knowledge-obsessed person I’ve ever met, admitting he doesn’t know anything. Irony.* “So this entire hallway’s a fake like back in Andranine.”

“I wou-” Ivan stopped as the hallway disappeared in a flash of light, replaced with a room covered in staircases, most of them at angles impossible to walk on. “That was the key. Now what about these?” He gestured to the architecture.

Alex looked at the staircase directly in front of them, taking note of the door at the top. “The doors just fall out onto the other side. Someone please tell me this is a sick joke.”

“What you know no longer matters,” repeated Ivan, ascending the staircase and opening the door. Beyond wasn’t the floor, but another staircase. “Odd.” He stuck his hand through. “These doors are portals of some sort.”

“So let’s just follow them and get it over with, you know?” Liz elbowed past him and walked through. “Oh crap, I’m upside down,” she called from above.

Alex’s head craned upwards and found Liz’s surprised face only a couple of feet from her own. “How?”

“What you know no longer matters,” said Caleb. “Let’s just keep following the staircases and ignore the fact that we’ll be upside down and sideways compared to the normal floor.” He walked behind Liz as they walked through each doorway, their bodies never straight up and down.

“This is ridiculous,” she spat before glancing at Ivan. “Let’s get this over with.” She pushed herself up the endless staircases, forcing her eyes to stay forward. Each time she saw the ground, her stomach lurched. “Caleb, Liz, how are you doing this? This thing is impossible.”

“I realized there is nothing about these staircases that can make sense, so why try to think about it?” answered Caleb. “I’ll just keep on moving until we reach the end. It’s beyond these doors up

here, by the way.”

Alex stopped and looked up, dumbstruck. *He’s...right. “What we know no longer matters.”* The words echoed with new purpose, the bewildering staircases falling away in favor of the one before her.

“Mind walking faster?” asked Liz. “We’re busy waiting over here.”

“Sorry, just...thinking.” She took the stairs two at a time.

“Think and walk. You’re talented enough for that.”

She scowled up at Liz, only to find the ground far below. Vertigo almost claimed her, but she pulled her head level and dashed up the remaining stairs, saving her scowl for when she was on normal ground once more.

#

The room in front of Liz could have been large, but in the darkness she couldn’t tell. “You have passed the first test,” said Jardarin, his voice echoing around the room. “Now confront your second. Remember the Tablets.”

“What was the second one again?” asked Alex.

““Someone who goes alone is dead, those who go together might succeed,”” she rattled off. “Don’t ask me what those people are trying to succeed at, but apparently we should stick together while crossing this room and finding the exit. Kinda obvious, wouldn’t ya think?”

*And yet you try your hardest to avoid working with others.*

*I’ve gotten better about it. Don’t give me any of that critique crap now. You’ve been pretty good recently. And by good, I mean silent.*

*You haven’t needed any reminders lately.*

*Nineteen years and just now you realize you can just shut up and make us all happy?*

“Everyone stick close to me,” said Alex.

“Hold up now, why do you get to be in front?” Liz stepped before her. “I’ve got this. This room’s pretty dark, but I know how to manipulate shadows. Can *you* do that?”

Alex shot her a look, but took a step back.

“Exactly. Stay close, and we’ll pass this test.” She walked into the room, her eyes flitting in every direction for the danger that had to be lying in wait. *Too easy.*

“What on Telthan?” exclaimed Ivan, his voice off to her right.

Her head jerked toward him. “Ivan, why are you over there?” Above him, she saw a massive plate falling, a thin shaft of light illuminating its proximity to him. “Never mind. Dive toward me. Now!”

Ivan didn’t ask a question for what had to be the first time in his life, and dove for her, the plate crashing onto the floor seconds later. “How did I get over there?”

*At least he dove first.* “I don’t know. Just get here.” She looked back to assure herself that Caleb and Alex were nearby. She sighed and pressed on. “If you somehow get separated,” she called over her shoulder, “Please call out immediately.”

Caleb yelped, the high-pitched noise coming from above her. Her head whipped up to see him walking on the ceiling. “Get down here!”

“H-how am I up here?” he asked, panic-stricken.

*I swear, the entire point of this room is to irritate the stuffing out of me.* “Well, I said to come down!”

At her words, he appeared right next to her, borderline hyperventilating.

“Calm down already. We need to keep on moving. This stupid room is determined to separate us and force me to acknowledge it. I guess *not* doing that is how to fail. Right, Alex?” She glanced over at where Alex had been. “Alex?”

“I’m here!” The voice was right in front of her, but Liz saw no one. “You know, I’m the only one allowed to turn invisible. Stop that.”

Alex popped back into view, her eyes bulging. “You couldn’t see me? I was right here the entire time.”

“Shut up and get across this room. Now. I’m tired of you all getting pulled everywhere.” She picked up the pace, her head swiveling to keep track of all of them until they had reached the far wall. *Nothing but babysitting. Why did I keep Alex from doing this?* She shook her head and let out another sigh as a pair of doors opened before them.

“You have passed the second test. Behold, the third.”

“Great. Just. Great.”

#

Caleb passed the threshold into a darkened room, only to have to cover his eyes against the sudden light. When he could see, he beheld a tall, narrow room with white stone columns along the sides, a vaulted ceiling terminating in an arch. In the center was a pedestal holding a single book. Without another thought, he walked toward it. “The Rise and Fall of Andranine: A Study of the Defense,” he read aloud.



“Hey, we need to stick together!” griped Liz, dashing to his side.

“Odd name for a book,” said Ivan, joining them. “Considering no one was able to investigate the place for fifty years. We’re the first ones to make any sort of investigation within the city, though parts of me wish we hadn’t.”

“But that means the cover is a lie,” said Alex from the threshold. “There have been no explorers except us. No one could write such a book.”

“Maybe not a lie, but a fanciful bit of fibbery on the part of the author. No one could disprove him or her, regardless. Caleb, is there any author stated on the cover?”

“No, just the title.”

“You know, normal people just open the book and start reading a few pages,” said Liz. “Caleb, if you please?”

Caleb glanced from her to Alex, searching for approval. Thankfully, Alex nodded. He opened the large book, and a blank page stared back. *Huh?* He flipped to another page, then another, trying to find text that wasn’t there. “A book with no words?”

“No words? What craziness are you spouting?” asked Ivan, peering over his shoulder. “By Telthan, what is this test even about? Liz, third Tablet!”

“Yeah, that one.... ‘A lot is beyond knowledge and beyond time. Little can be known.’ I think.”

“Then the blank book makes sense,” said Alex, stepping from the room’s threshold. “It’s an illustration. Everything that we, the first explorers, might be able to put in that book is just empty words, blank pages.” She looked Ivan straight in the eyes. “What we know is very little, and what we don’t know is very often beyond what we can learn at all. How many unanswerable questions have we been posing this past month?”

“Quite a lot,” said Ivan, his head bowing. “With how much work we have done to know what we *do* know, it is truly not much. And yet, it is likely more than the people of Telthan have known for millennia.”

“You have passed the third test. The fourth test is fraught with peril. Remember the Tablets, or you shall perish.” Doors opened at the far side, the room beyond appearing to glow of its own accord.

“We’d better be almost done with these stupid tests,” said Liz, pouting her lips. “I’m tired of them.”

“Aren’t we all?” asked Alex, leaving the pedestal for the doorway. “Come on.”

#

Liz scowled at the words ‘fraught with peril.’ *Great, now we’ll have to keep someone from*

*dying.*

Her nose caught a whiff of smoke. She sniffed again, sulfur greeting her nostrils. She snorted and coughed, then peered into the room. Before her was a pit filled with molten rock, the only way across large platforms that floated in every direction on their own accord. “Oh great, an obstacle course, where if you fail, you burn alive. Just what I always wanted.”

“At least he was not exaggerating,” said Ivan, his eyes bulging. “How are we to navigate this safely?”

“Why don’t we find out what the fourth Tablet said first?” suggested Caleb.

“Oh yeah, that too.” She looked to the ceiling, reciting in a sing-songy voice. “‘Doom comes to the careless, death to the hasty. Prepare or die swiftly.’ Easy to remember. I’ve learned that the hard way several times.” She wagged her eyebrows, calling attention to her scars.

“Stealing things and getting caught,” coughed Alex under her breath.

“Oh hush, you. It’s the past, and I’m keeping it there. You do the same.” Liz wanted to be annoyed, but her words surprised herself. *Did I just say that? Since when did I want to bury the only happiness I knew before I met these three?*

*Since you realized it wasn’t as satisfying as you thought it was.*

*Yeah. Right. Keep on dreaming, Porter. Or how about get with Caleb and he can show you a thing or two about dreaming.*

“C-could we just s-start crossing, one step at a t-time?” asked Caleb. “Sh-should fit what Liz s-said, right?”

“Stop your shaking,” commanded Alex as she reached for the pack that wasn’t there. “For want of some rope.”

“It is a room full of molten rock.” Ivan wiped his brow. “The heat alone is making me sweat. I do not believe rope would survive very long.”

“Let’s just start climbing rocks,” said Liz, tired of the idle banter.

The first platform inside the doorway was stationary, making it easy for all four of them to get onto it. The second, however, slowly floated up and down.

“It’s just a step away if you wait for the right moment. No sooner.” She heeded her advice and looked back to see the others do the same.

“C’mon, we need to go faster. I’m about to broil in here.”

“Stay the course, Liz,” said Alex. “No need to get careless.”

“Yeah, yeah...” She led the way across more platforms. After an eternity, she jumped through the far doorway, the sweltering heat behind her at last. She smiled at the sure footing of the floor, the soft candlelight welcome after the dark red of the room.

Jardarin stood before her, smiling. “You have passed the fourth and final test. You are indeed worthy to cross beyond the edge of this world. As an added boon, I shall answer your questions.” His arm gestured to a round table. “Come, and sit with me.”

Liz wanted to object, but he was already seated.

“Come.”

She threw her hands up in defeat and glanced at the others. “Guess we’re going to get some questions answered,” she whispered.

“I will not complain,” said Ivan.

“Come.”

“On our way!” called out Alex, pushing at the rest of them before hurrying to the table.

## Chapter 36: The Only Option

Liz was sick and tired of Jardarin's assumptions. *Not to mention his holier-than-thou attitude, speech more stilted than Ivan's, and height.* "Why do we have to be worthy of a suicide mission, assuming we're even interested in it?"

"And why do we need your permission?" added Alex, to Liz's surprise.

"The Way forbids ignorance of the dangers beyond." His face was less expressive than a stone wall. "It is a Guardian's solemn duty to prepare travelers who would seek the edge. Beyond is a world that does not abide by your expectations. Logic fails, steadfast truths lose their foundations. Without true belief, only madness and death await you. I have spoken."

*Oh, great. More religious mumbo-jumbo.*

"So why the tests?" asked Caleb. "Why the Tablets of Warning?"

"The Tablets of Warning are the nine truths of the Guardians. Five to warn of the world beyond, three to speak of our purpose, and one to provide comfort for the weary."

*And more officious rhetoric. Does he even believe what he says?* "But we only had four tests, not nine."

"Four of the truths of the world beyond must be revealed through experience. The fifth needs no

such preamble.”

*Shocker. At least he isn't kidding about the fifth one.*

“Who are the Guardians?” asked Ivan, arching an eyebrow.

“I am of an ancient tradition, stretching back for millennia. There are two Guardians, Caretakers of the Lodges of the Dawn and Dusk. We guard not against the world beyond, but against those who would seek to fight against the denizens of that world without purpose, without the guiding light of the Way.”

Liz resisted the urge to grab the man by the shoulders and shake him to clear the stupidity from his head.

“Have you ever been to the world beyond?” asked Alex, trying and failing to hide a scowl.

“No, I have not.” He shuddered. “At the end of my life, I shall teach a worthy pilgrim of the Way and the Guardians and pass through to join my brethren fighting on the other side.”

*Brainwashed idiot.*

“What is the Way?” asked Caleb.

“I am forbidden to speak of it to you, for it is beyond the understanding of those who live in this world.”

Liz seethed. “Forbidden? Seems mighty convenient to say that when all you do is fall back on the Way every single question.”

“Hold your peace, Elizabeth Porterwather!” Jardarin thundered at her, his face still emotionless. “You belittle something far greater than you will ever become, and I shall not tolerate such blasphemy.” He looked at the others. “You are permitted two more questions.”

She blinked, her bravado stripped. *I'll prove you wrong. Just not right now.*

“Did you write the Tablets of Warning?” asked Ivan.

“I did not. My predecessor did. He passed through the edge fifteen years ago. I know of the forgotten art of chiseling into the bedrock of the world beyond, but it is not my place to use it.”

“Wait, did you just say ‘bedrock of the world beyond?’” asked Alex, her eyes bulging with fear.

“There is much that I do not know, and much that I do not understand. I have spoken.” He stood up and walked away, leaving Liz confused and annoyed.

*And all the jerk does is give us more questions. What is the world beyond anyway?*

“Your things are waiting for you below,” said Jardarin, stopping at the threshold. “You are free

to make your decision whenever you desire. Farewell, and may the Way light your path.” He disappeared.

*The Way can shove it. The guy called me Elizabeth!*

#

Alex looked from Ivan’s blank stare, to Liz’s angry snarl, to Caleb’s hopeless distance, hoping the confusion she felt was as apparent.

“That jerk just added more questions,” spat Liz.

“That would be a mild way of putting it,” said Ivan, annoyed.

“So let’s see what he just made worse...” continued Liz, counting off on her fingers. “There’s a Lodge of the Dusk somewhere, a world beyond, the bedrock of said world, the Way, and something about his brethren. Did I get it all?”

“Don’t forget we need to be worthy of the Way without knowing anything about it,” said Caleb.

“What else is new?” asked Alex, throwing her hands up. “The second we figure anything out, five more questions pop out at us. It keeps on making less and less sense!” She stamped her fist on the table. “I’m sick and tired of this endless spiral of cluelessness.”

“As much as I hate to say it, I do believe that was part of Jardarin’s point,” said Ivan. “What we know will be challenged in the world beyond. If he *is* correct, nothing will truly make sense there anyway.”

“Who cares about the world beyond?” asked Liz. “We’re here, in Telthan. Under the exact same rules we’ve always had. Nothing has changed.”

“Nothing?” asked Caleb.

Alex ignored him. “He spoke of some decision we need to make, but I want to make sense of this before deciding anything. I thought he’d help us out. That didn’t happen.”

“Religion and dogma can be powerful things,” observed Ivan. “The Way he speaks of can only be some form of either. Mind, I wholesale reject such terrible notions. They prop up hope in something that is not there.”

“But aren’t we hoping for a better future for Telthan, free of the Darkening, and whatever came before it?” asked Caleb.

“I do suppose you are right in saying that. However, it is a hope founded on what is reasonable and provable, not blind faith and naïve expectations. Perhaps the Way is similar...” He shook his head. “Based on Jardarin’s words, I doubt it.”

“Yet we hope.”

“Yeah, we’re all a bunch of religious kooks and heretics now,” said Liz, casting a glare at Caleb. “I’m just *bursting* at the seams with excitement.”

“I don’t like the idea, either.” Alex sighed. “But that’s more or less what we are, compared to the average person of Telthan. We’re not like them anymore.”

“Hey! I was never normal and I never plan to be!” objected Liz, a wide smile breaking across her face.

“But where do we go from here?” asked Caleb.

Alex wanted to glare at him for pushing the issue, but restrained herself. “There are likely other places in Telthan we haven’t discovered yet, not to mention analyzing the texts we have for additional clues. There is a lot we don’t know, and it’s high time we fixed that.”

“That will require a lot of blind exploring,” cautioned Ivan. “And we will need to come up with a better plan for travels, if that is what we end up doing.”

“Blind exploring is boring,” complained Liz. “Lots of traveling followed by maybe a couple of days of actual exploring.”

“But it’s the best option we have, if we want answers,” reminded Alex.

“No, it’s not,” said Caleb, his eyes fixed on the table.

*If it isn’t Liz being a thorn in my side, it has to be someone else.* “Why isn’t it?”

“There is nothing more we can learn in this world,” he continued, his head rising to meet her anger. “There are no more answers we can find, no more theories to test. Everything will eventually lead back here, at the edge of the world, before the entrance to the world beyond. That is the only place we can go.”

“You don’t know that,” she growled, livid at him for the first time since Andranine.

“Weren’t you paying attention to what Jardarin said?” He kept meeting her glares, silently ignoring her growing rage. “There are questions we cannot answer in Telthan. The answers lie in the world beyond. He knows very little. Didn’t you hear the yearning in his voice, the desire to see the world beyond and have his own questions answered?”

“Or he could be an obstructionist dogmatic imbecile trying to either force us into committing effectual suicide, or make us quit seeking the truth,” suggested Ivan, dismissing Caleb with a wave.

“The guy’s big enough to function as a roadblock in more ways than one,” said Liz.

“And yet he said that his predecessor *wrote on those Tablets!*” Caleb’s hands slammed down onto the table, pushing him to his feet. “That alone should be proof behind what he says. The Guardians can write on things considered unbreakable. Can you say anything remotely close to

that about anybody, anywhere else in Telthan?”

“Have we seen him do it?” soothed Ivan. “No, we have not. He has only spoken of it. The only corroboration being that the Tablets of Warning were written in our language as opposed to a language long forgotten.”

“But do you have a better explanation?” asked Caleb.

“There are certainly many logical possibilities to be considered-”

“*Do you have a better explanation than mine?*” The question echoed through the room, shocking Alex with its force.

Silence.

Caleb stared at Ivan, unblinking.

“No. I do not.”

“Exactly. For all of your crazy ideas, alternate suggestions, and whatever other excuses you want to make, ultimately everything ends *here*.”

“Excuses?! I do not make excuses!” Ivan came to his feet, his finger inches from Caleb’s face.

“You don’t?” Caleb pushed his arm down. “How many times have we been confronted with impossible coincidence, and you shrug it off as ‘lucky circumstances?’ How many times have you insisted that belief in a god, crazy dogma, or some faith is just delusional heresy? And who else was willing to run away from his own friends because there was ‘knowledge to learn?’” Caleb’s eyes burned, his teeth gritted.

“How dare you! It was a mistake, and one I regret, but I should in no way be judged for a momentary indiscretion!”

“No, you shouldn’t.” The fire in Caleb’s voice ebbed away. “But you ran away from the truth in each of those moments. You only seek what is convenient for you, what matches with what you ‘know.’ And *that* is what I will judge you for.”

“Now hold on a second,” said Liz, pushing herself between the two. “Why are you insisting we kill ourselves, Caleb? We’re next to a big black portal of nothing that we know goes to the home turf of Creeps and even Cryptic McStrangespeech admitted it’s essentially death. Nobody returns. Nobody comes home. And you’re telling us that it’s where we *have* to go?” She shook her head. “You’re nuts.”

“If we truly want to learn what we say we do, it is the only option,” he replied. “But if we’d rather figure out how to avoid the truth as best we can, we should just leave here. Go back, continue our old lives that will never seem normal, not even for a moment.” He caught Alex’s eyes. “We’re at the point where truth is beyond knowledge. It’s firmly in the realm of belief.”



Alex stared back at him, stunned. *He can't possibly be serious.* She slapped her hand on the table. "No. I refuse to believe that. It doesn't match up with reality. At all."

"But do we know what reality is in the first place? We thought reality was the Darkening, but it used to not be. We thought reality was peace and prosperity forever aside from the Darkening, and found pain where it shouldn't exist. We thought reality was what we could see and understand, but every time we've been wrong. The only thing we can hold onto is the hope that eventually there will be a final reality that cannot be stripped away."

"I utterly disagree with this mad notion of charging headlong into the unknown," said Ivan under his breath.

"I'm not a fan of suicide, either," said Liz. "Well, dying in general, but I can't avoid that, really. But I *can* die on *my* terms, not some unknown creature's."

"But what else can we do?" asked Caleb.

"Nothing," spat Alex, the word stinging her lips.

"Then whether we like it or not, whether we want to or not, we have no choice. We must cross the edge of the world and seek the knowledge that can only be found beyond."

She hated his conclusion, hated the inevitability of it, hated him for daring to stick by it. *But he's right.* She sighed, defeated. "Then let's get our things." She stood and walked for the door. "We have a portal to cross through."

## Epilogue

Alex stood beyond the Tablets of Warning, staring uncertainly at the black wall of formlessness before her. She felt the portal's warmth, felt the foreboding of what lay beyond.

"We don't need the coats," Caleb whispered, dropping his to the ground.

"And here I thought I was the only one sweating," said Liz.

Three more coats fell atop his.

"There is no turning back once we walk through," Ivan's mouth drew into a tight line. "Jardarin was clear about that."

"This is where it ends, and where it begins," said Caleb. "There never was any turning back."

"We're totally crazy for trying this," said Liz. "But at least it'll be an adventure."

"It'd better not be short-lived," said Alex. *And if it is, I'd better get to smash some Creep skulls in before they kill me.*

"It won't be. I am sure of it," said Caleb.

"If only I could share your faith." She shook her head. "But for now, I'll just trust in yours."

He smiled back at her. “I understand. Maybe in time. Could I ask a favor, though?”

“What?” *Don’t ask me to be kind to the monsters. I will have my revenge.*

“Could we walk through the portal together this time?”

She chuckled. “Yeah, sure.” She reached for his hand and Ivan’s, Caleb grasping Liz’s in turn. “Alright. We’ve wasted enough time standing around here. Let’s go explore the unknown.” She walked into the portal, the others following in her wake.

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This book owes everything to the campaign A World Together organized by frogman55 on the Myth Weavers play by post forum in December 2008. Without my desire to build a land to put in the setting, Telthan would not exist. I still wonder what frogman had in mind with the place.

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